

THE MEANINGFULNESS OF YOGA TO CHRISTIAN DISCIPLESHIP

John N. Sheveland

THE ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE of comparative theology has shown repeatedly that when members of one faith cross over into the study of another, they not only learn about the new tradition, but also find their own religious commitments revitalised in ways that they could not have predicted before the encounter.¹ The ancient practice of yoga, stemming from the Hindu, Buddhist and Jain traditions of India, presents Christians with such an opportunity. It offers them a set of habits and a discipline which can empower their discipleship and spirituality. This essay aims to tease out how this might be so. First, I shall describe the broad contours of yoga as a spirituality. I shall then go on to offer some constructive suggestions about the meaningfulness of yoga for Christian living and spirituality, and I shall conclude with some remarks on the prudence that should govern this kind of spiritual appropriation.

¹ Some notable book length contributions that have helped to shape comparative theology as an academic discipline include: Francis X. Clooney, *Divine Mother, Blessed Mother: Hindu Goddesses and the Virgin Mary* (New York: Oxford UP, 2005), *Hindu God, Christian God: How Reason Helps Break Down the Barriers between Religions* (New York: Oxford UP, 2001), *Seeing through Texts: Doing Theology Among the Srivaisnavas of South India* (Albany: State University of New York, 1996), *Theology After Vedanta: An Experiment in Comparative Theology* (Albany: State University of New York, 1993); James Fredericks, *Buddhists and Christians: Through Comparative Theology to Solidarity* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2004), *Faith among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1999); Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2002); *Many Mansions? Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity*, edited by Catherine Cornille, second edition (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), *Song Divine: Christian Commentaries on the Bhagavad Gita* (Louvain and Grand Rapids: Peeters and Eerdmans, 2006); Ruben L. F. Habito, *Living Zen, Loving God* (Boston: Shambhala, 2004). Excellent essays can regularly be found in journals such as *Buddhist-Christian Ethics*, *Journal of Buddhist Ethics*, *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies*, *Studies in Interreligious Dialogue*, *Theological Studies* and *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*.

Yoga as a Spiritual Practice

The practice of yoga is a prescription, a recommendation for how to live as an *integrated* human person. The idea of integration is absolutely critical; for yoga is predicated on a diagnosis of the human condition which states that most of us are *disintegrated*, that we lack organization, clarity, and presence to ourselves, and generally that we misapprehend reality.² In yoga, and also in the traditions of Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism, individuals are seen as chronically and stubbornly misapprehending reality by failing to regulate the mind, the body and the breath, all of which have an impact on their degree of mental quietude and peace. Not only do we fail to discipline the mind; we fail to notice our failure to discipline the mind. We are sufferers without knowing it, and thus we have no possibility of putting an end to our suffering.

Our mind is the ultimate culprit in this disorder. It has a habit of attaching itself to the body's experience of sensory data, so that the impermanence and fluctuation of the external world creep their way into it, conditioning it through the cumulative effects of distraction, lack of integration and suffering.³ This suffering may be of many kinds, including the obvious pain associated with bodily injury or with loss and bereavement. Yoga also understands suffering as a condition of unsatisfactoriness in which people feel ill at ease even in what appear to be moments of happiness or pleasure—moments which are, however, the products of an unreliable, distorted mind.

To prevent such suffering, yoga seeks to discipline the way in which the mind first perceives, and then forms attachments and aversions to, external realities. Yoga transforms people by teaching them a set of skills which quietens the transient affects that assault the mind; it gets people to re-view themselves; and the result is a joy (*sukha*) that rings more loudly and more profoundly than the fleeting and ultimately empty moments of happiness that the distorted mind enjoyed. Yoga is a

² Recent translations of the *Yoga Sūtras* and accessible survey materials include: *The Yoga-Sutra of Patanjali*, translated by Georg Feuerstein (Rochester, Va: Inner Traditions, 1979); Georg Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition: Its History, Literature, Philosophy, and Practice* (Prescott, Az: Hohm, 1998), *The Deeper Dimension of Yoga: Theory and Practice* (Boston: Shambhala, 2003); T. K. V. Desikachar, *The Heart of Yoga: Developing a Personal Practice*, revised edition (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1999); *Yoga: Discipline of Freedom*, translated by Barbara Stoler Miller (New York: Bantam, 1998); *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, translated by Christopher Chapple and Yogi Ananda Viraj (Delhi: Sri Satguru, 1990).

³ Desikachar, *The Heart of Yoga*, 9–12.

spiritual practice aiming at the unification of what has been severed. Some basic definitions of it include ‘to unite’, ‘to come together’ and, for theistically orientated practitioners, ‘to become one with the divine’.⁴ In these senses it qualifies within Hindu thought as a liberation teaching (*moksha-shastra*) containing an array of physical and spiritual practices focused on human integration. The so-called ‘eight limbs’ (*ashtanga*) of classical yoga are the prime metaphor for the integration and growth of personhood. They form the content of yoga and indicate just how expansive and holistic a practice it aims to be. Briefly, the eight limbs are: restraint towards others (*yama*); restraint towards oneself (*niyama*); postures (*asanas*); breath control (*pranayama*); withdrawal of senses (*pratyahara*); concentration on a single point (*dharana*); meditation (*dhyana*); and union or absorption (*samadhi*).

The ‘limb’ metaphor communicates the holistic intention of yoga practice. Just as limbs on a tree grow together and in relative proportion, and just as the limbs of a foetus *in utero* grow together and in relative proportion, so too, in yoga, these eight aspects of the human person should develop holistically in the single project of becoming more human.⁵ Not only should they develop together, but the development of each is bound up with the development of the others. No one aspect of personhood can be ignored, for that would mean atrophy of the person as such. These plural activities—these eight limbs—are gathered into an orchestrated unity, so that one progresses in postures as one progresses in breath control, concentration, focus, and right action towards others and oneself. We are now speaking of just one development that admits of distinct moments or aspects corresponding to the multiplicity of our being as people. This is without doubt a kind of humanism, one that resonates well with many aspects of Christianity. But before addressing these correspondences, let us first look at what yoga is *not*, by exposing the inadequacies of certain prevalent stereotypes.

The single project of becoming more human

What Yoga Is Not

Yoga is not reducible to a New Age spirituality. The syncretistic New Age spiritualities certainly draw on yoga, but yoga itself belongs to an ancient

⁴ Desikachar, *The Heart of Yoga*, 5–6.

⁵ Desikachar, *The Heart of Yoga*, 107.



*Patañjali, represented as the Hindu god
Ananta*

and durable spiritual path in the Hindu, Buddhist and Jain traditions. The term first appeared in the *Katha Upanishad*, written between 800 and 600 BC, and underwent steady development within the Hindu religious world. It was embraced within the Jain religious matrix in the sixth century BC by Vardhamana Mahavira, and was later incorporated into Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhist practice. The Indian author Patañjali, its most famous expositor, wrote the *Yoga Sūtra* in the second or third century AD, establishing a tradition of sustained exegesis and commentary which extends to the present day.⁶

Nor does yoga espouse a kind of ‘self-redemption’. Yoga practice cultivates the transformation of consciousness and self-realisation, the success of which can be attributed either to the disciplined effort of the practitioner or to the gracious intervention of the one the *Sūtras* call *Isvara*, or Lord. But yoga should be regarded as a religious *practice* rather than a religion—a practice which leads people closer to certain goals with respect to mind and body. It offers no independent means of ‘redemption’ in the Christian understanding of that term. Redemption in that sense is simply not within the horizon of the *Yoga Sūtra* or its commentators.

Western popular culture’s unbalanced and commodified view of yoga is not a reason to reject it. The Western (and sometimes Eastern) media, gyms and health clubs present the impression that yoga amounts

⁶ See for example *Sankara on the Yoga Sutras*, translated by Trevor Leggett (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1992); Feuerstein, *The Yoga Tradition*; Miller, *Yoga: Discipline of Freedom*; and Chapple and Viraj, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*.

to little more than a physical exercise with impressive outcomes for those seeking comprehensive bodily strength and flexibility. The reception of yoga in the West is an example of enculturation, but an impoverished one that fails to appreciate the holistic vision of human life on which the practice was originally founded long ago in India. Our Western exposure to yoga is mediated by New Age spirituality, advertising (a recent campaign by McDonald's in the US featured yoga), gyms and health clubs, even the celebrity endorsement of pop stars. We therefore do ourselves a disservice by rejecting yoga on the basis of such misunderstanding.

Ishvara-pranidhana (devotion to the Lord) need not be construed by Christians as making yoga incompatible with Christian faith. The *Yoga Sūtra* contains a provision for practitioners to become dedicated to a 'Lord' who, in their experience, bestows the grace which empowers them to progress towards their goals. This provision within the *Sūtra*, while important for those who come to yoga from a theistic faith and understand the union of *samadhi* to be union with the divine, is nonetheless a marginal theme which occupies scant space.⁷ Several commentators have held that the mention of devotion to the Lord is so casual that those nine verses could be excised from the corpus altogether without harming the coherence of the text.⁸ The emphasis that the *Sūtras* place on personal effort supports this judgment, although Georg Feuerstein and others disagree, suggesting that the marginal presence of *Ishvara-pranidhana* in the *Sūtras* is an important concession that the author Patañjali made to those who experience empowerment from a source outside themselves and who accordingly find the non-theistic systems of Samkhya and Buddhism unappealing.⁹ The *Ishvara-pranidhana* verses thus acknowledge the experience of practitioners who attribute progress in the goals of yoga to a source beyond themselves.

While Indian scholarship debates the role and importance of theism in the *Yoga Sūtra*, what should be noted for the Christian imagination is that this marginal theme poses no rivalrous challenge to a Christian understanding of God.¹⁰ The *Sūtras'* understanding of 'Lord' is different

⁷ See *Yoga Sūtra* 1: 23–28; 2: 1, 32, 45.

⁸ See Georg Feuerstein, *The Philosophy of Classical Yoga* (Rochester, Va: Inner Traditions, 1996), 11–13.

⁹ Feuerstein, *The Philosophy of Classical Yoga*, 3.

¹⁰ See Feuerstein, *The Deeper Dimension of Yoga*, 25–27,

in kind from Abrahamic understandings of God as Creator, Saviour and so Lord. The Lord of the *Sūtras* occupies a functional role as the giver of grace (*prasada*), assisting practitioners on their path. That is the only material significance the *Sūtras* assign to the Lord: the Lord is no creator; the Lord is no saviour; the Lord is not identified as Brahman, Siva, Visnu, or any other deity. Even in the mystical experience of union (*samadhi*), the text makes no indication that Isvara is party to that union. Isvara is given a functional role in the *Sūtra*, with no hint of a teleological role. The Lord simply grants a boon, and devotion to the Lord is predicated on that alone. The *Isvara-pranidhana* theme in the *Sūtras*, then, is theologically quite thin. It would need to be far more robust to be problematic for Christians.

Contributions to Christian Spirituality

Yoga is inherently pluralistic, adaptive and intended for all, and it solicits creative appropriation. When considering participation in a religious practice other than one's own, it is important to understand clearly how that tradition itself views the participation of outsiders. Many in the Roman Catholic communion are painfully aware of this with respect to celebration of the Eucharist. From the vantage point of self-described Hindus, is the practice of yoga available to religious outsiders? It is, and for three reasons.

First, the Indian expositors of yoga enthusiastically endorse it as a practice of universal import, available to all.¹¹ Secondly, relative outsiders can practise yoga because it is not a religion *per se*. The goals of yoga, rather than being properly religious, theological or dependent on a faith commitment, are spiritual, humanistic and psychological. Christian practitioners are thus by no means lending their assent to a rival faith or revelation. Thirdly, yoga has a plurality of practices, styles and modalities. It can be intensely individualised to respond to the particularities of each participant. The injunction to 'start where you are' resonates throughout many texts on yoga, acknowledging and honouring those features which make us individuals. This means that our level of preparation, our physical ability, our mental discipline, our predisposition towards certain yogic disciplines over others, are all

¹¹ This attitude permeates Desikachar, *The Heart of Yoga*.



© Mattana

Statue in a yogic pose at Wat Suthat, Thailand

taken into account; we start from them, rather than at some arbitrarily determined point which might disempower us as practitioners. Yoga is thus pluralistic and adaptive at the practical level.

Yoga is also pluralistic and adaptive at the level of culture. One need not be a Hindu or Buddhist; one need not entertain a particular conception, or any conception, of God; one's own goals need not be the same as those of others. Indeed, a central spiritual insight of the yogic tradition is that we ought not to become habituated in any of our actions or patterns of thought. Instead we should be open to novelty, to change, to doing things in different ways and to seeing others do things differently. Resisting change and novelty by succumbing to habit, repetition and sameness ultimately causes suffering.

We ought not, therefore, to confine and reify the practice of yoga itself, inhibiting its natural capacity for adaptation and renewed relevance. We ought not to grasp at the original Indian context of the practice, or at any context, as a pristine and untainted version of yoga to which all others are inferior. Consequently a Christian enculturation

of yoga is, in principle, justified, appropriate and consistent with the internal logic of yoga itself—even if some of the ways in which yoga has been consumed and commodified in the West are not. Doubts about the ‘how’ of our society’s embrace of yoga do not subtract from the judgment that yoga’s pluralistic and adaptive nature solicits a creative appropriation, by our society and others.

Yoga proposes a sexual discipline (*brahmacharya*) that can be appropriated both spiritually and critically. Yoga has more to say about sexuality than Western popular culture would suggest. The sexual discipline associated with yoga need not—or need not only—refer to stamina and endurance. This kind of stereotype wrongly associates yoga with a crass eroticism, but in fact yoga encourages physical discipline and sexual restraint. Casual, reckless or uninhibited physical gratification harms the mind—one’s own and those of others—by causing it unrest. Such gratification can do violence to both self and other, which is why the first limb of yoga (*yama*) enjoins sexual restraint (*brahmacharya*).

Commentators have interpreted the discipline of *brahmacharya* in varying ways, with some ambiguity. Sankara simply referred to *brahmacharya* as ‘the restraint of sex organs and senses by a man who frees himself from urges’.¹² The tradition has often interpreted restraint as total abstinence, on the supposition that sexual activity of any kind distracts the mind from its higher spiritual orientation and goals. But *brahmacharya* need not, and perhaps should not, mean interpreting sexual activity as at odds with sacred knowledge.

T. K. V. Desikachar, the son of the great Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, who was one of the greatest yogins of the modern era, offers a more accommodating, but no less spiritual, interpretation. Desikachar suggests that *brahmacharya* could very well entail complete abstinence—if that is what the individual chooses—but what is critical in the teaching is that one’s sexual discipline exhibit restraint: that it contribute to, and not inhibit, one’s spiritual and mental goals in yogic practice.¹³ Desikachar, a husband and father, finds little tension between the goals of yogic practice and the expectations of marriage and family life. His understanding leaves open whether an individual should be

¹² Sankara on the *Yoga Sutras*, 263.

¹³ Desikachar, *The Heart of Yoga*, 99.

celibate or sexually active, while firmly insisting that both modes find expression in ways that empower and do not obstruct the spiritual objectives of *brahmacharya*. This is a good example of yoga's individualised approach to practice. To take your individuality seriously and 'start where you are' includes the particular form one's practice of *brahmacharya* will take. For some, *brahmacharya* will call for celibacy, for others it will call for some other form of restraint. Both are, equally, *brahmacharya*.

Yoga's body-*purusa* holism amplifies Christian conceptions of body-soul holism. There is a serious danger, in today's shallow and distorted Western appropriations of yoga, of idolizing the body and ignoring yoga's unified anthropology. Our culture prizes the visually attractive, and narrowly delimits what counts as visually attractive. It also links fitness to sexuality. No doubt much of yoga's recent popularity can be attributed to its observable physical benefits, which practitioners rightly extol. They gain strength and flexibility throughout the body, a diminishment of stubborn aches and pains, more energy, and an overall sense of physical well-being that they usually struggle to describe, but experience as real and true. These are important benefits, and they are not to be disparaged or regarded as secondary because they are benefits to the body, any more than the are to be overvalued for that reason.

For these benefits only tell half the story. Yoga offers a unified anthropology, one that links together the 'gross body' and the 'subtle body' in a symbiotic relationship. The gross body is what we would refer to as our physical selves. The subtle body is the mind. Yoga aims to



© Count18

Commercialisation: yoga in a shop window

integrate the two, so that mind and body reciprocally reinforce one another. The partnership of mind and body can be understood from the perspective of each.

First, the bodily performance of postures and regulated breathing intends a deliberate effect on the mind. Remember that yoga has diagnosed our minds: they suffer from disturbing fluctuations caused by undisciplined sense organs and by a mistaken identification with what we sense, what is external to ourselves: we attach ourselves to what we like and turn away from what we dislike. Yoga has diagnosed this fluctuation of the mind, as it swings from aversion to attachment, as a cause of suffering (*duhkha*). Yoga's holism of body and mind insists that the connection between them can be turned around so that both are healthy. The performance of *asanas* (postures) and *pranayama* (regulated breathing) focuses the mind on the present, on the now, and thereby subdues its turbulent fluctuations, which the tradition likens to a monkey leaping from branch to branch. Postures and breathing are deemed important for their salutary effects on the mind.

But the relationship goes both ways. Disciplining or calming the body affects the mind, but the mind is capable of discrimination (*viveka*) and discernment with respect to the freedom that the body and its senses are allowed to exercise. The mind, in other words, can discipline the body, as the fifth limb suggests (*pratyahara*—withdrawing or holding back the senses). The key is to integrate one's approach: to discipline both body and mind and to benefit from the reciprocal effects on each, becoming a living example of the holistic metaphor of the limbs.

Christians will find much here to inspire their imagination. Conceptualising the unity of 'body' and 'soul' (Karl Barth) or 'matter' and 'spirit' (Karl Rahner) has preoccupied theologians. Barth employed a christological ordering principle to express the unity that should characterize the 'body' and 'soul' of 'real' (*wirkliche*) persons. Persons are, Barth wrote, 'wholly and simultaneously both, in ineffaceable difference, inseparable unity, and indestructible order'.¹⁴ Barth intended his language directly to mirror the language of the Chalcedonian creed describing the relationship between divine and human natures in one person, Jesus Christ. Body and soul achieve the same 'picture of peace'

¹⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.2 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1948), 325.

and inseparability as the unity of natures in the person of Christ.¹⁵ In this way, for Barth, it is equally true to say that human persons are ‘besouled bodies’ as to say they are ‘embodied souls’. Karl Rahner, too, wrote at length in bringing to expression the unity of spirit and matter, referring to matter at one point as the ‘seedbed of spirit’.¹⁶ And more recently Nancey Murphy has proposed a ‘non-reductive physicalism’, by which the soul is best understood as an emergent property of brain, not as a separate entity.¹⁷ The philosophy and the thought-world behind yoga are different from those of Karl Barth, Karl Rahner and the non-reductive physicalists. Nonetheless, yoga provides an additional attestation of a unity of the human person which Christian theologians have also been keen to express.

Of equal interest is yoga’s focus on the physical body and the way in which it can contribute to the mind’s stability, clarity and peace. This is an important reminder for those in the Christian traditions who have not adequately embraced the radical dignity of the whole human person. It is to be hoped that the grim suspicions about matter and the physical body associated with Manichaeism and Gnosticism are long gone. But in any case yoga can create new conditions in our imaginations for appreciating the full dignity of being human, including the dignity of being a physical self.

Interreligious Prudence

A very good friend of mine, well versed in Christian theology, once remarked that yoga seems to encourage practitioners to be self-preoccupied and self-centred—after having seen how some people tend to behave in yoga studios. There is so much emphasis on one’s body and paying attention to it, so much emphasis on one’s breathing and regulating it, and so much emphasis on training the mind not to succumb to distractions and anger. Do these emphases not amount to a preoccupation with oneself?

¹⁵ Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III.2, 338.

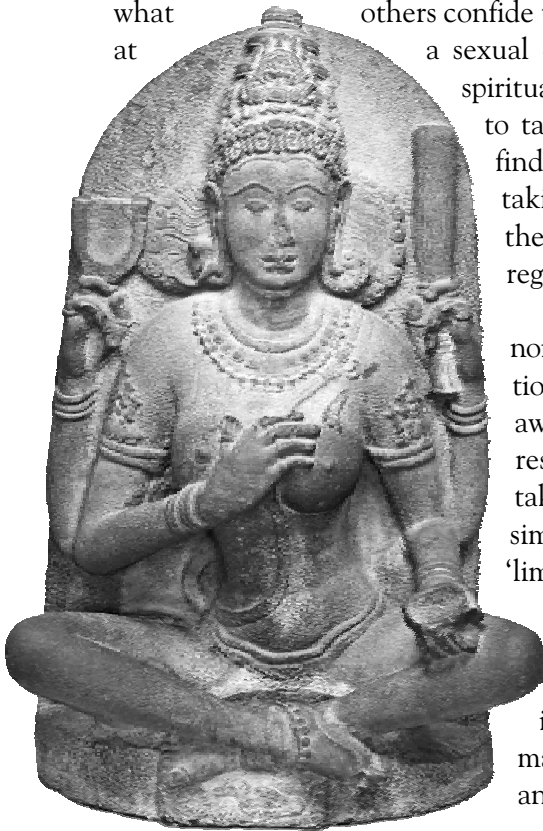
¹⁶ For his understanding of the unity of matter and spirit in the context of bodily resurrection, see Karl Rahner, ‘The Resurrection of the Body’, *Theological Investigations*, volume 2, translated by Karl-Heinz Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon, 1963), 211.

¹⁷ See *Whatever Happened to the Soul? Scientific and Theological Portraits of Human Nature*, edited by Warren S. Brown, Nancey Murphy and H. Newton Malony (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).

This is a relevant observation and should give rise to a serious caution. Fashionable yoga rarely, if ever, demonstrates to us the social and ethical injunctions that yoga places on its practitioners. Indeed, the first of the eight 'limbs' (*yama*) lists five norms for interacting with others. These norms are:

1. non-injury (*ahimsa*);
2. truthful, non-harming communication (*satya*);
3. not stealing or misappropriating (*asteya*);
4. sexual restraint and responsibility (*brahmacharya*);
5. not being covetous or greedy (*aparigraha*).

Practitioners are expected not to harm either others or themselves, in speech or action. They are expected to speak the truth kindly and not injuriously, and to consider how their speech affects others. They are expected neither to take what is not theirs nor to mishandle and abuse what others confide to them. They are expected to arrive at a sexual discipline that contributes to their spiritual ends. And they are expected not to take in excess of what they need, to find contentment (and so peace) in taking only what is necessary. These are the five restraints or norms that regulate social interaction.



It is not insignificant that these norms deliberately direct the practitioner away from the self towards awareness of others and of his or her responsibilities towards them. If we take seriously the image of holistic and simultaneous development that the 'limb' metaphor suggests, we must realise that yoga intends people's moral transformation by the ethical norms (*yamas*) just as seriously as it intends their physical transformation through the postures (*asanas*) and their mental transformation

through regulated breathing and detachment from liking and disliking.¹⁸ Each limb has its integrity, and only as each limb grows does the healthy tree grow. In other words, ethical conduct is as fully yogic as the advanced performance of postures. T. K. V. Desikachar observes that it makes no sense for practitioners to excel at postures while ignoring the other seven limbs. This would be like a bodybuilder strengthening only one arm while allowing rest of the body to atrophy. The result would be unbalanced and, as bodybuilding, unsuccessful.¹⁹ A practitioner of yoga who succumbs to an excessively personalised practice—a *curvatus in se*—by neglecting the social and ethical expectations of the *yamas* is likewise unsuccessful. There can be no doubt that yoga focuses on the mind and on subduing the effects on it of transience and ignorance, and also that disciplining the body is conceived as a means to attain mental quietude. But this focus on getting one's mind in order offers no permission to view one's practice in reductively self-interested terms. A final caution concerns the danger of 'amnesia off the mat'. The overall goal of yoga is the purification, transformation and development of one's thinking and living. While the physical practice of yoga might occur on a mat, the attentive practitioner will not reduce it to the confines of the mat. The spirituality of yoga intends the transformation of one's daily lived experience. A yoga class might very well be a privileged occasion to protect oneself from destructive mental conditioning that leads to wrong perceptions of self and other. But the point of achieving such clarity and peace in class is to radiate these qualities beyond the class into one's daily life and relationships. Failing to do so can be likened to departing from the Eucharist and failing to love and serve the Lord by loving and serving one's neighbours in daily life. Simple attendance at liturgical services does not make a good Christian, and the thoughtless performance of *asanas* on a mat does not make a successful practitioner of yoga.

The successful combination of Christian discipleship and yogic wisdom requires a transformation of self: not a fragmentary but a whole transformation, which integrates body and soul, body and mind, liturgy and ethics, *asanas* and *yamas*. Appreciating the holistic nature of yoga is the first and requisite step towards practising transformatively. Yoga's

¹⁸ Feuerstein, *The Deeper Dimension of Yoga*, 22.

¹⁹ Desikachar, *The Heart of Yoga*, 7.

emphasis on holism is also what recommends it to the attention of Christians and to all who seek personal authenticity, self-integration and moral responsibility.

John N. Sheveland received his doctorate in Systematic and Comparative Theology from Boston College, and is currently is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Gonzaga University, USA.