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Worldview and Yoga

By Freddy Davis

Over the years, there have been great debates in Christian circles regarding whether or not a Christian can practice yoga and still be a good Christian. Some, even well known, Christian pastors and leaders have roundly condemned it, and even called it satanic. There are others who insist that it is nothing more than a form of exercise, and that there is nothing wrong with it. In some ways, both of these are right. If that seems contradictory, it is because of a misunderstanding about the true nature of the Christian faith.

In the early church there was a similar discussion. At that time, the issue at hand regarded food offered to idols. In general, Christians were encouraged not to partake. However, the reason was not because eating it would somehow spiritually harm the one eating. Rather, it was because of the negative influence it might have on an immature believer. Regarding the act itself, however, Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:25-32:

25 Eat anything that is sold in the meat market without asking questions for conscience' sake; 26 FOR THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S, AND ALL IT CONTAINS. 27 If one of the unbelievers invites you and you want to go, eat anything that is set before you without asking questions for conscience' sake. 28 But if anyone says to you, "This is meat sacrificed to idols," do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for conscience' sake; 29 I mean not your own conscience, but the other man's; for why is my freedom judged by another's conscience? 30 If I partake with thankfulness, why am I slandered concerning that for which I give thanks? 31 Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you

do, do all to the glory of God. 32 Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God;

Paul gave basically the same explanation in Romans 14 where he wrote:

13 Therefore let us not judge one another anymore, but rather determine this — not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way. 14 I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean. 15 For if because of food your brother is hurt, you are no longer walking according to love. Do not destroy with your food him for whom Christ died. 16 Therefore do not let what is for you a good thing be spoken of as evil; 17 for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

Paul's conclusion was that eating or not eating is rather meaningless when it comes to a person's salvation. Salvation is accomplished by faith in Christ, and that alone. When making the determination as to whether or not one should partake, the reasoning has nothing to do with salvation and everything to do with one's witness. If the witness is not hurt, eating is fine. If it hurts the witness, the Christian should abstain.

When it comes to yoga, the same principle is in play. Practicing or not practicing yoga, in and of itself, has nothing to do with one's salvation. The reason for participating or not has to come from another place. In order to understand this more fully, let's take a journey to see why all the controversy.

Note: This article is specifically addressing the practice of yoga, but it is noteworthy that the practice of Tai

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Chi creates a similar dynamic. Tai Chi is a form of martial arts, but the practice imitates the practice of yoga in many ways. When practicing Tai Chi, it creates the same dynamics in one's mind and body that is found in yoga. Interestingly, Buddhists in Japan use archery in the same way.

What is Yoga?

The practice of yoga originated in Hinduism and continues today to be a common Hindu exercise. In fact, there are six orthodox schools in the Hindu tradition, and yoga is one of the six. The word itself comes from the Sanskrit word *yuj*, which means "yoke" or "to unite." The idea is that practicing this discipline is a means of uniting the body, mind, and spirit.

In order, though, to grasp the original purpose of yoga, we need to look at the Hindu concept of salvation. Salvation in Hinduism is called Moksha. This occurs when an enlightened human is able to escape the reincarnation cycle and enter into oneness with the impersonal life force that represents ultimate reality. Hinduism recognizes four ways to achieve Moksha. Even though these four ways may seem to be very different, it is considered that there is really only one yoga (union). The different paths are simply different ways to achieve the same goal, and all of them are considered valid. Each individual chooses his or her own path based on personal preference. The four paths include:

1. The Way of Action - This path leads a person to carry out certain ceremonies, duties and rites. As people perform these works without regard for personal gain, they move closer to Moksha.

2. The Way of Knowledge - The knowledge path uses the mind and

philosophy as a means of gaining complete comprehension of the universe, thus leading individuals toward Moksha.

3. The Way of Devotion - The path of devotion leads a person to salvation through acts of worship. By this worship, an individual demonstrates selfless love for one of the Hindu gods.

4. The Royal Road - The Royal Road uses meditation and yoga techniques to experience a form of personal enlightenment. Obviously, this is the one we are looking at in this article.

Thus, in its original essence, the practice of yoga is a Hindu religious practice. It is designed to help a person gain enlightenment and make progress on the road to ultimate union with the eternal impersonal life force.

The Practice of Yoga

The practice of yoga begins with a form of physical exercise, but also creates dynamics that many identify as spiritual. It is this spiritual element that can be taken in different directions to create either a sense of inner peace and calmness, or can actually become a religious practice. The original practice in Hinduism emphasized the religious practice, while many modern practitioners focus on the physical benefits of the exercises.

Just to be clear, it is possible to practice yoga strictly as a physical exercise. That said, it does create within the practitioner particular feelings that need to be fully understood in order for the individual to not be unintentionally led into a non-Christian religious belief.

The Physical Practice of Yoga

Most people in the West who get into yoga do so for the physical exercise – and it is a very profound physical work out. It builds muscle strength and flexibility and it helps a person gain control over their breathing. The physical practice of yoga involves assuming

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and holding particular positions that create physical strength and flexibility. It also involves controlled breathing that slows down the metabolism and forms the foundation for blocking out mental distractions. All of these things are very good elements of exercise.

The Spiritual Practice of Yoga

The spiritual element of yoga is generally experienced as an individual's personal interpretation of what is going on mentally and emotionally during the practice of yoga. The process of slowing down one's mind and metabolism creates a feeling of peace and serenity. In fact, it can actually give a sense of euphoria that is often interpreted as a religious experience.

In its original Hindu incarnation, creating this religious experience was exactly the purpose of the practice. To facilitate this sense of inner peace, the developers of yoga created mantras. A yoga mantra is simply the use of words or phrases to manipulate one's thoughts. Traditional mantras are derived from the Sanskrit language of India. That said, the mantras can be almost anything from any language.

The Sanskrit word "mantra" simply means "instrument of thought." The concept is that by repeating a mantra, a person is able to manipulate and direct their thoughts. According to the teachings of the main yoga schools, the universe was created through the medium of sound. By repeating certain sounds, it is believed that people are able to manipulate their consciousness and steer it toward its source in the Self – that is, to sense a connection with the impersonal life force.

There are considered to be two categories of mantras:

1. **Doctrinal** - Doctrinal mantras instill within the one reciting it a particular

spiritual doctrine while serving as a vehicle for meditation.

2. **Meaningless** - While the words of a "meaningless mantra" are not totally meaningless, their purpose is not to teach doctrine. Rather, they are designed simply to create a particular state of consciousness in the one reciting it.

Essentially, the purpose of a mantra is to use the medium of sound to help a person empty the mind of all distractions in order to elicit a meditative state. This meditative state is an altered state of consciousness that is supposed to help the individual experience the ultimate life force that is believed to exist within the individual. An altered state of consciousness is simply a state of awareness that deviates from ordinary waking consciousness. It can include such things as dreaming sleep, a drug-induced hallucinogenic state, a hypnotic state, a trance, and, as in yoga, a relaxed state of high awareness. While chanting a mantra, an individual is led to feel the vibration of their body. This, in turn, helps the mind to free itself from all distractions as the yoga exercises are practiced.

Meditation is a precise technique for resting the mind and attaining a state of consciousness that is totally different from the normal waking state. It is the means by which individuals come to experience the "center of consciousness" that exists within. (We will look more deeply at the idea of meditation a little later.)

What the Practice of Yoga Makes You Feel

One of the interesting things about the practice of yoga is the way it makes a person feel. Once the body is conditioned to be able to do the exercises, the practice itself significantly calms the mind and the metabolism. Breathing becomes shallow, heart rate decreases, and the mind blocks out all distractions. The feel-

ing that it creates is a kind of peace and serenity – sometimes even described as euphoria. If a person believes in the Hindu understanding of the nature of reality, a person can imagine that they have become unified internally, and have become one with their physical surroundings. It needs to be clearly understood, at this point, that this kind of feeling is generated physiologically and does not reflect the way reality is actually structured. The world we live in is objectively real and is completely separate from the human person. Human beings do not become spiritually unified with it – by yoga or any other means. The impersonal life force does not exist as understood by Hindu belief.

Distinguishing Feelings from Reality

There is another point that also needs to be clearly understood; the feelings that occur when practicing yoga are not the result of some kind of spiritual occurrence. While it can "feel" as if it is a spiritual experience, it really is not. There is no objectively real transcendent reality that the practice of yoga connects a person to. The Far Eastern belief in an impersonal life force that humans can connect with by practicing yoga is not real. The mental connection people make between the feelings that occur while doing yoga and the impersonal transcendent reality is strictly a philosophical construct. People feel a feeling and mentally associate it with this false belief about transcendent reality.

The reason that some Christians urge people not to practice yoga is because it is associated with Far Eastern religious beliefs. The practice of yoga, because of the feelings it is able to generate within practitioners, is able to reinforce the Far Eastern philosophical beliefs in some people's minds. However, this does not make the beliefs real. Just because the feelings are real does not mean the beliefs are as well.

As such, Christians who decide to practice yoga need to be able to make a clear distinction between the feelings that are generated in the practice of yoga and Far Eastern religious philosophy. In its essence, yoga is a physical exercise. And as with any kind of exercise, it creates its own unique feelings and mindset as it is practiced. But the feelings themselves are not religious in nature – they are physiological. Any religious sense that people pour into the experience is based on beliefs that the individual holds independent of the exercise.

Hindu Meditation Vs. Christian Meditation

There is another matter that should be understood, as well. The practice of yoga is often associated with the practice of meditation. Because the mind is quieted when practicing yoga, getting into a meditative state (an altered state of consciousness) is normal. What needs to be understood, however, is that there is more than one way to experience meditation.

The meditation that is associated with Far Eastern religious practice is designed to "empty" the mind. The purpose of this practice is to try to make a connection with the transcendent impersonal life force. Since this life force is understood to be impersonal, there is no kind of "personal" communication that can be engaged with it. Thus, prayer and revelation are not a part of this religious practice. So the supposed connection that people might make with the life force as yoga is practiced is necessarily impersonal – and it is experienced by feelings, not by conscious thought. The meditative process of emptying the mind supposedly facilitates this connection. As was said before, this does not reflect what is happening in reality, but those who believe it think a real spiritual experience is occurring.

Christian meditation, on the other hand, is the exact opposite – in involves "filling" the mind. People can do this by prayer or by actively contemplating Scripture. It is possible that meditation while practicing yoga can be channeled in a way that corresponds with Christian beliefs. Of course, it is typically the Far Eastern approach to meditation that is taught in most yoga classes. Christians who do decide to practice yoga should make sure they consciously understand the differences, and not allow the feelings generated by the practice to lead them into non-biblical beliefs about the nature of reality.

Taking the Witness into Account

From a biblical perspective, it is simply wrong to dismiss the practice of yoga out of hand as something evil. It is a form of physical exercise, and no exercise, in and of itself, separates a person from God.

Christian salvation relates to a person's personal acceptance of Christ as Savior and Lord, and nothing else.

That said, there are reasons some Christians might want to think twice before participating in yoga. It is absolutely possible that by not understanding what the exercise is all about, the practice of yoga can lead some people into a false belief about the nature of reality and the nature of faith. It is simply a fact that the practice of yoga, in most places it is taught, is based on Hindu religious beliefs. Because of this, there are two things that Christians must be very careful of.

The first thing is to personally have a very clear understanding of the difference between Hindu and Christian beliefs. Hindu beliefs interpret the feelings generated by the practice of yoga in a way that affirms their Hindu understanding of, and belief in, an impersonal life force. It also promotes a form of meditation that reinforces the belief that the feelings they experience connect them with the impersonal life force. Since it is the Hindu understanding of reality that is taught in most yoga studios, people can end up participating in Hindu worship without even realizing it. Christians should clearly understand this dynamic and avoid participating under those circumstances. Without that clear understanding, it can easily lead a Christian away from Christ.

The second thing Christians need to be very aware of is the witness that is being portrayed to others. In the verses about food offered to idols that we looked at earlier, the apostle Paul was very concerned that even though eating the food would not affect a person's individual relationship with God, it could lead non-believers and those weak in the faith in the wrong direction – away from faith in Christ. It is a solidly biblical principle that Christians should not do anything that might cause a weak brother to stumble in their faith.

So, Should Christians Practice Yoga?

When it comes to whether or not a Christian should practice yoga, it is not possible to give a definitive answer. There are circumstances where it would not be a good idea to do it, but there are other circumstances where it would not be a problem. It should not be done in an environment where the practice is specifically tied to Hindu worship. Neither should it be practiced in situations where it would hurt one's witness or lead weak Christians into territory that might harm their faith. On the other hand, it does not relate directly to one's salvation, and the actual practice or non-practice does nothing to affect that. At this point, the New Testament teachings and principles regarding food offered to idols is a good model to follow. In that regard, each individual Christian must discern God's leading for him or herself.

That said, if you do choose to practice it, you need to be willing to take on a very profound responsibility. That is, you need to make a firm, ongoing commitment to make sure you do the hard work to learn what you need to know to distinguish between the Hindu practice and the pure element of exercise. Along with that, you need to be proactive in teaching the people you interact with the truth about the gospel and its difference from Hinduism. Only then will you be in a position to make a godly decision about whether or not to participate in yoga.

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