“How Does Pantheism View Good and Evil?”

I found your website very helpful in offering information on yoga and Christianity, especially Michael Gleghorn’s article.

I came across a quote for a guru:

> *Life has a bright side and a dark side, for the world of relativity is composed of light and shadows. If you permit your thoughts to dwell on evil, you yourself will become ugly. Look only for the good in everything so you absorb the quality of beauty.*

Can you comment on how pantheism views evil and good? If you can shed some light on this quote, it would be helpful for me to understand how to address this with someone with this belief system.

Hello _____,

Thanks for your letter. Pantheism ultimately makes no distinction between good and evil. If all is one, and all is “God” (or Brahman), then the distinction between good and evil must ultimately be illusory. If not, then evil infects the very being of “God” itself. Thus, pantheism has a real problem with evil.

Of course, there is much truth in the guru’s quote (although it’s not terribly consistent with pantheism). However, one can find preferable advice (in my opinion) in the Bible. As Paul told the Philippians, “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirableif anything is excellent or praiseworthythink about such things” (Philippians 4:8).

Shalom in Christ,

Michael Gleghorn

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"You're An Absolute Idiot As Far as Your Knowledge of Yoga Is Concerned!"

Would you please let Michael Gleghorn know that he is an absolute idiot as far as his knowledge of yoga is concerned—especially Iyengar yoga?

It is a sign if ignorance to talk about something that one knows nothing about. If more people in this world practiced yoga, as opposed to organized religion, this world would be a much better place!

Hello,

Sue forwarded your letter to me. Thanks so much for writing! I guess I never do anything halfway; if I'm going to be an idiot, I'm going to be an "absolute idiot"—partial idiocy just wouldn't satisfy me! :o)

I'm sorry you didn't enjoy my response on yoga. I guess you won't much like my upcoming radio program on the subject either. Just so you know, I did try to quote primarily from authoritative yoga sources (including the Iyengar website and various yogis, swamis, etc.). Furthermore, before sending that reply to my correspondent, I had Brad Scott (formerly of the Ramakrishna Order) read it for accuracy. He thought it quite

good.

Most likely you disagree with my personal perspective on yoga. That doesn't surprise me. I certainly don't expect everyone to agree with me.

I write from within a Christian worldview perspective. If you don't share that perspective, it's not surprising that you would not agree with some of my remarks. The worldview upon which most of yogic philosophy is based is utterly incompatible with biblical Christianity. If you've accepted yogic philosophy, we would doubtless differ on a great many issues (e.g. the nature of God, of man, of salvation/liberation, the uniqueness of Jesus, what happens after death, etc.). If one of these competing worldviews is true, the other must be false. For many reasons (virtually every article on Probe's website addresses these reasons in one way or another) I'm a completely convinced Christian. I therefore do not want to see my brothers and sisters in Christ led astray by embracing what I honestly believe is a false worldview. And that is really my main objection to yoga. It's certainly nothing personal against those who practice it.

I certainly wish you well, but since you refer to me as an "absolute idiot" I'm hardly convinced that the world would be a better place if more people practiced yoga. I would hate to be called such names by the majority of the world's inhabitants! :o)

Grace and peace to you,

Michael Gleghorn
Probe Ministries

“Is There a Christian Alternative to Yoga?”

I have a question in response to your postings regarding Yoga and Christianity. This posting addresses the incompatibility of Yoga with Christian beliefs. I agree with the content of the article and have many other resources that express similar views.

However, I am trying to find a Christian alternative for flexibility, stretching, and exercise that give similar health benefits. I am aware of the concern with some of the Yoga postures and want to stay away from anything that could be potentially harmful. I can find many resources to warn of the potential concerns of Yoga practice even for exercise, but I cannot find much in the way of positive alternatives.

Can you point me to some good sources for Christian stretching and exercise alternatives to yoga? This would be very beneficial for myself and for me to pass along to others.

Thanks for your question—it’s a very good one! I wish I could give you a very clear and direct answer to your question, but unfortunately I cannot. Nevertheless, although I do not have a great deal of personal experience with stretching and exercise alternatives to Yoga, I do believe that there are probably some very worthwhile alternatives available.

[Note from the webmistress: Check out PraiseMoves, an orthodox Christian stretching program from a former yoga instructor who knows what she’s doing. I am very impressed by her explanation of why yoga and Christianity are not compatible.]

A couple possibilities which you may want to consider are gymnastics and ballet. I know that those who are involved in these practices have to be very flexible, and of course both are extremely good forms of exercise. You can probably find

some helpful books and/or videos on the web or at your local bookstore. You might even want to see what options are available in your area to get supervised training (e.g. a gymnastics or ballet class, etc.). In addition, you can probably find some helpful books which simply deal with the subject of stretching. Of course, some of these books may incorporate some stretches which are also used in yoga. But my personal opinion is that this would probably not be harmful. I tend to think there is a pretty big difference between incorporating some yoga stretches into a more comprehensive stretching program (on the one hand) and actually practicing the discipline of yoga (on the other).

I wish I could be of more help. But if you begin with gymnastics and ballet (and general books on stretching) I think you can probably find something that will accomplish all you like without the potential dangers from yoga practice. Even if you're not interested in gymnastics or ballet, books on these subjects could maybe point you in the right direction. You might also consider calling a local gymnastics coach, or ballet instructor, and asking their advice.

I wish you all the best!

Shalom,

Michael Gleghorn
Probe Ministries

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and Evil?”

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Shalom in Christ,
Michael Gleghorn

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"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

Yoga and Christianity: Are They Compatible? – A Biblical Worldview Perspective

Michael Gleghorn takes a hard look at yoga to determine if the practice is compatible with Christian living. After examining the spiritual underpinnings of yoga and the relationship of the physical aspects to the spiritual teaching, he concludes that Christians seeking physical exercise would be wise to consider techniques other than yoga.

 *This article is also available in Spanish.*

What is Yoga?

What is yoga? For many in the West, yoga is simply a system of physical exercise, a means of strengthening the body, improving flexibility, and even healing or preventing a variety of bodily ailments. But if we inquire into the history and philosophy of yoga we discover that "much more than a system of physical exercise for health, Yoga is . . . [an] ancient path to spiritual growth." It is a path enshrined in much of the sacred literature of India.{1} Thus, if we truly want a better understanding of yoga, we must dig beneath the surface and examine the historical roots of the subject.

Before we begin digging, however, we must first understand what the term "yoga" actually means. "According to tradition, 'yoga' means 'union,' the union…of the finite 'jiva' (transitory self) with the infinite'…Brahman' (eternal Self)."{2} "Brahman" is a term often used for the Hindu concept of "God," or Ultimate Reality. It is an impersonal, divine substance that "pervades, envelops, and underlies everything."{3} With this in mind, let's briefly look at three key texts that will help us chart the origin and development of yoga within India.

It appears that one can trace both the practice and goal of yoga all the way back to the *Upanishads*, probably written between 1000-500 B.C.{4} One *Upanishad* tells us: "Unite the light within you with the light of Brahman."{5} Clearly, then, the goal of yoga (i.e. union with Brahman) is at least as old as the *Upanishads.*

In addition, the word "yoga" often appears in the *Bhagavad Gita,* a classic Hindu text possibly written as early as the fifth century B.C.{6} In chapter 6, Krishna declares: "Thus joy supreme comes to the Yogi . . . who is one with Brahman, with God."{7}

Finally, in about A.D. 150, the yogi Patanjali systematized

yoga into eight distinct "limbs" in his *Yoga Sutras*. These eight limbs are like a staircase, supposedly leading the yogi from ignorance to enlightenment. In order, the eight limbs are: *yama* (self-control), *niyama* (religious observances), *asana* (postures), *pranayama* (breathing exercises), *pratyahara* (sense control), *dharana* (concentration), *dhyana* (deep contemplation), and *samadhi* (enlightenment).{8} It's interesting to note that postures and breathing exercises, often considered to be the whole of yoga in the West, are steps three and four along Patanjali's "royal" road to union with Brahman.

We see that yoga is an ancient spiritual discipline deeply rooted in the religion of Hinduism. This being so, we may honestly wonder whether it's really wise for a Christian to be involved in yoga practice. Next, we'll continue our discussion by examining some of the important doctrinal differences between yoga and Christianity.

Yoga and Christianity: What are the Differences?

Many people today (including some Christians) are taking up yoga practice. We'll later consider whether yoga philosophy can truly be separated from yoga practice, but we must first establish that there are crucial doctrinal differences between yoga and Christianity. Let's briefly look at just a few of these.

First, yoga and Christianity have very different concepts of God. As previously stated, the goal of yoga is to experience union with "God." But what do yogis mean when they speak of "God," or Brahman? Exactly what are we being encouraged to "unite" with? Most yogis conceive of "God" as an impersonal, spiritual substance, coextensive with all of reality. This doctrine is called pantheism, the view that everything is "God." It differs markedly from the theism of biblical

Christianity. In the Bible, God reveals Himself as the personal Creator of the universe. God is the Creator; the universe, His creation. The Bible maintains a careful distinction between the two.{9}

A second difference between yoga and Christianity concerns their views of man. Since yoga philosophy teaches that everything is "God," it necessarily follows that man, too, is "God." Christianity, however, makes a clear distinction between God and man. God is the Creator; man is one of His creatures. Of course man is certainly unique, for unlike the animals he was created in the image of God.{10} Nevertheless, Christianity clearly differs from yoga in its unqualified insistence that God and man are distinct.

Finally, let's briefly consider how yoga and Christianity differently conceive man's fundamental problem, as well as its solution. Yoga conceives man's problem primarily in terms of ignorance; man simply doesn't realize that he is "God." The solution is enlightenment, an experience of union with "God." This solution (which is the goal of yoga) can only be reached through much personal striving and effort. Christianity, however, sees man's primary problem as sin, a failure to conform to both the character and standards of a morally perfect God. Man is thus alienated from God and in need of reconciliation. The solution is Jesus Christ, "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world."{11} Through Jesus' death on the cross, God reconciled the world to Himself.{12} He now calls men to freely receive all the benefits of His salvation through faith in Christ alone. Unlike yoga, Christianity views salvation as a free gift. It can only be received; it can never be earned.

Clearly, Christianity and yoga are mutually exclusive viewpoints. But is every kind of yoga the same? Isn't there at least one that's exclusively concerned with physical health and exercise? Next, we'll take a closer look at hatha yoga, the one most often believed to be purely physical in nature.

What Is Hatha Yoga?

Here we've learned that yoga is an ancient spiritual discipline rooted in a belief system that is utterly incompatible with Christianity. But is this true of *all* yoga? Isn't *hatha* yoga simply concerned with physical development and good health?

Hatha yoga is primarily concerned with two things: *asana* (physical postures) and *pranayama* (breathing exercises). But it's important to realize that both asana and pranayama also play a significant role in Patanjali's *raja* (or "royal") yoga. In the traditional eight "limbs" of Patanjali's system, asana and pranayama are limbs three and four. What then is the relationship of hatha to raja yoga?

Former yoga practitioner Dave Fetcho states that yoga postures "evolved as an integral part of Raja . . . Yoga."{13} He points out that the author of the famous handbook, the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika,* "presents Hatha . . . solely and exclusively for the attainment of Raja Yoga."{14} He also cites a French yoga scholar who claims, "the sole purpose of . . . Hatha Yoga is to suppress physical obstacles on the . . . Royal path of Raja Yoga and Hatha Yoga is therefore called 'the ladder to Raja Yoga.'"{15} Fetcho concurs, noting that the physical postures are "specifically designed to manipulate consciousness…into Raja Yoga's consummate experience of *samadhi:* undifferentiated union with the primal essence of consciousness."{16} These statements should make it quite clear that hatha, or physical, yoga has historically been viewed simply as a means of aiding the yogi in attaining enlightenment, the final limb of raja yoga.

This is further confirmed by looking at Iyengar yoga, possibly the most popular form of hatha yoga in the U.S. The Web site for the Iyengar Yoga Institute of San Francisco states: "BKS Iyengar studies and teaches yoga as unfolded in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjaili [sic] and the Hatha Yoga Pradipika among

other classical texts. Thus Asana, or postures, are taught as one of the eight limbs . . . of yoga defined by Patanjali."{17} In fact, the ultimate goal of Iyengar hatha yoga is precisely the same as that of Patanjali's raja yoga.{18} Both aim to experience union with "God," Brahman, or universal consciousness.

If all these things are so, it seems increasingly apparent that hatha yoga may ultimately involve its practitioners in much more than physical exercise. Although it may not be obvious at first, the ultimate goal of hatha is the same as every other form of yoga: union of the self with an impersonal, universal consciousness. We must remember that the Bible never exhorts Christians to seek such an experience. If anything, it warns us of the potential dangers in doing so. Next, we'll consider whether yoga practice might, in fact, be dangerous—and why.

Can Yoga be Harmful?

Despite its touted health benefits, there are numerous warnings in authoritative yoga literature which caution that yoga can be physically, mentally, and spiritually harmful if not practiced correctly.

For instance, Swami Prabhavananda warns of the potentially dangerous physical effects that might result from yoga breathing exercises: "Unless properly done, there is a good chance of injuring the brain. And those who practice such breathing without proper supervision can suffer a disease which no known science or doctor can cure."{19}

In addition, many yogis warn that yoga practice can endanger one's sanity. In describing the awakening of "kundalini" (coiled serpent power) Gopi Krishna records his own experience as follows: "It was variable for many years, painful, obsessive…I have passed through almost all the stages of…mediumistic, psychotic, and other types of mind; for some

time I was hovering between sanity and insanity."{20}

Finally, however, from a Christian perspective it seems that yoga could also be spiritually harmful. To understand why, let's return to the experience of "kundalini." Yoga scholar Hans Rieker declares, "Kundalini [is] the mainstay of all yoga practices."{21} But what exactly is kundalini and why is it so central to yoga practice?

Swami Vivekananda summarizes the kundalini experience as follows: "When awakened through the practice of spiritual disciplines, it rises through the spinal column, passes through the various centres, and at last reaches the brain, whereupon the yogi experiences samadhi, or total absorption in the Godhead."{22} And researcher John White takes the importance of this experience even further declaring: "Although the word kundalini comes from the yogic tradition, nearly all the world's major religions, spiritual paths, and genuine occult traditions see something akin to the kundalini experience as having significance in "divinizing" a person. The word itself may not appear…but the concept is there…as a key to attaining godlike stature."{23}

Reading such descriptions of the kundalini, or coiled serpent power, the Christian can almost hear the hiss of that "serpent of old…who deceives the whole world."{24}In Eden, he flattered our first parents by telling them: "You will be like God."{25} And though Christianity and yoga have very different conceptions of God, isn't this essentially what yoga promises?

Swami Ajaya once said, "The main teaching of Yoga is that man's true nature is divine."{26} Obviously this is not the Christian view of man. But if the goal of yoga is to realize one's essential divinity through union with "God," then shouldn't the Christian view the practice that leads to this realization as potentially spiritually harmful? Next, we'll conclude our discussion by asking whether it's really possible to separate yoga philosophy from yoga practice.

Can Philosophy and Practice be Separated?

We've seen that yoga is an ancient spiritual discipline whose central doctrines are utterly incompatible with those of Christianity. Even hatha yoga, often considered to be exclusively concerned with physical development, is best understood as merely a means of helping the yogi reach the goal of samadhi, or union with "God." Furthermore, we've seen that all yoga, including hatha, has the potential to be physically, mentally, and spiritually harmful.

In light of such evidence, it may appear that this question—"Can yoga philosophy be separated from yoga practice?"—has already been answered in the negative. And this is certainly the view of many yoga scholars. Dave Fetcho, formerly of the Ananda Marga Yoga Society, has written, "Physical yoga, according to its classical definitions, is inheritably and functionally incapable of being separated from Eastern religious metaphysics."{27} What's more, yoga authorities Feuerstein and Miller, in discussing yoga postures (asana) and breathing exercises (pranayama), indicate that such practices are more than just another form of physical exercise; indeed, they "are *psychosomatic* exercises."{28} Does this mean that separating theory from practice is simply impossible with yoga?

If one carefully looks through an introductory text on hatha yoga,{29} one will see many different postures illustrated. A number of these may be similar, if not identical, to exercises and stretches one is already doing. Indeed, if one is engaged in a regular stretching program, this is quite probable. This raises an important question: Suppose that such beginning level yoga postures are done in a context completely free of yogic philosophy. In such a case as this, doesn't honesty compel us to acknowledge at least the *possibility* of separating theory from practice?

While I hate to disagree with scholars who know far more about

the subject than I do, this distinction does seem valid to me. However, let me quickly add that I see this distinction as legitimate *only* at the very beginning of such practices, and *only* with regard to the postures. The breathing exercises, for various reasons, remain problematic.{30} But this distinction raises yet another question, for how many people begin an exercise program intending never to move beyond the most basic level? And since by the very nature of yoga practice, such a distinction could *only* be valid at the very earliest of stages, why would a Christian ever want to begin this process? It seems to me that if someone wants an exercise program with physical benefits similar to yoga, but without all the negative spiritual baggage, they should consider low-impact or water aerobics, water ballet, or simple stretching.{31} These programs can be just as beneficial for the body, without potentially endangering the soul. In my opinion, then, Christians would be better off to never begin yoga practice.

[Note from the webmistress: Also see Why a Christian Alternative to Yoga? on the PraiseMoves.com website for an excellent treatment of this subject from a former yoga instructor who explains why the two are incompatible.]

Notes

1. Raphael, *Essence and Purpose of Yoga: The Initiatory Pathways to the Transcendent* (Massachusetts: Element Books, Inc., 1996), back cover.
2. Brad Scott, "Exercise or Religious Practice? Yoga: What the Teacher Never Taught You in That Hatha Yoga Class" in *The Watchman Expositor* (Vol. 18, No. 2, 2001): 5.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 6.
5. Ibid., cited in Swami Prabhavananda and Frederick Manchester, *The Upanishads: Breath of the Eternal* (New York: New American Library, 1957), 120ff.
6. *Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Juan Mascaro (New York: Penguin Books, 1962), back cover.

7. Ibid., 71.
8. John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 1996), 601.
9. See Romans 1:18-25.
10. See Genesis 1:26.
11. John 1:29.
12. See 2 Corinthians 5:19.
13. Dave Fetcho, "Yoga," (Berkeley, CA: Spiritual Counterfeits Project, 1978), cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 602.
14. Ibid., 603.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid., 602.
17. See "Source and Context: Patanjali and Ashtanga Yoga" at http://www.iyisf.org/. This quotation was obtained from the site on March 1, 2002.
18. Ibid.
19. Swami Prabhavananda, *Yoga and Mysticism* (Hollywood, CA: Vedanta Press, 1972), 18, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 604.
20. Gopi Krishna, *The Awakening of Kundalini* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1975), 124, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 608.
21. Hans Ulrich Rieker, *The Yoga of Light: Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (New York: Seabury Press, 1971), 101, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 606.
22. Swami Vivekananda, *Raja Yoga* (New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, 1970), 16, cited in Scott, "Exercise or Religious Practice? Yoga: What the Teacher Never Taught You in That Hatha Yoga Class," 5.
23. John White, ed., *Kundalini Evolution and Enlightenment* (Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1979), 17, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 606.
24. See Revelation 12:9.
25. See Genesis 3:5.
26. Swami Rama, *Lectures on Yoga: Practical Lessons on Yoga* (Glenview, IL: Himalayan International Institute of Yoga,

Science and Philosophy, 1976, rev.), vi, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs,* 596.
27. Dave Fetcho, "Yoga," 2, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 600.
28. George Feuerstein and Jeanine Miller, *Yoga and Beyond: Essays in Indian Philosophy* (New York: Schocken, 1972), 27-28, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs*, 600.
29. For example, Richard Hittleman, *Introduction to Yoga* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969)
30. For instance, the breathing exercises can by physically dangerous. Sri Chinmoy wrote, "To practice pranayama without real guidance is very dangerous. I know of three persons whohave died from it…" See *Great Masters and the Cosmic Gods* (Jamaica, NY: Agni Press, 1977), 8, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs,* 604. In addition, however, from a Christian perspective such exercises may also be mentally and spiritually dangerous (at least potentially) because they can induce altered states of consciousness that may make one more vulnerable to demonic deception. Indeed, psychologist Ernest L. Rossi has written of pranayama: "The manual manipulation of the nasal cycle during meditation (dhyana) is the most thoroughly documented of techniques for altering consciousness." See Benjamin B. Wolman and Montague Ullman, eds., *Handbook of States of Consciousness* (New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1986), 113, cited in Ankerberg and Weldon, *Encyclopedia of New Age Beliefs,* 595.
31. Of course such programs will need to be tailored to each individual's needs and goals. It's always a good idea to talk to your doctor before beginning any new exercise program.

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