



Truth Builders Ministries

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Is it okay for Christians to do yoga?

Question: “What would you say to American Christians (who are naive about the spiritual realm, powers of darkness, demonic influence, etc.) who say, ‘Oh, I just take yoga for the physical and mental health benefits; I’m not involved in the religious part.’ In other words, they think if they are not intentionally practicing the ‘religious side’ of yoga, it can’t have any effect on them.
(D. in Crozet, Va.)

This is a commonly asked question. Yoga is immensely popular in America, and throughout the West. It is estimated that over 30 million Americans practice yoga. It has become a \$3 billion a year business. And we are increasingly seeing yoga practiced by Christians, and even offered in churches. So this question is of very great importance.

What is Yoga?

Let’s first address the question, what is yoga? Miriam Webster’s online dictionary defines yoga this way:

1 capitalized : a Hindu theistic philosophy teaching the suppression of all activity of body, mind, and will in order that the self may realize its distinction from them and attain liberation

2: a system of exercises for attaining bodily or mental control and well-being¹

As it can be seen, there are two understandings of yoga. The first is that Yoga is a Hindu religious system. The second is that yoga is a physical discipline that may or may not involve any religious content. The common assertion of Christians practicing yoga is that they are involved in the second type of yoga. For them, they claim, yoga is only a physical practice and is spiritually neutral. Thus, the question that needs to be addressed is whether yoga, and by that we mean any type of yoga, is spiritually neutral or does all yoga contain spiritual content?

There are a number of different forms of yoga. These include Raja Yoga (meditation and mental discipline), Bhakti Yoga (involving worship and devotion), Karma Yoga (the yoga of right deeds), Jnana Yoga (the yoga of knowledge), and Hatha Yoga (the yoga of postures). It is this last discipline that is the most popular outside of India. And when most non-Hindus speak of yoga, they are actually thinking of Hatha Yoga.

What is Hatha Yoga?

Hatha Yoga is the most recently created form of yoga. The other forms of yoga were developed over many centuries. Some date back to centuries before the birth of Christ. Yoga itself was largely systematized by a Hindu sage named Patanjali in the second century B.C. in a work entitled *The Yoga Sutras*. This work is still considered a basic manual for all yoga. In the 10th century of the Christian era two Shaivite^a ascetics, Matsyendranath and Gorakshanath, formed a new yoga system called Hatha Yoga. This new yoga practice had roots in Raja Yoga, and also shows strong influence from Tantric Yoga. Thus Hatha Yoga is a mixture of both physical disciplines (from Tantric Yoga) and meditation techniques (from Raja Yoga). Since Tantrism emphasizes sexuality, and includes the practice of ritual sex to achieve enlightenment, there is a latent sexual component to Hatha Yoga.

As Hatha Yoga progressed, there were several works written describing the techniques required for its practice. The most celebrated work is the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* written in the 15th century by Yogi Swatmarama. This manual was written in Sanskrit. It is still considered an authoritative text for the practice of Hatha Yoga, and even today is one of the three standard works on Hatha Yoga. It is worth considering the opening verse of this work:

“Salutation to Adinatha [Shiva] who expounded the knowledge of Hatha Yoga, which like a staircase leads the aspirant to the high pinnacled Raja Yoga.”

Note that the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* is dedicated to Shiva. Also, this one verse indicates that it was the Hindu god Shiva who first developed Hatha Yoga. Furthermore, Hatha Yoga is presented as a means to a goal, preparing the yogi^b for the practice of Raja Yoga. And what is the purpose of Raja Yoga? To develop the mind so that the yogi can achieve enlightenment, union with the Ultimate Reality.

Thus, we have already seen that all yoga practice originated in Hinduism. That Hatha Yoga itself was supposedly created by the Hindu god Shiva. And that Hatha Yoga is but a “staircase” that leads to yoga mediation, or Raja Yoga.

What is the Purpose of Yoga?

To understand the nature of something, it is helpful to understand the purpose for which it was created. So we ask the question, what is the purpose of yoga? What was it designed for?

The first point to be considered here is the actual meaning of the word “yoga.” Yoga is a word that is derived from the Sanskrit^c *yug*, which means “a joining,” or “union.” Thus, the term yoga refers to a union.

So what is this union? To answer this question, we need to briefly review some Hindu religious teaching. Hinduism teaches that all that exists is actually a single reality. Further, all that exists is divine, i.e., all is god. This is called pantheism. So everything that exists is divine and is an aspect of the one reality that is god. However, this god is not the God of the Bible. This deity is not a personal

^a By Shaivite we mean the devotees of the Hindu god Shiva.

^b A yogi is a person who practices yoga. Technically, a yogi is a male, and a yogini is a female.

^c Sanskrit was the ancient language of the Indo-Aryan people of the Indian subcontinent.

being at all. Rather this deity is the impersonal ultimate and supreme reality. In Hinduism this supreme reality is called Brahman.

Hinduism also teaches that since all is god, all is divine, that man is also divine. According to Hinduism you are one with god. Your individual soul (called *atman*) is one with Brahman, the ultimate, god itself. One of the most famous statements in Hinduism is “thou art that.” That is to say, you (*atman*, the individual soul) is the same as “that” (Brahman, the One, the Ultimate). However, there is a problem here. You are ignorant of this. You are not truly aware of this reality. Hinduism says you live in a world of illusion, believing you are separate from Brahman. So for the Hindu salvation consists of seeking enlightenment, an experience of self-realization where you become truly aware of your oneness with Brahman. This is what supposedly happened to the Buddha. And this is what yogis are seeking for. Yoga is all about union with Brahman.

Consider these quotes about yoga and the concept of union with Brahman:

- “The purpose of all Yogas is to unite man, the finite, with the Infinite, with Cosmic Consciousness, Truth, God, Light or whatever other name one chooses to call the Ultimate Reality. Yoga, as they say in India, is a marriage of spirit and matter.”²
- “All yogic practice, including Hatha Yoga, is designed to help the yogi gain control over the body, breath, senses and mind... [which] leads to... enlightenment, cosmic consciousness, higher consciousness, self-realization, and nirvana.”³
- “Samadhi^d ... is the goal of yoga. It’s when the yogi finally becomes aware of nothing but Brahman... the all pervading, Supreme Self, or God—everywhere.”⁴

Thus, we see that all yoga, Hatha Yoga included, has the purpose of uniting us with Brahman, that is, of causing us to achieve a state of spiritual enlightenment in which we realize that we are divine, that we are one with ultimate reality. This is pure Hinduism. And the connection of yoga with Hinduism cannot be denied.

Although many Christians do not see this connection, Hindus do see it. Consider what various Hindus have said about yoga:

- Professor Subhas Tuwari of the Hindu University of America in Orlando, FL has said: “Yoga is Hinduism.”⁵ He also stated: “Efforts to separate yoga from its spiritual center reveal ignorance of the goal of yoga.”⁶
- Swami Param stated: “Why be covert? Participants should be invited upfront to ‘come study Hinduism,’ which is what they’re doing when learning hatha yoga.”⁷
- Sannyasin Arumugaswami, the Managing editor of *Hinduism Today* says, “Hinduism is the soul of yoga, based as it is on Hindu Scripture and developed by Hindu sages.”⁸

^d Samadhi is the highest stage of meditation, in which one achieves union with Brahman.

It is no wonder that noted professor of comparative world religions, Dr. Walter Martin, once observed: “Yoga is Hinduism. It cannot be separated from it.”⁹ It is also significant that Ravi Zacharias has been noted to say, “There is no Hinduism without yoga, and there is no yoga without Hinduism.”

Hatha Yoga’s Postures

Without a doubt there are probably readers of this piece who are still unconvinced of the religious nature of yoga, and that yoga is really Hinduism. Some are probably thinking something like this: “I understand that for Hindus yoga has a religious purpose. But it doesn’t for me. I don’t get into the meditation or the spiritual aspects. I don’t chant ‘Om’ or make offerings to some Hindu god. To me, yoga is nothing more than a physical technique for better health.” With this thinking in mind, let us examine the physical aspects of Hatha Yoga—the actual postures.

In the practice of Hatha Yoga the yogi undertakes to do certain poses or postures. In yoga, these are called *asanas* (with the accent on the first syllable). So the question must be addressed—what is the purpose and nature of the asanas?

As noted above, Hatha Yoga arose out of Raja Yoga, the yoga of mental control and meditation. The actual purpose of the asanas is to prepare the yogi for Raja Yoga itself. Remember, Hatha Yoga is the “staircase” to the higher discipline of Raja Yoga. We see this in the very meaning of the word asana. Asana actually means “seat.” The various postures of Hatha Yoga were designed to create physical discipline in the life of the yogis, enabling them to sit for long periods of time in deep meditation.¹⁰ The asanas are preparation for meditation.

But the asanas are more than just preparation, they are a form of mediation itself. It is frequently stated that yoga affects body, mind and spirit. For example, *The Complete Idiot’s Guide to Yoga* defines yoga as “a physical, mental and spiritual way of life that puts reality into perspective.”¹¹ Thus, when doing Hatha Yoga not only is the physical body engaged and affected but the mind and spirit as well. So performing the asanas is seen as more than just a physical technique. It is a mental and spiritual exercise as well. That is why many books on yoga practice call the asanas “moving meditation.” One writer puts it this way: “You could say that Hatha yoga is meditation of the physical body.”¹² Others even state that the asanas are a form of prayer!

That the practice of the asanas is more than just physical is also seen in the influence they have in a person’s life. One common observation of many people concerns the transforming power of yoga. It not only changes a person physically but mentally and even spiritually. This transformation can occur even if the person is unaware that a transformation process is occurring. Consider these quotes from various writers on yoga:

- “Even if you start with the physical exercises alone, however, Hatha Yoga will quickly begin to work its magic.”¹³ In other words, it will change you!
- “At first glance it [yoga] appears to be little more than a series of strange physical postures... But in time, anyone who continues with regular practice becomes aware of subtle change in their approach to life... you begin to glimpse a state of inner peace which is your true nature. It is this that constitute the essence of true yoga — this self-realization that we are all seeking....”¹⁴

- “The secret of Yoga lies in the fact that it deals with the entire man, not with just one of his aspects. It is concerned with growth—physical, mental, moral and spiritual. It develops forces that are already within you. Beginning with improved health and added physical well-being, it works up slowly through the mental to the spiritual. The transition is so gradual that you may not even be aware of it until you realize that a change in you has already taken place.”¹⁵

Many can testify to the fact that they have been changed by yoga—their feelings, their outlook on life, and sadly for many, their belief systems. There are countless people who have become Hindus, or joined ranks with the New Agers, or delved into Eastern mystical practices, because of their involvement in yoga. For the Christian who sees nothing wrong in yoga, we cannot help but wonder if their beliefs and values may have been changed without their realizing it.

One note of caution here is necessary. The changes brought about by yoga can be extreme, even dangerous. If you do a serious study of yoga, you will find many warnings about the practice of yoga and its potential harm. This does not come from those opposed to yoga, but from its proponents.

Many assert that yoga that is done without proper instruction or preparation, and some techniques of yoga no matter how they are done, can have disastrous consequences. There are accounts of physical injury, brain damage, mental breakdowns, and even insanity from people practicing yoga. There are also accounts of individuals being becoming possessed by demons. Note Christian researchers Dr. John Ankerberg and Dr. John Weldon in this regard to the latter:

- “Yoga practice involves occult meditation, the development of psychic powers, and may result in spirit contact or spirit possession.”¹⁶

There is another serious concern with the asanas which demonstrates that they are more than just physical techniques. Everything about Hatha Yoga is grounded in the Hindu religion and in an eastern mystical worldview. This is true about the asanas, as well as anything else. The asanas were developed by Hindus as part of their religious practice. Therefore it is not surprising to find that every one of the asanas has a spiritual component to it. Each posture has reference to a Hindu god or goddess, a sacred animal, or a Hindu sage. Those which are dedicated to a god or goddess are obviously a problem for the Christian. At first glance, the others may not seem so bad. However, it should be understood that the animals honored in a specific asana are either sacred to a particular god—usually acting as that god’s companion or means of travel—or have reference to some event in the life of a god. As for the sages, from a Hindu perspective these are not just wise men but are actually demi-gods, lesser divine beings, and still worthy of devotion and worship.

To illustrate this point, let’s review a few of the asanas and see their spiritual association:

- The Fish: Has reference to the god Vishnu, who incarnated as a fish to save mankind.
- The Eagle: Honors Garuda, the king of birds, who carries Vishnu on his back.
- Downward Dog: Honors the dog as a sacred animal. In India there is an entire festival dedicated to the dog each November. Dogs are also associated with Yama, the god of death.
- The Monkey: Honors the monkey god, Hanuman. The pose recalls his giant leap from India to Sri Lanka in service to Vishnu.
- The Crane: Has reference to Baka, a demon who attempted to kill Krishna.
- Warrior: Dedicated to Lord Virabhadra, the fierce warrior guard of the deity Vishnu.

- Cobra: Recalls the cobra as a sacred animal associated with several gods. Also doing this asana has the power to awaken the spiritual serpent power, Kundalini, and cause Samadhi.
- Lord of the Dance: Honors Shiva, the god of destruction and lord of the dance.
- The Corpse: A pose of relaxation, but also a reference to the Hindu concept of extinguishing the ego and transcending the body as a means to enlightenment

This is only a short list. But it illustrates the point. Each asana honors a god, a sacred animal associated with a god, or a divine sage. In other words, the asanas themselves are nothing less than a form of Hindu worship. They are physical prayers that pay homage to false gods. Biblically we understand these gods to be nothing less than demons. So to practice the postures of Hatha Yoga is to actually engage in honoring demonic spirits.

Again, the words of Dr. Walter Martin are relevant here:

- “Yoga is not a substitute for aerobics, and it was never intended to be used for physical activity alone; it was created to worship deities the Bible calls *demons*.¹⁷

There is a series of yoga postures that many people do to begin their day. It is called the Sun Salutation, or even the Sun Worship (*Surya Namaskara*). This routine is purposely designed to honor the sun, a significant deity in Hindu worship. Does it seem appropriate for Christians to begin their day doing obeisance to the sun? One should consider Deuteronomy 17:2-3 in this regard: Men did what was “evil in the Lord’s sight” by worshipping “other gods... the sun and the moon.”

It is noteworthy that the Hindu Scriptures declare that the god Shiva is the “Lord of yoga.” If Shiva is the Lord of yoga, and you participate in physical exercises that honor Shiva, Vishnu, and other Hindu gods, then the question may legitimately be asked, “Who is Lord of your life?” God is explicit that we are only to honor Him as God (see Exodus 20:3, Isaiah 44:6, Isaiah 43:10, Deuteronomy 6:13-14). God takes the honoring of other gods very seriously.

Perhaps a person may think: “But I will redeem the asanas. I will do them in honor of Jehovah, not Shiva.” Is this possible? Some assert that this is so. However, based on what we have also discussed it seems unlikely. The postures of Hatha Yoga are not only dedicated to pagan, demonic gods, they are part and parcel of an entire religious and philosophical system whose purpose is to cause an individual to be transformed and experience union with the ultimate divine reality, Brahman.

Perhaps remembering the experience of the Israelites at Mt. Sinai is applicable here. While Moses was receiving the Tables of the Law, the children of Israel were making an idol—a golden calf. It is interesting to note that in midst of their idolatry they attempted to justify their actions by “redeeming” the golden calf. They called their idol “Elohim,” the most common designation for Jehovah God in the Old Testament (see Exodus 32:8). Their attempt to take something that was inherently evil and ungodly and give a Christian name to it was repugnant to God. This action elicited the Lord’s wrath and condemnation. There are some things that are just not redeemable because they are inherently evil themselves. Yoga is one of these things.

Conclusion

There are many other errors and dangers to found in the practice of yoga. We have not attempted to address the dangers of *pranayama* (breath control), the concept of the *chakras* and *Kundalini*, and the influence of occult practice and belief, all of which are part of the yogic system. Each of these is purely demonic and pagan. Each of them is anti-Christian by definition. Any one of them is enough to require that the Christian should reject yoga completely.

But instead we have attempted to address the issue of the physical techniques of yoga itself. It is our hope that we have demonstrated that yoga is nothing less than Hindu worship and practice. You cannot understand the true nature of yoga without understanding Hinduism. And when you understand Hinduism, then you must see the intrinsic errors in yoga and why it is spiritually dangerous.

We would do well to consider this quote from a yoga manual: “This [hatha yoga] is the physical yoga practice that uses body postures to open the body and heart. But yoga is much more than a physical practice. The science of yoga is thousands of years old. It is an entire system with its own moral codes, breathing disciplines, and meditation techniques designed to take you along your spiritual journey.”¹⁸ Note that yoga does not just open your body, but also your heart. It is a holistic system involving the physical, mental, moral and spiritual areas of your life. It is religious. And it is not Christian. So if you allow your heart to be opened through yoga, consider what may enter in!

The words of Laurette Willis are appropriate in this regard. She was a practicing yogi for 22 years, and for many years was a yoga instructor. When she came to faith in Christ, she rejected yoga, recognizing the anti-Christian, pagan system inherent in yoga. She states: “You may say, ‘Well, I’m not doing any of the meditation stuff. I’m just following the exercises.’ It is impossible, however, to separate the subtleties of yoga the technique from yoga the religion. I know because I taught and practiced hatha yoga for years.” Also, “From experience I can say that yoga is a dangerous practice for the Christian and leads seekers away from God rather than to Him.”¹⁹

Postscript

For those who are concerned about their health and would like a physical program that gives the benefits of yoga but without all the spiritual baggage, there is an alternative. Laurette Willis, mentioned above as a practicing yogi for many years, has developed a Christian program called Praise Moves. She has created physical postures that do not copy yoga asanas, but enables the practitioner to enjoy the physical advantages of yoga. You can find out about this program online at praisemoves.com.

Endnotes

¹ <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/yoga>, accessed 5-23-14.

² Indra Devi. *Yoga for Americans*. New York: New American Library, 1968, p. xxiii.

³ Sumukhi Finney. *The Yoga Handbook*. New York: Barnes and Noble, 2004, p. 25.

⁴ Joan Budilovsk and Eve Adamson. *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Yoga*. 2nd ed. Indianapolis, IN: Alpha Books, 2001, p. 11

⁵ *Time Magazine*, September 2005. Quoted on <http://praisemoves.com/about-us/why-a-christian-alternative-to-yoga/#Hindus>, accessed 5-23-14.

⁶ HinduismToday.com, September 2009 Quoted on <http://praisemoves.com/about-us/why-a-christian-alternative-to-yoga/#Hindus>, accessed 5-23-14.

⁷ Elliot Miller. "The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment." Part 3. Christian Research Institute Article JAY001-03, p. 4.

⁸ Miller. Part 3. p. 4.

⁹ Walter Martin, Jill Martin Rische, and Kurt Van Gorden. *The Kingdom of the Occult*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2008, p. 317.

¹⁰ Martin Kirk, Brooke Boon, Daniel DiTuro. *Hatha Yoga Illustrated*. Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2006, p. 22.

¹¹ Budilovsk and Adamson, p. 6.

¹² Finney, p. 46.

¹³ Budilovsk and Adamson, p. 7.

¹⁴ Lucy Lidell. *The Sivananda Companion to Yoga*. New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., p. 10.

¹⁵ Devi, p. xxii.

¹⁶ Source: www.jashow.org/wiki/index.php?title=Yoga_-_Part_1, accessed 5-23-14

¹⁷ Martin, p. 319.

¹⁸ Kirk, Boon and DiTuro, p. xiii.

¹⁹ Quoted in Martin, p. 318.