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Theo-yoga

A Theological Look at an Individual's Yoga Practice

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Om

The first time I engaged in a serious yoga practice was a class I took in Sheboygan, Wisconsin with my mother. I remember being nervous about my abilities to keep up, realizing my lack of prior disciplined experience would undoubtedly show throughout the practice, while remaining hopeful that the basic stretches and poses I had taught myself thanks to videos would shine through. I also remember the instructions to focus on the breath, the exact placement of body parts throughout the poses, and the slight adjustments made by Marsha, the teacher. Throughout the ninety minutes of the practice, I kept up, attempting to match what was being demonstrated while holding for long counts, breathing heavily, and sweating a surprising amount. Afterwards, my mother and I rejoiced in the car. We had shared a lesson and survived. We were pleased with how loose our muscles felt and how sensitive we were to the way our entire bodies were fitted together.

Since coming to Boston, I have tried several times to find a good studio, one where I felt comfortable with the instructors. On the recommendation of a friend, I tried out one studio, Back Bay Yoga, and quickly became a regular at three very different classes. The first, Forrest Yoga, was high impact, working the body with breath until every pore was oozing with sweat. The second class concentrated more on the flow of movement, as its name, Vinyasa, implies. The third class, and undeniably the one I looked forward to most, was a restorative class, concentrating on gentle moves to stretch the body into acceptance and absorption of what the



day had brought. Each of these practices left lasting impressions upon my being, what I've termed mountain moments, and deserve a more in-depth explanation of technique and poses. Following this discussion will be an attempt to examine my very basic practice of yoga theologically. This paper will deal only with my personal experience of yoga. While yoga is incredibly rich and diverse, with a long history originating in India prior to the wide spread adapting of the practice within the United States, I will be examining three forms of yoga that have been thoroughly Westernized.

Mountain Moments in Yoga

Forrest Yoga, developed by Ana Forrest, focuses upon drawing heat through the center of the body through breathing. Each class began in a seated pose with the instructor guiding the students to gradually increase the pace and depth of the breath. The preferred poses are often more challenging versions of standard yoga poses, for example, dolphin pose for downward facing dog (down dog), pictured below. Leg lifts, deep bends and long holds in difficult, muscle straining positions are required. One of the most difficult moves is a core strengthening exercise involving the legs extended at a 90° angle from the core, clenching a rolled up mat between the thighs. From



this point, the head is lifted off the ground, the legs are extended further, and an attempt is made to touch an elbow to the opposite leg. After doing several of these exercises, the concentration of the class increases, moving on to more intensely strengthening moves, such as warrior, goddess, and sun salutations (which will be explained in depth under Vinyasa yoga). Near the end of class, prior to the traditional ending in *Shavasana*, or corpse pose, the instructor would lead and encourage the class to practice a very advanced move, such as headstand, splits, or arm balances.

I never failed to leave class totally soaked through from sweat, a little sore and a lot amazed that I had lasted through the entire class. After a few weeks, though, the soreness the next day failed to appear, I became stronger and my muscles more defined. I learned the vocabulary specific to the class including the names for the poses and individual types of breath, and how to vocalize my pain in holding the poses past comfort. Instead of holding the noise inside, we were encouraged by the instructor to release the pain through grunts and exhalations. Hearing the others in my class sighing through poses I also found difficult encouraged me to hold them for the duration, knowing I was not the only one who was being challenged. The auditorial affirmation gave me the courage to persevere in the face of difficulty.

However, my mountain moment, when I felt awed and encouraged by my own practice bearing fruit, occurred during one of the advanced practice moments. For several weeks, in this class as well as several others, the final advanced move was to work on handstands. This particular move involves kicking straight up from a down dog position, using the momentum of the kick combined with the strength of the abdominal muscles to come to a perfect balance on the hands, arms fully extended, creating a line from mat to toes. There were various stages to this process: kicking up against the wall, kicking up without going anywhere just to get down the rhythm, or working with a partner to take turns kicking up into the waiting hands to help get the feel of balance in the position.

Although I had been practicing the moves in several different classes, I continued to feel nervous for a number of reasons. I was afraid of falling over and crashing on my bottom, making myself appear foolish. I was afraid of failing, not getting on my hands regardless of how hard I tried. I felt that my arms could not be strong enough to support my considerable frame. I kept trying, practicing, but I never really believed that I could, in fact, get the timing correct with the momentum to get my feet directly above my hands. Strangely enough, one day when I was practicing with a partner, I actually succeeded in getting my feet up far enough for my partner to take hold of them. I couldn't remain in the position for very long, but the feeling of euphoria in knowing that I could get into the position after all my fears is indescribable. While I haven't had the opportunity to attempt a handstand since this moment, I know that the next time I do I will go into the move with the knowledge that I had been there before. If I got there once, I know that the next time will not be as difficult, scary or unknown.

While Forrest Yoga is fantastic for both working my muscles and in helping me overcome my fears, Vinyasa Yoga helped me connect my breath with my bodily movements. Vinyasa yoga is an offshoot from Astanga yoga, and consists of patterns of repetitive motion. A



good portion of the practice is made up of Sun Salutations, a set pattern of exercises which begin in a standing position and, through fluid movements in bends, jumps and the rising and lowering of the body in various patterns, a cycle of motion is enacted. Often, standing positions to work on balance, and long stretches were also incorporated into the practice. Once again, we would open by sitting in silence and close by lying in corpse position.

The mountain moment found within this practice not one based in one moment. Within each movement of the Sun Salutation is the ability to flow into the next, each individual movement providing the starting place for the next. The ritual of movement in precise, choreographed ways, first one movement, then another, followed by another allowed an amazing insight of boundary, especially when timed by my breath. While there may have been a number of people sharing the practice in the room, after a while the instructor would inevitably tell us to move at our own pace for an unknown time, switching positions within a breath. At some point in the practice, after I had been doing Sun Salutations long enough to have memorized the pattern, the flow was all there was.

Breath in, forward bend. Breath out, stretch out from the back, creating a table top. Breath in, jump back into down dog. Breath out, plank position. Breath in, cobra/up dog. Breath out, tuck the toes under, down dog. Breath in, jump forward into a bend. Breath out, stand in mountain position. Repeat.



The first half of one variation of a Sun Salutation: from upper left: Mountain pose, back bend, forward fold, step back, down dog, plank, and cobra. From this point, the practitioner would move into down dog.

In the repetitions, the movements became ritualized while remaining deeply personal because of the movement's dependency on the breath. Due to the studied repetition, my mind could stop focusing on the matters of the day and instead be focused on what movement was now, how it could flow into the next, and what my body was currently feeling. This connection between my mind and body helped me to be aware of my muscles straining or trembling at times, where stress had created tight and sore spots, and, most importantly, how my body could be connected within itself, the dependency of breath and movement on each other. Without breath, there would be no movement; without movement, there would be no need for breath.

Another important realization in the practice of Sun Salutations was where rest could be found. Each Salutation contains at least two points where the practitioner is in down dog, and

as such, it's rather unique. Instead of the body being in a state of total support, the entire pose is focused on balancing upon the hands and the feet, as pictured below. It is a basic pose, taught in almost any yoga class, and yet took me a long time to be able to get into the pose correctly. So many different muscles need to be in alignment: the pressure on the hands spread out in the first two fingers, elbows straight, the head hanging gently, the arms and shoulders turned away from the head, the spine straight, the tailbone pointed up. When I get into the pose for the first time in a practice, I perform this checklist to make sure that my body is correct, usually changing the position of my arms and perhaps bending my knees in a pedaling motion to stretch out my calves and hamstrings. But when I finally achieve the correct position, the adjustments and practice stretches pay off. The position feels right, as though every part of me is activated and challenged, just by creating an inverted "V". What makes the pose most unusual, however, is that during Sun Salutations it is often at this point in the rotation that extra breaths can be taken in order to rest from the movement. Incredibly unlikely as it may seem, down dog is restorative, challenging the idea that only when a person is fully supported by an external object is she or he able to be restored.



Breath and rest, along with balance and renewal, were also important factors in the third class I regularly attended, Restorative yoga. Quoting from the website description of the class:

When we are in balance, we feel our bodies and we become present... we do not gravitate toward addictive patterns of self-defeating behaviors such as over-eating, over-doing, over-extending, numbing-out, or involve ourselves in busy work and distractions just for the sake of it. Instead, we are more aware and in attunement with ourselves and with the world around us and naturally move toward harmony and peace.¹

This class was routinely one of the most filled classes at the studio. I believe this was due in part to the pastoral presence of the instructor, David. While leading the class through stretches and meditations, he would use humor and a gentle insistence to coax us into stretching further and becoming more aware and accepting of our emotions. Unfortunately, this instructor moved away from the studio. However, the last class I took from him provided the next mountain moment.

David's final class was very completely charged with emotion as we were lead through the normal routines of gentle stretches and twists. However, at the very end of class, during the time normally set aside for the corpse position, David, the instructor, led us through a chant. Done responsively, he would sing a phrase and the class would repeat it while seated in some form of a lotus position. The words were foreign to me and, until doing research for this

¹ www.backbayyoga.com

project, I had no idea what exactly we were saying, but through the responses shared by the entire class it was extremely meaningful. With the added knowledge of the translation of the chant, the experience increases in meaning:



**OM SAHANA VAVATU SAHANA BHUNATTU
SAHA VIRYAM KARAWAVAHAI
TEJASVINAVADITAMASTU
MA VIDVISHAVAHAI
OM SHANTI SHANTI SHANTI OM**

*Together may we be protected
Together may we be nourished
Together may we work with great energy
May our journey together be brilliant and
effective
May there be no bad feelings between us
Peace, peace, peace²*

Lotus
position

Thinking back on the experience, it was not simply the words or the emotion associated with the losing of a pastoral presence, but these two elements combined with the connection with the community of those around me created the feeling of belonging and participation in something greater than myself.

Common Threads through the Practices

Each of these classes stresses a unique aspect of yoga, taught by different groups of people taught and drawing unique groups of students receiving the lesson. Each class had its own ritual and its own expectations, but all classes required movement, breathing and trust. Within each class is a special challenge, found in outright physical exertion in building muscles, flowing movement with breath, or acceptance of self among others. When I practice by myself, I'm aware of my choices and my own ability to choose my next movement within the frameworks taught by my teachers. When I am in a class, on the other hand, I give myself over to the direction of someone else, trusting in her or his guidance and ability to demonstrate various poses, even those which are quite difficult. Part of the trust is built through the teachers' correction of poses. Proper form is essential to yoga practice in order to gain the most from each movement without risking injury. In order to correct improper poses, it is often necessary for the instructors to gently push or move a limb to a better position. There have been many times that such a correction has helped me to gain a better understanding of where my body needed to be in order to get the most stretch from a particular pose.

² From the Kato Upanishad found at <http://www.yogaholidays.net/magazine/mantras.htm>



The pose pictured, half pigeon, has arrows to demonstrate all the different lines of muscles stretched. The job of the instructor is to make sure that the students safely perform the poses with the addition of props, suggesting ways to move into correct alignment of limbs and body parts.

From the description of the classes above, an obvious link between these various class forms is the poses themselves. While each class does contain a specific set of poses, there is some overlap. All of them offer some degree of fluidity, allowing for the poses to be more or less challenging, depending upon the individual practitioner. They also depend upon muscle strength and flexibility, two attributes which are not usually paired. Strength is required for supporting the body in positions not normally found outside of practice, such as handstands, dolphin pose, and the repeating patterns or long holds required of various poses. A third element in each practice is that of balance. Many of the more advanced poses require standing on one leg or having the legs extending from the core in unusual ways.

Another feature of the classes is the fact of others being present, creating a communal aspect of shared breath and being. From the first class in which I participated, teachers have stressed focus on individual abilities, without judgment or comparison to others. Because most of the classes I participate in are open to people of all levels, people of all levels are in the class. Beginners are able to place their mats next to someone who has practiced for decades. While those who have been practicing for a long time are capable of the most advanced variations, the teachers themselves will often admit to struggling with a particular form, creating an atmosphere of humility where all are accepted at the level where they are. However, there is a strong current of trying new things, working within various intensities to see how far a person

can push herself before returning to the known.

Participating in a class can highlight the ability of each person to grow, challenge herself, demonstrate the correct way to experience the pose, and encourage beginners to persevere in their practice.



The communal aspect is also apparent in the breathing exercises and the frequent partner work (as mentioned in the paragraph above on handstands).

Each class begins with a set amount of seated breath work, followed by frequent reminders to breath

through the poses. As mentioned in the Forrest Yoga section, often times the breathing throughout the class informs and challenges one practitioner to stay within the pose longer than if there was complete silence. The joint struggle within a challenging position held for an unknown, extended time creates unity by lessening the frustration of solitude. The practice of breathing during a difficult pose is known as *ujjayii* breathing, a groaning hiss from deep in the

back of the throat as the breath is released. By using deep breathing as a vocalization of what is happening throughout the body, the class remains connected and united in difficulty. I have found that I hold poses longer when in a class, surrounded by others obviously being challenged, than on my own.

Spirituality of Yoga

In the midst of the physical happenings of the yoga practice, there is a deep spiritual connection as well. Each time I practice yoga, I feel the connection between my body and my breath, an awareness of who I am and how I've come to be that way, and God's presence in the room full of people breathing and moving in similar but individualized ways. Although it's not quite the same, there is a sense of community when the word *Om* is chanted by 30 or so people all at once that I have only occasionally felt while the Lord's Prayer is being said. I find myself using the breathing practices as taught by yoga as breath prayers throughout the day, when I find my stress and anxiety levels rising. It's a full body and spiritual connection that gives me peace, as well as each movement knowingly being a gift of God.

Theologically Thinking about Yoga

All of the elements named above participate in the theology behind a yoga practice. The facets of connection, ritual, breath and acceptance combined with physical movement allow for comfort and challenge within a body. Each of these facets will be further explained in the following paragraphs.

History and experience has shown that human beings are social animals. Whenever able, they form social groups to share burdens of life, such as child care, food collection, and construction of shelter. These groups are not always constructive, however, as the long list of wars and even longer lists of conflicts between groups proves. Connection, therefore, is a positive way of knowing and allowing another person to be who she or he is. Within the practice of yoga, this definition of connection is realized by the shared respect of the teacher leading the course who reminds the class to focus on self rather than engage in competition, and through the guided practice itself. While much of this connection is based upon the respect of the teacher, there is a sense of connection in expectations as well. Each person who came for the lesson is in the studio for the lesson. Having the shared focus of being present for yoga connects the students to the teacher and to the other students. The occasional partner work confirms this connection, as each person's practice can be influenced by the aid of another. However, the bond between fellow students who meet in class is usually rather weak. The mindset of coming to a place to practice yoga and the focus on individual improvement tends to prevent strong social bonds from arising.

Another area of strong connection is the connection between mind and body. Yoga practice depends on the practitioner's awareness of what her body is doing at any particular time, listening to the muscles and feeling the stretch to know when enough is enough. The movement of yoga also allows for the mind to occasionally take comfort in know that the body is capable of moving on its own, preventing over analysis of past events and anxiety by remaining connected to the present moment and stirrings. The connection between mind and

body can also function in the opposite direction: the mind can challenge the body to perform some motion that is out of the usual. (One example of this would be in the handstand mountain moment above.) In this way, the connection between mind and body is vital to the yoga practice, and can spill over into other parts of a practitioner's life, grounding a person in the present reality to know what is occurring around her.

The second theological characteristic is that of ritual, or ceremony within yoga. The rituals within the particular yoga classes in which I participated have been described above. However, one of the rituals not yet mentioned is that of the opening *Om* and the closing *Namaste*. Practice, regardless of which sort, would open and close with these two words, framing each experience within the known, despite what exercises actually were done. Ritual marks a person's day, creating boundaries and marking time off into sections. Some people need more ritual, others feel too bound by it, but each person has it to some extent, in some form. Often ritual is tinged with religious overtones, such as the sacraments, a wedding or a funeral (speaking from a Protestant perspective) or a worship service, but it also is found within eating, hygienic, dressing, and shopping habits in the individual and cultural levels. Ritual is theological because ritual roots people in the present while reminding what came before with hope for the future. In yoga, it is the beginning practice with the perfect word *Om*, and ending with the wish for peace.

The third theological marker is that of breath. On a purely human biological level, breathing is the exchange of gases within the lungs, inhaling oxygen and exhaling carbon dioxide. Breath is a marker of life; a person who does not breathe for extended periods of time is considered dead. Perhaps because it is so important, it is an automatic function, often unnoticed unless a person is unable to breathe freely. Contrary to the lack of awareness of breath in every day life is the practice of yoga. The breath is carefully attended, its path through the esophagus and into the lungs followed in the imagination. Often, instructors will ask the students to send the breath to tight areas to relieve tension, taking advantage of the restorative power of the breath. Breath regulates the flow from one pose to another with the Sun Salutation practice. During some warm ups, the class is instructed to breathe together, controlling the inhaled and exhaled on the teacher's cues, reaffirming the essential life which courses through each student. At the end of the class, during *Shavasana* pose, corpse pose, the students lie on their backs, arms by their sides, palms upwards, feet slightly apart and ankles rolled out to the side. This pose is the only one which supposes no stretch at any point. The only instruction is to simply be. However, when this time of relaxation is ended, attention is once more drawn to the breath, a reminder that the difference between life and death is that essential breath, moving in and out of the body.

Acceptance, the fourth indicator of theology within yoga, refers to self acceptance as opposed to the usual doubt. Speaking from personal experience, there have been times when I have felt ashamed and overcome with doubt in my abilities or my self. Through the focus on the present in yoga, I can remind myself of the basic parts of myself which are good and function as they ought, and in fact are beautiful in the movement. It is the times that I accept myself as I am in the moment that I feel most able to be accepted by others and by God. I believe that yoga makes this acceptance possible by micro-focusing on a small area, limited by the mat on which I practice, and whatever movements happen in any particular moment. During much of my practice, my eyes are closed or focused on an inanimate object, preventing

me from comparing myself to others and instead on the internal emotions and tensions of my muscles. I believe that the majority of people have doubts and insecurities as a part of the brokenness of humanity. Because humans desire connection with others, people will also look for ways to compare themselves with others, creating doubts when they come up short. While this view is highly simplified and lacks the diversity found within the human race, I believe it to be true, at least within the culture of the United States of America. Through yoga and other internalized disciplines, such as prayer, meditation, and running, attention is taken away from being accepted by others and instead focused upon self awareness and acceptance. If the body is not intrinsically good, why bother with attempting to improve flexibility and strength? To accept the body sometimes may require accepting the mind, busy as it may be. Yet, acceptance is a slippery slope: if the body is accepted as good, the mind may be next. If the mind is accepted, then the path may be open to accepting other minds, other ideas and opinions.

The final theological marker, physical movement, I stumbled upon due to the lack of a disciplined, mainline practice within the Protestant Christian Churches. While there has been some interest in labyrinths recently, attention is often drawn to the senses of hearing and seeing, and, all too often within the United Methodist Church, tasting. As stated above, as human beings we are mindful and soulful, but these two things are contained within a corporeal body, which requires movement to thrive. While we are, at times, called to “be still and know that I am God,” (Psalm 46:10), to choose live in utter or even partial physical stillness would be to deny the gift of a body. Yoga, by committing to a practice, allows movement that is challenging but graceful, reflective yet flowing. Each and every muscle group experiences some motion and attention. Muscles, as the breath, are often denied attention unless they are acting up. Yoga draws attention to how the body moves, and how it can move, using what is there to press towards new poses, new challenges and new abilities, not solely within the mind, nor solely within the body, nor solely within the sole, but as a complete unit, corporeal entity of strength and being. Through focusing partial on physical movement, yoga allows practitioners the ability to use the one thing they cannot separate themselves from: their body. The practice allows for sweat, heat, and exhaustion in a very basic and good way.

Conclusion

Yoga, for me, has always been a very personal practice. It began with my mother’s encouragement and developed in a number of places and times. I have felt connections with those with whom I shared the practice through chant, encouragement when achieving a handstand, and the rhythm of my own body made explicit in movement timed with my breath. While there are negative aspects of yoga, such as the use of yoga purely as an exercise regiment, the culture of consumerism pressuring yoga practitioners towards unnecessary purchases and the unhinging of the practice from its original purposes, there is still a wealth of theological treasure to be found within Yoga: the ability to feel connected with others and the self flowing into acceptance; the ritual physical practice linked with the breath.

For me, God is in the beauty and grace of the postures, the energy which flows from each separate muscle and sinew to join together, creating a bodily awareness, capable of learning, of overcoming challenges and finding comfort in unlikely places, such as down-dog. God is in the acceptance of my body as I acknowledge what I can do with it today and the

possibilities present in the tomorrow. God is in the breath, the *ruâh*, moving in and out with or without attention drawn specifically to it. God is also in the shared practice, the emptying of myself at the end through the *Savasana* or corpse pose. It is in this time that there is no movement but the breath, releasing the tension, stress, and heat built up throughout the yoga practice, the day, the week, and simply lying blank for a moment in an attitude of meditative wonder and power. Each practice begins with the perfect sound, flows and builds upon movement and breath, and ends with *Namaste*.

Peace.