

Fr. Maximus (Marretta): Differences between Hesychasm and Yoga



Fr. Maximus (Marretta), of Holy Ascension Monastery, 2008, during his ordination to deacon at the parish of St. Maximos the Confessor, Owego, NY, 2008.

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Differences between Hesychasm and Yoga

by Fr. Maximus Marretta

Notes from Philokalia II Course, Spring Semester 2013, Three Holy Hierarchs Orthodox Theological Institute

(The word “hesychasm” can be used in both a general and in a specialized sense. In a general sense, a hesychast is anyone who practices stillness – that is, one who lives in a quiet place and prays. But in a more specialized sense, hesychasm refers to a specific movement in 14th century Byzantium which emphasized breathing methods, the vision of the uncreated light, and the distinction between essence and energy in God. In these notes, “hesychasm” refers to the second, more specialized sense.)

1. Hesychasm is prayer to Jesus Christ. Yoga is meditation either on nothing, or a body part, or on a mantra. In yoga, the ultimate goal is to cease thought altogether.

2. The Jesus Prayer, which is a sentence consisting of a subject and predicate, is not a mantra. A mantra is a single word (or occasionally a short phrase.) It is not a complex thought, but a single idea. Usually it is the invocation of the name of a heathen deity.

3. In yoga, the head is held straight and high, indicating pride. In hesychasm, the head is held down, indicating humility. In yoga, the head is held straight in order to channel the Kundalini energy upward. In hesychasm, the head is bent forward to focus the mind on the heart, and to form a circle with the body, acting as an image of the cyclical nature of prayer.

4. Yoga uses a great variety of postures, demonstrating an unhealthy obsession with the body and with mechanical techniques. In hesychasm, the posture is not so important, provided it is dignified. Yoga promotes excessive physical health, which according to hesychasm, incites the passions.

5. Yoga uses a great variety of breathing methods, because it believes that the breath is actually energy. Hesychasm uses one simple method, solely for the purpose of concentration. It does not hold that there is any mystical quality to breath itself. The breathing techniques of yoga are mostly unnatural (hyperventilating, breathing through one nose, etc.) and require excessive attention to the breath. In hesychasm, the breath is merely the conductor of attention into the heart.

6. Yoga is based on a false theory of prana. According to this theory, man is not bipartite (consisting of body and soul), but tripartite; consisting of physical body, subtle energy body (which duplicates the shape of the physical body but includes the mind), and the true spiritual self. Yoga believes that physical breath (prana) is the link between the physical body and the subtle body of energy (also called prana). Breath is thus identified simultaneously with the physical and subtle/mental bodies. By regulating breath in order to control the physical body and subtle body, yoga then conquers both and releases the soul/self which is beyond matter and thought. All yoga discussion of breath and its value derives from this false notion of the existence of prana.

7. There is a constant sexual subcontext in Yoga, which is both physical and mental. Physical, because the postures recommended for meditation (buttocks back and pelvis forward) put pressure on the perineum; and mental, because in Kundalini one must meditate on the perineum in order to draw its energy into the brain.

8. The core element of yoga is called Kundalini. According to this theory, the prana energy of humans is concentrated at the bottom of the spinal column, in the perineum. One meditates on the energy in this area and gradually raises the energy up through the spinal column (through focal energy points called "chakras") until the genital energy reaches the top of the head. This process is likened to the uncoiling of a serpent (kundalini). When the energy has reached the head, enlightenment is achieved and one becomes free of matter and thought and passes into a state transcending the mind. According to some schools, one is also freed from oneself and becomes one with everything.

9. Much (although not all) of yoga actively uses the imagination to visualize something calming in order to aid concentration. In hesychasm, the use of the imagination in prayer is forbidden. In yoga, concentration is an end to itself (regardless of what you are concentrating on) because the purpose of concentration is to decrease the number of thoughts one has. Since enlightenment consists in freedom from thought, reducing the number of thoughts from many to one is part of the road to reducing the thoughts to

zero. In hesychasm, the purpose of concentration is to concentrate the mind on Christ. In order to be united with Christ, there must always be some level of consciousness.
