

Yoga: Healthy or Not?

written by Tim Jennings, M.D. | July 3, 2009



The topic I would like to request is a topic that I have heard good Christians support and other good Christians decry. The topic is the benefits or detriments of Yoga. I guess I would like to know if Yoga is something a Christian should participate in?

Thank you

Thanks for your question. The reason you may have heard a variety of viewpoints on yoga is that yoga has many forms and can mean different things. For example, consider the word exercise. Exercise can have many permutations. We can engage in physical exercise, mental exercise, religious or spiritual exercise. We can exercise demons, engage in military exercises and so forth. Likewise the term yoga can be applied to a range of experiences.

Traditionally, yoga refers to a variety of physical and spiritual exercises or disciplines that originated in India. In many Eastern religions, such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism, yoga is often associated with certain forms of meditation. These meditations generally do not include communion with a

personal God as revealed in Jesus.

Within Hinduism yoga also refers to six different schools of philosophy. Within these philosophies a series of healthy principles are espoused, such as the five abstentions: non-violence, non-lying, non-covetousness, non-sensuality, non-possessiveness. Other healthy principles include purity, contentment, austerity, study, surrender to god (however there are many god concepts which are not healthy), mental discipline and the study of nature.

The mental disciplines of yoga trend toward an emptying of self, or self-denial, but without the focus on a real, loving, personal God as revealed in Jesus. This leaves practitioners operating under their own strength in their effort to overcome human weakness and propensity to selfishness. Without the supernatural indwelling of the Holy Spirit all such human effort will fail. In Eastern religions there is a very subtle danger. The practitioners' agenda is to empty self, overcome self, deny self, which is the very goal of Christianity. However, in Eastern religions the worshipper does this by their own effort, works and mental discipline so that while their focus is to "overcome self" they actually elevate self. Without the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit selfishness cannot be eradicated from the heart.

One should not conclude however, that the Holy Spirit will not reach out to practitioners of yoga. It is not our place to judge and the Bible gives every indication that the Holy Spirit is working to reach all people who sincerely are following the truth as they know it. But without the revelation of Jesus Christ, as revealed in Scripture, Eastern religions are not the best source of truth about God and their practices can obstruct or delay a person from coming to the true knowledge of God as revealed in Jesus. Therefore, I personally do not recommend the religious practices of Eastern religions.

However, in Western society yoga is most often associated with its physical exercises and postures and it is this aspect that most westerners practice. To the degree that the practice of yoga is restricted to the physical postures and exercises it can be quite beneficial and health promoting and I do recommend people engage in routine exercise to keep their bodies as youthful and fit as possible. The exercises and postures of yoga are one means to improve our physical health.

Therefore, the next time you hear a person espouse the benefits of yoga and another person its dangers, clarify exactly what the person means when they use the term yoga.