

## Yoga

By Robert Velarde

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**Founder:** The founding of yoga is historically uncertain, though its codification is credited to Patanjali, an Indian who authored the Yoga Sutras, which form the basis for raja yoga (ashtanga yoga) and were collected around 400 B.C.

**Definition:** Meaning “yoking” or “union” in Sanskrit, yoga is both a school of Hindu spirituality and physical exercise. Spiritually practiced yoga is intended to further progress toward spiritual liberation (enlightenment) in an Eastern religious sense.

**Key Words:** yoga (yoking/union), prana, pranayama, asanas, chakras, nadi, bhakti yoga, jnana yoga, karma yoga, raja yoga (also called ashtanga yoga), kundalini yoga, tantra yoga, hatha yoga, Atman, atma

### HISTORY

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Originating thousands of years ago, yoga has grown into a popular Western practice, emphasizing its exercise benefits and, in some circumstances, its spiritual underpinnings. Historically speaking, the purpose of yoga is spiritual union with the divine, as viewed from a Hindu perspective. Although contemporary yoga of the spiritual variety is rooted in Eastern monistic pantheism—the view that all is one and all is part of an impersonal divine force—its worldview origins are actually dualistic. As Elliot Miller observes:

At the time that Patanjali developed yoga, the dualistic philosophy of Samkhya (or Sankhya) was prominent in India. Samkhya held that there are two fundamental realities: (1) *parushas*, or individual, immaterial, eternal, and indestructible soul, and (2) *prakriti*, which forms the material world, and itself consists of three basic elements known as the three *gunas*: *Sattva* (goodness/truth), *Raja* (passion/activity), and *Tamas* (darkness/inertia).<sup>1</sup>

The goal of this form of yoga, however, in comparison with monistic pantheism forms of yoga remains essentially the same—to correct a perceived problem within the human condition via yoga in order to bring about enlightenment or a positive state of being. Historical developments in Hinduism later gave rise to forms of polytheism (many gods) combined with monistic pantheism, especially of the Advaita Vedanta variety (all is one, all is divine).

Yoga, then, seeks to join the practitioner with the impersonal reality called Brahman, thus bringing about spiritual liberation (enlightenment). The problem with the human condition, as articulated by the philosophy that underlies yoga, is spiritual ignorance. Yoga is intended to free the practitioner from “ignorance and illusion,” leading ultimately to “a state of deep concentration that results in a blissful, ecstatic union with the ultimate reality.”<sup>2</sup>

### Proliferation

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Yoga’s arrival in the United States is tied to groups such as Self-Realization Fellowship—an organization founded in 1920 by Paramahansa Yogananda, author of *Autobiography of a Yogi* (1946), and based in Los Angeles, California—as well as individuals such as B.K.S. Iyengar, founder of Iyengar Yoga and author of *Light on Yoga* (1966). Yoga has since grown significantly, to the point of becoming a mainstream practice in the West most often associated with exercise. Materials on yoga are available for couples, babies, the elderly, golfers, headache relief, prenatal yoga, and even material on yoga for dogs.<sup>3</sup> *Yoga Journal*, which began with a print run of 300 copies of its initial issue in May 1975, now reaches 1.966 million people<sup>4</sup> and claims that more than 20 million Americans are practicing yoga.<sup>5</sup> Vishal Mangalwadi and Ronald Enroth observe, “Yoga has moved from the fringes to the mainstream,” noting, “In recent years yoga has invaded Western popular culture. It has inspired a cover story for *Time* magazine, provided ‘strength and empowerment’ for people dealing with health issues, and fueled the sale of yoga apparel.”<sup>6</sup> *The Times of India* reported,

“Americans are making yoga stand on its head with creative innovations and marketing muscle in what appears to be the second coming in the United States of the ancient Indian practice.”<sup>7</sup>

From its “hippie” rise in the 1960s, through its continued growth in the 1970s and 1980s yoga was most often rightly associated with Eastern religion, specifically Hinduism and Buddhism, but has since become far more mainstream and repackaged for Western consumption. As Marcia Montenegro comments:

... those who market yoga have successfully airbrushed out the spiritual roots of yoga and marketed yoga as an exercise. With celebrities doing yoga, yoga on TV, glossy magazine ads of beautiful people doing yoga, yoga videos, yoga CD’s, yoga mats, and yoga wear, yoga has become glamorized and trendy... yoga is now vigorously embraced, linked to health and hipness.<sup>8</sup>

## PRACTICE

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Although there are different schools of yoga, the underlying spiritual goals remain Hindu in purpose—to unite with Brahman,<sup>9</sup> thus attaining enlightenment. The most popular Western form of yoga is *hatha yoga*, which emphasizes physical aspects. Another form is *tantric yoga*, which encourages practices that are usually avoided by those seeking enlightenment, such as partaking of alcohol and involvement in sexual activity. *Raja yoga* emphasizes control of the mind via control of the body. *Jnana yoga* underscores the intellect, detachment, moral pursuits, and a desire for spiritual liberation. *Kundalini yoga* focuses on the arousal of the kundalini energy said to be located at the base of the spine. Other forms of yoga include *karma yoga*, which elevates good works in the process of salvation, and *bhakti yoga*, in which the practitioner “seeks salvation through the path of devotion to a personal representation of God,”<sup>10</sup> though the gods emphasized are not as God is defined within Christianity.

Yoga is popularly portrayed as simply an exercise—stretching intended to strengthen, tone, and benefit the body. Traditionally, however, yoga involves far more than various poses and stretching. Patanjali noted eight members, limbs, or stages of yoga, which relate to “moral, physical, and mental disciplines” and include “(1) moral restraint [*yama*], (2) religious observance [*niyama*], (3) postures (*asanas*), (4) breath control (*pranayama*), (5) sense withdrawal [*pratyahara*], (6) concentration [*dharana*], (7) meditative absorption [*dhyana*], and (8) enlightenment (*samadhi*).”<sup>11</sup> It is beyond the scope of this article to address in detail all eight of the stages of yoga. As such, only three will receive specific attention: breath control, meditative absorption, and enlightenment. These three stages of yoga are the most relevant to an understanding of yoga from the viewpoint of spiritual evaluation and discernment.

**Breath control** in yoga, known as *pranayama*, is rooted in belief in *prana*, which is defined as energy “said to flow through thousands of invisible channels called *nadi*, which cross at a series of seven energy centers known as *chakras*.”<sup>12</sup> Practices that involve energy such as *prana* all hold to key beliefs including the views that life energy is the fabric of the universe; disease arises from an imbalance or blockage of the flow of life energy in the body; life energy can be adjusted, activated, channeled or otherwise manipulated in order to treat illness or maximize health; and life energy is associated with the divine, which in the case of yoga involves the Hindu view that the divine is an impersonal energy force flowing through everything.<sup>13</sup> Breathing exercises in yoga are intended to harness *prana*, thus furthering one’s path toward enlightenment.

**Meditative absorption** in yoga (*dhyana*) is specifically intended to lead to enlightenment (*samadhi*). Some forms of yoga-oriented meditation will seek to empty the mind of all thought, while others will concentrate on something specific, usually determined spontaneously during meditation.

The attainment of **enlightenment** (*samadhi*) is the goal of yoga. The human problem is said to be ignorance and the solution is to unite our soul (*atma*) with Brahman:

Our problem is not sin but ignorance—the fact that we have forgotten our divinity. We need to experience, realize, or perceive that divinity...Salvation lies in attaining the original state of consciousness that has been lost. If we are God, we cannot expect a god to come and save us. We have to realize our own divinity, and yoga is the path by which to experience God-consciousness.<sup>14</sup>

## YOGA AND CHRISTIANITY

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In *Examining Alternative Medicine* several questions are posed:

Can the practice of ayurveda, traditional Chinese medicine, yoga, and Therapeutic Touch (among others) be separated from their spiritual underpinnings?...these practices, and many others in the alternative stable, are deeply rooted in Eastern mysticism, New Age philosophy

and, in some cases, spiritism and the occult. Is it appropriate for those who take the Old and New Testaments seriously (or for anyone else) to participate in these therapies... Is there a potential spiritual risk associated with any of these therapies?<sup>15</sup>

Is it possible to practice yoga apart from its decidedly Eastern religious worldview, and do so safely? The simple answer is no; it is not possible to practice true yoga without the underlying spirituality it purports to promote. If yoga is practiced in such a fashion—divorced from its spiritual roots and purposes—then it is not true yoga. As Wilson and Weldon note:

The goal of yoga is the same as Hinduism—Hindu God-realization, i.e., for the yoga devotee to realize that he is one with Brahman, the highest impersonal Hindu God. The physical exercises of yoga are designed to prepare the body for the psychospiritual change vital to inculcating this idea into the consciousness and being of the person. Hence talk of separating yoga practice from theory is meaningless. From a Christian perspective, whether the two can safely be divided is doubtful. 'I do yoga, but Hinduism isn't involved,' is an incorrect statement. Those who do 'yoga exercises' alone run the risk of spiritual warfare entering their lives.<sup>16</sup>

The question may then arise, "Why can't Christians practice yoga and just ignore any spiritual aspects of it that are at odds with Christianity?" By definition yoga is spiritual, but not in any Christian sense:

...yogic exercises are not merely a collection of ancient maneuvers that happen to improve muscle tone and provide some relaxation at the end of a long day; they are, in fact, religious exercises that are intended to induce a particular *experience*—not just a belief—that we are one with Brahman, the Absolute.<sup>17</sup>

One may ask, "Why not 'Christianize' yoga and turn it into a practice that honors God?" The entire enterprise of yoga—its purpose for existing—is to bring about enlightenment in a Hindu sense. To attempt to remove these elements from yoga is akin to removing Christ from Christianity. One may call it Christianity, as certain liberal forms of Christianity do, but in reality it would no longer be Christianity, but, as C.S. Lewis called liberal Christianity, it would be "Christianity and water"—a diluted, ineffective shadow of its true self.

Similarly, attempts to Christianize yoga ultimately fail. First, they so water down the purpose of yoga that it is no longer really yoga. Second, they force a non-Christian system into a Christian framework without grasping the fact that doing so essentially creates a new practice rather than somehow baptizing an old practice so that it may be converted safely for Christian consumption. Third, attempting to Christianize yoga may lead people to believe that many other potentially spiritually dangerous practices may also similarly be cleansed and adapted for Christian consumption. If such a line of reasoning is applied, for instance, to the world of the occult, the results could be physically and spiritually devastating for the Christian involved in such an endeavor. Yoga should not be taken lightly, particularly when we recall that its underlying purpose is essentially seeking to produce altered states of consciousness and union not with the true God of the Bible, but union with the mystical, pantheistic, impersonal force known as Brahman. The popular world of yoga in the West, though repackaged for Western consumption, remains steeped in Eastern mysticism. A perusal of any issue of *Yoga Journal*, for instance, will reveal articles and advertisements directly associated with Eastern religious teachings and New Age spirituality.

Is yoga dangerous? Both practitioners of yoga and critics of it answer in the affirmative. Shree Purohit Swami, a Hindu teacher, comments: "People forget that Yama and Niyama form the foundation, and unless it is firmly laid, they should not practice postures and breathing exercises. In India and Europe, I came across some three hundred people who suffered permanently from wrong practices ..."<sup>18</sup> Hans-Ulrich Rieker, author of *The Yoga of Light*, warns, "Yoga is not a trifling jest if we consider that any misunderstanding in the practice of yoga can mean death or insanity."<sup>19</sup> Christian philosopher and apologist Douglas Groothuis summarizes the potential dangers of yoga: "All forms of yoga involve occult assumptions, even *hatha* yoga, which is often presented as a purely physical discipline. Even advocates of yoga report the dangers of the energy (*kundalini*) it may awaken. This may involve insanity, physical burning, sexual aberrations and so on."<sup>20</sup> Occult expert Kurt Koch adds:

The system of yoga stands behind magic, mysticism and occultism...yoga is totally opposed to what the Bible says. It is therefore dangerous for Christians to become susceptible to yoga...The fourth stage of yoga is concerned with the mastery of magic and the cosmic forces. It involves the practice of spiritistic and magical phenomena...Yoga may indeed be harmless to begin with [in early stages], but it ends dangerously. Yet even the first stage of Yoga is not without its dangers when for example the exercises involved are linked with short Buddhist prayers.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, Wilson and Weldon offer these astute observations: “In the authoritative yoga literature, there are invariably warnings about the dangers of yoga practice without first gaining vigorous moral, mental, or sometimes physical prerequisites (Yama and Niyama). This is largely neglected by many today.”<sup>22</sup> Wilson and Weldon go on to document several potential dangers of yoga including body disorder, disease, and madness, adding that kundalini can be linked to demonic activity.<sup>23</sup> Of course, this is not to say that everyone practicing yoga will experience such harmful results but nevertheless it is telling that serious yoga adherents warn of its potential deleterious side effects.

## CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

The essential aspects of yoga are in direct contradiction to the Christian worldview. Prana views reality as flowing with an impersonal, universal life energy. In other words, it holds to pantheism. Christianity, on the other hand, views God as a personal being who is active in his creation, but transcends it. Meditation in yoga is intended to result in the realization that we are divine beings and, as such, is part of the divine force. This approach to enlightenment has nothing in common with Christianity, which emphasizes our sin and separation from God, need to repent, and God’s personal solution to our condition through the death and resurrection of Christ (Romans 10:9). Yoga is also a self-centered path to salvation rather than the Savior-centered path as taught in Christianity (John 14:6). As such, yoga is essentially a works-based system of spiritual liberation, which is in contradiction to the Christian view, which is centered on the grace of God (Ephesians 2:8-9).

In addition, Jesus taught nothing remotely similar to the Hindu practices associated with yoga. Christ’s teachings were decidedly theistic, rooted in Judaism, and, as such, He acknowledged the reality of one personal, transcendent, creator God. The human problem is not ignorance of divinity, but separation from God as a result of sin that can only be corrected via repentance and belief in Christ. Mangalwadi and Enroth summarize the significant differences between Hinduism and Christianity as follows:

Yoga and Hindu philosophy seek union with God. The problem is that they seek it in the wrong place. Jesus offers true salvation as a free gift, and this salvation does bring about genuine reunion with God. Our union with him fulfills our individuality. It does not obliterate it. It makes our bodies precious—temples of the living God.<sup>24</sup>

The Bible commands Christians to avoid teachings or practices that are contradictory or in opposition to the Bible.<sup>25</sup> Those seeking health benefits from yoga may find such benefits in other practices that do not involve Eastern religious underpinnings, such as a number of exercises emphasizing stretching, aerobic exercise, and more, that are completely divorced from problematic religious influences.

### Notes

- 1 Elliot Miller, “The Yoga Boom: A Call for Christian Discernment, Part 1: Yoga in its Original Eastern Context,” *Christian Research Journal*, volume 31, no. 2 (2008): 2, accessed June 5, 2014, <http://www.equip.org/PDF/JAY001-1.pdf>.
- 2 *Encyclopedia Britannica* 15<sup>th</sup> ed., s.v. “Yoga.” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 2003.
- 3 For example, *Doga: Yoga for Dogs* by Jennifer Brilliant and William Berloni (Chronicle Books, 2003).
- 4 “Advertise,” *Yoga Journal Advertise*, accessed June 9, 2014, <http://www.yogajournal.com/advertise/>.
- 5 *Yoga Journal* “Yoga in America Study 2012.” Accessed June 9, 2014. [http://www.yogajournal.com/press/yoga\\_in\\_america](http://www.yogajournal.com/press/yoga_in_america).
- 6 Ronald Enroth, ed., *A Guide to New Religious Movements* (InterVarsity Press, 2005), “Yoga and Hinduism” by Vishal Mangalwadi with Ronald Enroth, 42.
- 7 “Americans Twist Yoga into Some New Shapes,” *The Times of India*, as reported in *Hindu Press International*, June 3, 2003.
- 8 Marcia Montenegro, “Yoga: From Hippies to Hip,” (Christian Answers for the New Age, 2004) accessed June 10, 2014 [http://christiananswersforthenewage.org/Articles\\_YogaHippie s1.html](http://christiananswersforthenewage.org/Articles_YogaHippie s1.html).
- 9 In certain forms of Hinduism, particularly in popular Western forms, Brahman is essentially the impersonal force of the universe.
- 10 Miller, 5.
- 11 Miller, 3.
- 12 Paul Reisser, Dale Mabe, and Robert Velarde, *Examining Alternative Medicine* (InterVarsity Press, 2001), 83.
- 13 *Ibid.*, chapter 5.
- 14 Mangalwadi and Enroth, 45.
- 15 Reisser, Mabe, Velarde, 22.
- 16 John Weldon and Clifford Wilson, *Occult Shock and Psychic Forces* (Master Books, 1980), 71.
- 17 Reisser, Mabe, Velarde, 59.
- 18 Cited in Weldon and Wilson, 72.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Douglas Groothuis, *Unmasking the New Age* (InterVarsity Press, 1986), 68.
- 21 Kurt Koch, *The Devil’s Alphabet* (Kregel, 1971), 124-126.
- 22 Weldon and Wilson, 72.
- 23 *Ibid.*, 73-76.
- 24 Mangalwadi and Enroth, 58.
- 25 Romans 16:17; 1 Timothy 6:20-21; 2 John 1:7-11



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