Yoga and Quakerism: Message to Poplar Ridge Friends Meeting, 10/18/26
Sarah Nelson

**Prelude**

**Welcome**

**Opening prayer** - "The Universal Prayer" chanted in Sanskrit
*Om asato ma sat gamaya*
*Om tamaso ma jyortir gamaya*
*Om mritryor ma amritam gamaya*

*Lead me from untruth to truth./Lead me from darkness to light./Lead me from attachment to the material to an experience of the eternal.*

**First hymn** - "For the Beauty of the Earth" - p 10

**Readings** - from *Faith and Practice* "In Silence"

*[Early Friends] made the discovery that silence is one of the best preparations for communion [with God] and for the reception of inspiration and guidance. Silence itself, of course, has no magic. It may be just sheer emptiness, absence of words or noise or music… But it may be an intensified pause, a vitalized hush, a creative quiet, and actual moment of mutual and reciprocal correspondence with God.* - Rufus Jones

*By 1660 [George Fox] had taught some 50,000 Friends, as he called them, to sit in silence under the inwardly searchlighting truth which showed up every act or impulse of self-will or self-righteousness. Naturally, they quaked, struggled, and despaired for months, upheld meanwhile by fellow-quakers alert to self-made escapes, until finally a "new man" was born within, able to respond freely to the positive leadings of the Light, and joy broke through.* - Hugh Barbour

*When your heart is wandering and distracted, bring it back quickly to its point, restore it tenderly to its Master's side, and if you did nothing else the whole of your hour but bring back your heart patiently and put it near our Lord again, and every time you put it back it turned away again, your hour would be well employed.* - St Francis de Sales

**Second hymn** - "Be Thou My Vision" - p 154

**Joys and Concerns**

**Spoken message**

When I say I teach yoga, I realize that most people think I mean stretching. This is vaguely accurate, in the same way that the fellow on the Quaker Oat box depicts a Quaker. Or, have you ever told someone you were a Quaker, and been faced with a question about your horse and buggy? Just as most people don't know what Quakerism is, most people don't know what yoga is.

TKV Desikachar said, "There is an ocean of yoga," and this is true. It is a spiritual tradition that grew up in the Yes/Both/And worldview of India, and encompasses multiplicities of practices and understandings. Though it shares a common birthplace with Hinduism, it is emphatically not a religion. Sankhya philosophy, which provides the underpinning for yoga, is in fact a-

theistic. Yoga itself describes the existence of some eternal reality, which you could call God, or Consciousness, or the Vastness, but it does not insist on adherence to any explanation in particular. Can you admit to some reality greater than yourself - even the fact that you do not cause the sun to rise each day? That will do.

The common translation of "yoga" as "union" is accurate - the root of the word is *yug*, to yoke, and refers to the merging of one's individual consciousness with the Big C Consciousness. Cool idea. Difficult to achieve. More practicable definitions come from the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* - "yoga is the stilling of the mind" (1.2) and the *Bhagavad Gita* "yoga is skill in action" (2.50). Yoga equally describes a path, a practice, and the goal of that practice.

One specific approach, *ashtanga yoga* (the eight limbs of yoga) from the *Sutras* reveals a process of turning attention gradually inward. It starts with proscriptions for relationships in the world: non-harming, truth-telling, non-stealing, moderation, and non-hoarding; then lists personal observances: cleanliness, contentment, self-discipline, introspection, devotion. Then comes *asana*, working with the body; *pranayama*, breath control; then *pratyahara*, drawing the senses inward; and then three steps in meditation: learning to concentration, achieving an uninterrupted flow of attention in one direction, and finally, an integration with the object of attention.

Yoga is a process of moving from gross to subtle. Yes, we are human beings living in the world, with a body to take care of, with its thoughts and emotions. And there is a method by which we can learn to quiet our minds.

I've been studying yoga for nearly 30 years, and have a good intellectual grasp of the process, and employ it with dedication. However, the realization of the practice - having a still mind - is a work in progress. I grew up in this meeting, attended every Sunday, and even received plenty of "religious education" before meeting each week, taught by such excellent human beings as Jane Simkin, Joan Moora, Sally Otis, and my father, among others. We read Bible stories and with Joan's guidance learned how to paint them; we studied the early Quakers and learned the importance of social action - abolition, suffrage, prison reform; we collected for UNICEF; we memorized the Lord's Prayer and the 23rd Psalm. It was a solid and noble curriculum, arranged by our busy parents. But I don't remember learning how to meditate, or discussing exactly what we were doing in the silent part of meeting. It must have been addressed, but it didn't penetrate my understanding.

I think about the similarities between yoga and Quakerism frequently. There are many, including an emphasis on quiet contemplation, a guide to worldly behavior with nonviolence at the top of the list, and the idea of an inner light, a topic for another time. I wish I knew *how* George Fox "taught some 50,000 Friends… to sit in silence under the inwardly searchlighting truth which showed up every act or impulse of self-will or self-righteousness," and how it was that the "…positive leadings of the Light… and joy broke through" (Hugh Barbour, quoted in *Faith and Practice*, p 10).

But I don't know, and it is yoga that has provided the guidelines for my spiritual efforts. I get up every morning - and I do mean every morning - and go to my yoga mat. I do some gentle movements, which I coordinate with my breath. This is good for my body, but is really designed for my mind. I am learning to focus in a chosen direction. I then sit and do breathing exercises. People talk about "breathwork," which can mean all kinds of things, including a very clean way to get high. That's not what I'm doing. *Pranayama* actually means to regulate one's energy, to resist the outward pull of the senses, to try to draw one's resources inward. I choose a technique and do it for about 15 minutes. And then I meditate. I sit quietly and focus my attention on one thing. It could be simply the movement of the natural breath. More often I

chose a mantra, a short phrase, to repeat. My mind is busy and verbal, and it helps to hang my attention on words. Most days it takes an hour to 90 minutes to do all this.

I was once taking a yoga class when a car with bone-shaking bass passed by. My teacher pointed out that modern life arouses our senses so much as to make us numb; that for many, a thumping bass is necessary to *feel anything.* (And this was before cellphones). For our over-stimulated and outward-directed attention, expectant listening, as described in Quakerism, can be a tall order. Yoga, for me, has provided a way to find a little inward quiet, a method to regulate my behavior, and guidance for living.

If you want to try yoga, as we move into silence, chose an object on which to place your attention. It could be a word, a phrase, the movement or sound of your breath, the ticking of the clock. You could choose a line from a song - the hymns I've selected this morning are favorites from way back, and I know at least one verse of each by heart. Singing them silently to myself is a way to harness my thoughts. When I was a kid I concentrated on the movement of the branches outside that window. We rest the mind by resting it on something. You may already do something like this. When the mind wanders, as is its nature, simply draw it back to your chosen object. This is yoga meditation.

## Silent meditation

**Third hymn** - "St James' Air: 23rd Psalm" - p 211

**Afterthoughts**

**Introductions**

**Announcements**

**Postlude and handshakes**