

# Food for Thought - Christian Yoga

by Gordon Smith

Both **Yoga** and **Christianity** have changed since the early days of their origins. Christianity is like a tree that has many branches, and has grown and extended its teaching into a variety of sects. Yoga, similarly, has shared the same experience and responded to the demands of the physical world by placing a lot more emphasis on anatomy & physiology and the coping with stress. This does not mean that we have become clearer about either Yoga or Christianity, as both have been influenced by history and power seekers on many continents, and it can be refreshing to return back to the roots and look at both with a new eye.

The Christian has the advantage of being able to purchase a **red letter testament**, turn back the clock of history and read Christ's words as recorded from the earliest times. The Yogi has also the advantage of great early literature such as, **The Upanishads, The Bhagavad Gita** and **Sutras of Patanjali**. **The Sermon on the Mount** becomes particularly relevant to both as the modern competitive world takes over and both get caught in organisation and the financial demands of society.

Philosophy arose out of the need to interpret religious and spiritual experience and that is true today as Yoga and Christianity evolve side by side. But some may feel uneasy about contaminating Christianity with what, in some cases, is little understood Yoga practice. Whatever the level of teaching, my first Yoga teacher gave me good advice, when he said, **do not believe anything that I tell you, first examine everything carefully and only accept what in your heart you know to be true**. This was good advice indeed, as it avoids taking onboard a lot of untested information.

The test of any great tradition is **time**, whether it is for music, art or poetry. Both **Christianity** and **Yoga** have withstood this test and, on careful examination and study, it will be realised that **both** are the result of the **outflowing** and **flowering** of **spiritual insight** at the highest level.

To make just one interesting comparison, Yoga has given us **Yantra**, to help focus the mind and provide a different way of looking at reality. Similarly Christianity has given us the symbol of the **Cross**. A symbol that has burned itself into human consciousness for the past two millennia.

Both the Cross and Yantra provide similar functions and when viewed against the background of **ultimate reality**, both become like the **patterns** on a mosaic pavement that enable us to glimpse the genius of the great artist that inspired them.

## Yoga or Religion ?

Often we hear a strong denial, that Yoga is not a religion. Although the words Yoga and religion are not originally of the same language, they are in essence related and, as far as any words can be, are synonyms. The word **religion** means to rebind, that is to bind back to the source. The 'lig' root in the word is found in words like ligature, meaning **to bind**. The word **Yoga** is used in a similar sense in that it means to **yoke** or **join** with the source of one's being.

Most Yoga practitioners have no desire to offend the established church and when we hear of the occasional Yoga class being banned from a church hall, the statement often accompanies that Yoga is not a religion. This can be made in all earnestness when the exercises are taken out of context and it is believed they belong in sports or keep fit category.

To the knowledgeable and discerning, Yoga reaches far beyond matters that relate just to health and into the philosophical and spiritual realms in a way that no other practice can. The Yoga philosopher seeks to discover the link factors that exist between all manners of disciplines, ideals and different religious practices, so that a more holistic view of life is developed.

No matter how strong the denial that there is a connection between Yoga and religion, for those who practise Yoga there will be the gradual awakening to what is best described as **the dawning of the spiritual**. To concentrate on Hatha Yoga leads to a **truer and nobler way of life**, with **improved control in all aspects of living**. **Even the most physically orientated individual can glimpse the way of the Bhakti, as without love for what we are doing there can be no real progress**.

I recently spoke with someone who had attended several Yoga classes and who thought that Yoga was somewhat selfish and self orientated. In some respects he was right in that **Yoga aims toward a higher selfishness** that ultimately transcends the lower orientation of the self and ego. **'Self' realisation** as the goal of Yoga is best expressed if spelled with a capital 'S' rather than otherwise as it is the level of transcendence and immediacy of spirit that transcends ego. If there is uneasiness about things Eastern, why not practise Christian Yoga? As knowledge and understanding deepens, inconsistencies melt away and there will be an awareness of the affinity with best practice and with **The Way, The Truth and The Life**. It is the quality of the **will** that is of importance and **The Way is the Will to the highest**. The **Truth** is the **light of Consciousness** expressed as Logos or Word. The **Life** is the **Love that works for the development of the potentiality of all beings**.

Gordon Smith has taught Yoga for many years, and has been a member of the British Wheel of Yoga since the early days of Wilfred Clark. He and his wife, Pam, have written a book entitled, 'Meditation – A Treasury of Technique', published by CW Daniel, 1994, ISBN 0 85207 2147