

HYPOSTATIC UNION AND THE SUBTLE BODY: AN ANALYSIS OF CHRISTIAN YOGIC PRACTICE

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I. Introduction

The issue of Christian yogic practice has been central in discussion of Catholic adaptation to Indian culture. Sister Ishpriya once wrote that Christianity and Hinduism meet in “the cave of the heart,” a reference to a central yogic practice of seeing the heart not only as a silent place of refuge but as a microcosmic representation of the universe itself.¹ Of course, Sister Vandana touched on many central yogic themes in her insightful reflections on the prayer of the name in the Hindu and Christian traditions.² Father G. Gispert-Sauch has also explored the sacred syllable “Om” and its relation to Christian spirituality.³ More specifically, authors such as V.F. Vineeth and J.M. Dechanet have outlined specific aspects of what can be called “a Christian yoga” that assumes its formal shape from the yogic tradition proceeding from Patanjali but draws its content from

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¹Sister Ishpriya, “The Cave of the Heart,” *Vidyajyoti* 40 (February 1976) 79-83.

²Vandana Mataji, *Nama Japa* (Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1995).

³G. Gispert-Sauch, S. J. “A Controversial Syllable,” *Vidyajyoti* 45 (May 1981) 232-238.

Christian spiritual and scriptural reflection.⁴ Within the West, the development of Christian yoga has been seen as a central and suggestive aspect of the ashram and inculturation movements within Indian Catholicism.⁵

But just as Indian spirituality and yogic practice have been seen as important resources in the Christian search for God, so too have they been considered to be threats. Within the Catholic tradition, decades before he was elected Pope, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger cautioned against seeking refuge in the “indeterminate abyss of the Divinity.”⁶ For his part, Hindu critic Sita Ram Goel has seen Catholic adaptations to Indian culture as a guise for renewed missionary activities.⁷ Ironically perhaps, both these criticisms yet attest to the central significance of Indian spirituality for an Indian Catholicism that seeks to find its place within Indian culture.

The contentious issues surrounding inculturation were very much in the background when I first travelled to Matri Dham Ashram in Varanasi during the mid 1990s. In revisiting Matri Dham’s use of “Christian yoga” well over a decade later, I wish to examine neither its physical discipline nor its political implications within Indian society or the Catholic Church. Instead, I wish to consider yogic meditation as a form of symbolic processing and metapractical reflection as it functions to engage the Hindu and Catholic traditions. In what follows, I will examine two directed yogic meditations that formed the core of Matri Dham’s “Indian Christian Experience” retreat.⁸ In diagramming

⁴V.F. Vineeth, CMI, *Yoga of Spirituality*, Bangalore: Vidya Vanam Publications, 1995; J.M. Dechanet, O.S.B. *Christian Yoga*, London: Burns and Oakes, 1960.

⁵See Catherine Cornille, *The Guru in Indian Catholicism: Ambiguity or Opportunity of Inculturation?* Louvain: Peeters Press, 1991; Helen Ralson, *Christian Ashrams: A New Religious Movement in Contemporary India*, Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1987.

⁶For the text of the Ratzinger letter, see Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation,” *Word and Worship* 23, 2 (February 1990), pp. 46-57; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation,” *Word and Worship* 23,3 (March-April 1990) 87-94.

⁷See Sita Ram Goel, *Catholic Ashrams: Sannyasins or Swindlers*, Delhi: Voice of India Publications, 1994.

⁸I also address different parts of Matri Dham’s Indian Christian Experience in two other publications: see Mathew N. Schmalz, “Ad Experimentum: Theology, Anthropology and the Paradoxes of Indian Catholic Inculturation,” *Theology and the Social Sciences*, ed. Michael Barnes, Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2001, 161-180; “Christianity: Culture, Identity, and Agency,” *A Companion to the Anthropology of India*, ed. Elizabeth Clark-Deces, London: Wiley Blackwell, 2011, 277-294.

the structure of these meditations, I will explore how this form of Christian yoga uses the formal structure of traditional yoga to articulate a vision of hypostatic union in which the subtle body becomes a field for a joining of the knower with the known.

2. The Oblation of the Heart

Matri Dham Ashram was established by Monsignor Jose A.E. Fernandez, the first superior general of the Indian Missionary Society. In the subsequent decades, Matri Dham became a centre for inculturation and charismatic renewal for North India as a whole. Within the Hindu tradition, yoga is the path of knowledge. But it is also a path of discipline that employs a variety of somatic and mental techniques to still and then dissolve the mind. Central to the ashram's inculturation efforts is the Indian Christian Spiritual Experience, an extended retreat that employs yogic practice to lead participants or *sadhakas* through a series of structured meditations that culminate in a deeper experience of the Risen Christ within the specificity of Indian culture. In one of the initial meditations, the retreat leader uses the general framework of yogic practice to tame the mind by addressing the effects of sin. In this effort, the general framework of yoga, as articulated in the *Maitri Upanishad* and the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali, is turned not to releasing humans from bondage to nature, or *prakriti*. Instead, yogic practice becomes a means to release humans from bondage to sin and thus becomes a particularly Christian form of *pratyahara* by enabling a withdrawal of senses from their external objects.

"You Are Precious to Me"

The mediation begins early in the morning in Matri Dham's chapel and all present are called "to gather together their scattered selves" into a one-pointedness. All are reminded that they are in a temple, a *mandir*, dedicated to Jesus as beloved and guru. The retreat leader then asks all present to focus on Jesus and says: "He is standing in front of each one present, calling them and saying: "I love you, I want you. You are precious to me." The focus of the meditation then turns to the body and everyone is asked to consider his or her own body and to reflect:

Am I satisfied with my body--the colour, the shape, the organs. It is He who created me, formed me carefully, lovingly. Am I satisfied with my body? If not ask pardon to our beloved for it is he who made us. With full satisfaction and happiness, let us invite him to enter into our body, into the core of our being. Place a beautiful lotus flower in

the depth of your heart, a beautiful lotus flower of any colour - place it in the middle of your heart and invite Jesus to come and sit on it in the centre of the flower.

Within Jesus seated inside the hollowed heart, the participants are led through a series of visualizations. First, all are asked to see their parents in front of them and then to look at the feelings written on their faces. "What is my relationship with them?," the retreat leader encourages everyone to ask. If there are hurt feelings, all are urged to ask pardon, even if they themselves did nothing wrong. Then the retreat leader tells everyone to "breathe them in and place them on the petals of the lotus with Jesus, and see that they are on the right and left side of Jesus, inside your heart." This process is repeated as all are asked to envision their family members, friends, teachers and priests and examine their feelings toward them, ask pardon and then "breathe them in." The scope of the meditation becomes progressively larger with those present visualizing the Catholic Church, its Pope and Bishops, and then political leaders and government officials, and then finally the rich, the robbers and the terrorists. The retreat leader concludes the meditation with the admonition:

See if anybody is left - if there is anyone who you are finding it difficult to reconcile with - bring them in front of you, try to see their face clearly, if they have done any wrong to you, forgive them and try to accept them as they are. You ask pardon, even if you didn't do anything wrong. Try to embrace them in your imagination and take them to Jesus in the core of your being.

With these words, the direction of the mediation ends, leaving the participants to meditate in silence.

A Christian Pratyahara

Yoga is first and foremost a *sadhana*, a process that the French scholar Jean Varenne has characterized as "subjugation," "conquering" or "overcoming."⁹ Within classical yoga theory, human beings are bound by a metaphysical ignorance in which they fail to realize their true selves. According to the Maitri Upanishad, the Self is *purusa*, the masculine element that is a passive knower of the field of existence.¹⁰ The three strands of nature, the *gunas*, weave a garment that covers

⁹Jean Varenne, *Yoga and the Hindu Tradition*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1976, 93.

¹⁰"Maitri Upanishad," in *Hindu Scriptures*, trans. R. C. Zaehner (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), II. 5.

purusa. The interactions of *sattva*, goodness, *rajas*, passion, and *tamas*, darkness then surround this unalterable aspect of the human Self. The Maitri Upanishad states that the self becomes confused because of its attachment to Nature and therefore falsely believes itself to be the agent of action.¹¹ Control of the breath, withdrawal of the senses from their objects, concentration, and intellectual discernment constitute parts of the six-fold yoga that leads to union with the unchanging ground of the Self and the universe, understood as Brahman.¹²

The relationship between classical yogic theory and the Matri Dham's Christian yogic meditation is initially introductory and formal. Participants are presented with Patanjali's full articulation of yoga as an eight-fold path, beginning with the disciplines of restraint, virtuous practice and posture, proceeding through breath control and withdrawal of the senses to the final stages of concentration, discernment and release. The focus, however, is not upon metaphysics: there is little mention of yoga's connection to the philosophical speculations of the *samnkya* school, nor anything more than a passing consideration of the sheaths that envelope the Self in its position in the field of Nature. Instead, the preparations for Christian yogic practice are practical: participants learn the postures, or *asanas*, and begin to articulate segments of the greeting of the sun (*surya namaksara*) to the lines of the Lord's Prayer. All of this is to discipline the body and prepare the mind for a "one-pointedness" that will centre upon Christ.

This preparation in the formal and somatic aspects of yogic discipline allows the meditation to use the structure of yoga for a particularly Christian purpose. When the retreat leader calls the participants to one-pointedness, he asks them to reflect upon their bodies and thus grounds the practice within a particular form of somatic consciousness. Such a bodily awareness has always been a crucial component of yoga for the body itself contains the intelligence, thought and organs of perception that must be "yoked" in order for the *sadhaka* to move to a higher state of consciousness.

But after calling for such awareness, the retreat leader compresses the formal stages of yoga in a powerful meditation that calls participants to acknowledge their own pain. By having participants serially visualize

¹¹"Maitri Upanishad," III, 1-2.

¹²"Maitri Upanishad," V.18.

their own woundedness, the meditation recalls the yogic dictum that begins Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*: "for those who know, all is pain" (*sarvam dukkham vivekinah*).¹³ Yet here the pain is not that of metaphysical ignorance, understood in the classically yogic sense of bondage to the phenomenal world and the empirical self. Instead, the pain that all humans suffer, and indeed must realize as pain, is the pain of sin.

There are a variety of ways to interpret how the meditation functions within the course of Matri Dham's Indian Christian Experience. The most obvious interpretation is simply to see the meditation as an exercise in reconciliation, shaped by charismatic imagery that has now become common in North Indian Catholic religiosity. But the meditation itself seeks to articulate a particularly yogic vision of how the act of forgiveness offers a path to release. For Patanjali, yogic discipline progresses from a restraint of the body, mind, and the breath to specific meditational practices in which the practitioner cultivates a detachment from the objects of the phenomenal world. This effort is called *pratyahara*: the withdrawal of the senses from their external objects. Like a tortoise bringing its limbs into its shell, the yogi gathers his senses together and turns them inward. Within classical yogic theory, *pratyahara* is an essential move because the doors of the body, the sense organs or *indriyas*, must be closed as a preparation to the mental concentration of *dharana*. But in the meditation at Matri Dham, the external objects are the pain-filled relations with others. In order to move to a fuller concentration on Jesus, practitioners must release their attachment to resentment and thus to sin. Indeed, the connections to sin recalled in the variety of relationships that structure human social life. The visualizations and images elicited by the meditation become the Christian equivalent of impregnations of action, called *vasanas*, that classical yogic theory insists must be burned away in order for mental activity to cease. In this sense, forgiveness becomes an oblation of the heart that severs the ties that bind the mind to the external objects of pain and anger that so characterize human action in the world.

3. Hypostatic Union and the Subtle Body

By calling participants to forgive, the initial meditation becomes a Christian form of *pratyahara* by delinking the mind from its external

¹³Patanjali, *The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, trans. Georg Feuerstein, Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 1989, II.15

objects of perception. Just as classical yogic theory posits *pratyahara* as prelude to the concentration of *dharna*, so too does the meditation on sin and forgiveness assume a preparatory and purgative function within Matri Dham's Indian Christian Experience. To conclude the retreat, participants are led through "the twin heart meditation" that articulates the crucial themes emphasized in Matri Dham's use of yogic practice.¹⁴ This final reflection calls practitioners to empty their hearts to more effectively channel the healing love of Christ. This image then finally connects yogic visions of the subtle body with Christian understandings of the incarnation and hypostatic union.

The Twin-Heart Meditation

The meditation commences with all present being called to practice *pratyahara* and *dharna*: to withdraw the external senses and focus upon the divine breath within. All are asked to envision Christ as the rising sun, which illuminates our hearts. Jesus' radiance also exposes the dirt and stains that disfigure our internal selves, soilings that must be removed before He can enter us. Yet it is the loving mercy of Jesus that may remove our blemishes if we open ourselves to him. Then all present are called to hollow out their hearts, and make them clean, so that Jesus may enter. In the centre of our spiritual being, "in the centre of our hearts." The retreat leader then asks those present to imagine a beautiful lotus bud, with Jesus at its centre:

Oh Jesus, my mother and father, my sister and brother, my friend and my lover. Please come and take your place inside me. You know that I love you, you know that I love you. Give your blessing, so that I may experience your loving kindness - to me, towards the whole of nature, towards the whole of humanity, towards the whole universe.

The retreat leader then continues by asking all to try to see Jesus' face clearly, to see the lotus bud blossoming and finally Jesus taking his place upon it. The retreat leader asks each individual to receive Jesus and the gifts he brings, for he has chosen each individual to be His instrument to bring love to the world. "Try to let his love fill your heart," the retreat leader says, and continues by asking participants "to envision it filling the heart and see the petals of the lotus dancing with joy - with gratitude, allow the stream to flow out, away from the heart and fill the world." The retreat leader asks for those who wish

¹⁴Matri Dham's "Twin Heart Meditation" is a Christian re-framing of "The Twin Heart Meditation" developed by Choa Kok Sui, see <http://www.meditationontwinhearts.org>

compassion or mercy to any particular person, to bring that person into view. All present are asked to place their finger on their crown *chakra*. Imagine a lotus there as well and let the stream of the Holy Spirit flow from heaven, through the head and heart *chakras* and out into the world, to nourish the needy and the suffering, the poor and the marginalized. The meditation then concludes with a prayer: "Let your blessing flow into the whole universe; see that you are used as a channel. Jesus, our beloved is using you as a channel to express his love and kindness, mercy and compassion, understanding, harmony and goodwill."

Hypostatic Union and the Subtle Body

Crucial to this final meditation is the image of the heart. Within the Upanishads, the heart is often understood to contain the universe in microcosm. In the *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, Brahman is related to the elemental "person," *purusa*, for as *purusa* Brahman not only spans the universe but also exists within the human heart as the Inmost Self that has the size of the measure of the thumb.¹⁵ According to classical yogic theory, the human heart contains space, time, and generative fire. The discipline of yoga becomes the Vedic sacrifice turned inward and offered in the human heart. Within this framework, yogic meditation becomes an inner journey to the lotus of the heart and the underlying essence of all that is real.

Initially, the meditation seems simply to fill these Upanishadic and yogic images with a Christian meaning. Christ is enthroned upon the lotus of the heart and thus embodies the universe both in microcosm and macrocosm. Christ is in all and is all with everything pervaded by his Word. The image of Christ as the rising Sun also recalls identifications of Brahman with heat and light. In the *Maitri Upanishad*, Brahman is metaphorically envisioned as shining in the sun or as the *mandala* of the sun itself.¹⁶ The task of the yogi then is to pierce the darkness of ignorance with the mantra AUM in order to be illuminated by the Absolute. Within the twin-heart meditation specifically, Christ becomes the light that not only reveals the stains of human sin but also fuels the entirety of creation. Christ then provides a purifying light and heat that perfects while dispelling

¹⁵"Svetasvatara Upanishad," in *Hindu Scriptures*, trans. R.C. Zaehner, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992, III.13

¹⁶*Maitri Upanishad*, VI.5.

ignorance. The gnosis to which Christian yoga leads is the ultimate knowledge that Christ is the font of all life and being.

By drawing upon a diverse set of religious images, the twin heart meditation attempts to establish a context for a reciprocal interplay between Christianity and Indian culture. But there is also something more complex underlying the meditation than a simple correlation of symbols would suggest. In addition to the imagery of the heart, the meditation also draws upon a vision of the subtle body. Within yogic theory, the subtle body is a mystical entity that coexists with the gross body. The geography of the subtle body is dominated by *chakras*, energy centres that are associated with particular element, shape and syllable. Recall how participants are asked to focus upon the crown *chakra*, the energy centre that lies between the eyebrows and top of the head. The crown *chakra* is symbolized by a blue circle and the syllable "ham." But most significantly, the crown *chakra* is associated with the element ether or *akasa*. Within the branch of yoga called Nada-Brahman, the element ether is understood to be the medium of sound. Sound and the sonic manifestations of Brahman are at the very core of Nada-Yoga, for the very word Nada means "sound."¹⁷ According to the *Nadabindu-Upanishad*, the yogic practitioner listens to eleven different internal sounds in order to become indifferent to the world.¹⁸ The saga Vacaspati, in a commentary on the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali, correlates the highest sphere of consciousness with the sound of Brahman.¹⁹ Yet in the twin heart meditation, it is Christ as Word who pervades the individual with sonic vibrations of charity and love. But this can only happen when the devotee is fully emptied, for empty space as ether is the environment most conducive to the transmission of sound. This final meditative move then becomes crucial for a meditation that sees Christ as the underlying reality of the universe, who is simultaneously present in microcosmic universe within the cave of the human heart.

With Christ as the centre of the meditative exercise, progressive visualization of the subtle body becomes a way to enter into the mystery of the incarnation. The subtle body becomes a way of visualizing not only how the love of Christ pervades all things, but perhaps more importantly how Christ and human beings find a

¹⁷See Guy Beck, *Sonic Theology*, Motilal Banarasidass, 1995, pp. 81-120

¹⁸Guy Beck, *Sonic Theology*, 93.

¹⁹Guy Beck, *Sonic Theology*.

particularly intimate connection within “the cave of the heart.” In his reflections upon the hypostasis of the human and divine in Christ, the theologian Karl Rahner sees hypostatic union as a kind of “call” to human beings.²⁰ Because Christ makes human nature his own, hypostatic union becomes the fullest realization of human nature itself. It is within this context that the Twin Heart meditation should be understood because it attempts to envision hypostatic union as a realization of human destiny in its directed visualizations of Christ and the subtle body.

Conclusion

In considering the two meditations that ground Matri Dham’s use of yogic imagery and practice, certainly much could be said in support the critics of Christian yoga and the very idea of a Christian ashram. Yogic practice and imagery are deeply rooted in a sophisticated metaphysical system. While to characterize the religious vision of yoga as an “indeterminate abyss” is unnecessarily polemical, it is nonetheless most certainly the case that it is difficult indeed to reconcile Upanishadic metaphysics with the incarnational vision of Christianity. But to understand Matri Dham’s use of yoga as something fundamentally doctrinal or discursive in content would be mistaken.

What is initially most apparent in the yogic exercises, particularly in the Twin Heart Meditation, is the pervasive use of symbolism. Within both theological and anthropological discourse, the status of “symbolism” and the “symbol” is hotly contested. In a widely influential work, the anthropologist Dan Sperber has articulated a theory of symbolism in which symbolism does not “mean,” at least in a conventional sense. For examples, symbols cannot be paraphrased. Moreover, culture in and of itself most certainly does not provide an algorithm by which symbols can be consistently translated. Symbols are symbols precisely because symbols contain new data that cannot be assimilated into our conceptual categories.²¹ Symbols then become linked in a chain of symbolic processing until conceptual conditions are finally met. Hence, when we speak of the “meaning” of symbols we are often speaking of the impact of symbols upon our

²⁰For example see, Karl Rahner, “On the Theology of the Incarnation,” in *A Rahner Reader*, ed. Gerald A. McCool, New York: Crossroad, 1989, 145-159

²¹See Dan Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975. I also use Sperber to discuss the experimental Indian Rite Mass at Matri Dham, see Schmalz (2001), cited in note 8.

consciousness—not something that necessarily inheres within symbols themselves. The integration of yogic imagery into a Christian framework constitutes precisely the kind of new data of which Sperber speaks. The Twin Heart Meditation and other yogic practices do not articulate a blending of Christianity with a particularly Hindu metaphysics. Instead, the use of yogic imagery becomes a provisional but necessary epistemological move within Catholicism's effort to reconcile itself with Indian culture.

If Christian yoga constitutes a form of "symbolic processing," then it also elicits "metapractical" reflection. In "Philosophy as Metapraxis," Thomas Kasulis makes an important distinction between "metaphysics" and "metapraxis."²² Metaphysics is the "development of a philosophical theory about the nature of reality."²³ Metapraxis, by contrast, leads to the development of a theory about the nature of one's own praxis.²⁴ According to Kasulis, any praxis inevitably has a "thetic" component in that it posits something as "real." But metapractical reflection is a form of *a posteriori* theorizing, for it is the practice that precedes efforts to probe its philosophical implications. For Kasulis, it is crucial that metapraxis is not mistaken for metaphysics with particular religious practices immediately being subordinated to doctrinal or philosophical systems. Religion is a lived reality, and to the extent to which it is lived it is also practised. In the case of Christian yoga, whether as practised at Matri Dham ashram or as advocated by Indian Catholic theologians, we have an initial engagement with an irreducibly Indian form of religious praxis. The visualizations and guided imagery associated with yogic practice represent an effort to speculate as to what reality lies behind the practice. In the case of Christian yoga, it is the reality of Christ that lies behind the practice, and it is the experiential awareness of Christ, mediated through the human body, that grounds the metaphysics of yoga itself.

²²Thomas P. Kasulis, "Philosophy as Metapraxis," in *Discourse and Practice*, ed. Frank Reynolds and David Tracy, Albany: SUNY Press, 1992, 169-198.

²³Thomas P. Kasulis, "Philosophy as Metapraxis," 174.

²⁴Thomas P. Kasulis, "Philosophy as Metapraxis," 179.