

# Ascetic Practices in Interfaith Dialogue

## Jain Yoga and Orthodox Hesychasm

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### Abstract

*This article explores the fundamental theological and philosophical propositions on which ascetic teachings and mystical experiences within Eastern Orthodox Christianity and Jainism are based. In particular, it examines spirituality, purification, and psychophysical techniques, including bodily postures, breath control, and inner exploration (e.g., the Jesus Prayer and dhyāna), which aim at a soteriological ideal in Hesychasm and Śvētāmbara Jainism. The article demonstrates the value of the body and the importance of asceticism in the spiritual experience of both traditions. Finally, it emphasizes that the focus on ascetic practices is a missing link in interreligious dialogue and can be a significant contribution to ecumenical work in the area of interfaith encounter. This study is part of a growing body of scholarship on ascetic practices as a means of liberation in Jainism and Christianity, as well as a pioneering work on Jain–Hesychast dialogue.*

### Keywords

*Jainism, Hesychasm, ascetic practices, interfaith dialogue, yoga, liberation*

Given the increasing cultural and religious diversification, as well as an inevitable encounter with “the other” in the contemporary world, the urgent need for a constructive interfaith dialogue has become crucial to maintain universal peace. Many challenges of

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today's globalized and multiculturalized world have shown the need to build bridges between representatives of different religious communities and establish a reconciled diversity, that is, "to be religious interreligiously."<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, the necessity to coexist across cultures and religions to achieve the ideal of "global ethics" requires a "disenchantment" of the dominative Christian paradigm in the ecumenical movement. W. S. Ariarajah rightly points out that it is time to accept the call to a "wider ecumenism"<sup>2</sup> that would include in the *oikos* all people who inhabit the earth regardless of faith, culture, or other dividing categories.

The high priority of a new paradigm in ecumenical dialogue is self-evident. This call should rehabilitate "minor" religions, which have always been sidelined to the margins of mainstream interfaith dialogue. What this research opens up for reflection is also the importance of not considering any religion as a monolith but taking into account the different faith traditions and practices that are present within one religion: for instance, the *Śvētāmbara* branch within Jainism and Eastern Orthodox Hesychasm within Christianity in the context of this article. The objective of this research is to explore the fundamental theological and philosophical principles on which ascetic teachings and mystical practices within Christianity and Jainism are based. In particular, it investigates the practice of the Jesus Prayer in Hesychasm and yoga represented in Jainism.

For a comprehensive analysis of the problems raised in the study, the study uses interdisciplinary, philosophical, and historical methodology. The research employs a comparative method for a heuristic objective with a goal of describing and classifying psychophysical techniques to identify features that would otherwise be ignored or missed, such as the value of the body in the Oriental and Western ascetic practices. The article presents the structure of ascetic discourse in theoretical terms using a cross-cultural and trans-historical approach.<sup>3</sup> This method assists in putting the two traditions in dialogical relation for a "reciprocal illumination,"<sup>4</sup> in the words of A. Sharma, to describe the mutual enlightenment, which happens during comparison, as well as to make the experience of religious representatives accessible to outsiders and scholars.

Despite a wide range of scholarly interest in soteriology and asceticism, until now the problem of interfaith dialogue between Orthodox Hesychasm and Jain yoga has remained outside of the attention of specialized academic studies. The majority of studies focus on one particular field, namely Orthodox theology or Jain studies,

<sup>1</sup> Paul Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2002), 10.

<sup>2</sup> Wesley S. Ariarajah, "Wider Ecumenism: A Threat or a Promise?" *Ecumenical Review* 50:3 (1998), 321.

<sup>3</sup> Oliver Freiberger, "Elements of a Comparative Methodology in the Study of Religion," *Religions* 9:2 (2018), 7.

<sup>4</sup> Arvind Sharma, *Religious Studies and Comparative Methodology* (Albany: SUNY, 2005), ix.

lacking interdisciplinary approaches to explore the interconnection between the two traditions in a broader context. Taking into consideration the gaps in the existing research theories, the key goal of the study is not to contrast formal philosophical or theological systems taken in isolation but to examine how traditions are lived out in personal spiritual experience. In particular, the article seeks to outline the psycho-physical methods of Orthodox Hesychasm and Jain yoga as soteriological ways. It will further analyze similarities and differences between the two traditions, taking into account the developments in theological and historical discourses of spirituality, purification, value of the body, and the ways of inner practices, which lead to mystical experience. It will also explore possible ways for contemporary interfaith dialogue.

The pursuit of the soteriological ideal (*mokṣa*, *nirvāṇa*, *soteria*, *theosis*, etc.) through asceticism is a distinctive philosophical and theological idea that is inherent in almost all religious systems despite time period and territory. *Śvetāmbara* Jainism and Eastern Orthodox Hesychasm are two religious traditions where asceticism and mystical experience play a significant role in the spiritual transformation of a person. Each system has its own model of spirituality, which is often subjective, difficult to express in concepts, and, in practice, not transmitted to outsiders. Hence, it is challenging to objectively discover mystical experiences and compare the spiritual practices of different religions. Nonetheless, despite differences in theoretical foundations, similarities in practices designed to achieve a soteriological aim can reveal common grounds for interfaith dialogue.

Regarding the historical background of relations between Jainism and Eastern Orthodox Christianity, it is noteworthy that direct borrowings between the two traditions were unlikely.<sup>5</sup> Nevertheless, many opportunities for mutual contact existed. If there were any adoptions, most probably Christians took them from India and not vice versa, possibly through the Arab and Persian Sufis who transferred the Indian habits to the Greek Orthodox world.<sup>6</sup> Simultaneously, Christian teachers and texts from the Byzantine Empire could influence Sufis.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, in 1354, St Gregory Palamas was captured and arrested for a year by the Turks on his way from Thessalonica to Constantinople. There is an

<sup>5</sup> Jules Monchanin, "Yoga and Hesychasm," *Cistercian Studies* 10:2 (1975), 85–92.

<sup>6</sup> Eiji Hisamatsu and Ramesh Pattni, "Yoga and the Jesus Prayer: A Comparison between Astāṅga Yoga in the Yoga Sūtra of Patañjali and the Psycho-Physical Method of Hesychasm," *Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies* 28:1 (2015), 62; Kallistos Ware, "Identity and Difference in the Spiritual Life: Hesychasts, Yogis, and Sufis," *The Athens Dialogues* (2012), <http://athensdialogues.chs.harvard.edu/cgi-bin/WebObjects/athensdialogues.woa/1/wo/EtaUS6SXhCEw3B4LOvJ7t0/4.0.59.15.0.3.13.9>.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

opinion that during this time he could share his vision of Hesychast practices with local Muslims, even though there are no surviving records about it.<sup>8</sup>

## Spirituality and Purification

Undoubtedly, each ascetic practice has determinative instruments to achieve its main spiritual goal. The process of purification is very important for both Jain and Orthodox traditions, as it is a foundation on which ascetic spiritual practices are built. For instance, in early Jainism, asceticism (*tapas*) was the only way to achieve liberation (*mokṣa*). The Jain canon *Uttarādhyānasūtra* mentions that purification is possible only through right asceticism (XXVIII.35), the foundation of which is non-attachment to the material world (*kāyotsarga*). Hesychasm also believes that without asceticism, it is impossible to struggle with passions and achieve the knowledge of God and deification (*theosis*). Moreover, without asceticism, it is impossible to be authentically human.<sup>9</sup>

As stated in the *Tattvārthādhigamasūtra* (TĀS) of Umaswati (c. 2nd–5th century CE), one of the most authoritative Jain treatises, the purification of the soul and *mokṣa* is achieved through three jewels (*ratnatraya*) of Jainism: right faith (*samyak-darśana*, or *samyak-śraddhāna*), right knowledge (*samyag-jñāna*), and right conduct (*samyak-cāritra*) (I.1).<sup>10</sup> According to the karmic theory of Jainism, any human activity (including the levels of body, language, and mind) leads to the influx of karma.<sup>11</sup> Its accumulation binds a person in *saṃsāra* and impedes them from achieving liberation. A human being cannot avoid this influx but can control its intensity through their own activities (TĀS, VI.6). In this sense, yoga, which is identified by *Umaswati* with activity (TĀS, VI.1), weakens the flow of karma and means ethics, which is a clear example of Jain virtues<sup>12</sup>: namely, nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*), truthfulness (*satya*), non-stealing (*asteya*), chastity (*brahmacarya*), and non-possession (*aparigraha*) (*Yogasāstra* [YŚ], I.19-24).<sup>13</sup> These moral virtues are very similar to the Christian commandments, which are fundamental for Hesychasm.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Kallistos Ware, “Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?” in *Asceticism*, ed. V. L. Wimbrush and R. Valantasis with the assistance of G. L. Byron and W. S. Love (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 13.

<sup>10</sup> Here and later translation according to Āchārya Umāsvami, *Tattvārthasūtra*, ed. Vijay K. Jain (Dehradun: Vikalp Printers, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Kantilal Mardia, *The Scientific Foundations of Jainism* (Delhi: MBP, 1996), 43.

<sup>12</sup> Jayandra Soni, “Yoga in the Tattvārthasūtra,” in *Yoga in Jainism*, ed. Christopher Key Chapple (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 32.

<sup>13</sup> Here and later translation with some author changes according to *The Yogasāstra of Hemacandra: A Twelfth Century Handbook on Śvetāmbara Jainism*, trans. and ed. Olle Qvarnström (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).

The doctrine of *katharsis* in Hesychasm is the first stage of spiritual development, which is characterized by the cleansing of the heart and soul from material burden through renunciation of the world and repentance, that is, the changing of mind and turning away from sin. “Purification of heart, through which we acquire humility and every blessing that comes from above, consists simply in our not letting evil drought enter the soul,”<sup>14</sup> mentions St Hesychios the Priest in his treatise “On Watchfulness and Holiness.” This shows clearly that in both traditions, a spiritual aspirant first of all strives to clean their soul from imperfections and the influences of the material world, that is, sin in Hesychasm and *karma* in Jainism. In both systems, repentance (*pratikramaṇa* in Jainism, *metanoia* in Hesychasm), as an unceasing conscious acceptance of one’s faults and desire for self-improvement through the whole of life, is of great significance. More importantly, any mystical experience requires a special preliminary preparation of the physical, cognitive, and spiritual aspects of the practitioner.

In Jainism, human activity is correlated with ethical norms in the sense of right conduct and right knowledge, that is, the cognitive and moral aspect of understanding the reality; both are based on right faith and are necessary conditions on the way to liberation. *Hemacandra* (12th century CE) in *Yogaśāstra*, one of the most prominent texts of *Śvetāmbara* tradition, presents yoga as an equivalent of the three jewels (I.15-18) as well, stating that without it, liberation is impossible (III.155), which clearly determines the ethical component of purification in Jainism.

Likewise, an Orthodox monk, Evagrius Ponticus (4th century), distinguishes between ascetic techniques (*praxis*) and contemplation (*theoria*). The former means physical and intellectual purification from passions leading to *apatheia* – a state of purified soul. It does not mean that a person overcomes passions forever. However, having gained awareness of one’s sin, one should not fall into temptation. St Anthony of Egypt, the father of Christian monasticism, says, “A person’s chief task is to be mindful of his sins in God’s sight and to expect temptation until his last breath . . . against one thing he must continually struggle – the warfare in his own heart.”<sup>15</sup> Only after succeeding in *praxis* and *katharsis*, when his intellect is still, can a monk approach *theoria*.<sup>16</sup> Hence, the Hesychast is the one who managed to go through one

<sup>14</sup> Here and later translation according to *The Philokalia: The Complete Text compiled by St Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St Makarios of Corinth IV*, vols. I–IV, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, P. Sherrard, and K. Ware (London: Faber and Faber, 1979–1999), 1:193.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted by Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware), in Kallistos Ware, *The Inner Kingdom* (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 103.

<sup>16</sup> Hisamatsu and Pattni, “Yoga and the Jesus Prayer,” 63.

stage to another. Only after succeeding in *praxis* and making efforts for *katharsis*, when the intellect is still, can a monk approach *theoria*. While Evagrius and St Maximus the Confessor emphasize the transition from *praxis* to *theoria* as an inner struggle to overcome passions and acquire virtues,<sup>17</sup> Jain authors present the 14 “levels of virtue” (*gūṇasthāna*) of the soul on the path to liberation, which begins with ignorance (*mithyādr̥ṣṭi*) and leads to complete freedom in a state of inactive omniscience (*ayoga-kevala*).<sup>18</sup>

Overall, the spiritual practices of both Jains and Hesychasts start with such preparatory conditions as the purification of body and soul to cultivate morality and discipline. This approach helps to calm the mind and make it ready for other parts of the spiritual path. In addition, both moral and cognitive aspects are very important for a practitioner since these ideas are rooted in monastic traditions of Śvētāmbara Jainism and Eastern Orthodoxy.

## Value of the Body in Ascetic Practices

Unlike other philosophical or theological approaches, mystical experiences are based not only on speculative theoretical foundations but also use a system of practices to verify them. The role of the body in Jainism and Hesychasm cannot be underestimated. Before analyzing the inner contemplative practices, one should turn to the body-oriented techniques, including bodily postures, breath control, and inner exploration, which are an important part of the soteriological method.

The attitude to bodily postures in both traditions is cautious, even restrained. It is known that in the canonical period of Jainism, they appear under the “intercession” of the suffering of the body (*kaṃyakeśā*)—the sixth type of external *tapas*. In particular, the *Dāśārṇataskandha* mentions postures such as *bhagavati*, *aupapāṭike*, and *dasarutaskanda* (VI.3).<sup>19</sup> At the same time, *Yogasāstra* clearly states that further contemplation requires yogic postures (*āsana*): “Whichever [posture is required] for the mind to obtain steadfastness, that very posture should be undertaken for the benefit of meditation” (YŚ, IV.134). However, the fact that *āsana* has not hitherto been characteristic of Jainism speaks to the external influences of other traditions. In particular, *Hemacandra* describes in detail nine postures (*ṣaṣṭhārikāsana*, *vīrāsana*, *vajrāsana*, *abjāsana*, *bhadrāsana*, *daṇḍāsana*, *utkaṭikāsana*, *godobhikāsana*, and

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>18</sup> See Padmanabh S. Jaini, *The Jaina Path of Purification* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

<sup>19</sup> Sagarmal Jain, “The Historical Development of the Jaina Yoga System and the Impacts of Other Yoga Systems on Jain Yoga: A Comparative and Critical Study,” in *Yoga in Jainism*, ed. Christopher Key Chapple (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 17.

*keṅyotsargāsana*) (YŚ, IV.124-133); it is one of the earliest instances where non-sitting postures are called *āsanas*. Of note, *keṅyotsargāsana*, a standing (typically) or sitting position with arms down, which is canonical for Jain tradition, is considered the most important, since a person becomes indifferent to the body in it (YŚ, IV.133). Although certain positions for contemplation occur in the early period of Jainism, full-fledged *bathayoga* was included in Jain practice only in the 18th-century school of *Terāpanthī*.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, some references to bodily postures can be found in Sinaite authors and the Coptic Makarian cycle (7th–9th centuries)<sup>21</sup>; however, these mentions become explicit only in the later Byzantine era in the *Philokalia*, a collection of spiritual treatises written between the 4th and 15th centuries by Orthodox authors. In particular, bodily techniques are mentioned by St Nikiphoros the Hesychast (13th century) (*On Watchfulness and the Guarding of the Heart*); in the work ascribed to St Symeon the New Theologian (959–1022) (*The Three Methods of Prayer*, or *The Method of Sacred Prayer and Attentiveness*), which is the earliest fixed representation of a psychophysical method; St Gregory of Sinai (1260s–1346); and St Kallistos and St Ignatios Xanthopoulos (14th century) (*Directions to Hesychasts*, or *Century*).<sup>22</sup>

For instance, Pseudo-Symeon instructs about the right place for a spiritual practice, “Sit down in a quiet cell, in a corner by yourself,” and adds about the position of the body, “Rest your beard on your chest, and focus your physical gaze, together with the whole of your intellect, upon the centre of your belly or your navel.”<sup>23</sup> St Gregory of Sinai also advises sitting on a seat of one span (around 17.8 centimetres) high but warns that the crouching pose will quickly become uncomfortable and painful, which is necessary.<sup>24</sup> Probably, such an approach is linked with a theory that the Jesus Prayer originated in an old tradition of the Eastern spiritual concept of *penthos*, which is a clear awareness of oneself as a sinner and having a feeling of grief,<sup>25</sup> one of the most important Christian virtues.

On the other hand, such attention to bodily techniques, and especially concentration on the navel, provoked a serious theological debate between St Gregory Palamas and

<sup>20</sup> See Olle Qvarnström and Jason Birch. “Universalist and Missionary Jainism: Jain Yoga of the Terāpanthī Tradition,” in *Yoga in Practice*, ed. David Gordon White (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 365–82.

<sup>21</sup> Kallistos Ware, “Praying with the Body: The Hesychast Method and Non-Christian Parallels,” *Sobornost Incorporating Eastern Churches Review* 14:2 (1992), [https://bogoslav.ru/article/2671134#\\_ftnref85](https://bogoslav.ru/article/2671134#_ftnref85).

<sup>22</sup> Ware, “Identity and Difference in the Spiritual Life.”

<sup>23</sup> *The Philokalia*, 72.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:264.

<sup>25</sup> See Irénée Hausherr, *Penthos. La doctrine de la compunction dans l’Orient chrétien* (Rome: Pont. Institutum Orientalium Studiorum, 1994).

Barlaam of Calabria, who mockingly called the Hesychasts *omphalopsychoi* (navel-psychics). As a result, in *The Triads in Defense of the Holy Hesychasts*, St Gregory mentions that “the flesh is also transformed, it is exalted with the soul, communes together with the soul in the Divine, and itself likewise becomes the possession and dwelling-place of God.”<sup>26</sup> He emphasizes that a human consists of both soul and body that was created by God in his image and likeness, so each person is a holistic being and none of their parts can be neglected. However, some modern Orthodox teachers criticize such attention to the body. For instance, in the 19th century, St Theophan the Recluse and St Ignatii Brianchaninov called the practice of bodily exercises useless and even dangerous if done without the guidance of a spiritual teacher.<sup>27</sup>

Whereas the main bodily position in Hesychasm is with a bowed head, with the chin touching the chest while sitting on a low stool, Jainism offers a broad scope of postures to choose from, mainly with upright back and crossed legs. Jain *āsanas* are more elaborate, which is explained by the influences of other yogic traditions, and they may include crouching positions. But the main difference on this point is that Jain postures serve to train the body and make it strong so that it would not distract a practitioner during further contemplation. Conversely, Hesychast position should be consciously uncomfortable and cause pain to hold the practitioner’s attention. Despite some differences in particular techniques, the attitude of Jainism and Hesychasm to interconnection between the physical and the psychic confirms a positive role and value of the body in ascetic practices and spiritual development in both traditions.

Another important dimension of spiritual practice based on the corporeal aspect of the human being is the control of breath. Contemporary discoveries in the field of neuroscience prove that mind and breath are interdependent because they perform the same activity.<sup>28</sup> A similar idea was developed by ancient ascetics of various spiritual traditions in different parts of the world. Following the Indian philosophical tradition,<sup>29</sup> *Hemacandra* states that mind and breath are “mixed like milk and water” (YŚ, V.2). In particular, it claims that taming the mind through breath control leads directly to *mokṣa*: “When both [activities of mind and breath] stop, liberation results

<sup>26</sup> *The Philokalia*, 4:339.

<sup>27</sup> Ware, “Praying with the Body.”

<sup>28</sup> See В. Б. Слезин и др., “Изменение функционального состояния мозга при христианской молитве” (in Russian) [Changes in the functional state of the brain during Christian prayer]. *Независимый психиатрический журнал* 4 (1999), 28–32.

<sup>29</sup> This connection is mentioned in the *Chāndogya-upaniṣad* (VI.8.2), *Yogasūtra* (II.53), and *Gorakṣasātaṅka* (49), and in Tantric texts, e.g., in the *Mataṅgapārameśvarayogapāda* (II.10-11).

on account of the cessation of sensory impressions” (YŚ, V.3).<sup>30</sup> Clearly, breath control is primarily an important method of concentration in Hesychasm, too. When prayer is related to physical activity, it helps to make the mind silent and prayer unceasing. Speaking about the art of prayer, St John Climacus emphasizes, “Let the remembrance of Jesus [the Jesus Prayer] be present with each breath, and then you will know the value of solitude” (*Ladder of Divine Ascent*, 27:61).<sup>31</sup> This view is shared by St Hesychios the Priest in his work *On Watchfulness and Holiness*: “Let the Jesus Prayer cleave to your breath” (182).<sup>32</sup> In addition, St Kallistos and St Ignatios Xanthopoulos mention in *Directions to Hesychasts*, “As you draw in your breath, introduce at the same time the words of the Prayer, uniting them in some way with your breathing.”<sup>33</sup>

However, the first explicit mentions of such breathing methods belong to Nikephoros the Hesychast and another unknown author of the end of the 13th century who is often confused with Symeon the New Theologian.<sup>34</sup> This period has made Hesychasm famous for its psychophysical methods added to the recitation of the Jesus Prayer. Early Jain *sutras* make no reference to various types of breath control known as *prāṇāyāma*; they appear for the first time in *Hemacandra’s Yōgāsāstra* in the 12th century. It is worth pointing out that this period is almost identical to the time when explicit instructions for breath control appear in Hesychast texts. The control of breathing is presented as an auxiliary soteriological tool for liberation. In particular, it is emphasized that *prāṇāyāma*, defined as “the cutting of the flow of exhalation and inhalation” and consisting of *recaka*, *pūraka*, and *kumbhaka*, helps to cure all diseases and predict the time of one’s own death, which played an important role in the yogic practice (YŚ, V.4, 10-12). Also, it is recommended to switch to *prāṇāyāma* when mastering the *āsanas*; this is recognized as a guarantee of approaching contemplation: “Once [the yogic postures have been mastered], some [teachers] advocate breath control to accomplish meditation. If not [practised] together, the mind and the breath are impossible to control” (YŚ, V.1).

<sup>30</sup> For more examples about the links between *prāṇāyāma* and liberation, see James Mallinson and Mark Singleton, *Roots of Yoga* (London: Penguin Classics, 2017), 132–33.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted by St John Climacus, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959).

<sup>32</sup> *The Philokalia*, 1:195.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:196.

<sup>34</sup> Иоанн Мейендорф, “О византийском исихазме и его роли в культурном и историческом развитии Восточной Европы в XIV в.” (in Russian) [On Byzantine Hesychasm and its role in the cultural and historical development of Eastern Europe in the XIVth century] *Труды Отдела древнерусской литературы* XXIX (Л., 1974), 293.

The basic instruction regarding the breath in Hesychasm was to slow down the inhale and exhale. For example, Pseudo-Symeon says, “Restrain the drawing-in of breath through your nostrils, so as not to breathe easily.”<sup>35</sup> While in these cases control of the breathing is encouraged as a preparatory exercise before the Jesus Prayer, St Gregory of Sinai understands it as a method that should go along with the prayer. He believes that by holding the breath, an ascetic can control attentiveness: “Restrain your breathing so as not to breathe unimpededly”<sup>36</sup>; however, he warns people to be careful with self-delusion and violence to their own body. Although *prāṇāyāma* appears as an important element of the yogic system in Jainism, it is often criticized when used as a separate tool for receiving supernatural powers (*siddhi*): “it is not possible to attain the path of liberation for one who is exclusively devoted to such skills” (YŚ, VI.5). Accordingly, it becomes an obstacle to *mokṣa* but is a suitable method of maintaining body health and gaining supernatural abilities.

Therefore, breath control has a significant role among psychophysical methods of Jainism and Hesychasm. Both traditions believe that breath is interconnected with mind, so it is applied to calm it down and prepare for further contemplation and prayer; it is an efficient tool to achieve concentration and inner silence. Nonetheless, the prominent scholar of religions Mircea Eliade rightly warns us not to be deceived by any “external analogies” between the breath techniques of classical yoga and Hesychasm, despite their striking phenomenological similarity.<sup>37</sup> Although Jain *prāṇāyāma* is more complex than Hesychast techniques, both traditions treat breath control mainly as a preparatory tool. Notably, the goal of such exercises differs: the Hesychast breathing method aims to interiorize the name of Jesus in the heart, while the Jain *prāṇāyāma*, combined with *āsana*, aims to unify the consciousness for contemplation.

The detailed analysis of Jain and Hesychast corporeal practices shows that during the 12th and 14th centuries, religious traditions in different parts of the world were enriched with systematically described bodily oriented techniques leading to mystical experiences. The Ukrainian yoga scholar Dmytro Danilov aptly called this period the “axial age of somatics” in Western and Oriental esoteric traditions.<sup>38</sup> Interestingly, such unified systems of bodily oriented methods provided more people with an opportunity

<sup>35</sup> *The Philokalia*, 4:72.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 4:264.

<sup>37</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 65.

<sup>38</sup> Dmytro Danilov, “The ‘Axial Age of Somatics’ as a Means of Attaining Mystical Experience in Oriental and Western Esoteric Traditions of the 12–14 centuries AD,” paper presented at the Religions Symposium of the Jagiellonian University, Krakow, 6th IKSRS: Religion and Cultural Shifts: From Axial Age to (Post)Secular Age, 13–15 November 2017, 3.

to encounter the divine through specific physical exercises. Therefore, they became a symbol of belonging to a particular religious tradition, making it recognizable as a specific community as well as intelligible to outsiders.

## The Way of Inner Practices and Achieving Mystical Experience

Recent research in the sphere of neuroscience shows that prayer and meditative techniques have much in common in their psychophysiological aspect.<sup>39</sup> A group of scientists from the Bekhterev Psychoneurological Research Institute in Russia claim that Christian prayer corresponds to a special psycho-functional state of the brain, which has been described as a “slow wakefulness” and which is determined by the activity of the diencephalic level of the emotiogenic system of the brain.<sup>40</sup> However, Jain contemplation at the level of *śukla-dhyāna* can lead to such a depth that a person enters a state of consciousness where there are neither sensations nor their absence, that is, the state “without mind” (*amanaska*). There is no such cessation of consciousness in Hesychasm; a person remains within it, although they reach the initial stages of “equanimity.”

According to the teaching of the first *tirthaṅkara* *Ṛṣabhadeva*, Jains believe that contemplation is the central practice of their spirituality, along with the “three jewels,” that leads to liberation. Contemplation in early Jain texts is a form of asceticism, while in the late medieval period it starts to adopt more complex ideas from other religious traditions. *Umaswati* already establishes *dhyāna* as a soteriological tool, with its effectiveness similar to asceticism: “the virtuous (righteous) and the pure [meditation] . . . are the causes of liberation” (TĀS, IX.27-29). Additionally, *Hemacandra* claims that *śukladhyāna* can be practised only by yogis of the highest level: “Only those who possess the first bodily configuration and who know [all] the pūrva[-scriptures] are capable of performing this [pure meditation]” (YŚ, XI.2). The *Yogaśāstra* states that the mind becomes calm when it, along with the senses, is withdrawn from external objects. That is why the practice known as *pratyāhāra* is a necessary auxiliary condition for the next stages: concentration (*dhāraṇā*), righteous meditation (*dharmadhyāna*) (VI.6), and further pure meditation (*śukladhyāna*). The perception of *dhyāna* is quite branched and has been changed in different periods of Jainism. Nevertheless, its highest type, *śukladhyāna*, happens when the mind loses its points of concentration and becomes stable and motionless (*nirvikalpa*). *Hemacandra* emphasizes that liberation cannot be achieved while the mind is unstable, even if one thinks that they are following the path of yoga. He

<sup>39</sup> Andrew B. Newberg, “The Neuroscientific Study of Spiritual Practices,” *Frontiers in Psychology* 5:215 (2014), <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00215/full>.

<sup>40</sup> Слезин и др., “Изменение функционального состояния мозга при христианской молитве” (in Russian) [Changes in the functional state of the brain during Christian prayer], 31.

claims, “When the mind is restrained [from the objects of the senses], [the influx of] karmic matter is completely stopped” (IV.38). The key to the purified state of mind is calmness (*sāmya*), since one has to exercise control over such feelings as attachment and disgust. Only after mastering serenity can one begin *dhyāna* (IV.112). Stillness is one of the most crucial aspects of Hesychast teaching, since a personal relationship with God is possible only in *hesychia*.

Inner exploration has a significant role in the psychophysical method of Hesychasm, too. It presupposes the moving of the intellect (*nous*) into the heart (*kardia*) and vision of the light (*photism*). For instance, Pseudo-Symeon indicates the importance of the heart centre for Hesychast spirituality: “Search inside yourself with your intellect so as to find the place of the heart, where all powers of the soul reside.”<sup>41</sup> This spiritual practice often leads to illumination during the process of prayer, which is associated with the divine light from Mount Tabor. In Palamite theology, the light is considered an uncreated divine energy through which *theosis*, union with God, is achieved. Therefore, the contemplation of light is to a large extent conceived as the central moment of the Hesychast psychophysical practice. At the same time, Jain authors have developed a rich theory of the colouring of the soul (*leśyā*),<sup>42</sup> which refers to the state of mind and its interaction with the karmic matter. The six main colours (black, blue, grey, red, yellow, and white) correspond to the mental disposition and spiritual level of the soul and indicate the proximity of liberation.

Interestingly, the inner practices of the *Yogaśāstra* contain a Tantric element, as they reproduce the teachings of the three energy channels for concentration and movement of the breath: *iḍā*, *piṅgala*, and *suṣumṇa* (V.61), as well as sacred syllables, *mantras*, for soteriological purposes. In particular, *Hemacandra* offers techniques for visualizing *mantras* (VIII.1-5, 18-23); together with *prāṇāyāma*, they are believed to awaken both supernatural abilities and liberation. Broadly speaking, *mantras* in Jainism are sacred combinations of sounds and vibrations focused not so much on material aspects but mostly on seeking forgiveness and praising teachers and deities. It should be noted that they were not used in early Jainism.<sup>43</sup> On the one hand, the Jesus Prayer, as a quintessence of Hesychasm, aims at a constant recitation and remembrance of the name of Jesus in order to establish a personal relationship with Christ.<sup>44</sup> But unlike *mantra*, the Jesus Prayer is a personal invocation of God’s name

<sup>41</sup> *The Philokalia*, 4:72-73.

<sup>42</sup> For more details about *leśyā*, see Paul Dundas, *The Jains* (London: Routledge, 2002).

<sup>43</sup> Mallinson and Singleton, *Roots of Yoga*, 263.

<sup>44</sup> Marco Toti, “The Hesychast Method of Prayer: Its Anthropological and Symbolic Significance,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 8:1 (2008), 18.

and, more importantly, is an explicit confession of the Christian faith. Both traditions encourage the use of prayer beads during spiritual recitations and invocations.

Both *dhāraṇā* and the Jesus Prayer are associated with the movement of the mind and breath to different parts of the body (YŚ, V.26-41); in particular, they mention the navel and the heart. But while for Hesychasts the heart is a central point of unification within the human body and soul on which the whole teaching is built (moreover, inner exploration below the heart is forbidden, and the navel is used as a preliminary step toward the exact location of the heart), Jainism proposes concentration on other parts of the body, too, such as the nose, forehead, eyebrows, palate, eyes, mouth, ears, and head (YŚ, V.26-41; VI.7). Such a wide range of objects for concentration contributes to the emergence of different types of experiences from consciousness. St Gregory also points out the need to constantly keep the mind within the limits of the body. In support of this ascetic position, he refers to St John Climacus, saying that a silent man (the true hesychast) is the one who seeks to limit the incorporeal, that is, the mind, in the body.<sup>45</sup> From an anthropological point of view, it appears reasonable to place the Hesychast prayer and Jain contemplation method within the framework of what the French anthropologist Marcel Mauss called “techniques of the body,” which is connected to the religious and symbolic background of the two systems, since the body is the first and most natural technical object of the human.<sup>46</sup>

Whereas Jains agree that the contemplation should last at least one *mubūrta*, that is, a period of 48 minutes,<sup>47</sup> because the constancy of the mind on one object is possible only during this period, Hesychasts do not give any explicit instructions regarding the duration of the Jesus Prayer, except that it should become unceasing.

Furthermore, it can be argued that the primary purpose of the soteriological path presented in the *Yogaśāstra* is the state of *uninibbāva/amanaska/amanaskatā/vimanaska*, which leads to *mokṣa*. It is a yogic state that cannot be fully understood in concepts, subjected to doctrinal or logical-discursive analysis. In particular, it occurs when the yogi no longer consciously restricts the activity of the mind because he has stopped misconceptions about the object and has realized his own identity with the highest

<sup>45</sup> Кривошеин, “Аскетическое и богословское учение св. Григория Паламы” (in Russian) [Ascetic and theological teaching of St Gregory Palamas], [https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Vasilij\\_Krivoshein/asketicheskoe-i-bogoslovskoe-uchenie-sv-grigorija-palamy](https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Vasilij_Krivoshein/asketicheskoe-i-bogoslovskoe-uchenie-sv-grigorija-palamy).

<sup>46</sup> Marcel Mauss, *Sociologie and Anthropologie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1968), 385.

<sup>47</sup> Nathmal Tatia, *Studies in Jaina Philosophy* (Fremont: Jain Publishing Company, 2006), 291–93; Jaini, *The Jaina Path of Purification*, 145.

reality. Similarly, the Jesus Prayer is free from the discursive level of thinking and leads to a personal relationship with God that is possible in *hesychia*. It is a straight way to reaching the “inner kingdom” and achieving *theosis* – the main goal of an Orthodox ascetic. In this regard, it should be emphasized that the whole process of spiritual ascent in both religious traditions has to be regulated by the guidance of a spiritual teacher/*guru*.

Despite a wide range of similarities in purification techniques and psychophysical methods, there is a crucial difference in the ultimate goal of the two traditions. Whereas the ascetics of both Jainism and Hesychasm aim to enter the state of absolute stillness and joy, their philosophical foundations are contradictory. Orthodox *theosis* presupposes the salvation of a person through God’s gift of grace (“Do what I now tell you and with God’s help you will find what you seek,”<sup>48</sup> instructs St Nikiphoros the Monk) when no external techniques would straightaway lead to unification with God. By contrast, Jain *mokṣa* is a direct result of the personal efforts of an individual; each human soul is responsible for its own liberation. The final goal for the two religions in terms of spiritual freedom can be regarded as distinctive.<sup>49</sup> In Hesychasm, it is **freedom for** communion with God on Christocentric grounds when in the centre of spirituality is neither God, as in medieval Catholicism, nor human, as in the cultures of the Renaissance and Enlightenment, but God-man Jesus Christ, the incarnate God and deified man. In Jainism, it is **freedom from** karmic matter and metaphysical ignorance; it is a transtheistic<sup>50</sup> approach, which does not accept the existence of a creator or liberator deity similar to Abrahamic religions. Here the question arises of whether it is important to distinguish between *how* a person prays and *to whom* a person prays. However, in both systems, the desire for personal “deification” is not limited to a self-centred immersion in a mystical state and change of one’s own ontological and epistemological nature, but instead serves as a genuine foundation for the future transformation of other people, too – for instance, in the role of a spiritual teacher: elder in Hesychasm and *aribant*, *kevalin*, and *tirthaṅkara* in Jainism. In addition, for both traditions, the meeting with a higher transcendental reality is already possible in this life (*theosis/nirvāṇa*).

Obviously, this is where theoretical and practical dimensions of Jainism and Hesychasm differ. Thus, Metropolitan Kallistos rightly points out that the divergence in theology is counterbalanced by convergence in spirituality, emphasizing

<sup>48</sup> *The Philokalia*, 4:205-6.

<sup>49</sup> Milica Bakić-Hayden, “Two Methods of Contemplation: Yoga and Hesychast Prayer: An Exercise in Comparative Religion,” *Glasnik Etnografskog instituta SANU* 56:2 (2008), 181.

<sup>50</sup> Heinrich Zimmer, *Philosophies of India*, ed. Joseph Campbell (London: Routledge, 2013), 182.

that dialogue exists in opposition.<sup>51</sup> Although Hesychasm and Jainism are not total opposites, they differ in the formal expressions of their doctrines. This challenge should be regarded in a wide field of perspectives and opportunities for interfaith dialogue based on ascetic practices, which involve purification and bodily and inner techniques. The genuine dialogue is possible only in recognition and tolerant acceptance of the differences as well as similarities.

It is common knowledge today that the Orthodox churches believe in no salvation outside the church (*extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*) and declare yoga as “incompatible” with the Christian faith. By contrast, Hesychasts led by St Gregory Palamas claimed that other religious traditions profess the same divinity, but its fullness can be attained only after they believe in the bodily incarnation of Christ. He says,

even among those who reject the Gospel of grace, it is no longer possible to be caught in complete ignorance. Indeed, who is now, . . . even whether he is a Scythian, Persian or Hindu, does not know that God is not anything created and sensibly comprehensible? For as at the future coming of Christ, the grace of Resurrection and immortality will not be limited only to those who believe in Him [. . .]. (II.4)<sup>52</sup>

This approach is shared by other Orthodox teachers, such as Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, Maximus the Confessor, Macarius the Great and others.<sup>53</sup>

At the same time, one of the fundamental principles of Jainism is the doctrine of *anekāntavāda* (non-onesidedness).<sup>54</sup> It means that reality is very complex and can be perceived differently depending on the point of view, so none of the opinions is absolutely true and complete. It advocates intellectual *ahimsā* (nonviolence) and explains the positive attitude of Jainism toward religious plurality that opens wide horizons for interfaith dialogue.

## Conclusion

The spiritual practices of both Jains and Hesychasts start with a preliminary purification, which includes many aspects, such as the cleansing of body and soul in order to

<sup>51</sup> Ware, “Identity and Difference in the Spiritual Life.”

<sup>52</sup> Translated by the author from Григорий Палама, *Триады в защиту священно-безмолствующих* (in Russian) [Triads in defence of the holy Hesychasts] (M.: Канон, 1995).

<sup>53</sup> О. О. Соколова, “Порівняльна характеристика духовної космології класичної йоги та ісихазму” (in Ukrainian) [Comparative characteristics of the spiritual cosmology of classical yoga and Hesychasm], *Мультиверсум. Філософський альманах* 58 (2006), [https://www.filosof.com.ua/Jornel/M\\_58/Sokolova.htm](https://www.filosof.com.ua/Jornel/M_58/Sokolova.htm).

<sup>54</sup> Melanie Barbato, “Jain Approaches to Religious Plurality,” *Current Dialogue* 60 (2018), 4.

cultivate morality and discipline. This approach assists in calming the mind and achieving silence to prepare the practitioner for further steps on the spiritual way. Notably, the purificatory techniques aim to transform both moral and cognitive features of a person, since they are rooted in ancient monastic traditions of *Śvetāmbara* Jainism and Eastern Orthodoxy.

Unlike other philosophical or theological approaches, mystical experiences are not only based on speculative theoretical foundations but also use a system of practices to verify them. This opens a wide field of opportunities for dialogue based on spiritual practices. The cross-cultural and trans-historical comparative analysis between ascetic traditions of Jainism and Hesychasm clearly brings the body back to the discourse of interfaith dialogue. The role of the body in both traditions cannot be underestimated. Special attention should be paid to the way a person glorifies the “divine” within such body-oriented techniques, as bodily postures for contemplation and prayer, regulation and holding of breath, visualization, and concentration on exact parts of the body (navel, heart, eyebrows, etc.) constitute an important part of the soteriological method.

The detailed analysis of Jain and Hesychast corporeal practices shows that during the 12th and 14th centuries, religious traditions in different parts of the world were enriched with systematically described bodily oriented techniques leading to mystical experiences. This period is known as the “axial age of somatics” in Western and Oriental religious traditions. However, in both systems, the desire for personal “deification” is not limited to automatic immersion in a mystical state with the following change of ontological and epistemological state of a person but serves as a genuine foundation for the future transformation of other people, too (for instance, in the role of elder in Hesychasm and of *aribant*, *kevalin*, and *tirthaṅkara* in Jainism). In addition, for both traditions, the meeting with a higher transcendental reality is possible in this life (*theosis/nirvāṇa*); nevertheless, in a broader eschatological context, it usually happens after one’s death.

Despite a wide range of similarities in purification techniques and psychophysical methods, there is a crucial difference in the ultimate goal of the two traditions. Whereas the ascetics of both Jainism and Hesychasm aim to enter the state of absolute stillness and joy, their philosophical foundations are contradictory. Orthodox *theosis* presupposes the salvation of a person through God’s gift of grace, while Jain *mokṣa* is a direct result of the personal efforts of individuals who are responsible for their own liberation. The final goal for the two religions in terms of spiritual freedom can be regarded as distinctive, too: communion with Jesus Christ in reverse to liberation from *karmic* matter and metaphysical ignorance. Although this is a field where theological and philosophical

dimensions of Jainism and Hesychasm differ, it is important that some divisions in theology and formal doctrine can be counterbalanced by proximities in spirituality and ascetic practices aimed at the soteriological ideal.

Undoubtedly, the focus on ascetic practices is a missing link in interreligious dialogue that should be regarded in a wide horizon of perspectives and opportunities for such a genuine dialogue, which is possible only in recognition and tolerant acceptance of the differences as well as similarities. As Gerard Hall beautifully puts it, “When you dialogue with somebody, look at your partner as a revelatory experience, as you would – and should – look at the lilies in the fields.”<sup>55</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Gerard Hall, “The Call for Interfaith Dialogue,” *Australian eJournal of Theology* 5 (August 2005), [https://acuresearchbank.acu.edu.au/download/9c598df322fcbcea302849b655a1ee43941159ad029474cb53f6b2f8110b1fb2/709331/OA\\_Hall\\_2005\\_The\\_call\\_to\\_interfaith\\_dialogue.pdf](https://acuresearchbank.acu.edu.au/download/9c598df322fcbcea302849b655a1ee43941159ad029474cb53f6b2f8110b1fb2/709331/OA_Hall_2005_The_call_to_interfaith_dialogue.pdf).