

Islam and Yoga

A comparative study of congruence between two traditions

"We always find some form of Yoga whenever the goal is *experience of the sacred* or the attainment of a perfect *self-mastery*, which is itself the first step toward magical mastery of the world. It is a fact of considerable significance that the noblest mystical experiences, as well as the most daring magical desires, are realized through yogic technique, or, more precisely, that Yoga can equally well adapt itself to either path." — Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*

Years ago when young I began doing hatha yoga. Although several years passed without practicing yoga, the complete yoga breathing I learned from it was a constant presence in my life. There was also my Islamic life, including praying *salât* five times every day. A couple years ago I returned to yoga while keeping up my Islamic practice. How are these two developments related? How do they interact?

When I returned to the practice of yoga, I found that it is easily integrated with the Islamic life; in fact the two assist one another. Not only is there no conflict, but Islam and yoga together make a mutually beneficial synergy. Both are agreed that, while the body is important as a vehicle on the way to spiritual realization and salvation, the human being's primary identity is not with the body but with the eternal Spirit.

This is not a case of syncretism between two religions (which would be spiritually invalid). Yoga is not a religion. Rather, it is a set of techniques and skills that enhance the practice of any religion. A French author named Jean Déchanet discovered this in regard to his Catholic faith and wrote the book *Christian Yoga* (New York: Harper, 1960). In my case, I have found that Islamic yoga is a reality. It is possible to employ the skills of yoga to worship Allah better and to be a better Muslim.

Yoga arose from the matrix of the Hindu world, although according to Mircea Eliade it is of pre-Hindu origin and can be traced back to prehistoric shamanism. Like India's other gifts to world civilization, for example the system of place notation on which all mathematics depends, yoga is not tied to the Hindu religion but has a universal applicability. It helps one to follow one's own religion better whatever that may be. It has certain specific affinities with Islam that make for an interesting study.

1. Metaphysical doctrine.

Since the metaphysic of Advaita Vedanta is in agreement with the *tawhîd* (doctrine of oneness) of Islam, there is perfect compatibility between Islam and yoga on the highest level. All traditional esoterisms agree that everything in manifestation has its origin in the Supernal. The manifestations on the material plane are derived from the ideational realm of archetypes (known as *al-a'yân al-thâbitah* in the metaphysics of Ibn al-'Arabî). This world, limited as it is, is just an expression of the ultimate Reality, and will ultimately be reabsorbed in its supernal Origin. Advaita Vedanta and Islamic esoteric metaphysics are agreed that God is the only absolutely real, eternal Reality; all else is contingent and therefore transitory. The unitary view of reality in Advaita Vedanta accords well with the *tawhîd* (divine

oneness) of Islam, and the Oneness of Being in the Sufi doctrine of Ibn al-'Arabî.

It is interesting to compare the symbolism of Prophet Muhammad's nighttime ascent to Heaven, *al-Mi'râj*, with the corresponding symbolism in yoga. The Prophet ascended on al-Burâq, a riding beast with the head of a woman, through the seven heavens to the Throne of God. In yoga, the *kuNDalinî* is a feminine power (*sakti*) that dwells at the base of the spine and ascends through seven levels (represented by the seven *cakras*) to the summit of liberation (*brahmarandhra*).

2. Salât and âsanas.

One of the most obvious correspondences between Islam and hatha yoga is the resemblance of *salât* to the physical exercises of yoga *âsanas*. An Indian Muslim author, Ashraf F. Nizami, noted this in his book *Namaz, the Yoga of Islam* (Bombay: D.B. Taraporevala, 1977). The root meaning of the word *salât* is 'to bend the lower back', as in hatha yoga; the Persians translated this concept with the word *namâz*, from a verbal root meaning 'to bow', etymologically related to the Sanskrit word *namaste*. The thousands of postures and variations known to hatha yoga can be classified into a few basic types, including standing postures, spinal stretches, inverted postures, seated postures, and spinal twists. The genius of Islamic *salât* is to incorporate all of these in rudimentary form into a compact, flowing sequence, ensuring a thorough, all-round course of exercises for good health that is easy for everyone to practice.

a) Standing. The Mountain Pose (*TâDâsana*) is the foundation for all standing *âsanas*. One always begins from this and returns to it at the completion of the standing sequence. In this it very closely resembles not only the standing posture of *qiyâm* in *salât*, but also the "Return to Mountain" of T'ai Chi Ch'uan. Standing in Mountain Pose or *qiyâm* is a quiescent exercise for the whole body: feet, legs, and spine working together. With one's feet planted squarely on Earth and one's head reaching toward Heaven, this pose is of the finest metaphysical significance to the sacredness of the human state, for verticality is the essence of religion.

b) Spinal stretching. As the yogis say, one is as young as one's spine. Hatha yoga concentrates much careful attention on deep, thorough stretches of the spine, bringing the head forward to rest on the knees. Since all the nerves of the body are channeled from the spinal cord out between the vertebrae, a healthy spine is of central importance for the well-being of the whole human body and mind. It takes much patient, persistent practice to make and keep the spine ideally flexible, and only the most dedicated yogis succeed in this. Since Islam is a path for everyone, the Islamic spinal stretch is kept easy and within everyone's reach: the bowing position called *rukû'* only requires that you bend forward enough to place your hands on your knees. Nonetheless, even this minimal stretch helps keep the spine in good condition. When I returned to yoga after praying *salât* for several years, I found that making *rukû'* seventeen times a day had beautifully prepared my spine for deeper forward stretches.

c) Inverted poses. The heart does its best to circulate blood all through the veins and arteries, but it's a demanding job, and exercise is needed to help the circulation go at maximum efficiency. In particular, raising fresh blood to the brain through the carotid artery, and lifting it from the feet back up to the heart, is always going against the pull of gravity. This is why two of the most important and beneficial *âsanas* are the Shoulderstand (*sarvangâsana*, the 'whole body pose') and the Headstand (*sirSâsana*). Islamic prayer has taken the most essential aspect of these inverted poses: lowering the head below the heart. The position called *sujûd* is easy for everyone to accomplish and helps to bathe the brain in fresh oxygenated blood to keep it healthy and alert. Ashraf F. Nizami writes: "This may be termed similar to ... HALF SIRSHASANA. It helps full-fledged pumping of blood into the brain and upper half of the

body including eyes, ears, nose and lungs."

d) Seated postures. The word *âsana* means 'seat' and the basic postures for meditation are seated ones, especially the Lotus. The Diamond Pose (*vajrâsana*) is practically identical with the seated position of *salât* called *jalsah*. This has, of course, not escaped the notice of both yogis and Muslims in India. Nizami writes: "This is a HARDY POSE or is like VAJRASANA." Swami Sivananda in his book *Yoga Asanas* writes: "This Asana resembles more or less the Nimaz pose in which the Muslims sit for prayer." Furthermore, both *vajrâsana* and *jalsah* are the same as the *zazen* posture of Japan. Having practiced a little yoga when young, it became easier for me to sit on the floor in mosques for long stretches of time. In turn, accustomed to this in Islam over the years, it was then much easier to learn seated yoga postures like the Lotus, since my leg and hip joints were accustomed to the floor.

When sitting in the Lotus, a yoga *mudra* that accompanies meditation is made by forming the index finger and thumb into a circle. The Islamic *mudra*, made while sitting in *jalsah*, is to extend the index finger in a straight line (to attest to the Oneness of God), while forming the thumb and middle finger into a circle. The figure 1 and the figure 0 can convey a Tantric symbolism, and also are curiously similar to the binary 1 and 0 of computer science.

e) Spinal twists. A session of yoga practice normally concludes, just before final relaxation, with a thorough twist of the whole spine (*ardha matsyendrâsana*) to the right and to the left. It helps to even out the spine from the other poses it has done and keep everything balanced. In much the same way, *salât* concludes with the prayer of peace (*salâm*) said while turning the head to the right and then to the left. This works only the cervical and maybe a few of the thoracic vertebrae, but it is useful for keeping the neck flexible and is consistent with the pattern in *salât* of presenting reduced versions of the yoga *âsanas*.

3. Breathing.

In yoga, the science and art of breathing is paramount. The relaxation and exertion of all the members of the body, the stilling and concentration of the mind, the energizing of the whole being, and the access to the spiritual dimension all depend on breathing. In most languages of the world, the words for 'breathing' and 'spirit' are the same or closely related. The Arabic word for 'spirit' is *rûh*, coming from a root with several interconnected meanings: 'to relax', 'to breathe', and 'to set out moving'. The full range of these meanings, taken together, summarizes all the functions of the breath in Yoga. The Sanskrit word corresponding to *rûh* is *âtman*, which also comes from an Indo-European root meaning 'breath' (compare the High German word *Atem*, 'breath').

The spiritual importance of breath is a part of Islam's teachings. Hazrat Inayat Khan writes on the subject of Islamic purification: "Man's health and inspiration both depend on purity of breath, and to preserve this purity the nostrils and all the tubes of the breath must be kept clear. They can be kept clear by proper breathing and proper ablutions. If one cleanses the nostrils twice or oftener it is not too much, for a Moslem is taught to make this ablution five times, before each prayer." According to Hakim G. M. Chishti in *The Book of Sufi Healing*, "Life, from its beginning to end, is one continuous set of breathing practices. The Holy Qur'an, in addition to all else it may be, is a set of breathing practices."

4. Meditation and worship.

In part 23 of the *Yoga Sutra*, Patañjali teaches the attainment of supreme spiritual realization through

devotion to God (*îsvara pranidhana*). The sutra is a very succinct, condensed type of literature, so a single brief mention suffices. Because Patañjali did not elaborate upon it, some commentators have assumed that his God is a mere figurehead or abstraction and therefore not so important in yoga practice. Nothing could be further from the truth; in fact, the one feature that distinguishes the metaphysic of the Yoga *darsana* from that of the Sankhya *darsana* of Kapila (a non-theistic analysis of the elements in the cosmos and consciousness) is the presence of God in Yoga. This makes all the difference, and allows the consonance of Yoga with religion.

Patañjali wisely chose to refer to God as *îsvara*, which in Sanskrit simply means 'God, the Supreme Being' and does not name any deity of any particular religion. This universality frees Yoga from conflict with any religious doctrine, so that its techniques can be applied by a believer of any faith. In India, Yoga has been applied to a vast variety of different religious perspectives, and it works just as well for other religions including Islam. There is nothing specifically Hindu or Islamic about its techniques, but it will assist the devotee in any kind of worship. Yoga means to concentrate and still the mind; when this concentration is directed upon God, the yogi is reaching toward the heart of his religion.

As for meditation, *trâTaka* is a yogic technique to focus the attention and attain one-pointedness. It consists of fixing the gaze on a single point. (It assists balance, too.) While standing in Islamic prayer, we practice *traTaka* by fixing the gaze on a spot on the ground where the forehead rests in *sujûd*. During *rukû'*, the *trâTaka* is directed at the point between the big toes. The purpose is to focus the attention on the prayer and keep it from wandering. In this way it helps lead to a meditative state.

An important part of Sufi spiritual practice is to invoke the Divine Name *Allâh* and meditate upon it. Once I had learned through yoga how to still the mind and focus the attention, I discovered that the same technique greatly sharpened and clarified my meditation on the Divine Name. It was like a nearsighted person putting on glasses and suddenly seeing clearly and sharply.

Some Sufi orders practice meditation and invocation focused within certain centers (*latâ'if*) in the subtle body; this is the same technique as the yogic meditation upon the *cakras*.

5. Purification.

It goes without saying that both Islam and yoga require basic physical and moral cleanliness and purity (*tahârah, sauca*) before performing their practices. The two differ in several respects, but one feature that is common to both is using water to rinse the breathing passages: a yoga *kriya* (cleansing practice) called *jala neti* consists of pouring water into one nostril so that it flows through the sinuses and out the other nostril. The Muslim when making *wudû'* takes water up the nose and blows it out; this is called *istinshâ'*. Again, the Islamic version does not go as deep, being simplified to make it easily accessible to everyone.

6. Food.

The Ayurvedic principles of yogic diet and the hadiths of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) are agreed that milk and ghee are beneficial, and that beef is detrimental to health. Likewise, both discourage eating onions and garlic. Ginger (Arabic *zanjabîl*, from Sanskrit *srngivera*, from Proto-Dravidian *ciñci vêr*) is mentioned in the Qur'ân (76:17) as a spice of Paradise. Ayurveda regards ginger as *sâttvika*, a quality helpful to spiritual life. Both Ayurveda and the Qur'ân tell of the spiritual qualities of the basil plant, the sacred basil (*Ocimum sanctum*) called *tulasi* in Sanskrit and the sweet basil (*Ocimum basilicum*) called *rayhân* in the Qur'ân (while the Italians value it only for its culinary qualities!). *Tulasi* basil is used to uplift, clear, and invigorate the mind, assisting the consciousness to focus on spiritual thoughts; *rayhân* is mentioned in the Qur'ân (55:12) as a plant of Paradise, and the Prophet recommended it to his Companions for its refreshing aromatherapy. The Arabic word *rayhân* is derived from the same root as *rûh* 'spirit'.

Historical interaction.

In historical time, Muslims did consciously borrow from yoga and acknowledged the source. The traveling scholar Abu Rayhan al-Biruni (11th century) translated the *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali into Arabic. Shah Muhammad Ghaus of Gwalior (16th century), a leader of the Shattârîyah order of Sufis, incorporated yoga practices into his teaching, based on the yogic text *AmrtakuNDa*. Yoga even reached as far as North Africa, where al-Sanusi (19th century) wrote of the yoga âsanas (*jalsah*); he referred to yoga in Arabic as "*al-Jûjîyah*". However, the congruences between yoga and Islam that I noted above are not historical borrowings, but derive from the primordial beginnings of the traditions.

A large international yoga organization, 3HO, has adopted the sujûd from Islamic prayer, calling it "Easy Yoga."

Easy Yoga for Elimination



To stimulate the Apana, the eliminative energy of the body, try this exercise: Sit on the heels. Bring your forehead to the ground in front of your

knees. Place your hands in fists by your ears. Raise your buttocks as high as possible, keeping your forehead on the ground. Breathe long and deep through the nose. Continue for 1 - 3 minutes and then relax.

Conclusion.

It can be valid and beneficial for Muslims to learn yoga, not as their spiritual path *per se*, but as a valuable adjunct to the spiritual path of Islam. Islam is a complete, integral spiritual path, so yoga is no substitute for any Islamic requirement. The Prophet said that wisdom is the believer's stray camel: wherever he finds it he will recognize it (and claim his right to it).

How to explain the many points of correspondence between yoga and Islam? Did these ancient teachings travel from India to Arabia? No—there is no need to assume such a horizontal transfer; the sacred truths are revealed vertically from Heaven to all peoples. There are close similarities between Islam and yoga not because of borrowing or cultural diffusion, but because of both originating in the Primordial Tradition, *sanâtana dharma*, *al-dîn al-hanîf*, which all the prophets of Allah have brought and reaffirmed throughout the ages, among all nations, revealed directly from the Creator.

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