

## **FIVE MAIN REASONS WHY I NO LONGER PRACTICE HATHA YOGA! (Mike Shreve)**

**There is a major trend in our eclectic western society that is gaining momentum.** It involves a departure from our Judeo-Christian roots (quite often because people have become disenchanted with a powerless expression of Christianity) and a turn toward new age and far eastern concepts and practices that many hope will improve the health of their bodies, minds and souls. One of the chief indicators of this trend is 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. The majority of westerners do not associate yoga with religion or an approach to the Creator, simply because they are unfamiliar with the deeper levels of practice and the religious doctrine that forms its base. Most westerners relate to yoga only in its simplest form—the physical exercises (asanas) and breathing exercises (pranayama) that make up a practice called “Hatha Yoga.”

**This type of 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. However, there are some definite negatives that are almost always, to one degree or another, attached to a yoga experience. Usually, this makes it, not only unwise, but ill-advised for Christians to participate. Before I elucidate on this, let me first share my spiritual resume—something that I believe qualifies me as an authority on this subject.

### **MY SPIRITUAL RESUME**

**Before my conversion to Christianity 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 Bhanan 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 Hatha Yoga exercises, as well as other meditation and mantra techniques aimed at experiencing higher supernatural realms. Kundalini Yoga claims to be an amalgamation of many types of yoga, including Hatha. 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 Hatha or any other kind of yoga.**

Over the past thirty-seven years of ministry I have often been asked if it is acceptable for a Christian to practice Hatha Yoga. Though there may be rare exceptions to the rule, I usually respond in the negative. When I do, those enquiring are often surprised by my reaction. But the love of God, the love of truth and the love of people all compel me to assume this posture. I believe this is an issue that we will face more and more as our culture evolves under pervasive, syncretistic influences.

## THE FIVE REASONS

**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:

**(1) Spiritual Roots**—Hatha 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 for physical well-being.** They have been specifically created to supposedly 'open up the chakras.' According to yogic lore, there are seven chakras or spiritual energy centers 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 that 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.' It is also important to note that each "chakra" is associated with a certain Hindu deity. These deities are all mythical beings, full of human-like frailties and faults.

Practitioners may have no knowledge of these things, 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. It may seem like too strong of a statement, but to do so smacks of idolatry and blasphemy.

It is also taught that a yoga practitioner can exit his body through the 'chakras,' especially the third eye or the crown chakra, and experience higher, spiritual realms. Hatha Yoga allegedly prepares one for these kinds of experiences. No promises like this are attached to aerobics, isometrics, weight lifting, jogging or other methods of exercising. If these out-of-body experiences 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 those 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.

In traditional Hindu teaching, Hatha Yoga is the third stage in Patanjali's eight-stage plan toward enlightenment (Samadhi).<sup>1</sup> The first two stages are Yama (restraint) and Niyama (observance, devotion). In a book titled *The Book of the Vedas, Timeless Wisdom from Indian Tradition*, we find the following description:

*The word **Hatha** is an amalgam of "sun" (ha) and the word "moon" (tha), and symbolizes the positive (sun) and negative (moon) currents in the body. The balancing of the two is seen as the means to harmonizing and mastering these currents so that "vital force" (prana) can be controlled. In so doing, the mind will be cleared and the path open to experiencing higher states of consciousness.*<sup>2</sup>

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 actually reveals two very different views of God in His relationship with creation (Pantheism versus Theism).

**(2) Spiritual Perspective**—Most yoga advocates embrace a pantheistic view of the universe and its relationship to God. In Pantheism (an idea which dominates Hinduism), the universe is an emanation of God. Because God veils Himself in the appearance of physical matter, it is taught that 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 co-exist 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? It should help the inquisitive reader to see that there is absolutely NO account of anyone in the Bible being harmed by being filled with the true Holy Spirit (symbolized by a dove—a harmless creature). But there are accounts of insanity or dark, occultic powers being the byproduct of an encounter with this power likened to a serpent (a venomous and dangerous creature which 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 Hatha 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 commandments warns in no uncertain terms:

*I am the LORD your God...you shall have no other gods before Me.*  
(Exodus 20:2-3)

**(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. (This ‘consciousness-raising transference’ is something most devotees fervently seek after. When it is transferred directly from the spiritual teacher, it is called *Shaktipat*).

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 for truth and for Ultimate Reality. Some are seeking for no more than just to shape up their bodies. Because of this, in some cases, it is

possible to go to a Hatha Yoga class and never be introduced to any kind of false spiritual 'power': 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 can have their belief-system eroded over a period of time and end up being drawn into the far eastern mystical point of view, to the detriment of their own soul. It should be mentioned that in order to be a "certified" yoga teacher, by the standards in place in 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?

**(4) Spiritual Intrigue**—Even if the Hatha 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 thought. I recently visited a Hatha Yoga Center in California, as I often do, 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 (which is non-biblical in many ways). 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, Hatha Yoga becomes the 'bait' to carry 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.

**(5) Spiritual Endorsement**—Just suppose everything is relatively benign in a yoga class, that no one promotes far eastern philosophy, that all the teachers are Christians, and even Christian music is played, etc. Is there still a negative? Yes, there is! If a Christian goes to classes (that may have NO spiritual emphasis whatsoever), still, a signal is going out to others that could easily be misinterpreted. Those who see Bible believers participating in Hatha Yoga classes could easily construe it to be an endorsement for the whole system of thought (unless a clear, definitive line is drawn, especially by those teaching the classes).

This issue is very similar to Paul's admonition to early Christians not to eat meat offered to idols. He said that the idol didn't really exist and certainly the people needed food, so eating it would be all right. However, weak Christians or non-believers might interpret such an act as an endorsement of idolatrous practices. (Read all of 1 Corinthians 8.) For this reason, Paul asserted, "I will never eat meat 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.

Well, I think I know what might be going through your mind at this point. “*Guess it’s time to break out the old jogging shoes. Treadmill and racket ball court, here we come!*” Well, not necessarily so.

**I have a number of friends who have developed yoga alternatives, who feel that the idea of “Christian yoga” is an oxymoron.** I agree. In all fairness, I do know fitness teachers who claim to have “Christian Yoga” classes. They do praise and worship, quote Scripture and never meditate using far eastern methods. They are often real believers, sincerely committed to the truth. However, I am still very uncomfortable with the overflow of Hindu terminology and the reasoning behind some of the poses (like the lotus posture with the fingers curled in a circle that represents the word “OM”). According to Hindus, this was the sacred syllable that accompanied creation and meditating on it can usher a person toward “enlightenment” or “samadhi”. Why even associate yourself with false concepts like this? Check out the following websites and I believe you will conclude that exercise can be low impact, yet free from any false mystical entrapments.

WholyFit with Laura Monica— [www.wholyfit.org](http://www.wholyfit.org)

Praise Moves with Laurette Willis— [www.praisemoves.com](http://www.praisemoves.com)

Doxa Soma (Praise with the Body) with Angela Carlson— [www.doxasoma.com](http://www.doxasoma.com)

Check what these Christian Fitness Instructors have to offer. Instead of walking on “thin ice” and not being sure of where you stand, build your life on the sure foundation of the Lord Jesus Christ.

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1 Patanjali was the writer of the Yoga Sutras, a categorization of yogic thought arranged in four volumes. The first three were apparently written, some say, around the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BC and have become the foundation for most yogic teaching since. Yoga is one of the six orthodox systems of Indian (Hindu) thought.

2 Virender Kumar Arya, *The Book of the Vedas, Timeless Wisdom from Indian Tradition* (Hauppauge, New York, Barron’s Educational Series, Inc., 2003) p. 76 (emphasis by author of this article)