“Is it OK for a Christian to Practice Yoga?”

I read your email response to the question “Is it OK for a Christian to train in martial arts?” and have a question of my own on a related subject.

For several years I have had fairly severe back problems, and was advised by a physiotherapist friend (who is a Christian), to consider taking up Yoga as it might help. My father expressed concerns about this, as he felt that it was a direct path to eastern religions. For the same reason I was never allowed to train in martial arts when I was a teenager. Several other friends of mine also feel that Yoga is decidedly ‘non-kosher.’

My own view is the same as that expressed in your article—that martial arts and the like do contain dangerous elements for the Christian, as they are linked to eastern philosophies. However, I feel that it is possible to participate in such activities, as long as one uses them for physical training rather than for a spiritual purpose, and remains aware of the possible dangers.

With this in mind, I have been attending Yoga classes for the past few months, and my back has never been better! It is a blessed relief to me to be able to move painlessly for once!! (At 24, I’m a little young to consider putting up with back problems for long!). I have been attending Iyengar yoga classes, which, so far, have not involved any spiritual content. The ‘meditation’, consists of lying down at the end of the class and feeling relaxed. I often use it as quiet time to meditate on Jesus!!

Some of my friends at church appear to think that just getting into a position may lead directly to demon possession. I feel

that perhaps Yoga has been given a bad press, as it appears to me that the exercises themselves are rather separate from transcendental meditation and the like, which obviously go totally against what the bible teaches. Have I just been fortunate in finding a class that is not compromising my faith, or am I compromising myself without even realizing it? Obviously I don't wish to open myself to any spirits other than the Holy Spirit!

I would value any insight you might have on this topic.

Hi _____,

Thanks so much for writing! You ask a very important question about a very controversial subject. Indeed, you offer an interesting case study to which I want to reply rather carefully.

Let me first say that I am truly sorry to hear of your back problems. Since you have apparently found some genuine relief of these problems through the practice of yoga, what I have to say may be a little difficult to "digest." So if you're ready. . .

Until very recently, I would have entirely agreed with your own evaluation of yoga. I would have made precisely the same distinction which you made between the physical postures and breathing exercises of yoga (on the one hand) and the non-Christian philosophical and religious ideas (on the other). I still think this can often be a helpful and valid distinction in other areas (e.g. much of the martial arts), but I'm afraid I've become rather skeptical about its applicability to yoga. Please let me explain why.

The physical postures and breathing exercises in yoga are inseparably bound up with the philosophical and religious ideas. I realize this may initially sound absurd, but please hear me out. The discipline of yoga is, as a general rule, firmly grounded within a pantheistic worldview. Pantheism

teaches that everything which exists is part of a unitary, all-encompassing divine reality. In short, pantheism teaches that all is "God." But in pantheism, "God" is not a personal being distinct from the world; rather "God" IS the world and the world IS "God."

But why is this important? According to the pantheistic philosophy of yoga, each one of us is also part of this all-encompassing divine reality known as "God" or Brahman. As Brad Scott, a former practitioner of yoga, has written in a recent article,

> *"..all creation to the Yoga-Vedantin is comprised of the substance of Brahman. Hence, yogis are pantheists… Brahman created the universe out of Itself, as a spider spins out a web" ("Exercise or Religious Practice? Yoga: What the Teacher Never Taught You in That Hatha Yoga Class." The Watchman Expositor: Vol. 18, No. 2, 2001, p. 7).*

And since "God," or Brahman, is ultimately something non-physical, what we imagine to be our physical bodies are (according to yoga philosophy) merely just a crude layer of mind. The physical postures and breathing exercises of yoga are actually intended to help move the mind in the direction of altered states of consciousness. The ultimate goal of yoga is "union" with "God" or occult enlightenment. Please allow me to support these statements with some authoritative quotations.

On the Watchman Expositor website there is a brief overview of yoga at http://www.watchman.org/na/yoga.htm. The author of this piece quotes from Swami Vishnudevananda, well known authority of Yoga, in his book, *The Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga*, as follows:

."..the aim of all yoga practice is to achieve truth wherein the individual soul identifies itself with the supreme soul of God."

He also quotes from Swami Sivananda Radha, in a book on Hatha Yoga, as follows:

> *When most people in the West think of yoga, they think of yoga as a form of exercise. Too often… there are yoga teachers who teach asanas without an understanding of their real nature and purpose. Asanas are a devotional practice which like all spiritual practices, bring us to an understanding of the truth…. Beyond this there also lies a mystical or spiritual meaning. Each asana creates a certain meditative state of mind, (p.xv; emphasis mine).*

And again, from the same source:

> *Hatha Yoga plays an important part in the development of the human being… the body working in harmony with the mind, to bring the seeker into closer contact with the Higher Self, (Ibid, p.xvii).*

Indeed, it is for this reason that the Yogi authority Gopi Krishna writes:

> *"All the systems of yoga…are designed to bring about those psychosomatic changes in the body which are essential for the metamorphosis of consciousness" (Quoted in John Ankerberg and John Weldon, Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs, Harvest House Publishers, 1996, p. 596).*

And finally, John Ankerberg and John Weldon quote from Judith Lasater's article, "Yoga: An Ancient Technique for Restoring Health":

> *"One basic assumption of Yoga Sutras [a standard yoga text] is that the body and mind are part of one continuum of [divine] existence, the mind merely being more subtle than the body…It is believed that as the body and mind are brought into balance and health, the individual will be able to*

perceive his true [divine] nature" (597).

As you are probably already aware, the term "yoga" simply means "union." And, as previously stated, the ultimate goal of yoga is "union" with "God," one's Higher Self, or Brahman. All the different "limbs" or stages of yoga, including the physical postures (asana) and breathing exercises (pranayama), are specially designed to prepare the practitioner for union with "God" and occult enlightenment.

In this regard, Ankerberg and Weldon also cite Feuerstein and Miller, two authorities on yoga, who contend that the postures of yoga (asana), as well as the breathing exercises (pranayama), are more than just physical exercises—they are psychosomatic (mind/body) exercises:

."..the control of the vital energy (prana) by way of breathing, like also asana, is not merely a physical exercise, but is accompanied by certain psychomental phenomena. In other words, all techniques falling under the heading of asana and pranayama…are psychosomatic exercises. This point, unfortunately, is little understood by Western practitioners…" (600).

Interestingly, Brad Scott, the former yoga practitioner mentioned previously, who (by the way) studied yoga for seven years under Swami Shraddhananda of the Ramakrishna Order, provided me with a web address for The Iyengar Yoga Institute of San Francisco which you may want to take a look at. The address is: http://www.iyisf.org/. The state-accredited two year certificate program one can earn at this institute requires not only studies in anatomy and physiology, but in yoga philosophy as well. You may be interested in reading the following course descriptions taken from the website:

Philosophy

Yoga Sutras

2 units (required)

A study of classical yoga philosophy based upon a reading of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. The aims, methods, and powers of yoga, as well as the nature of liberation, will be investigated.

Bhagavad Gita

2 units (required)

The Gita, as a practical handbook for yoga, will be studied and related to daily life. The different branches of yoga described in the Gita will be discussed and placed in context with other major Indian scriptures.

Physiology of Yoga

1 unit (Elective Course)

Yoga is a vitalistic science that views all of existence as supported by a force called prana. Yoga physiology describes how this vital force pervades and animates the physical body. This course will lay the groundwork to help one begin to view themselves and the world around them from this vitalistic perspective.

It's important to keep in mind that this force called "prana," which supports all of existence, is ultimately the same force as "God." Thus, one does not escape pantheism even in a class on yoga physiology! As Ankerberg and Weldon write, ."..prana, God, and occult energy are all one and the same. The one who practices yogic breathing (pranayama) is by definition attempting to manipulate occult ('divine') energy" (602).

Again, in another section on the website, concerning the Iyengar approach to Hatha Yoga, we read the following:

> *"Yoga as taught by B.K.S. Iyengar emphasizes the integration of body, mind and spirit. The Iyengar approach to yoga is firmly based on the traditional eight limbs of yoga as expounded by Patanjali in his classic treatise, The Yoga Sutras. Iyengar yoga emphasizes the development of strength, stamina, flexibility and balance, as well as concentration (Dharana) and meditation (Dhyana)."*

But what are these eight "limbs" on which the Iyengar approach is firmly based? John Ankerberg and John Weldon point out that the eight limbs of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras are "defined within the context of a basic Hindu worldview (reincarnation, karma, and moksha, or liberation) and intended to support and reinforce Hindu beliefs." (601). They go on to describe these eight limbs as follows:

• Yama (self-control, restraint, devotion to the gods [e.g., Krishna] or the final impersonal God [e.g., Brahman]

• Niyama (religious duties….)

• Asana (proper postures for yoga practices; these represent the first stage in the isolation of consciousness…)

• Pranayama (the control and directing of the breath and the alleged divine energy within the human body [prana] to promote health and spiritual [occult] consciousness and evolution)

• Pratyahara (sensory control or deprivation, i.e., withdrawal of the senses from attachment to external objects)

• Dharana (deeper concentration, or mind control)

• Dhyana (deep contemplation from occult meditation)

• Samadhi (occult enlightenment or "God [Brahman] realization" i.e., "union" of the "individual" with God).

In light of this, when we read on the IYISF website that

“students at IYISF [Iyengar Yoga Institute of San Francisco] are encouraged to refine both their knowledge of asanas (poses) and pranayama (breathing)….The same precision of practice brings the serious student to the cutting edge of exploration in the field of mind-body interaction,” we now have a better idea of what’s being referred to.

Let me conclude this discussion with a brief word about “kundalini awakening.” This much-sought-after experience could potentially open the one who has it to occult influences. As you may already know, Kundalini is sometimes thought of as a Hindu goddess believed to lie coiled as a serpent at the base of the spine. Others, however, think of Kundalini simply as “coiled serpent power,” without necessarily identifying this power with a Hindu goddess (Brad Scott, personal e-mail). Either way, however, one of the primary purposes of yoga practice is to arouse Kundalini so that she/it travels up the spine toward her lover, Shiva, who is said to reside in the brain. Supposedly, as she/it travels up the spine she opens up the seven psychic centers (called chakras). Weldon and Ankerberg write:

> *“When the crown or top chakra is reached, the union of Shiva/Shakti occurs, supposedly leading the practitioner to divine enlightenment and union with Brahman” (606).*

This, of course, is identical with Patanjali’s eighth limb, samadhi (although Brad Scott informed me in a personal e-mail that “The Shiva-Shakti mythology…was superimposed on yoga after Patanjali’s time”). Since the yoga authority Hans Rieker claims that “Kundalini [is] the mainstay of ALL yoga practices,” (Ankerberg/Weldon, 606, emphasis added) it is very important to point out that such an experience MAY place the practitioner under occult influences of a spiritual nature. For the Christian, firsthand accounts of this experience sometimes sound as if some sort of demonic influence may be involved. Mind you, I’m not saying that this is ALWAYS the

case, but Weldon and Ankerberg write that many Hindu and Buddhist gurus, “when describing their spirit, or ‘energy,’ possession,” often link it directly to “kundalini activity” (606). They go on to cite a leading guru, Swami Muktananda, as confessing that he was violently shaken by a spirit during kundalini arousal:

> *“A great deity in the form of my guru has spread all through me as chiti [energy] and was shaking me….when I sat for meditation, my whole body shook violently, just as if I were possessed by a god or a bad spirit” (610).*

Weldon and Ankerberg conclude with this observation: “Because all yoga has the ability to arouse ‘kundalini,’ all yoga should be avoided” (610).

And for all of the reasons offered above, I cannot in good conscience recommend that a Christian practice yoga—even if they limit themselves only to the physical postures and breathing exercises. Having said this, I certainly hope you understand that I’m not trying to be insensitive to your particular situation. Indeed, I will grant that it’s at least POSSIBLE that you could continue practicing yoga for many years without experiencing any of the destructive spiritual effects which such a practice could potentially have. However, in the case of yoga, where it becomes quite difficult (if not impossible) to separate the non-Christian religious and philosophical ideas from the physical postures and breathing exercises, my own advice would be to very humbly recommend that you look for a different exercise program, one that would help relieve your back pain without potentially compromising your spiritual health as a Christian.

I hope this gives you some solid reasons for making an informed decision concerning ongoing yoga practice. I genuinely wish you all the best. If you would like more information, you may want to consider taking a look at Brad

Scott's book, *Embraced by the Darkness: Exposing New Age Theology from the Inside Out* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1996). Although I have not yet personally read this book, I found his article on Yoga in the Watchman Expositor (Vol. 18, No. 2, 2001) to be extremely helpful in understanding the vast doctrinal differences between the philosophy of yoga and biblical Christianity. Another potentially valuable resource is John Weldon and John Ankerberg's, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1996).

Shalom,

Michael Gleghorn