

Beatitudes, Christ and the Practice of Yoga

The word “yoga” immediately evokes images. And this is the key to understanding its appeal and its success. In our mind’s eye, we see a bodily shape in some bodily positioning that we recognize as a yoga posture. We see it immediately in our imagination.

In contrast, philosophical ideas or religious doctrines, use abstract words -- like Truth, Justice, Divinity, Happiness, Faith, Power, etc. -- that are less likely to generate instant pictures in our imagination. And that is the difference.

Yoga is specific and not abstract. It is bodily and not intellectual. It is experiential and not an idea to think about. It is a practice and not a theory. These are the reasons for its success.

Yoga first became popular two thousand years ago when people in India tired of the theological arguments and ritual complexities of Hinduism. People longed for a more direct experience of the Holy, and turned to ancient local traditions that had only been practiced by hermits. These hermits had withdrawn from the world in order to find peace within. And, they found it through simple bodily practices which we now call “Yoga”.

Hinduism was not alone in facing a crisis among its adherents. Among Eastern Orthodox Christians, the same emphasis on theological arguments and elaborate worship services also left a longing in the hearts of people. And so the “Jesus Prayer” -- actually a form of yoga -- came into practice. In Western Christianity similar forms of yoga appeared, from the “Quietism” of the Quakers to the “Little Way” of St. Therese of Lisieux.

But to return to our usual image of yoga and its associations with Hinduism or with Health Clubs. What has this form of bodily posturing have to do with Christ’s teaching of the Beatitudes? Father Anthony Randazzo, a Catholic priest, and Madelana Ferrara-Mattheis, a yoga instructor, think there is an intimate connection. And their book, “Be-

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atitudes, Christ, and the Practice of Yoga” is a guidebook for those willing to explore the connection.

This is an engaging book, and a perfect “textbook” for beginners. And not only those who are beginners at Yoga, but also those of us who are beginners at the practice of the Beatitudes, Indeed, for anyone of us who are still beginners at Prayer. It is a good book for anyone who has said -- like the disciple -- “Lord, teach us to Pray.” (Luke: 11: 1)

Anthony and Madelana have written this book together, but there are times when they speak directly of their own personal stories. In the book, their “storytelling” is indicated by a change in typeface. And so they tell their stories from very different perspectives -- a man and a woman, one a priest one a layperson, one celibate and one married.

But it is not their conversation alone, for throughout the book Jesus also speaks, as do many other persons who are sharing this journey together. The “many other persons” are in fact a large number of people from New Jersey -- like Anthony and Madelana -- who have decided to explore the connection between Yoga practice and Christian faith. And so they also lend their names and their voices to the lively conversations of their pilgrimage.

What is the setting of this pilgrimage? On the surface, it could be a yoga class in a parish hall somewhere in suburban North Jersey. But they use a literary device that turns the book into a symbolic quest. They tell a story. Their storytelling devise is indicated by the chapter titles:

Chapter 1: At Dockside with Spiritual Navigator

Chapter 2: Setting Sail with Christ the Yoga Teacher

Chapter 3: Charting Our Course: Skies are Clear and It’s Smooth Sailing

Chapter 4: Heading Out to the Deeper Waters: Finding Spiritual Tools for Survival on the Journey

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Chapter 5; Surviving on the Sea: Mapping the Journey with the Sutras

Chapter 6: Sermon on the Mat: Flowing into Practice with Christ and Yoga

Chapter 7: Telling Tales of the Journey

Chapter 8: Sitting by the Water's Edge: A Compassionate Landing

Anthony and Madelana don't indicate what the water is, but the Sea of Galilee immediately comes to mind. But other bodies of water may come to the reader's mind. I myself, having grown up in New Jersey near to where Anthony and Madelana live, immediately think of the Jersey Shore. And, in their memories, the same Jersey Shore may have come to their minds. For other readers it will be a lake, a river, another ocean.

On a deeper level, the metaphor of a water pilgrimage is perfect: A traditional land pilgrimage on foot involves movement and strain on the pilgrim's trail. But a journey on a boat permits the travelers to be still in their bodies as the ship itself moves over the waters. A land journey involves strained muscles and sore feet, but a yoga mat floating on the still waters of a calm sea suggests a level of relaxation that no luxury cruise experience could ever match.

Such is the setting for the book. But what of its content?

What exactly is yoga? Most importantly, it is the bodily positions (called Asanas) and the breathing practices (called Pranayamas) that accompany the Asanas. The Asanas still the body, and the breathing practice slows down our respiration. They dampen the busy and nervous energy of the body (and therefore the accompanying influence on the mind) to be "busy, busy, busy -- ever so busy." To constantly move here and there, there and here. For people in the modern world, our body and mental busy-ness make us restless, dissatisfied, and ultimately discontent. The asanas and pranayamas, in contrast, make us restful, content, and peaceful. Rather than being scat-

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tered by ever changing thoughts, emotions, and bodily nervousness, we are calmed and centered.

The essence of yoga is that it focuses us as it invites us to focus on a “single point.” In the same way, the Jesus Prayer of the Eastern Church uses a “yoga of words” -- or mantra -- to focus our attention on a single point: Jesus Himself. Evoking His Name makes Him present and brings us peace. Or, as the Gospel writers tells us, “Come to me you who are tired and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke and learn from me, for I am humble and gentle. My yoke is light and my burden is sweet.” (Matthew 11:28-30)

Anthony attempts the same, but being part of the Western Christian tradition rather than the Eastern Churches, he chooses a mantra that will first bring us peace. But then it will bring us back into the world where we may live out that peace amongst others in community. How does Anthony do it? With the prayer of Jesus known as “The Beatitudes.” Both Luke and Matthew tell the story of the recitation of the Beatitudes - Luke with the Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6: 17-26), Matthew with the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5: 1-12).

To take just one of the Beatitudes as an example, from the back of the book which has pictures illustrating the Asanas along with the Beatitudes that are prayed through breathing: Taking the very simple and easy to do Pranam asana, we inhale the words “Blessed are the poor in spirit...” Then we exhale the Beatitude “...for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven.” It’s that simple.

Anthony provides the Beatitudes and his co-author the yoga. Both are acting as teachers (gurus) but the use of a story, an extended guided meditation, provides the entrance for the real guru --- Christ. What is important to remember with yoga is the same truth to be remembered with the Beatitudes: We cannot learn them intellectually or abstractly through our own efforts. We need a teacher, a personal coach, a guru. And so Anthony may turn to Madelana to be his yogic guru, and she may turn to him to be her beatitude guru. But, ultimately, they both turn to Christ who is their fullest and truest guru. Anthony and

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Madelana are simply His students. He encounters them as guru, as teacher, as friend, as lover. He meets them face to face, heart to heart.

This I-Thou encounter between the human (us) and the divine (Him) is facilitated by yogic practices that have entered all the major religions of the world. The Sufis practice an Islamic form of yoga in the Soul's encounter with the Compassionate and Merciful God. And the Hindus do as well, as can be experienced in their wonderful sacred book called the Bhagavad-Gita (which is also one of the great books in world literature.)

In the Bhagavad-Gita, the Lord Krishna instructs the warrior Arjuna on how to practice yoga in the midst of the busy world. He teaches that the heart of yoga is a detachment from the desires that the world fosters upon us and festers within us. And so Arjuna becomes still in his mind and his heart (He has interiorized the asanas and the pranayamas) so that he need not renounce the world as a hermit or a recluse. Instead, Arjuna can live in the world, and engage in action, without being trapped by the addictive nature of wishes, actions, deeds and desires.

This, of course, is what Jesus the Yoga teacher reveals to us: By centering our bodies and our breath in the peace of the Beatitudes, we can re-enter the world and change it for the better. And all this can be done without falling under a worldly spell!

This book deserves a wide audience, as well as a revised and expanded printing. I would like to hear more of the personal stories from Anthony and Madelana, and perhaps listen to a CD to accompany the book. The CD would include the closing chapter's the wonderful guided relaxation on the beach.

That final episode echoes the closing of scene in the Gospel of John where Jesus joins Peter and the others on the beach. There He asks Peter, "Do you love me?" And Peter's answer is ours: "Lord, you know I love you." (John 21: 15-18)

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Read this book, try the exercises, the find two teachers -- a Spiritual Director and a Physical Coach. And then in the midst of your busy life, but hopefully in the company of other seekers -- a pilgrim community -- you will find the Christ. His presence will assure you that his "yoke" is easy, and his burden is light. He will reveal Himself to you as your teacher, your friend, your lover.

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