

Christian Yoga? It's a Stretch

There is nothing wrong with stretching, exercising, or regulating one's stress through breathing. But when the tenets of yoga are included, it's by definition a worship act to spirit beings other than the God of the Bible. By way of analogy, there is nothing inherently wrong with intimacy, sex, and pleasure. But when the tenets of adultery are included, it's a sinfully idolatrous worship act. A faithful Christian can no more say they are practicing yoga for Jesus than they can say they are committing adultery for Jesus.

Giving sound teaching on yoga is important because there is increasing adoption of yoga by our culture, with over 15.8 million people practicing yoga and nearly every store you go into selling all kinds of yoga products. It's gone mainstream. As such, Christians are also adopting it as a healthy aspect of exercise and lifestyle—complete with things like “Holy Yoga,” which is an oxymoron. Saying yoga can be Christian because you do it for Jesus is a bit like going into a mosque, going through the worship practices, and then saying you're not a Muslim because you're doing it for Jesus. They don't mix.

When looking at the acceptance of yoga in the Christian church, we find that there are two issues at hand: (1) People simply don't understand what yoga is, its roots, and its tenets; or (2) People think that they can engage in yoga because it's just stretching, while ignoring the religious aspects of the practice of yoga.

As one woman who identified herself as a mainline Protestant said in an article, “Here we go again with fear-based, black-and-white thinking. . . . It's not fair to say yoga is demonic. In fact, I find it insulting. There are many ways to grow spiritually.” To this we would reply, “No. There are not many ways to grow spiritually. There is one way, which is through the power of the Holy Spirit provided through Jesus' death and resurrection on the cross, as part of God the Father's plan for salvation.” Comments like this woman's are the exact reason why it's important to explore what yoga really is and what it teaches, and to understand that the spiritual elements of yoga make their way into our life and culture in ways we don't necessarily see overtly.

In this article, we'll define what yoga is, give a history of yoga, talk about the various forms of yoga, and take a look at yoga through the “receive, reject, or redeem” matrix that is commonly used.

What Is Yoga?

There are many different types of yoga—which we'll cover below—but it's important to begin with a general definition of yoga that will provide a basic framework for what the entire realm of the discipline is intending to do. According to Elliot Miller, noted New Age expert and editor of the *Christian Research Journal*:

Yoga is derived from the Sanskrit word *yug*, which means “to yoke.” This is a term [most Christians are] familiar with from the Bible (Phil. 4:2; Matt. 11:9). A yoke is a crossbar that joins two draft animals at the neck so they can work together; the term, therefore, is applied metaphorically to people being joined together or united in a cause. In Hinduism, as in many religions, union is desired with nothing less than God or the Absolute, and yoga is the system that Hindus have developed to achieve that end.

The historic purpose behind yoga, therefore, is to achieve union with the Hindu concept of God. This is the purpose behind virtually all of the Eastern varieties of yoga, including those we encounter in the West. This does not mean it is the purpose of every practitioner of yoga, for many people clearly are not practicing it for spiritual reasons but merely to enhance their physical appearance, ability, or health.

However, as we'll show, it's nearly impossible to practice yoga and divorce it from its spiritual elements.

This is a sentiment that is shared by prominent Hindu academics such as Professor Aseem Shukla, who wrote in *The Washington Post*, “Why is yoga severed in America's collective consciousness from Hinduism?”

Yoga, meditation, ayurvedic natural healing, self-realization—they are today's syntax for New Age, Eastern, mystical, even Buddhist, but nary an appreciation of their Hindu origins. It is not surprising, then, that Hindu schoolchildren complain that Hinduism is conflated only with caste, cows, exoticism and polytheism—the salutary contributions and philosophical underpinnings lost and ignored. The severance of yoga from Hinduism disenfranchises millions of Hindu Americans from their spiritual heritage and a legacy in which they can take pride.

Hinduism, as a faith tradition, stands at this pass a victim of overt intellectual property theft, absence of trademark protections and the facile complicity of generations of Hindu yogis, gurus, swamis and others that offered up a religion's spiritual wealth at the altar of crass commercialism.

Sentiments like these have led to a growing movement of Hindus who want to "Take back yoga." As Christians, we must be intellectually honest and respect that yoga is in fact intertwined with Hindu religious practice. They have a right to be offended as much as we would be equally offended if they underwent Christian baptism or communion while denying any religious connection and secularizing it or doing it in a Hindu way.

The History of Yoga

According to yoga historian Mark Singleton, “Some scholars have found evidence of early yogic practice in the archaeological artifacts from the Indus Valley civilization in Sind, which developed from about 2500 BCE.

The posture exercises that most people consider to be yoga today had little or nothing to do with how the practice originally developed:

In spite of the immense popularity of postural yoga worldwide, there is little or no evidence that āsana [posture] (excepting certain seated postures of meditation) has ever been the primary aspect of any Indian yoga practice tradition—including the medieval, body-oriented haṭha yoga—in spite of the self-authenticating claims of many modern yoga schools. The primacy of āsana performance in transnational yoga today is a new phenomenon that has no parallel in premodern times.”

Basically, what Singleton is saying is that despite the arguments that yoga is just stretching, there is no historical evidence that this is the case—quite the contrary. The history of yoga is overwhelmingly spiritual in practice and the postures of yoga are only one aspect of yoga, and they are part of a broader system aimed at union with god and attaining enlightenment.

It is important to note that the exercise/stretching/posturing element of yoga only represents one of the eight limbs of yoga viewed as a whole. As Elliot Miller describes,

“The eight limbs of yoga involve strict moral, physical, and mental disciplines. They are (1) moral restraint, (2) religious observance, (3) postures (*asanas*), (4) breath control (*pranayama*), (5) sense withdrawal, (6) concentration, (7) meditative absorption, and (8) enlightenment (*samadhi*). A consideration of the limbs quickly reveals that yoga is a demanding autosoteric (salvation based on self-

effort) system, similar to original Theravada Buddhism with its eightfold path, which historically preceded Patanjali's yoga system and probably influenced it."

Miller goes on to explain that the two limbs of yoga that exercise the body, *asanas* and *pranayama*, were never meant to be separated from the other eight limbs of yoga like they have been in the West. Some forms of yoga even go as far as to *not* demand extreme stretching positions because they actually get in the way of meditation. As Miller explains, "Patanjali's expressed concern was for the practitioner to assume 'steady and easy' postures that would be conducive to meditation.

Thus, the goal of yoga was "to develop the desired pure state of consciousness [making] it necessary to withdraw from the input of one's senses and to develop one's powers of concentration." Ways in which this was (and is) accomplished include:

- Concentrating on sounds by chanting the names of Hindu gods or the sacred *om*, which Patanjali said is the voice of God
- Focusing on images, such as the tip of your nose or a religious icon
- Concentrating on one's own breath

The purpose of these exercises—both physical and mental—was to attain a state of "pure consciousness . . . where the practitioner begins to lose the distinction between subject [self] and object [whatever one is focused on]" in order to feel at one with the universe or God.

The ultimate goal of the entire practice of yoga is *samadhi*, which is direct and ultimate knowledge. The first seven limbs of yoga were meant to result in the eighth limb—*samadhi*— "which is defined as direct knowledge, free from the distortions of the imagination," completely free from the constraints of the material world.

In this way, yoga is a religious practice that advocates oneism (or monism). Oneism is a pagan and idolatrous practice that claims there is no distinction between the creation and the Creator—and can even be a denial of a Creator altogether. The material form of oneism is atheism, and the spiritual form of oneism is often called New Age, New Spirituality, or Integrative Spirituality, which are categorically committed to pantheism or panentheism.

According to spiritual oneism, the universe is a living organism with a spiritual force present within everything. Thus, everything is interconnected by the life force or the world soul. This life force manifests as spiritual beings (Christians realize these are demons) that manipulate the course of world events. These spirits can be influenced to serve people by using the ancient magical arts. Humans possess divine power unlimited by any deity. Consciousness can be altered through the practice of rite and ritual. Magic is the manipulation of objects, substances, spirit entities, and minds, including humans and demons, by word (rituals like yoga, incantations like *om*, curses, spells, etc.) and objects (charms, amulets, crystals, herbs, potions, wands, candles, etc.). Visually, you can think of this in terms of one circle in which everything is contained and interconnected as one. Through various rites and rituals—such as yoga—the reality of the universe and consciousness can be manipulated, it is said.

Oneism—and by association, yoga—is antithetical to Christianity in a number of ways. It states that:

1. There is no distinction between Creator and creation. Romans 1:25 calls this paganism and idolatry: “They exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator.”
2. There is not a focus on looking to Jesus Christ for salvation, but rather in to self for enlightenment and peace.
3. There is no distinction between good and evil since all is one, which leads to cultural pluralism and the denial of truth.
4. There is no distinction between humans and creation since all is one, thereby lessening the value of human life (which was created in the image of God).
5. There is no distinction between religions as all spiritualities are one, resulting in a vague spirituality and people saying, “There are many ways to grow spiritually,” “all religions are the same,” or “I don’t have a religion. I’m just spiritual.”

Whether they know it or not, Christians who engage in yoga are participating in a religious expression that is antithetical to Christianity. The result is often an unguarded spirit that is susceptible to the many lies of Satan and a slow, almost unperceivable degradation of faith and Christian truth in one’s life. The act itself is a worship act. Subsequently, it cannot be done in a way that is not spiritual. Romans 12:1 is clear that what we do with our bodies is worshipful toward the God of the Bible or something or someone else: “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Everything we do with our physical bodies also involves our immaterial souls. We are one person, and whatever we do involves and affects the totality of who we are.

Various Types of Yoga

Historically, there are seven types of yoga that have developed, each with their own systems and ways of reaching *samadhi*, which is not surprising given the pluralistic nature of Eastern religions that generally offer many paths to enlightenment. (Again, this is entirely antithetical to Christianity, which teaches the truth that there is only one way to salvation—through Jesus Christ. Jesus himself said this in John 14:6, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”)

The following is a quick summary of each and a brief example of how each system of yoga has infiltrated itself into our current Western thinking and way of life. Our hope is that you’ll begin to see clearly how yoga at its core is much more than a physical exercise but rather a system of thought that contends against Christianity and subtly finds its way into our thinking, habits, and lifestyles.

Bhakti Yoga: This system of yoga seeks salvation through a “devotion to a personal representation of God.” While this echoes Christianity in its focus on a personal God, the way in which salvation is attained is through acts within yoga, not through God’s gift of grace as revealed in the Scriptures. Additionally, Bhakti yoga is based on the belief that we are manifestations of God, blurring the boundary between God and man. In this system, “everything exists within God, but everything is not God. . . . the world and souls are real but they are also part of God’s being, not separate from Him, as in Christianity.”

This is clearly seen in our culture through movies such as *Avatar*. It is also found in those who believe rocks, trees, water and other parts of creation house an inherent spiritual energy. The idea that there is a vague spirituality manifested through all of creation is a subliminal belief of most young people and this philosophy is reinforced through mass media. This is why many young people prefer to call themselves

spiritual rather than identify with a religion. Little do they know that by doing so, they are identifying with a religion—classic paganism, also called monism, pantheism, panentheism, and yoga.

Hatha Yoga: This system of yoga is based on physical activity and is the type of yoga most commonly practiced in the West. Indeed, most Western people think of yoga as only a physical exercise, but in its roots, Hatha is about much more than just stretching. Rather, the physical activity in Hatha is meant to achieve an altered state of consciousness, as Elliot Miller explains:

“First, it is common for literature on hatha yoga originating from Hindu sources to emphasize that the purpose of the postures and breathing exercises is to “free the more subtle spiritual elements of the mind.” In other words, the physical exercises of yoga are intended to facilitate altered states of consciousness. They further are intended to foster “the development of will power, concentration, and self-withdrawal,” all necessary to “help you put your mind in a focused state to prepare for Meditation and, eventually, the search for enlightenment.” Finally, they are designed to “open the energy channels, which in turn allows spiritual energy to flow freely.”

This form of yoga has manifested itself in culture through meditation and breathing exercises. Popular culture is filled with “practical” advice to conquer stress through breathing, meditation, and exercise. While these advice columns don’t cache this information in the framework of a spiritual energy, the advice is derived from such beliefs. To be clear, these things can be helpful from a physical perspective to help reduce stress and regulate the body toward a relaxed state. Still, the Bible says to be “self-controlled and alert” (1 Pet. 5:8, NIV), which is impossible if we are seeking an altered state of consciousness and opening ourselves up to any and every spiritual influence without discernment. In addition, 2 Corinthians 10:5 says that “we demolish every arguments and pretensions that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take every thought captive to make it obedient to Christ.” How can we reach a ‘relaxed state of mind’, give the evil one an opportunity to enter our mind and at the same time “make our thoughts focus on being obedient to Christ.”

Jnana Yoga: As Miller puts it, “Jnana yoga could be described as ‘yoga for intellectuals’ or ‘yoga for philosophers.’ It seeks salvation through intellectual knowledge and discrimination.” But this is not the end of Jnana but rather just the beginning. The end goal of Jnana is “detachment from temporal concerns (but not necessarily withdrawal from them), virtue, and longing for liberation. Some form of meditation is also essential as a means of intuitively and experientially taking possession of the truth that has been logically discerned.”

This form of yoga is taking root in an aesthetic representation of Christianity that is commonly referred to as poverty theology. At its core, poverty theology shuns the material in favor of the spiritual. Knowledge is more prized than the physical. But the Bible is clear that both the physical and the spiritual are God’s creation, and God calls all of his creation “good” in Genesis 1. Furthermore, Jesus is God who took upon himself human flesh during the incarnation, which reveals that God values the physical. The Bible also promises believers will rise from death in a physical body to live in an eternal physical kingdom with God.

Karma Yoga: Many people operate on the system of karma even if they don’t practice yoga. Simply put, karma is a system of yoga that is based on salvation through good works.

Prominent Los Angeles yoga teacher Bikram Choudhury clearly explains the role of karma yoga in attaining salvation:

Generally, a work brings as its effect or fruit either pleasure or pain. Each work adds a link to our bondage of Samsara and brings repeated births. This is the inexorable Law of Karma. But, through the practice of Karma Yoga, the effects of Karmas can be wiped out. Karma becomes barren. The same work, when done with the right mental attitude . . . does not add a link to our bondage. On the contrary, it purifies our heart and helps us to attain salvation through the descent of divine light or dawn of wisdom.

That we casually use the term “good karma” in everyday speech in the Western world is proof of how the philosophies of yoga have infiltrated our culture without most people even realizing it. We use the words and believe without question the philosophy of karma, but many cannot explain how we came to know them other than through cultural osmosis. As Christians, we believe in Christ, not karma. We believe that Christ rules over our lives, not karma.

Kundalini Yoga: According to Miller, “*Kundalini* yoga deliberately attempts to arouse and raise the kundalini, believed to be *Shakti* or creative divine energy, which sleeps at the base of the spine like a serpent, coiled in three and one-half circles.” Through control of the respiratory system, Kundalini yoga teaches that people can tap into this energy within and harness it, thereby controlling their entire body. Not surprisingly, this system of yoga is also associated with visualization—the belief that you can manifest reality by imagining what you want.

Kundalini yoga is on the rise in our culture in a materialistic form with such teachings as *The Secret*, which asserts that you can manifest your desires by simply visualizing them. In this way, people are given almost God-like power to create their own reality and rule sovereignly over their lives and futures.

Raja Yoga: Raja yoga teaches that the mind is the highest part of the body and that by mastering your mind, you can master your body. In this system, vigorous exercises are meant to help you discipline your body through the power of your mind with the ultimate goal being a pure state of consciousness.

This system is seen in modified form as self-help gurus who teach that in order to prosper in life you have to master your mind and chase away the little thoughts that whisper you’re not good enough and that people don’t like you. By mastering your mind, you can find success. This has resulted in a cult of self-esteem that encourages people to push aside any doubts about themselves and trust that the only thing to fear is fear itself. Ignored is the fact that our biggest problem is not that we lack control, but rather that we are sinners who manifest our sin nature by wanting to be in control like God.

Tantra Yoga: Tantra yoga is based in the belief that engaging in taboo practices results in enlightenment. As such, tantra is associated with normally renounced practices in Hinduism, such as eating meat, drunkenness, and sex. An extreme form of tantra, known as left-handed tantra, “not only involves actual sex, alcohol, and drugs, but also has been known to involve black magic and all kinds of debauchery and criminal acts, including child sacrifice.”

If gluttony, drunkenness, and perversion are the telltale signs of devotion, perhaps no form of yoga is more prevalent in our society than the tantra. Our culture is consumed with the idea that partying and sex will lead to happiness. What’s left, however, is abuse, pain, depression, and sometimes even death.

Christian Yoga?

As stated earlier, there is a growing movement of Christians who are engaging in “Holy Yoga,” claiming that you can practice yoga and be a Christian as long as you divorce the practice of yoga from the teachings of yoga. In this last section, we’ll briefly consider whether there can truly be such a thing as Christian yoga.

Receive: There are things in culture that are part of God's common grace to all people that a Christian can simply receive. This is why, for example, I am typing on a laptop and I could post this article on the Internet without searching for an expressly Christian computer desktop or laptop or communication format.

Reject: There are things in culture that are sinful and not beneficial. One example is drunkenness, which has no redeeming value and must be rejected by a Christian.

Redeem: There are things in culture that are not bad in and of themselves, but can be used in a sinful manner and therefore need to be redeemed by God's people. An example that has resulted in a great deal of media attention is sexual pleasure. God made our bodies for, among other purposes, sexual pleasure. And, although many have sinned sexually, as Christians we should redeem this great gift and all its joys in the context of marriage.

So the question when it comes to yoga is, should it be received, rejected, or redeemed?

As we've explained in this article, yoga is a religious philosophy that is in direct opposition to Christianity. Thus, in its true form, yoga cannot be simply received by any Christian in good conscious. To do so would be to reject the truths of Scripture and thus Jesus himself.

Thinking through whether a Christian can redeem yoga becomes murky. As we alluded to earlier, going to a yoga studio to practice yoga as a Christian is a bit like going into a mosque to practice Islam as a Christian. They don't go together. Complicating the issue even more is that, as explained above, yoga is often not overt in its teachings but rather weaves them through seemingly harmless practices such as stretching. Without a discerning spirit, one can find oneself naively participating in spiritual activities that are not Christian.

Our advice is to not attempt to redeem yoga properly understood, as it is a system of belief that is unchristian, against Scripture, and thus demonic in nature. You cannot redeem such a thing.

So, in conclusion, Christians must reject yoga, as defined here. We'd also go so far as to say you should reject the term "yoga," as it is impossible to divorce it from its historical and spiritual context without much explanation and linguistic gymnastics. Instead, feel free in Christian liberty to stretch however you'd like, participate in exercise, calm your nerves through breathing, and even contemplate the Scriptures in silence. But do so in a way that does not identify with yoga and non-Christian mysticism. Do not seek to negate your mind, but rather renew your mind with the Word of God. Do not seek to empty yourself, but rather be filled with the Holy Spirit. Do not seek to turn into yourself for enlightenment, but rather look out to the God of the Bible. Do not seek to become one with the universe, but rather be reconciled to God through Jesus Christ.

Exercise is a gift of God for us to take care of the bodies that he created for his glory. It's good and important to exercise. But we should never, in our desire to be in shape and be healthy, adopt systems antithetical to Christianity because they make us feel good or have bodily value. Rather, let's first stay true to God and his Word and work out our bodies to his glory by his values handed down to us through Scripture.