NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

A GRACEFUL DANCE

Kathy Coffey | Jun. 26, 2009

(Dreamstime)

East & West

Limber bodies stretch, reach and fold in undulating waves of graceful yoga postures -- to a CD of Gregorian chant. While sitar, the ancient Persian instrument, is a more usual accompaniment, the harmony between the movement and the music got me thinking. Where else is there an easy accord between yoga and Christianity? What common ground do the two traditions share?

The questions become increasingly relevant as over a million people annually begin yoga. They find in it the meaning of the name, a union of soul and body. While the practice is deeply spiritual, it also has huge physical benefits. Adherents boast of increased flexibility, endurance and stress relief. A doctor told an 80-year-old patient who brings her oxygen tank to class that yoga has increased her lung capacity. Enthusiasts also relish the lack of competition, the emphasis on relaxation, the break from being achievement-driven. During the final *savasana* or corpse-pose, even the most frenzied schedulers stop racing and meditate quietly.

While the benefits are beyond dispute, many who don?t have a background in Sanskrit are puzzled by the terminology. Most beginners don?t know a *paschimottanasana* (seated forward bend) from an *adho mukha svanasana* (downward dog). Cheerfully, they go along, admitting ignorance like beer-drinkers at a posh wine-tasting. ?Sure, the chardonnay has oaken undertones from aging in French caskets,? they allow. But in private, they admit it just tastes good and golden.

A more reflective stance creates a better practice. While many yoga advocates are fleeing an uptight Christianity, they?re rejecting the worst components. A church that is dogmatic, authoritarian, exclusive and sexist should be shunned. But the best of Christian practice is based on themes that correspond to the best in Buddhism.

Understanding those connections helps create a bridge between the familiar and the unfamiliar.

As scholars point out, the archetypal teachings of Jesus resonate with thinking in the major world religions. No matter how alienated Christians become from institutional religion, the words of Christ still have a hold on their

hearts. And many people practice both yoga and Christianity, blending the two in a graceful dance because they aren?t incompatible partners. While books could be written about the links, some of the most basic follow.

Breathing

?He breathed on them and said to them, ?Receive the Holy Spirit? ? (John 20:22).

The major religious traditions concur on the intrinsic connection between physical breath and spiritual life. *Pranayama*, or breathing techniques, dovetail with the emphasis on breath that permeates the Judeo-Christian tradition. In Genesis 1, God breathes life into humanity. In John?s Gospel, the post-Resurrection Jesus breathes courage and forgiveness into his confused and frightened friends. ?All arts are derived from the breath that God breathed into the human body,? wrote 12th-century mystic Hildegard of Bingen.

Breath is the thread connecting mind and body. So teachers of meditation focus on the breath, encouraging people to fill their lungs deeply, savoring oxygen flowing through the system. We?ve seen the calming effects of a deep breath in a stressful situation. But at times when we most need it -- something unfamiliar, scary or demanding -- we freeze, reverting to short panting. A regular yoga practice can help monitor breathing and transfer that relaxing gift to tense times.

Remembering one deep, totally relaxed breath makes us wonder why we?d settle for anything less. In the long, slow intake we draw in God?s energy and sustenance. Exhaling, like the silver swoosh of a child on a slide, we release what is harmful or controlling. Few things are more vital to physical and spiritual well-being, or more overlooked.

Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr says that for Jesus, the opposite of faith isn?t doubt; it?s anxiety. One symptom of that unconscious, fearful undercurrent is shallow breathing. Prayerful mantras in the seven-syllable rhythm of deep breaths can spring from yoga -- for example, ?In all things, teach me to trust.?

Beginner?s mind

?Unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven? (Matthew 18:3).

After a series of strenuous postures, participants look forward to curling into a ball on their mats, a posture called child?s pose. They relax with faces down and limbs drawn together, a moving meditation compared to fallen leaves. They are saying with their bodies what Jesus said when he welcomed and held the child in his arms.

The willingness to become childlike echoes the Buddhist view of the knowing mind as an obstacle. Once we think we?re experts, we stop listening or seeing. Better to adopt the beginner?s mind, which admits its ignorance, thus learning more. A helpful guideline for both spiritual life and yoga practice is, ?When you think you?ve got it, you?re delusional.? Quaker writer Parker Palmer cautions us not to lose the ?edge of not-knowing that animates the best thinking and writing.?

God often lures us into situations where we are initially terrified: a new ministry, a group of strangers, an exposure to different ideas, a place we haven?t gone before. Left to ourselves, we quake like wimps. Buoyed by grace, our faltering courage stands straight and strides ahead.

My beginner experience might be helpful here: as one who made the transition from immersion in Catholic worship, retreat direction and writing, to one whose day now feels incomplete without yoga. It all began with a three-day retreat at a Shambhala Center. I?d signed up in an unguarded moment, with an unmeditated burst of energy.

While reflection and reading in Christian spirituality were fulfilling, they weren?t addressing my neck tension, back pain and shoulder stress. As a massage therapist pointed out with brutal lack of tact, ?Your neck is a train wreck; your back is a field of boulders. People who do yoga have muscles like butter.?

That sounded so mellifluous -- ?muscles like butter.? I also admired people who saw aging as an opportunity not to calcify, but to try new challenges. Thus began the rocky road out of the comfort zone. What helped chart this unfamiliar territory was discovering parallels to the Christian teaching I knew so well.

Reverencing the body

?For God?s temple is holy, and you are that temple? (1 Corinthians 3:17).

Christians learn a tender concern for others in the world, but often fail to extend that care to ourselves. We pour toxins and stress into our one, irreplaceable body -- then wonder why we have extensive aches and pains, hip and knee replacements. With regard to our bodies, we might ask ourselves the question raised by Al Gore in regard to the environment: ?Why didn?t you act when you could??

Our neglect may stem from the element in Christianity that is body-denying, failing to affirm its marvelous strength and elegance. Dualistic forms of thinking have created a mind/body split. We focus to our peril on the spiritual dimension, not realizing how integrated we are, how closely all parts are related.

While some Christians use original sin as their starting point, Buddhists begin with basic goodness. Maybe my urge to learn yoga had been the body reaching for its own natural ease and health. St. Benedict knew 1,500 years ago the rhythm of body, mind and spirit. Our glorious bodies were made to move, yet we chain them into rigor mortis, static long before the coffin.

Yoga practitioners learn about the interconnections of soul with all the body?s parts and functions. For instance, the legs are the body?s workhorses and exuberant dancers, the mind a passenger floating on their support. Our necks and backs get tired because we ask them to support us in ways they weren?t designed to do. We frequently hunch forward (as we drive, type or cook), but rarely balance that stance with a backward counterpose to keep the spine supple.

Christians call this interconnectedness the doctrine of the Mystical Body. ?As it is, there are many members, yet one body. The eye cannot say to the hand, ?I have no need of you,? nor again the head to the feet, ?I have no need of you.? ? Paul?s comparison of the human body to an intangible community of people rests on each part of the body performing its specific role, balancing each other.

Most learning happens through gradual increments, until we finally understand a conversation in another language or achieve a yoga position that had escaped us before. Then we?re surprised at how tiny steps have formed a sure, steady path. Jesus? metaphors for such incremental growth were a miniscule mustard seed that becomes a large bush, sheltering the birds of the air, or a few grains of leaven lifting the lump of dough. When,

after approximately 7,854 downward dogs, my instructor commented, ?That?s a bit better,? I felt a wild, un-Buddha-like sense of accomplishment. After all, it can take five years to loosen the hamstring.

Letting go/relaxing

?For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life?? (Matthew 16:26).

Much of yoga is ?getting ourselves out of the way.? Where have we heard that before? Jesus referred to a grain of wheat falling to the ground and dying, seeding more growth. Yet we live in a driven culture, hell-bent on success. Yoga is one way to bridge the gap between belief and practice.

We profess that God is in charge, taking care of our most intimate needs. Relaxing (which we do seldom) pays tribute to that. Being anxious (which we do often) denies it. When, even subconsciously, we carry anxiety in our bodies, it gets dumped onto those we love. ?You?re strongest when you?re relaxed? was helpful advice from a yoga instructor whose gentle touch could sculpt the body into a more graceful, less painful position.

Another valuable Buddhist guideline is to move *towards*, not away from, an irritation. One teacher gave the example of George Bush declaring after 9/11 that he?d ?annihilate terrorism.? We know that?s impossible.

On the other hand, the Dalai Lama, asked what he would say to Osama bin Laden, replied, ?I wouldn?t say anything. I?d listen and try to understand why he?s so angry.? Difficult as that teaching may seem, it echoes Jesus? ?Take up your cross [don?t run from it] and follow me.?

Sometimes our fears prevent fuller living -- and scripture repeats the message, ?Be not afraid.? Yoga is a risk: Who wants to look klutzy? Yet most teachers encourage people to take gentle steps and be patient with themselves. Gradually they learn how relaxing into a difficult posture eases the stress.

Like the contrast between breathing at its best and our usual style, so yoga isn?t the contortion of the body. But our habitual stances are: hunched over a desk, wedged into an airplane, car or bus seat, stuck on an assembly line, yoked to a phone.

Opening new channels in the body also creates new pathways for the brain. Jesus fousnd the borderlands, for instance between Tyre and Sidon, fruitful places where he often taught important truths. The unsettling admonition, ?Every movement is perfect. No movement is perfect? may boggle the Western mind. But wrestling with such ironies and engaging different streams of thought prompts creativity.

The hope of transformation

?His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became dazzling white? (Matthew 17:2).

Every yoga session ends with a profound bow between teacher and students, all saying, ?Namaste.? The word means, ?The God or light in me reverences the God or light in you.? Some conclude their practice with a dedication to the larger world. Conscious of the luxury that enables them to practice yoga, they consecrate it to those who don?t have such perks. The prayer concludes, ?May all beings enjoy profound brilliant glory.? That carries echoes of the Transfiguration: We are all called to become as radiant as Christ was on the mountaintop.

Ultimately both traditions lead towards the transformation of awkward human beings into graceful images of divinity. With centuries of wisdom, yoga provides stepping stones on that journey. Sometimes it?s startling to look into a mirror and recognize oneself in a line of people whose arms bend like ballerinas and whose fingers sweep upwards like five-pointed stars. Yet such a reach reflects the very essence of who we most truly are.

We say we are sons and daughters of a great and gracious God, heirs to the eternal kingdom. Yet do we carry

ourselves regally? Are we secure enough in our identity as God?s beloved children to abandon competition and relax into a divine parent?s assiduous care? There is a good reason why 15 million people around the world practice yoga. As citizens of one planet, we are united there in a space where the only achievement is rest.

Kathy Coffey gives retreats and workshops nationally and internationally. Her latest book is The Art of Faith (Twenty-Third Publications).

The Next Step FORWARD [1]

DONATE NOW [1]

Enjoy this article?
Help support more like it by **donating today!** [1]

Source URL (retrieved on *08/04/2015 - 20:19*): http://ncronline.org/news/spirituality/graceful-dance

Links:
[1] http://ncrnews.org/webathon/donate/article-end