

A CHRISTIAN YOGA

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IN men's inheritance, the most famous of the techniques which set free spiritual energy and lead us beyond the limits where we commonly vegetate is clearly yoga. The word indicates a whole *world* of practices and doctrines in which it is necessary from every point of view to distinguish very diverse tendencies. It may even happen that these tendencies are contradictory. The complete *ensemble* is in fact the heritage of the past five thousand years¹ in an abundant civilization, where some go as far as treating opposites as the same.

We have now good guides to clear our way in this astonishing complexity.² They lead us to recognize as an axis in it, classical yoga, as codified by Patanjali in the fourth or fifth century A.D., unshaken in spite of the diverse interpretations of it and in spite of the fact that its very nature as a spiritual technique allows it to be adapted to differing persons and differing groups. Yoga is 'mad with innovation'.³ We as western Christians are asking ourselves, 'Is a Christian yoga possible? Is it desirable? And what can yoga as it exists now teach us?' To answer these questions we must, as it were, take up our position in the axis, at the same time acquainting ourselves with what goes on off the axis.

We are going to try and distinguish first the *aim* of yoga, then the *mentality* which seems to go with it (whether this mentality gives rise to yoga or whether yoga itself tends to produce this mentality), and lastly the *means* which yoga uses.

I

The Aim

The word yoga implies the idea of joining together. The discipline of which it is the name unifies the complex world which the

1 The ancient civilization of India, discovered recently enough, seems to have known yoga. This civilization stretches as far back as the third millenium B.C., according to Masson-Oursel as far as the fourth (*Le Yoga*, p. 18).

2 See the bibliographical note which will conclude this article.

3 Masson-Oursel, in the work mentioned, p. 13.

ascetic presents to himself—ensures 'the cohesion of his vital forces'.⁴ In modern language yoga, if it succeeds, gives access to 'the highest level in the biological succession',⁵ where the man set free integrates the preceding levels. It would be 'the total experience of human life'.⁶ That is why it tends to produce mastery of the self deep within, the Self, in its complete consciousness. *Setting oneself free* is equivalent to forcing open another plane of existence, to appropriating to oneself a *mode of being* transcending the human condition⁷—the ordinary condition common to men and the inconveniences attendant upon it. 'The end of classical yoga is perfect *autonomy, ecstasy*',⁸ as opposed to any kind of *ecstasy*. In our time it is indeed necessary to insist on this contrast, when the marvellous is often taken for the spiritual to such a degree that certain drugs are asked to provide spiritual intensity. The exaltation so produced is offered in vain as an inner enchantment; it is in fact a going out of oneself. The superconsciousness which classical yoga aims at, on the other hand, being that of the Self, can be obtained only by the self, in doing away with the empirical selves, not by exciting them, and in a complete and voluntary lucidity. It is *autonomy, ecstasy*—M. Olivier Lacombe uses the word *esseulement* ('being alone') to translate the word for the supreme end which Patanjali defines as 'the constant and motionless resting of spiritual power in its own form'.⁹

It is 'the experience of the existential depth of the Self'.¹⁰ There is in that a very great human richness. According to Christian vision, the mystery of every spiritual existence is an absolute, since every spiritual nature endowed with intelligence and with freedom is, by that alone, the image of the Transcendent.¹¹ It is an *absolute*: a reality which can be affirmed in itself, its relations with the transient cut. The experience of this absolute, lived and savoured, is a sort of *natural mysticism* authentic in its own order.

In the course of the last twenty years M. Jacques Maritain, M. Olivier Lacombe and M. Louis Gardet have pointed out in a

⁴ Masson-Oursel, in the collection *Yoga* (Cahiers du Sud), p. 6.

⁵ Dr Thérèse Brosse, *ibid.*, p. 119.

⁶ J. Masuy, *ibid.*, p. ix.

⁷ Eliade, p. 18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

⁹ Quoted by Gardet, *Revue Thomiste*, 1954, p. 310, n. 1.

¹⁰ Gardet, *Recherches de l'absolu*, Les Mardis de Dar-el-Salam, Cairo, 1951, p. 64.

¹¹ Gardet, *Revue Thomiste*, 1954, p. 309.

precise and it seems definitive manner the legitimacy and the risks of such experiences of natural mysticism.¹² Although they go against the spontaneous tendencies of nature one talks, in their connection, of *natural* mysticism in contrast to *supernatural* mysticism, which is the experience of the inmost life of God, Father, Son and Spirit. The serious question posed is whether these experiences are or are not favourable to the union of the soul with the living God, which is, in the end, the only important thing to the Christian.

We must answer that they can be 'either a temptation, or, on the contrary, a help'.¹³ And we must certainly add that the risk seems to outweigh the chances of benefit. It is too strong a temptation to set about playing the virtuoso of the most sublime spirituality, too strong a temptation to delight complacently in the experience of one's own plenitude. In what respect then can the success of a training in yoga be a help in the life of friendship with God? In that it is necessary to possess oneself in order to give oneself. This assertion can be contradicted by saying that it is, on the absolute contrary, a question of *losing oneself*, a principle reiterated by our Lord with so much force.¹⁴ That is to argue the gravity of the risk pointed out just now. Whether we consider man or whether we consider the mystery of God, there is no worse failure than this supreme success—a too sure possession of oneself. Real success is the humble ceasing from oneself of love, and nothing compromises this more dangerously than recalling oneself to oneself. All this is certainly true. But between this closing upon oneself in possession of oneself and the opening out which love needs and of which love is the principle the distinction is singularly mysterious. In the end only God knows what takes place. The closing is not inevitable; only it is a fearful risk. When we say that it is necessary to possess oneself in order

12 J. Maritain, *Quatre essais sur l'esprit dans sa condition charnelle*, ch. III, 1939; O. Lacombe, 'On Indian Yoga' in *Etudes carmélitaines*, October 1937; 'An Example of Natural Mysticism, India', in *Etudes carmélitaines*, October, 1938; 'Natural Mysticism in India', in *Revue Thomiste*, January, 1951; L. Gardet, 'Some Research on Natural Mysticism', in *Revue Thomiste*, 1948, pp. 76-111; 'Natural Mysticism and Supernatural Mysticism in Islam', in *Recherches de Sciences religieuses*, 1950, pp. 321-365; *Recherches de l'absolu*, Les Mardis de Dar-el-Salam, Cairo, 1951; *Expériences mystiques en terres non chrétiennes*, 1 vol., Alsatia, 1953; 'True and False Mysticism' in *Revue Thomiste*, 1954, pp. 298-334. (This last article is of capital importance, as are also pages 322-326 of the article in *Rech. de Sc. Rel.*) M. Lacombe and M. Gardet are preparing a book on *The Experience of the Self*.

13 Gardet, *Les Mardis de Dar-el-Salam*, Cairo, 1951, p. 66.

14 Luke 9, 24; 17, 23; John 12, 25.

to give oneself we are thinking of a realization of the conscious being. Disciplines can help this. It is not necessarily egocentric. At all stages of psychical and spiritual development it is a spirit of *oblation* which is essential to man and most likely to lead to his own fulfilment. This spirit can be disinterested. It can be inspired by supernatural love.

Such observations lead us to perceive more clearly where the gravest spiritual risks of yoga lie. From beginning to end the important thing is *orientation*. In awakening the self the intention which may have been, to start with, that of divine love can become entangled in too great a concern for an interior experience more and more abundant and more and more effective. The yogis of India, the sufis of Islam, the adepts of Zen, who call forth their 'abrupt' and peremptory awakening have no other end in their efforts than the brightness of their own fire. That in fact they come upon the living God who hides himself there is possible, and that is God's secret. But the Christian knows in whom he believes and hopes, and whom he loves, *always beyond every experience*.

This certainty of God's transcendence severely limits the claims of experience to be its own norm. The yogis tell us, 'You who remain within the limits of ordinary experience cannot judge the results we reach. Join us in these regions of the interior world where we are advancing and you will see.' There is some truth in this way of talking; it is true that we cannot know what any spiritual fulfilment is in itself unless we have ourselves obtained it. But whatever it may be, we know that our God is infinitely beyond it, and that he gives himself only to humble love.

A reaching beyond ordinary spiritual possibilities with their psychological and bodily props is not necessarily 'diabolical' or 'Promethean'. And I mean a reaching beyond which is accomplished thanks to disciplines set in motion *by man*.¹⁵ We ought to understand once for all Pascal's *mot*, 'man surpasses man'. One of the principal senses in which this is true is that man is not himself unless he ceaselessly passes beyond himself, and in this his opening out to the infinite gives him endless possibilities. The encounter of the western world with yoga seems particularly 'providential' today; 'our civilization calls on us to solve the problem of man and his relations with the universe'; yoga presents itself as exactly

¹⁵ I have discussed this question of principle in my article, 'The Deification of Man', in *La Vie Spirituelle*, November, 1949.

the secular science which has specialized in this research.¹⁶ All our prayers, all our faculties of understanding, all our efforts must surely be awakened by the prospects this opens up. But let us not get excited in a vague way. What exactly are the gains of yoga? At the price of how many losses? Do the few who obtain a higher realization of themselves necessarily confine themselves to 'being alone'? Is it of the essence of this last phenomenon that they should become indifferent to the world? Or can their success really be of some benefit to their fellowmen?

Nowhere, yet, have I found any serious answer to these questions.

II

The Mentality

It is now a question of seeing whether the Christian spirit is capable of dissociating the doctrines and practices of yoga from those conceptions and ways of existence, that whole mentality, with which in India they are bound up, and which seem incompatible with that spirit. I believe that this dissociation is possible. Curiously enough it seems to me all the easier in that it is a question of freeing yoga from elements which are *more* inconsistent with the Christian spirit. The greatest difficulties in fact do not come from the ideas which are theoretically most important.

This dissociation is all the more necessary because too many people cherish equivocations. They contaminate Christianity by presenting as proceeding from it, for a Christian, Hindu conceptions which the Christian faith cannot allow. For instance a writer tells us that *Karma* is simply 'the theory of the consequence of actions'. This is to slur over the essential point. Christians cannot understand these consequences in the Hindu way, which takes for granted the transmigration of souls. Now in India, if yoga proposes as its end the freeing of man from human and cosmic conditions, it is in order to provide an escape from this supposed fatality of reincarnations. But there is no need to believe in reincarnation to secure better conditions for freedom. Even so, it is necessary to do this with one's eyes open.

In the same way this emancipation from earthly conditions is inspired among the Hindus by their doctrine of cosmic illusion,

¹⁶ Dr Brosse's expressions in *Approches de l'Inde*, volume edited by Cahiers du Sud in 1949, p. 312.

by *Maya*. For some the universe is purely illusory; for others it exists in a real sense, but it exists and continues to exist only because of men's *ignorance*.¹⁷ This is a capital point but it is easy to purify doctrines and conduct from such attacks on contingent being. The Christian believes in the dogma of creation; he proclaims with his God that this creation is good and very good;¹⁸ he must nevertheless be emancipated from 'the elements of the world'.¹⁹

The atheism and what one is tempted to call the pantheism of Hindu yoga are still more serious in Christian eyes. Yet they leave the way open for the charity of the Holy Spirit to animate this yoga eventually. In classical yoga there is scarcely any question of God. This is perfectly logical, since yoga is the art of obtaining from oneself all that one can. Patanjali made a rule for the yogi to concentrate on the Lord, *Içvara*, and to invoke him in order to hasten deliverance. But this 'God' is not a person; perfectly inactive, he is only an 'archetype of the yogi',²⁰ projected by him outside himself; he is, as it were, the focus of the yogi, the vanishing point of his perspective, nothing more. And certainly we Christians, for whom God is the life of our life, cannot allow this self-sufficiency of the creature. Yet it is clearly the most honest course that men without revelation can take, to try to exploit their own resources.

For some fifteen hundred years or more a way of 'devotion' has interfered more or less with the way of classical yoga. This is *Bhakti*, and with regard to this we have mixed feelings. On the one hand it is a joy to see a love for God awaken in spiritual 'ways', since this love must surpass them. We have every reason to think that in fact it is normally true charity which assumes the aspect of *Bhakti*, and sometimes in an heroic degree, as, it would seem, in a Ramakrishna. But on the other hand one is very uneasy indeed about its aberrations, about its frequent sentimentality, more than that about the *mawkish insipidity* with which M. Masson-Oursel reproaches it,²¹ and about the vagueness of its object (without revelation it cannot be otherwise); and it is hard to avoid the impression that this devotion combines ill with the disciplines of

¹⁷ Eliade, *Le Yoga*, p. 23.

¹⁸ Gen. 1, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31.

¹⁹ Gal. 4, 3.

²⁰ Eliade, *Le Yoga*, p. 88. (The author writes *Yogin*, according to the international usage of scholars.)

²¹ *Le Yoga*, pp. 44, 70.

yoga, that far from animating them it remains a stranger to them. Will explicit charity succeed any better in that? We would willingly believe so, but there lies one of the essential problems.

As for the so-called pantheism of India, does it always deserve this name? Is the *Self* which yoga sets free a *divine spark*? Certain people can think so, but it is not necessary. It is another thing to conceive as Plotinus did, and as the Upanishads teach, that there is 'a pure and simple identity between the metaphysical centre (in each of us) and the universal centre . . . an identity which needs only to be *experienced and recognized* and which is not to be realized since it is eternally real and actual.'²² Such philosophic interpretations, with the negation of a personal and transcendent God, can spill over into pantheism, but it is not inevitable. One can quite well refrain from taking 'the experience of the existential depth of the self' for a grasp of God himself. In any case faith would correct, in that matter, at its very root, a yoga which would be practised by true Christians.

More dangerous perhaps, because touching more nearly on practice, would be the psychological and moral materialism with which yoga is stamped. 'There is no soul; mental functions are biological.'²³ The Samkya-Yoga considers all psychical experience as a simple 'material' process, and its ethics bears the marks of this; purity, goodness, are not spiritual qualities but a 'purification' of the 'subtle matter' represented by consciousness. . . . The difference between the cosmos and man is a difference only of degree, not of essence.²⁴ Yoga is supposed to emancipate from *Karma* by scouring off from the soul the traces of its actions. The mentality which appears in such conceptions is naturally that of experimenters, and contributes towards shutting them up inside their own experience. It would be a very bad thing in a Christian. But Christians have the means to preserve themselves from it while at the same time profiting from the realism of yoga. The life of the

22 O. Lacombe and L. Gardet, *Revue Thomiste*, 1954, p. 313, n. 2. It is the well-known identity of *âtman* and *brahman*.

23 To tell the truth such 'materialist' statements demand closer consideration. M. Oliver Lacombe is kind enough to point out to me that in this respect there have existed throughout the centuries two sorts of yoga. One is completely biological, but if the other appears to us 'materialist' it is because it considers as being of the order of 'matter' all that is on this side of pure Spirit. One must no more make a mistake over this conception or this vocabulary therefore than over that of St Paul, when the Apostle talks about 'the flesh'. Yet even in this second variety there is at least a distinct materialist tendency and practically a whole mentality involved.

24 Eliade, *Le Yoga*, p. 37.

spirit is *conditioned*. The codes of behaviour which exploit this conditioning have much to teach us. The conception which those who have successfully focused them outside Christianity have of them matters little from this point of view, so long as Christians do not allow themselves to be won over by this other mentality.

But that, after all, is what we have to worry about most. A technique as 'engaging' as this, which transforms the creature to its very depths, which extends its powers, which is to obtain for it 'possession of the self by the self in the self'²⁵— such a technique certainly risks developing the most disastrous of all professional distortions, that of the ascetic who experiments to the furthest point with human possibilities. Every professional distortion consists in gradually making the means into the end. The more spiritual the profession the more obnoxious the distortion, because the spirit is freedom and then it acts as an automatism. The more the means claim of their nature to produce the result, and the more desirable the result is, the greater the risk. I was worried about this from the very beginning of my first article. We are here considering a 'way' at the end of which there is a temptation to say, 'I am in possession of my "divinization" by my own efforts.' At all stages the ascetic takes the risk of reducing his goal to results, and when he can attain these of attributing the whole thing to the guaranteed connection between the means and the results. The true end of spiritual ways is, let us remember, a union of love with the God whose nature it is to give himself freely.

The danger is well-known in the matter of para-psychological 'powers', which yoga normally procures since they are an actualization of the psychical energy of the soul.²⁶ Now few yogis, they say, used to advance, in the classical epoch, beyond the stage where one plays with these powers, so much did they delight in exercising them like gods.²⁷ We are well aware that certain Christian monks in actual fact confuse spiritual perfections with the perfections of regular observance. How much more tempting it is to become absorbed in techniques much more powerful in their psychical if not spiritual rigour and effectiveness.

We should not forget, either, that the yogi runs the risk in other ways of being caught up in his own performance. Apart

²⁵ L. Gardet, *Les Mardis de Dar-el-Salam*, Cairo, 1951, p. 39.

²⁶ Gardet, *Revue Thomiste*, 1954, p. 318.

²⁷ Eliade, *Le Yoga*, pp. 100-101.

from the generality of men, opening his heart to the inner perception of spiritual realities of which others have usually only a gross and erroneous conception or no suspicion at all, he runs the risk of relying on this 'esotericism',²⁸ of, by comparison, despising faith,²⁹ of presuming to elevate himself above morality, and of seeing in everyday religion only a vulgar degradation of the wonderful knowledge and practice whose secrets he has learnt.

What is one to say to this, except again, and always, that these dangers are very serious and foreboding? If ever Christians practise yoga they will have to live according to a faith, a hope in divine grace, a humility and love greater than these risks.

From all our considerations we can conclude that we must not identify ourselves unreservedly with either of the two points of view into which opinion on the subject of yoga is commonly divided. Some think that a method is valid for any end. For them it would be of its nature neutral, and would take its quality only from the end to which it is applied and the spirit in which it is used. They quote the saying of Ramakrishna, 'By the light of the same lamp one man may study the Gospel and another execute a forgery.' This is too comfortable a doctrine. Careful distinctions are necessary and vigilance with respect to a mentality, a way of existence, to which the means themselves incite. Others, on the other hand, refuse yoga *a priori*, because of the whole context in which it arose, as if it could not be disentangled from that. We are beginning to see that this disentanglement is, in principle, possible, but that it demands an effort at once lucid and generous.

(To be concluded)

28 It is apparent that *esotericism* must not necessarily be conceived as hidden doctrine reserved for initiates, so that access to the realities about which it teaches is forbidden to others. Etymology should help us to correct this conception: *esoterikos* means *inner*. Normally *esotericism* must be intuition (of which everyone is, in principle, capable if he purifies himself) of those realities which we usually content ourselves with apprehending in a too material, too practical, too notional way. About that, see Schwaller de Lubicz, *Du symbole et de la symbolique*, Cairo, 1951.

29 So Alain Daniélou, in the collection *Yoga*, p. 130.