Yoga

By Robert Velarde

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

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).

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.”

Proliferation

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. Yoga Journal, which began with a print run of 300 copies of its initial issue in May 1975, now reaches 1.966 million people and claims that more than 20 million Americans are practicing yoga. 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.” 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.”

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.

PRACTICE

Although there are different schools of yoga, the underlying spiritual goals remain Hindu in purpose—to unite with Brahman, 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,” 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).” 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.” 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. 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.

YOGA AND CHRISTIANITY

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...
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 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.
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.”22 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.23 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.24

- The Bible commands Christians to avoid teachings or practices that are contradictory or in opposition to the Bible.25 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**

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.
13 Ibid., chapter 5.
14 Mangalwadi and Enroth, 45.
15 Reisser, Mabe, Velarde, 22.
17 Reisser, Mabe, Velarde, 59.
18 Cited in Weldon and Wilson, 72.
19 Ibid.
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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