

Yoga and the Christian Faith: Conflicting or Compatible?

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One of the most popular physical fitness exercises of today is yoga. Fitness gurus from Hollywood to local gyms promote this technique as an easy method for wellbeing. They claim that yoga can transform our lives and gain control of our mind and emotions. As a result, it is gaining cultural acceptance. So, should Christians practice yoga?

The word yoga derives from the Sanskrit word “*yuj*” denoting to “yoke” or “unite”. The traces of this movement can be traced back to practices described in the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* written around AD 200 is considered to be the primary texts on yoga. It describes the yoga practice in terms of the “eight –limbed” (*ashtanga*) yoga. The first stage is *yama* self-control or restraint which consists of universal ethics such as truthfulness. The second *niyama* is the principle of self conduct. Personal behavior such as purity, study of the scriptures and devotion to the Lord are involved in this stage. The third stage is *asana* or the practice of the postures. Next the *pranayama* is the regulation of vital force such as breathing under the control of the will. The fifth stage of *pratyahara* deals with withdrawal and control of the senses. This is done through concentration on a single point, usually with the chanting of “om” until everything else disappears from consciousness. The sixth *dharana* is the stage of concentration. The next stage of *dhyana* or meditation is reached when the self remains stably directed toward one point without distraction. The last stage of *Samadhi* or absorption is reached when one is no longer conscious even of meditating and arrives at a state of transcendent bliss.

The analogy is given that just as a passenger rides in a chariot the “self” is said to ride the body. Therefore just as the charioteer is in control of the chariot the “self” controls the body, mind and senses. *Kath Upanishads* describes it as “when the five senses and the mind are still, and reason itself rests in silence, then begins the path supreme. This calm steadiness of the senses is called yoga.”

The physical postures and breathing exercises are only initial stages that should lead to moral purification and ultimately to spiritual bliss known as *Samadhi* or absorption. Furthermore, certain physical positions in yoga symbolize a spiritual act. Even the postures pay homage to certain gods. The greeting of Namaste that is “the divine in me bows to the divine in you” or the chanting of “om” to focus one’s mind leaves little doubt about the religious dimension of yoga. According to Aseem Shukla, the co-founder and board member of Hindu American Foundation, posits in an article on *Washington Post* “Arrayed in linear patterns, they stretch, bend, contort and control their respirations as a mentor calls out names of Hindu divinity linked to various postures: *Natarajaasana* (Lord Shiva) or *Hanumanasana* (Lord Hanuman) among many others. They chant their

assigned “mantra of the month” taken as they are from lines directly from the Vedas. Welcome to the` practice of yoga in today’s western world.”

At the heart of this debate is whether a religious system stripped off its spiritual roots is able to function as a mere exercise to keep bodies in shape. The advocates for yoga argue that yoga is completely a non-religious activity and there is no dogma involved. They have attempted to divorce yoga from any Hindu or Buddhist meditation. Hindu missionaries such as Swami Vivekananda when arrived in the United States have re-interpreted yoga, stripping off its spiritual significance and baptized in the western concepts of positive thinking and self help. They have played down the spiritual anchor of yoga in Hinduism. This re-marketing strategy has worked so well that yoga has become a household word. Even though there are various schools of yoga such as *hatha yoga*, which is more a physical yoga, based on an elaborate physiology; all are different methods of reaching the same ultimate goal of *Samadhi* or absorption. Apostle Paul exhorts us to be transformed “by renewing of your mind” not emptying of your mind.

The ultimate goal of yoga is an experience of undifferentiated oneness with the Brahman (the supreme self) or the absorption of the self in the Godhead. These deep Hindu spiritual ethos are incompatible with the Christian faith. There is a great gulf between the view of God, humanity and salvation as found in Hinduism and Christianity. Apostle John tells us in the book of revelation that people of God will be in eternal communion with Him not annihilation or “absorption.”

The philosophy of yoga teaches that human beings have the power to “purify” their nature through certain “techniques” and reach a state of transcendent bliss. There is no need of assistance from a higher power. This philosophical view is in contradiction to the Biblical understanding of humanity. The moral degeneracy that set in as a result of the sin in Eden became so great that the human mind has become darkened and weakened. Since the human will have been weakened, it is impossible to have decisive control through certain “techniques.”

Despite the presentation of yoga as harmless or even beneficial; these breathing exercises could be potentially dangerous in opening doors to “forces” or “spirits” beyond ones control. In 1989, Vatican issued a document saying yoga “can degenerate into a cult of the body” and “mistake pleasing sensations for spiritual wellbeing.” It is only through Christ we have “peace that passeth all understanding.”

To a devout Hindu such as Mr. Shukla, yoga’s physical exercises are never an end in itself. It is of no use if one does not complete all stages. Health, longevity, and peace are indicators of progress and an encouragement to continue the practice. Therefore, yoga is a spiritual quest. To ignore this reality is to disregard the essence of yoga. Tracing the roots of yoga to its Hindu roots has revealed that it is more than a mere exercise and we need the gift of discernment, more than ever before.