

Stretching the Truth About Yoga

Have you noticed a major trend gaining momentum in our eclectic Western society—the rise of interest in yoga? The word *yoga* means “yoke or union.” It speaks of being yoked with God or in union with God.

Yoga, on the surface, appears to be nothing more than a highly developed low-impact exercise regimen. What could be wrong with stretching, twisting, bending, breathing, sweating it out and getting the body in shape, regardless of the method used? Absolutely nothing—if that’s all there was to it.

Unfortunately, there’s more to yoga than meets the eye. The deeper levels of its practice and the religious doctrine that forms its base can be detrimental to followers of Christ, in particular, and these negative effects are almost always, to one degree or another, attached to a yoga experience. This makes it not only unwise but ill-advised for Christians to participate.

Let me share with you how I know this to be true.

My Spiritual Résumé

Before I became a Christian in the fall of 1970, I taught kundalini yoga at four universities in Florida. Several hundred students attended my classes. I studied personally under a guru named Yogi Bhajan and ran a yoga ashram (a commune where yoga devotees apply themselves more intensely to its practice). Each day was consumed with intense spiritual disciplines from 3:30 in the morning until about 8:30 at night.

In my classes, I incorporated many yoga exercises as well as other meditation and mantra techniques specifically aimed at

experiencing higher supernatural realms.

I was very devoted to the practice of yoga until I had an amazing encounter with the Lord Jesus Christ. This pivotal experience revealed to me the vast difference between the biblical approach to God and any methodology offered in Far Eastern religions. Since then, I have never practiced any kind of yoga.

In more than 40 years of ministry, I have often been asked if it is acceptable for a Christian to practice yoga. My answer is always in the negative, and those inquiring are often surprised by my reaction. But the love of God, the love of truth and the love of people compel me to assume this posture.

There are five primary reasons I advise Christians not to practice yoga. I categorize them as: 1) spiritual roots, 2) spiritual perspective, 3) spiritual transfer, 4) spiritual intrigue and 5) spiritual endorsement. Let's visit each of these points in greater detail.

Reason #1: Spiritual Roots

Yoga is based on a Far Eastern view of both the physical and spiritual aspects of a human being. Be assured, these exercises are not just meant for your physical well-being. They have been specifically created to supposedly "open up the chakras."

According to yogic lore, seven "chakras," or spiritual energy centers, exist in the body. The first five are located along the spine. The sixth is the "third eye," and the seventh is the crown chakra, located at the top of the head.

Adherents believe something called the *kundalini* (the latent "serpent power" supposedly coiled at the base of the spine) rises up through the chakras especially during deep meditation. This "awakening of the kundalini" is considered essential in bringing a person to "God consciousness." Each

chakra is also associated with a certain Hindu deity. These deities are all mythical beings, full of humanlike frailties and faults.

A yoga practitioner is believed to be able to exit his body through these chakras, especially the third eye or the crown chakra, and experience higher, spiritual realms. Yoga allegedly prepares one for these kinds of experiences.

Practitioners of yoga may have no knowledge of these things when participating in this form of exercise, but ignorance does not sanctify or purify the system from its attachment to spiritual falsehood. Those who believe in the one true God—if they are faithful to their belief system—cannot involve themselves in anything that accepts the worship of false deities. That may seem like too strong of a statement, but to participate could smack of idolatry and blasphemy.

Furthermore, no promises of body transcendence or elevated consciousness are attached to aerobics, isometrics, weightlifting, jogging or other methods of exercising.

If the out-of-body experiences tied to yoga were legitimate, leading a person to a real relationship with God, there would be no problem. However, I discovered the opposite to be true. Without a doubt, during the out-of-body experiences I had during long periods of yogic meditation, I was actually overtaken by demonic beings that granted me false experiences of the supernatural world. (Upon receiving Jesus as Lord of my life, I was delivered from these spirits.)

According to the Bible, the presence of God can only be accessed through the soul being washed in the blood of Jesus and a person being born again. This regenerative experience definitely leads one to a “higher state of consciousness”—a conscious awareness of the reality of God—but it is totally different than anything offered through Eastern religions.

Biblical salvation is not the result of some “serpent power”

traveling up through the spine from within. It is the result of the power of the Holy Spirit entering *into* a repentant person from *without*. The contrast of these two approaches to spirituality reveals two very different views of God in His relationship with creation, pantheism versus theism, which leads us to our second reason.

Reason #2: Spiritual Perspective

Most yoga advocates embrace a pantheistic view of the universe and its relationship to God. In pantheism, which is an idea that dominates Hinduism, the universe is an emanation of God. Because God veils Himself in the appearance of physical matter, it is taught there is a spark of divine nature within everything and everyone. So, to find God, you look within. In theism, the biblical perspective, God exists apart from physical creation and approaches man from without. In pantheism, God is an impersonal, cosmic energy. In theism, He is a personal God. These two views cannot coexist in one belief system.

The “serpent power” unleashed in meditation is not the power of the Holy Spirit, nor is it merely the latent power of the soul. It is a power even gurus admit can be very destructive to the yoga practitioner.

So, where does this power come from that can potentially be so dangerous? We know it doesn’t come from God. It should help the inquisitive reader to see there is absolutely no account of anyone in the Bible being harmed by being filled with the true Holy Spirit—symbolized by a dove, which is a harmless creature. But there are accounts of insanity or dark, occultic powers following an encounter with this power likened to a serpent—a venomous and dangerous creature that can be quite harmful. Belief in this power is at the root of the yogic system of thought.

If we are going to live free from deception, we must inspect

the root of yoga practice and not be merely concerned with the fruit of a body that gets in better shape. We should remind ourselves that one of the Ten Commandments warns in no uncertain terms, "I am the Lord your God. ... You shall have no other gods before Me" (Ex. 20:2-3).

Reason #3: Spiritual Transfer

Though I was unaware of it at the time, when I studied yoga, I came under the influence of a counterfeit spiritual power that was not the true power of God. This passed to me from the guru under whom I studied. (Actually, many yoga devotees often seek this transference of supernatural power from various gurus and swamis with fervency, thinking it is a faster means of attaining higher levels of consciousness.)

There are many sweet, gracious, kind and compassionate people studying yoga who would never purposefully seek to come under the influence of dark, deceptive, demonic powers. Most are genuinely seeking truth and Ultimate Reality. Some are striving for no more than just to shape up their bodies. Because of this, in some cases it is possible to go to a yoga class and never be introduced to any kind of false spiritual power, especially if all the participants are only into the physical aspect or if all participants are Christian believers with a pure doctrinal stance.

However, if the teacher of the class is involved in the philosophy behind the entire yogic system, there will be a subliminal spiritual transference from the teacher to the student that is likely not the true Spirit of God and can be very misleading. Those who are weak in their Christian faith may find their belief system eroded over a period of time and themselves drawn into this Far Eastern, mystical point of view to the detriment of their own souls.

It should be mentioned that in order to be a certified yoga teacher by the standards of that industry, a teacher must

spend a certain number of hours studying Vedic philosophy and the teachings of certain yoga masters from the East. Do you want that influencing you?

Reason #4: Spiritual Intrigue

Even if a yoga class atmosphere is relatively harmless, there is normally an arousal of curiosity on the part of those involved to learn more about the whole system of yogic thought. For instance, I recently visited a yoga center in California in order to share the gospel.

There I met a teacher, a gracious young man who claimed to be a Christian. However, all around the studio were magazines, books and videos that presented the Far Eastern worldview. There were also Buddha statues and pictures of Hindu deities.

Almost any person attending classes at this studio would inevitably be drawn to look at these books, magazines and tapes and become intrigued about other, deeper aspects of yoga. So, as is often the case, yoga becomes the bait that carries people into a vast belief system that involves much more than physical exercise. When curious seekers begin exploring these ideas, they are usually carried far away from the power and purity of the simple gospel of Christ.

Reason #5: Spiritual Endorsement

Let's suppose everything is relatively benign in a yoga class, that no one promotes Far Eastern philosophy, that all the teachers are Christians and that even Christian music is played. Is there still a negative? Yes, there is!

If a Christian goes to classes—even yoga classes that have no spiritual emphasis whatsoever—a signal still goes out to others that could easily be misinterpreted. Those who see Bible believers participating in yoga classes could easily construe their actions to be an endorsement for the whole system of thought.

This issue is very similar to Paul's admonition to early Christians not to eat meat offered to idols. He explained that the idol didn't really exist and that certainly people needed food, so eating it would be all right. However, he said weak Christians or nonbelievers might interpret such an act to be an endorsement of idolatrous practices. (Read all of 1 Corinthians 8 for more on this.)

For this reason, Paul asserted he would never eat that kind of meal again, lest he become a stumbling block to any spiritually weak person. It makes sense that our final conclusion should be just as strong with regard to the practice of yoga.

The Obvious Conclusion

I know what must be going through your mind at this point: "Guess it's time to break out the old jogging shoes. Treadmill and racquetball court, here we come! Push-ups and sit-ups—oh no, back to the old grind!"

Well, not necessarily so.

I have a number of friends who have developed yoga alternatives who feel the idea of "Christian yoga" is an oxymoron. I agree with them. There is no way Christianity can truly be mixed with yoga. Even recognized Hindu leaders have admitted that.

The following websites offer a low-impact exercise approach free from false mystical entrapments. In fact, they include the quoting of Bible passages and Christian music in their disciplines.

- [WholyFit](#):
- [PraiseMoves](#):

And the next time you're asked to join a yoga class—whether by Christians or unbelievers—remember that yoga goes far beyond a

mere stretch.

Mike Shreve is the author of 11 books, including his latest release, 65 Promises From God for Your Child. He has been involved in full-time ministry and global evangelism since 1971. He and his wife, Elizabeth, reside in Cleveland, Tenn., with their two children. For more information, visit .

Former yoga instructor Mike Shreve explains why the term *Christian yoga* is an oxymoron at