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Can Everyone Benefit from Yoga?

While openly available, yoga is rooted in Hindu scripture, teaches Hindu practices and leads to oneness with God. Practice with caution!

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One of the events we were privileged to participate in at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Melbourne was an interreligious panel entitled "Practicing Yoga: Covert Conversion to Hinduism or the Key to Mind-Body Wellness for All?" At this largest-ever interfaith gathering, many panels, including this one, focused on the interface of cultures and religions. With yoga becoming so popular in the world, it was a natural candidate for reflection, and the results were, as you will see, fascinating. The Parliament defined the issue and points of discussion thusly:

"The science of yoga has grown enormously on the global stage in the last few decades due to widespread recognition of its physical and mental health benefits. Hinduism teaches that yoga is comprised of eight steps, of which the popularly practiced postures are an integral part. Although yoga's origins are Hindu, its practitioners come from virtually all faiths. The United States alone has about 20 million practitioners, with hundreds of millions worldwide. However, the Hindu roots of yoga and the use of Hindu chants, such as the sacred syllable 'Om,' appear to have created apprehensions that the practice of yoga leads to de facto conversion to Hinduism. Yet, as a pluralistic, non-exclusivist and non-proselytizing religion, Hinduism teaches that one need not become a Hindu or repudiate one's own faith to practice yoga and reap its benefits. How founded is the fear of conversion? Is the practice of yoga inconsistent with the tenets of other religions? Can interfaith dialogue help individuals, irrespective of faith, reap the immense benefits that

follow from the practice of yoga? The aim of this program is to foster understanding among faith traditions and to create a sustainable basis for the practice of yoga by all."

Rev. Ellen Grace O'Brian, Spiritual Director of the Center for Spiritual Enlightenment and a minister in the kriya yoga tradition, moderated the panel discussion. Five panelists presented diverse viewpoints. Dr. Amir Farid Isahak, a practicing Malaysian Sufi, said that, in his interpretation, yoga can be practiced by Sufis without compromising their religion, provided they are careful about which practices they choose and as long as they focus on a goal of achieving proximity to God, but not unity. Professor Christopher Key Chapple shared information on the philosophical goals of yoga as expounded in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. He also spoke of the presence of yoga in Jainism and Buddhism, to demonstrate that long ago yoga moved beyond the boundaries of Hinduism.

Leigh Blashki of the Australian Institute of Yoga stressed that yoga practice should be not divorced from the spiritual disciplines that are its core. Suhag Shukla, a Hindu who grew up in the US and now a board member of the Hindu American Foundation, was adamant that yoga and its path of meditation are vital Hindu practices, integral to the religion. My presentation noted that today most popular yoga schools present yoga as a path of unitive mysticism, a meditative regimen that ultimately leads to experiencing the soul's oneness with God. Here is my summary of the issue.

Yoga: Unitive Mysticism

The term yoga refers to a wide variety of Hindu practices. Therefore, it is always helpful when discussing yoga to modify the word with a second term to clarify what particular kind of yoga is being discussed. The yoga that is the subject of this panel is commonly referred to as ashtanga yoga. Ashta means eight, and anga means limb. The idea is that this system of yoga comprises eight progressive practices. Sage Patanjali is credited with being the first person to present the ancient tradition of yoga in a systematic way. He did this in his Yoga Sutras, a famous literary work thought to date back as far as 200 bce. For simplicity, when I use the word yoga in this presentation, I am referring to ashtanga yoga.

Vamadeva Shastri, a respected author on yoga, astrology and ayurveda, rightly states that the meditative side of yoga is little known: "Yoga today is most known for its asana (yogic posture) tradition--the most popular, visible and outward form of

the system. Buddhism, by comparison, is known as a tradition of meditation, as in the more popular forms of Buddhist meditation like Zen and Vipassana. Many people who have studied yoga in the West look to Buddhist teachings for meditation practices, not realizing that there are yogic and Vedantic forms of meditation which are traditionally not only part of the yogic system but its core teaching! In the Yoga Sutras, only three sutras out of two hundred deal with asana. The great majority deal with meditation, its theory and results."

To understand yoga's meditative aspect, it is helpful to look briefly at each of the eight limbs or categories of practice. The first limb is yama, the ethical restraints, of which the most important is ahimsa, noninjuriousness. The second limb is niyama, specific religious observances, including puja in one's home shrine and repeating mantras. The third limb is asana, the yogic postures that are so widely practiced as a regimen called hatha yoga. The remaining five limbs are all related to meditation: pranayama, breath control; pratyahara, sense withdrawal; dharana, concentration; dhyana, meditation; and samadhi, enstasy, or oneness with God.

Sometimes it is said that the roots of yoga are Hindu. To develop this botanical metaphor more fully, I would affirm that, yes, the roots of yoga, its scriptural origins, are Hindu. But the stem of yoga, its practice, is also Hindu. The flower of yoga, mystical union, is also Hindu. In other words, yoga, in its full glory, is a vital part of modern Hinduism.

Yoga is practiced on a large scale in Hindu communities around the globe. The fact that yoga is also pursued by many non-Hindus does not negate it as a Hindu practice. Let's draw a parallel to Vipassana, the popular Buddhist meditative system. The practice of Vipassana by those who are not Buddhist does not lessen the fact that Vipassana is a Buddhist practice, not merely a practice that has its origins in Buddhism.

Can Non-Hindus Benefit from Yoga? Clearly, more and more people today, including adherents of other religions, are convinced that this is possible. Take, for example, the title of an opinion piece in an August 2009 edition of Newsweek: "We're All Hindus Now." The article quotes the view of Stephen Prothero, religion professor at Boston University, on the American propensity for "the divine-deli-cafeteria religion." He states: "You're not picking and choosing from different religions because they're all the same. It isn't about orthodoxy. It's about whatever works. If going to yoga works, great--and if going to Catholic mass works,

great. And if going to Catholic mass plus the yoga plus the Buddhist retreat works, that's great, too."

However, it is equally true that the leaders of some religions have spoken out strongly against the practice of yoga by their followers. For example, the Vatican has issued a number of warnings to Catholics about yoga over the years. In 1989 it warned that practices like Zen and yoga can "degenerate into a cult of the body" that debases Christian prayer. Further, the Church leaders cautioned, "The love of God, the sole object of Christian contemplation, is a reality which cannot be 'mastered' by any method or technique."

In 2008 the leading Islamic council in Malaysia issued an edict prohibiting the country's Muslims from indulging in the practice of yoga, fearing its Hindu roots could corrupt them. The council's chairman, Abdul Shukor Husim, explained the decision: "We are of the view that yoga, which originates in Hinduism, combines a physical exercise, religious elements, chanting and worshiping for the purpose of achieving inner peace and ultimately to be at one with God. For us, yoga destroys a Muslim's faith. There are other ways to get exercise. You can go cycling, swimming."

In a search on the web, another informative example turned up. In 2001 the Reverend Richard Farr, vicar of St Mary's church in Henham, England, made a decision that became the talk of the Essex village and beyond: he banned a 16-strong group of yoga enthusiasts from taking lessons in his church hall. Yoga is, he said, an un-Christian practice: "I accept that for some people it is simply an exercise. But it is also often a gateway into other spiritualities, including Eastern mysticism."

The Christian and Muslim leaders we cite as examples stated no concerns that the practice of yoga might result in conversion to Hinduism. However, all three expressed the concern that yoga practice is in conflict with the tenets of their religions. As Abdul Husim expressed it, "Yoga destroys a Muslim's faith."

This predictably raises the question, "What are the tenets of yoga?" We find an authoritative answer in the teachings of B.K.S. Iyengar, one of the most renowned modern teachers of yoga. His system, known as Iyengar Yoga, is widely popular, as

evidenced by the thousands of teachers listed on his website. There, in answer to his most frequently asked question, "What is yoga?" he states, "Yoga is one of the six systems of Indian philosophy. The word yoga originates from the Sanskrit root yuj, which means 'union.' On the spiritual plane, it means union of the Individual Self with the Universal Self. Sage Patanjali penned down this subject in his treatise known as Yoga Sutras."

Another popular yoga teacher, Bikram Choudhury, founder of Bikram Yoga, defines it in a similar way on his website, stating that yoga means union of the Individual Soul (Atman) with the Universal Soul (Brahman). He states, "Atman and Brahman are Hindu ideological terms that are used as a reference for the mind, whereas there truly is only Oneness."

Clearly, it is not just its specific practices, such as chanting the mantra "Om," that make yoga Hindu. It is the philosophy itself. The fact that the goal of yoga philosophy is mystical experience--or, more precisely, a mystical experience of the oneness of the soul with God--is the most central attribute that makes it inherently Hindu.

Conclusion: It is naive to take yoga as a physical system of exercise devoid of its philosophical, spiritual and cultural underpinnings. This profound spiritual discipline is ineluctably rooted in Hindu scripture. It is a path of religious practice on all levels, and its goal is enlightenment, Self Realization. It may not be an advisable practice for followers of religions in which unitive mysticism is unacceptable, as stated by the religious leaders of such faiths. Those who are affiliated with liberal religions and those with no formal religious ties can definitely benefit from the practice of yoga, physically, emotionally, mentally and spiritually. However, a caution to all who follow the path of yoga: be prepared to become gradually more and more aware of the unity of all that exists!

Yoga Is One of the Six Classical Hindu Philosophies

Among the most compelling facts supporting the profound association of yoga with Hinduism is its place as one of the six foundational philosophical systems that have been studied and debated for nearly a milennia. Here is a thumbnail sketch of those schools, known in Sanskrit as the Shad Darshanas ("six perspectives").

There are hundreds of Hindu darshanas of which six have been distinguished:

Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Sankhya, Yoga, Mimamsa and Vedanta. Each was tersely formulated in sutra form by its "founder," and elaborated in extensive commentaries by other writers. These systems are varied attempts at describing Truth and the path to it. Elements of each form part of the Hindu mosaic today.

Nyaya: "System, rule; logic." A system of logical realism, founded sometime around 300bce by Gautama, known for its systems of logic and epistemology and concerned with the means of acquiring right knowledge. Its tools of enquiry and rules for argumentation were adopted by all schools of Hinduism.

Vaisheshika: "Differentiation," from vishesha, "differences." A philosophy founded by Kanada (ca 300bce) teaching that liberation is to be attained through understanding the nature of existence, which is classified in nine basic realities (dravyas): earth, water, light, air, ether, time, space, soul and mind. Nyaya and Vaisheshika are viewed as a complementary pair, with Nyaya emphasizing logic, and Vaisheshika analyzing the nature of the world.

Sankhya: "Enumeration, reckoning." A philosophy founded by sage Kapila (ca 500bce), author of the Sankhya Sutras. Sankhya is primarily concerned with "categories of existence," tattvas, which it understands as 25 in number. The first two are the unmanifest Purusha and the manifest primal nature, Prakriti--this male-female polarity is viewed as the fundament of all existence. Prakriti, out of which all things evolve, is the unity of the three gunas: sattva, rajas and tamas. The Sankhya and Yoga schools are considered an inseparable pair. Their principles permeate all of Hinduism.

Yoga: "Yoking; joining." The ancient tradition of philosophy and practice codified by Patanjali (ca 200bce) in the Yoga Sutras. It is also known as raja yoga, "king of yogas," or ashtanga yoga, "eight-limbed yoga." Its object is to achieve, at will, the cessation of all fluctuations of consciousness, and the attainment of Self Realization. Yoga is wholly dedicated to putting the high philosophy of Hinduism into practice, to achieve personal transformation through transcendental experience, samadhi.

Mimamsa: "Inquiry" (or Purva, "early," Mimamsa). Founded by Jaimini (ca 200bce), author of the Mimamsa Sutras, who taught that the correct performance of Vedic rites is the means to salvation.

Vedanta: "End (or culmination) of the Vedas" (sometimes termed Uttara "later" Mimamsa). For Vedanta, the main basis is the Upanishads and Aranyakas (the "end," anta, of the Vedas), rather than the hymns and ritual portions of the Vedas. The teaching of Vedanta is that there is one Absolute Reality, Brahman. Man is one with Brahman, and the object of life is to realize that truth through right knowledge, intuition and personal experience. The Vedanta Sutras (or Brahma Sutras) were composed by Rishi Badarayana (ca 400bce).