

WHAT'S WRONG WITH TAKING A YOGA CLASS?

by Steve Wagoner

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The physical fitness craze is sweeping the country. With more leisure time, people are spending much time exercising, jogging, swimming, and the like. But amid all this activity, many are turning to yoga, not realizing the spiritual implications of such a move. Many celebrities and movie stars have given glowing testimonials concerning yoga. Some schools have incorporated yoga classes into their curriculum. America's fascination with yoga has grown faster than our knowledge of its dangers.

Let us begin examining the dangers of involvement with yoga by looking at some of yoga's basic presuppositions. Yoga has its roots in Eastern religion (Hinduism), and therefore teaches that "all reality is one." Every system of yoga seeks to merge the self (samkhya) with Atman (or god—the true self). But Atman is not the God of Christianity. In the systems of yoga, god is part of the problem, for "god" is impersonal, changeable, and lacks a sufficiently high vantage point to give solutions to the problems he is also embroiled in. The Hindu gods remind us of the gods of Greek mythology in some respects.

HUMAN BEINGS CANNOT MERGE WITH THE TRUE GOD

From a Christian perspective, man is either able to merge with God, or he is not. He is either the creature, or the Creator. He cannot be both. This makes a significant difference when one builds a system of ethics, especially if a person is willing to believe that man can achieve union with God by his own efforts. The creature-Creator distinction, bridged by the Cross and Resurrection events in Christianity, are important not only for liberation from the power of sin, but for redemption as well. From the Bible's point of view, we cannot come before God by our own unassisted efforts, much less merge with Him. Otherwise, we make the work and resurrection of Christ sheer folly. This fact alone sets up enormous differences between Christian thought and yoga at the outset — but let us continue.

PHYSICAL CONCENTRATION CANNOT CHANGE THE INNER BEING

A basic tenet in yoga is that there are different levels, or stages, of being that a person must move through before he can finally yoke the ego with the ultimate self (or god), which is said to be its “true nature.” To do this requires mystic and ascetic practice, usually involving the discipline of prescribed postures, controlled breathing, voluntary sense deprivation, and intense, complete concentration upon something (such as a mantra) — in order to establish identity of consciousness with the object of concentration (dharana). After intense contemplation, whereby one finally “sees through” that object to its essence (dhyana), one supposedly arrives at a trance-like state (samadhi), which is called the most intense energy level. In this state, it is claimed, the self is merged with “ultimate reality.”

Stories of yogis who can change their brain waves to unconscious patterns at will, or cause the heart to voluntarily stop, have been documented to support the contention that yoga provides one means for controlling the body and mind. It should be borne in mind, however, that some who have become involved in yoga have reported having had demonic experiences of a frightening nature. The end is not always what is sought; hence the contention that this is spiritual openness with religious significance — a risky science of playing with the inner man.

SELF-CONQUEST CANNOT BRING ETERNAL SALVATION

In yoga, an individual’s own mind constitutes his source of yogic power. Self-conquest is therefore to be achieved by “knowing one’s own mind,” which to many persons in Western societies sounds noble. But the problem is this: By the time one meets up with power in meditation, the reason is left behind. You have no way of knowing if the overwhelming and demanding power which you have experienced means you are good or evil. The idea is to give yourself to it and see what happens! Then you go back to the Hindu Vedas to read about what god you have experienced. But the Vedas tell of gods who can promise anything, and then turn on you with unpredictable viciousness and furious abrupt changes. There is risk involved here that has much spiritual significance (compare **Exodus 20:3; Ephesians 6:12; 1 Corinthians 10:18-21**). Anyone who delves into yoga very far, knows that the gods are where the power is. One discovers at length that some yogis have power to control their bodies, often in spectacular ways, but only because they have surrendered themselves to another power.

If yogic meditators have lower blood lactate, or consume less oxygen during meditation, their problems are still waiting for them when they come out of their trance. Life must be lived between experiences, and it is this “space” between experiences that proves to be a problem for the yogic meditator. The key to the problem lies not in technique,

but in humble dependency on Jesus Christ and His mercy, and on being led and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The yogic meditator is not apt to appreciate such a perspective, because it makes his “heroic efforts” to merge with god look quite foolish. After all, consider the years of intense self-discipline and the large outlay of cash (you didn’t think yoga was free, did you)) required to achieve union with the “ultimate self.” The Good News is that we don’t have to go through all that. The price has been paid for our salvation. Through the blood of Jesus Christ, we have bold access into God’s presence at any time **(Hebrews 10:19-22)**.

ECSTATIC EXPERIENCES CANNOT REPLACE GENUINE SELF CONTROL

One big problem with yoga is that by the time one meets up with some power, his reason has been left behind. The yogic meditator leaves knowledge for meditation, and meditation for detachment, and doesn’t know who (or what) he is submitting to. Frequently the god will promise divinity and power in exchange for complete surrender to its power. Does this sound anything like Satan’s temptation of Jesus in the wilderness **(Matthew 4:8 & 9)**?

One of the means by which we are to discern the difference between the true prophets of God and false prophets, is by means of self-control. **“The spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets” (1 Corinthians 14:32)**. In other words, those who truly have come before God and speak His words, remain in full possession of their rational faculties, with their self-control left intact. Self-control is one fruit of the Holy Spirit **(Galatians 5:23)**. Christian prayer leaves us with our wits so that we can tell if it is God working, or some other spiritual counterfeit. Implicit in the notion that we can unify ourselves with God, is the concept that we can also unify ourselves with Satan. Hence, the warnings of the early Church Fathers about seeking visions, external sensations, soul travel, or other ecstatic experiences that have the earmarks of delusion, and the potential of demonic invitation.

THE GLORY OF THE CREATOR MUST NOT BE GIVEN TO THE CREATURE

In yoga, body and soul are equated since all reality is viewed as one. Not only is man god, but so is everything else — which amounts to full-blown pantheism. It says, “That rock is god; I am god; etc.” Is this exchanging the glory of the Creator for that of the creature **(Romans 1:23)**? The view that all reality is one — surely creates a low view of God, and an absurdly high view of man.

Yoga also encourages the use of a “mantra” in meditation. Few realize just what a mantra is. Mantras evolved from the left Tantric Vehicle School of Buddhism, whose pathetic adherents erotically attempted union with the cosmos, were involved in ritual murders, and ate excrement to try for magical power. As John Weldon and Zola LeVitt

warn in their book, *The Transcendental Explosion*, present-day mantras often are, in fact, names of Hindu gods. Did not our God say, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” (**Exodus 20:3**).

When the Christian prays, he should not seek an experience. Instead, prayer involves praise to Jesus (our Mediator with God), cleansing the mind, putting to death the ego or personal desire — in such a way as to emphasize personal dependency on Christ and His mercy. Purity of heart and being receptive to the Holy Spirit by emptying the self (**Philippians 2:5-13**) are central factors. Prayer involves an affirmation of one’s sinfulness (unlikely in yogic practice) that one might also find forgiveness (again, unlikely in yoga). This stands in marked contrast with yogic meditation, where one’s troubles are still waiting for the meditator when he comes out of his trance, and perhaps are compounded by the encouragement of demonic activity and indifferent escapism .

Paul and the other apostles saw that the power of Christian meditation lay in praying systematically and frequently (**Acts 6:4; 1 Thessalonians 5:17**).

Paul knew that true meditation is a matter of the heart — not a mere technique nor a mouthing of words. Prayer is a joining of the Spirit: “I will with the Spirit and ... with the mind also” (**1 Corinthians 14:15**).

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Editor’s Addendum.

Some say, “But Isn’t meditation a good thing? After all, the First Psalm encourages meditation in the Word of God.” But there is a difference between engaging in yoga meditation exercises and meditating on the Scriptures! The yoga meditation seeks to turn off all thoughts; Bible meditation seeks to activate the mind into a deeper commitment to the Lord. The chief goal of yoga is to achieve a union between the individual and the Absolute. The chief goal of Christian meditation is to use our minds to perform God’s will more perfectly.

—H.S.M.