

Yoga-Practice in the Roman Catholic Church

by Franz Hartmann, M.D.

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Using the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius de Loyola [Founder of the Order of the Jesuits]

[Page 1] THE study of comparative religion being one of the objects of the Theosophical Society, it may be of some interest to compare the yoga-practices of the Roman Catholic Church with those described in the Oriental writings. We will then find that they are to a certain extent identical, consisting principally in meditation (prayer), shakti, self-control, abnegation, faith, concentration, contemplation, etc, or what Shankarġchġrya describes as Shġma, Dama, Uparati, Titġksha, Shraddhġ and Samġdhġna, not to forget bodily posture and the regulation of breath (Prġnayġma).

The most detailed instructions are contained in the writings of Ignatius de Loyola, a Catholic Saint, and founder of the (later on ill-reputed) Order of Jesuits. He was an officer in the Spanish army, born at Guipozcod in 1491, as the son of a nobleman. After **[Page 2]** having been severely wounded in battle, his mind took a religious turn; he abandoned his military career, became an ascetic, made a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, studied afterwards at Salamanca and Paris, and became in 1541 General of the Order of Jesuits. His writings have been translated into German by B. Kohler, and the following pages contain some extracts from the same.

The exercises prescribed by Loyola are calculated to develop the powers of the soul, especially imagination and will. The disciple has to concentrate his mind upon the accounts given in the Bible of the birth, suffering and death of Jesus of Nazareth, as if these were actual historical facts. He thus regards them, as it were, as a mental spectator, but by gradually working upon his imagination he becomes, so to say, a participator of it; his feelings and emotions are raised up to a state of higher vibrations; he becomes himself the actor in the play, experiences himself the joys and sufferings of Christ, as if he were the Christ Himself ; and this identification with the Object of his imagination may be carried on to such an extent that even stigmata, or bleeding wounds corresponding to those on the body of the crucified Christ, will appear on his body. In this way compassion and love are awakened and developed within the soul, and as the love of a divine ideal is something quite independent of the correctness of the scientific opinion which we may have concerning the actual existence of that ideal itself, this way of awakening divine love by the power of imagination **[Page 3]** may be very well suited for those for whom love without an object is at first unattainable. Therefore the spiritual exercises of Loyola consist principally of regularly prescribed and gradually ordered meditations and contemplations of the passion of Christ. If properly

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executed, they may produce freedom from the illusion of self and awaken the power of discrimination (Viveka) between the eternal ego and the temporal self.

The exercises and penances which Loyola taught to his disciples he practiced himself, and they were by no means easy. He spent seven hours in prayer, and scourged himself three times every night for the purpose of subduing the desires of his *flesh*. Some of the Catholic Orders still practice such severe exercises. The Trappists, for instance, have to work very hard, and their only recreation is prayer. Each brother receives at his entrance to the Order a gown as his only garment, which he has to wear until the hour of his death, without ever being permitted to take it off, whether in daytime or at night, unless it should become so dilapidated as to have to be replaced by a more solid one. Their *Matins* begin at midnight, lasting for one hour, and one being followed at short intervals by others, so as to allow very little time for rest. They are exposed to the summer heat and have to do without fire in winter, being permitted only a hard bed to sleep on and barely sufficient cover. Moreover they are not permitted to speak with each other or with anybody, and the food they receive is hardly sufficient to keep up their strength. **[Page 4]**

The Catholic Church, as a whole, may be regarded as an *exoteric* school of religion, and the different Orders therein as *esoteric* schools for practicing Yoga. How far some of these Orders have become degraded and have lost the right to be called schools for Yoga, is not our purpose to investigate at present. Certain, however, it is that the Mysteries contained in the Catholic Church are far too high to be grasped by everybody, be he priest or layman, and that the greatest danger which threatens the Catholic Church is the great number of its followers who are incapable of understanding its true spirit, in consequence of which its doctrines are misrepresented and misunderstood. Nevertheless, in some of the Orders practicing the above-described austerities, some of these Mysteries are still alive. These people lead a life of great hardship, and there are probably only few among *our parlor-yogis* and would-be magicians willing to exchange places with them; but we meet smiling faces and joyous hearts among them, and the fact of their having voluntarily taken upon themselves *the Cross of Christ* testifies to their intrepidity and sincerity,

Loyola objects to theoretical explanations regarding the divine Mysteries, as they would only gratify scientific curiosity in unripe minds and disturb them; he only gives instructions concerning the practice of meditation, etc., because, if this practice is properly carried on, the Mysteries will reveal themselves in the natural course of time. **[Page 5]**

The states of mind under consideration are in their progressive order as follows :

1. *Cogitation*. The state in which the mind is moved and swayed by influences coming from without. These emotions have to be subdued.
2. *Concentration*. The ego assumes power over the thinking process, regulates his thoughts according to his will, and uses them accordingly.
3. *Meditation*. The ego closely examines the object upon which his mind is concentrated.

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4. *Contemplation*. The mind enters the object of its meditation; it becomes an indweller of its sphere.
5. *Sanctification*. The mind becomes pervaded and sanctified by this association with the holy object; it becomes penetrated by its divine influence.
6. *Unification*. The contemplating mind becomes one with the object of its contemplation. To this may be added :
7. *Mortification*. or the entire disappearance of the illusion of separateness; there is no separate self which knows, because the knower, the known and the knowledge are one.

The object of meditation is, as has already been stated, the life and suffering of Christ. This is divided into different periods for contemplation, from the Incarnation to the Crucifixion and Resurrection. At first only the memory is called into action by studying the supposed historical facts; next comes the imagination, associating itself with the actors in the divine play, and finally the mind becomes the actor itself; **[Page 6]** *i.e.*, Christ is born, lives, becomes crucified and resurrected within ourselves.

There are numerous instructions given as to how these practical exercises are to be carried out, of which we will mention the following:

The first thing is to free oneself from all sinful thoughts and sensual emotions, and to seek to realize the direct action of the divine will; one should not seek to pry with one's intellect into the divine Mysteries, but wait in humility for their interior revelation. This is far more useful in the end than lengthy explanations on the part of the teacher.

The disciple should, while engaged with one object of meditation during one week, not be informed of what will be the object given to him for the next period; but he should be warned against the aggressions of evil spirits, and have their nature explained to him.

He should meditate for five hours every day, beginning at midnight, each meditation lasting at least one hour, and he must not let his mind wander from the object of his meditation.

He should never make a solemn promise or vow until he is perfectly certain that he is able to keep it; that is to say, until God (the Master) Himself reveals to the soul His readiness to receive her. Then he does not follow his own selfish desires, but obeys the divine will.

The teacher should not seek to pry into the sins and innermost thoughts of the disciple ; nevertheless he should observe him, so as to be able to give **[Page 7]** him such guidance and instruction as his case may require.

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Ignorant and uneducated persons cannot be guided in the same manner as those who have more intelligence. No one should be offered spiritual truths which he is not yet ripe enough to grasp or comprehend.

Each meditation should begin with prescribed prayers (the *Lord's Prayer*, *Ave Maria*, etc.).

The candidate should go to confession once in every week, and take every fourteen days the holy sacrament of communion.

He should separate himself from all his friends and acquaintances, and avoid all external disturbances, directing his mind solely to the service of God. The more he frees himself from all external attractions, the more will he become ready to receive the light, the grace, and the blessing of God.

The disciple should be instructed, according to the degree of his capacity to understand, about the origin and the real object of his life, which is to praise God and to serve Him. He ought to be made to see the relative worthlessness of all earthly things, and the value of that which is of eternal duration.

He should examine himself carefully every day, and compare the results of each examination with those of the previous one, in the same way as a father watches his child to see what progress it makes.

He should carefully avoid all doubt and despair and also all spiritual pride, and not dwell upon his own personal merits, but sacrifice them to God. **[Page 8]**

SPECIAL DIRECTIONS

Upon rising in the morning the disciple should at once firmly resolve to avoid all those sins of which he wishes to purify himself, and hold fast to that resolution during the day. Before retiring to rest he should examine himself again, to see whether he has been steadfast in his purpose, and it is useful to note his failures in some diary.

Resist and suppress every evil thought as soon as it arises.

Avoid all useless talk and gossip.

Look upon all worldly possessions with contempt; desire nothing for yourself, neither bodily comfort nor mental consolation, neither riches nor fame.

The disciple should be indifferent to wealth or poverty, honor or disgrace, suffering and death, and always be ready joyfully to accept martyrdom for the glorification of Christ.

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Here follow certain rules which may be found somewhat objectionable from our point of view, namely:

He should never think of agreeable things, such as the joys of Paradise, but always have his mind dwelling upon grief and repentance for his sins, and think of death and the Last Judgment.

He should always keep his room dark and exclude all light, keeping doors and windows closed, except while he is praying, reading or eating.

He ought never to laugh, nor say aught that may cause hilarity in others. **[Page 9]**

He ought never to look at anyone, except at receiving and taking leave of a visitor.

He ought to avoid in eating or sleeping not only that which is superfluous, but even as much as possible of what is considered necessary.

He ought to castigate and lacerate his body by means of lashes, applied with rods or ropes or in other ways, but without injuring the bones. This is for the purpose of doing penance for past sins and for conquering the lusts of the flesh, and also for entering into sympathy with the tortures suffered by our Lord Jesus Christ. [It is hardly necessary to remark that these ascetic exercises have fallen generally out of use, and are only practiced by certain religious Orders at certain times, or by some especially fanatical persons]

THE THREE METHODS OF PRAYER

The first method or step is to meditate successfully upon the seven mortal sins, the three powers of the soul, and the five senses of the body. This may be done while standing, sitting, kneeling, or in a recumbent position. While meditating upon the seven deadly sins, compare them with the seven cardinal virtues.

The second step is to meditate about the meaning of each separate word of the prayer, sitting or kneeling, and keeping the eyes either closed or gazing steadfastly upon some selected spot, and not letting his thoughts or eyes wander around. **[Compare *Bhagavad-Gīta* VI, 13] [Page 10]**

Thus he ought to remain for one hour or more, always beginning his meditation with an invocation, and ending with repeating the *Lord's Prayer*, *Credo*, *Anima-Christi* and *Salve Regina*. He ought not to proceed to meditate about another word before he has found in the previous one full satisfaction.

The third method consists in regulating the breath according to a certain measure of time. While drawing each breath some word of the prayer ought to be spoken within the heart, so that between each inhalation and exhalation, and during the whole time that this lasts, only one word is inwardly spoken. For

instance, if you meditate about the *Lord's Prayer*, beginning with " Our Father, which art in heaven," let your whole attention be directed only to the word *our* and its meaning, and then proceed to the next word, etc.

THE MYSTERIES OF THE LIFE OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST

These Mysteries cannot be satisfactorily explained to the human intellect; but they can be spiritually grasped by identifying oneself with the events historically described in the *New Testament*, and mentally participating therein.

In this way the imagination acts upon the will and the emotional nature, causing the higher vibrations of the soul to enter into action, to lift the mind up to the region of spiritual perception, and the love **[Page 11]** of God to enter the heart. It is then necessary to learn to discern between good and evil influence. Only God has the power to illuminate the mind without any preceding cause; but if there is such a cause, the good angels, as well as the evil ones, may send comfort to the soul; the first ones with good intentions, the evil ones with an evil object (such as to incite vanity or spiritual pride, etc.) in view, and the evil spirit may assume the shape of a messenger of light for the purpose of leading us to perdition. We therefore ought to examine the origin, current, and object of our thoughts. If the beginning, the middle and the end are good and the object the highest, it is the sign of a good influence; but if the thoughts are disturbed by doubts and turned to inferior objects, it is a sign that an evil spirit is at their back. Moreover the touch of a good influence is mild and sweet, and that of an evil one at first harsh and disturbing; but if the heart is inclined to evil, the evil spirit also enters silently, as if it were into his own house through the open door.

Finally it may be of some interest to hear what Loyola says in regard to the Church :

We must never use any judgment of our own, but be always ready to obey in all things the orders of the true bride of Christ, our holy mother, the Church.

If I see that a thing is white and the Church calls it black, I have to believe in its being black.

We must always approve of and praise the sayings and doings and manners of our superiors, whatever they may be; even if they are not such as can be praised **[Page 12]** publicly, because to do so would lower these persons in the estimation of the crowd.

One ought not, to the ignorant, to say much about *predestination* (Karma); because, instead of working for their own improvement, they will become lazy and say: "Why should I trouble myself? — If it is my predestination to be saved, I will be all right, and if I am predestined to be damned, I cannot prevent my damnation." One ought also not to speak about the divine grace of God as if it were a gift, rendering all our own works unnecessary. The highest truths are frequently misunderstood, and the best medicine becomes a poison if misapplied.

Some of the rules given by S. Ignatius de Loyola may be objectionable, but nowhere do we find among

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them the often quoted Jesuitical maxim that the object sanctifies the means. Moreover there is no doubt that while an object, be it holy or unholy, cannot sanctify its means, a holy purpose can and will sanctify the means, provided they are neither holy nor unholy, but indifferent. Thus for instance, the using of a knife upon a man's body may be a holy or unholy act. If it is done for the purpose of cutting his throat, it is unholy; but if the surgeon uses it for saving a person's life it is holy, and the purpose sanctifies the means.

The Roman Catholic Church has originally derived its doctrines and practices, and even its ceremonies, from the Northern Buddhistic School. Loyola is a true representative of its spirit. His spiritual exercises are in many ways identical with the instructions given in the East for the practice of Raja-Yoga, and a comparison of the two systems may be useful **[Page 13]** for those who do not merely desire to gratify their curiosity in regard to the astral plane, but desire to become more spiritual by letting the divine powers within their soul become awakened and developed through the influence of divine Love, divine Wisdom, and eternal Life.