

Yoga

By Rebecca S. May

- *What is yoga?*
- *Where did yoga come from?*
- *Should Christians participate in yoga?*

Definition

The practice of yoga is defined by “Webster’s Dictionary” as, “a Hindu discipline for achieving union with the supreme spirit through intense concentration, prescribed postures, controlled breathing, etc.” Or more simply, it is “the path followed so as to realize the God within” (“Dictionary of Cults, Sects, Religions, and the Occult”).

The goal in the practice of yoga is the mystical union with the universal spirit. The universal spirit is the Hindu view which claims that God is the spiritness which exists in everything. Salvation for the Hindu is not the attaining of heaven or the avoiding of hell, but the union of an individual's spirit with the God that exists in everything. This is accomplished by getting on the right path, through meditation. Meditation is emptying of the mind through physical, mental or spiritual exercises. This is most often accomplished by participating in yoga or the martial arts (see the Short Topic, “A Biblical Perspective on Karate and the Martial Arts”).

Hinduism

In order to understand yoga, it is important to first understand the religion from which it came. Hinduism has many complex beliefs. So complex, in fact, that it has been said that even the most devout Hindu does not fully understand, nor can he explain, his religion. Nevertheless, there are certain characteristics which are universally held by proponents of Hinduism. They are:

- Brahma: the Three-in-One God: Brahma, the Creator; Vishnu, the Preserver, and Shiva the Destroyer
- Submission to Fate, since man is not outside of but part of God
- The Caste System, socially labeling and organizing people into four groups
- The Laws of Karma, evil must come from evil
- Reincarnation, as a chain of rebirths in which each soul, through virtuous living, can rise to a higher state
- Nirvana, the final stage reached upon the emancipation of the soul from the chain of rebirths
- Dharma, the law of Moral Order which each individual must find and follow to reach Nirvana
- Yoga, the disciplines which enable the individual to control the body and the emotions

(“Handbook of Today’s Religions,” page 283, also see the Short Topic “Hinduism”)

I believe this to be the attraction to yoga today. Whether it is physical ailments or mental stress, people rush to yoga classes in order to gain control of their bodies and emotions. What they may not know or may be ignoring is that this is done by way of “self-realization,” that is, the realization of the God, which already exists, within.

Yoga

Yoga, like the martial arts, is primarily spiritual and then physical. It is, therefore, inaccurate and naive to claim either of these practices are simply a form of exercise. Yoga is taught today by Hindus, Buddhists, and anyone who holds to a pantheistic world view. In order for man to come to the knowledge of the god which resides within him, he must go through exercises in purification. It is only through this that man can become self-actualized or experience self-realization.

According to Kurt Koch, an expert on occultic beliefs, most systems of yoga can be divided into four stages:

The **first stage** embraces remedial gymnastics, breathing exercises, relaxation exercises, exercises in concentration, contemplation, and meditation.

The **second stage** involves the control of the subconscious and nervous systems. For example, the ability to heal oneself.

The **third stage** of yoga goes on to the controlling of the forces of nature. For example, the ability to make fire break out without any physical aid.

The **fourth stage** is concerned with the mastery of magic and the cosmic forces. For example, the ability to produce materializations, levitation, telekineses, states of trance, the excursion of the soul and many other spiritualistic phenomena (*Occult Practices and Beliefs*, pp 123-127).

Christianity

It should be obvious why the practice of yoga is antithetical to Christianity. First and foremost, it is rooted in a pagan religion which believes that we are all gods or part of God. You may think that since you are only involved with the first stage of yoga that the pantheistic religions behind it are not affecting you. As Kurt Koch reports, "I know of Christians who in taking part in such exercises have been made to repeat in chorus short Indian phrases by their teacher. On inquiry it turned out that they were saying things of the nature: 'Buddha is the enlightened one,' or 'Buddha is supreme'" (*Occult Practices and Beliefs*, p. 127). But God said, "you shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). This literally means, "in my sight" (i.e., either in addition to Me or in opposition to Me). God will not share His worship with another (Charles Ryrie, *New American Standard Study Bible*).

Not only does yoga contradict the Bible in its origin, it differs from biblical teaching in its practice. Meditation is the path yoga uses for an individual to become enlightened. Meditation in yoga involves emptying your mind so that it can come to the realization of the god within.

Meditation, in and of itself, is not bad. "Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening" (Genesis 24:63). It is not that we should never meditate, but we should view meditation as the Psalmist does, *Let the word of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer* (Psalm 119:14). He goes on to explain what is acceptable meditation, *I meditate on You, O God. My soul thirsts for You, my flesh yearns for You* (Psalm 63). And not just on God Himself, but he also meditates on God's works (Psalm 77), His precepts, His wonders, His statutes, His word, and His testimony. The Psalmist's point in Psalm 119 is clear, *O how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day*.

Clearly we are not to meditate on nothing. Rather than emptying our mind, we should fill our minds by dwelling on *whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things* (Philippians 4:8). *Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth* (Colossians 3:2). *And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength* (Mark 12:30). How can you love the Lord with all your mind if your mind is empty?

Paul makes a powerful statement to the Corinthians when he claims that an inactive mind is unfruitful. He tells them to pray for the interpretation of tongues, not just to speak in tongues. *For if I pray in a tongue, my spirit prays, but my mind is unfruitful. What is {the outcome} then? I shall pray with the spirit and I shall pray with the mind also; I shall sing with the spirit and I shall sing with the mind also. I thank God, I speak in tongues more than you all; however, in the church I desire to speak five words with my mind, that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue* (1 Corinthians 14:14-15, 18-19).

Questions and Answers

Q: *What is yoga?*

A: Yoga is the combination of mental and physical exercises which guide you on the path towards realizing the god which exists within you.

Q: *Where did yoga come from?*

A: Yoga is one of the foundational teachings of Hinduism.

Q: *Should Christians participate in yoga?*

A: Both the origin and practice of yoga goes contrary to the Bible. It is therefore dangerous and inappropriate for Christians to be involved in yoga at any level.