

Harmless Exercise or Spiritual Practice?

ENCINITAS, California—Inside the elementary school, a gym class takes deep breaths. The kids stretch. Outside the classroom, parents are protesting. What has them so upset?

This year, the Encinitas Union School District began teaching yoga to its 5000 elementary-school students at the district's schools. Some parents objected. They believe the classes teach kids Eastern religion.

Mary Eady refuses to let her first-grade son take part in yoga at school. She watched a yoga class and saw the children doing a sun **salutation**. They folded over in a bow, and then swept their arms toward the sky.

Mrs. Eady thinks the students are learning to worship the sun. This violates her belief that only God should be worshipped. Mrs. Eady is a Christian.

"They're not just teaching physical poses," said Mrs. Eady in an interview with the *New York Times*. "They're teaching children how to meditate and how to look within for peace and comfort."

Dean Broyles, President of the National Center for Law and Policy (NCLP), is the parents' attorney. He says they may sue the school district if it doesn't stop teaching yoga.

In response, the school system has changed some of the names of the positions. It plays down the spiritual elements of yoga.

But for Broyles and the parents, that's not enough. The program is funded by a \$533,000 grant from the Jois Foundation. The NCLP contends that the Jois Foundation is a religious organization.

"The stated goal of the Jois Foundation is to promote the 'gospel' of Ashtanga (Hindu beliefs and practices), a deeply religious form of yoga, worldwide," said the NCLP in an October 22 press release.

The Encinitas school system says the program is simply part of an overall wellness curriculum that includes nutrition and a school garden. "We think it's important to keep this program in our schools and we're going to do what we can to protect it," maintains Encinitas Assistant Superintendent David Miyashiro.

NEWSTHINK

Editorial by Jenny Pitcock

Does it really matter if the public school system uses yoga? Administrators say kids behave better since beginning the yoga program. If it creates good results and it's good exercise, what's the harm?

The words of one principal in an Encinitas school help provide an answer. She says, "I have teachers who say that before a test now students do yoga to calm themselves so that they're transferring [yoga] into the classroom, into their lives."

For the kids participating in this program, yoga, which is a practice of Hindu religion, is changing how



Yoga instructor Kristen McCloskey leads a class of third graders at an elementary school in Encinitas, California.



Fourth-graders holds a position during a yoga class at their school.



Hindu deity Shiva is often portrayed in a yoga pose.

they approach life. Many probably don't even recognize it as Hinduism. They're being **indoctrinated** in a religious belief—one that tells them to look inward for peace. Where are these kids likely to turn when they face a problem—to God or to their "inner divinity"?

Holy Yoga?

Even some Christians believe that yoga can be used for good. Holy Yoga, Scripture Yoga, and Yoga for Christians are programs that claim to use yoga to help people focus on Christ. Some change the names of the positions and include praise music in class. Do these changes make yoga an acceptable Christian practice?

It's instructive to look at what Hindus have to say on the matter. In May 14, 2006, the *Orlando Sentinel* interviewed Sannyasin

Arumugaswami. He was managing editor of *Hinduism Today*. He told the newspaper that yoga was developed by Hindu sages. It is based on Hindu scriptures. "Yoga opens up new and more refined states of mind, and to understand them one needs to believe in and understand the Hindu way of looking at God." Arumugaswami said, "Christians trying to adapt these practices will likely disrupt their own Christian beliefs."

We need to be discerning. When it comes to religious practices, we need to be especially careful. Even the poses in yoga have spiritual significance. They pay homage or worship to pagan deities. We must heed the scriptural command, "*Be careful, or you will be enticed to turn away and worship other gods and bow down to them.*"—Deuteronomy 11:16

Do you think public schools should be allowed to use yoga in the curriculum? What are some possible alternatives to practicing yoga for Christians? Send your response to TSeditor@gwnews.com.

Poses with Meanings

Downward Dog



Named for the stretch of a waking dog. The pose is supposed to connect a person's "center" and have a unifying power.

Warrior Positions



Named for a mythic warrior-sage of a thousand heads, eyes, and feet. The pose represents the spiritual battle with self ignorance.

Lord of the Dance



Honors the Hindu god Shiva as the "cosmic dancer."

Lotus Pose

The pose is frequently used for meditation and breathing exercises. Breathing is supposed to have a spiritual purifying power.

