

Can Christians Practice Yoga?

CAN YOGA BE EMBRACED FOR THE GLORY OF GOD IN CHRIST?

by Pastor Joe Suozzo

Over the last several years I have been observing a debate going on within the Christian community concerning the practice of yoga. There are several reasons why my personal interest has been peaked. The first is my wife's involvement in a Christian ministry called Holy Yoga since 2007. A second reason is my long-term commitment to missions in India. My wife and I served as evangelical missionaries for 10 years as church planters among Hindus in India. We were blessed to see the beginnings of a people group movement in North India where there are now 35+ house churches gathered and worshipping in Jesus' name.

Finally, I believe I have something credible to add to the discussion with my personal history as a conservative evangelical pastor and a student of theology and philosophy. My undergraduate degree in Theology is from Moody Bible Institute and my graduate degrees in missions and philosophy are from Columbia International University, SC and Banaras Hindu University, India.

I would like to share three particular tensions that we personally experienced as missionaries to India. By discussing these tensions, I believe it will help us to better understand how yoga and Christ do not have to be at enmity with one another. I also believe that sharing some of the tensions I have experienced as a missionary to the Hindu world, can shed light on how yoga as a traditional Hindu practice can be embraced for the glory of God and be used to help both those entrapped to New Age philosophy in the west and those who without the light of Christ in the east to come to a knowledge of truth.

The tension of being a tentmaking missionary

We went as tentmakers, an expression coined in the book of Acts (vs. 18:3), when Paul literally sewed tents to provide for his means while establishing the church in Corinth. Today the term tentmaker is used to describe missionaries who serve around the world under a non-traditional missionary visa. My tentmaking status took the shape as a student in the philosophy department in one of the largest universities in India. Others who serve as tentmakers start businesses, work with non-profit organizations, and even go as long-term tourists or retirees.

Tentmaking in missions has spawned thousands of works during the past 30 years. It was a response to many developing countries closing their doors to the traditional missionary visa, which was common-place during Colonialism. As developing countries became independent from Colonial western powers after WWII, many of them stopped issuing missionary visas, since Christian missions was often seen as an extension of Western power.

As I prepared to go to India in the 1980's, I sat for my ordination along with 20+ pastors who were invited by my sending church. I was surprised at how deeply many of them struggled with the idea of going to India as a tentmaker. Some of the comments and questions during my ordination council included "How could you go to India as a missionary and a student?" and "I don't think you can do both." At one point, in what was becoming a rather contentious discussion, the moderator reminded the council they were there to evaluate my theological readiness and character for ministry, not the strategy that I was planning to go to India with.

Once I arrived in India, this skepticism concerning our tentmaking status continued with the older missionary community. Initially, they believed the strategy was a bad idea and would only end in ruin. Some of them had been in India since the 1950's and had served faithfully. When India stopped issuing missionary visas, they believed that the door for missions from the west was simply shut. Fortunately, as they retired and went back home, many would recant their position against tentmaking when seeing the fruit of our labors as Hindus began to gather in house churches in Jesus' name.

The tension of culture between Christians and Hindus

One of the most shocking things that confronted me when I first arrived in India was the number of large, empty churches that sat on the edge of many North Indian cities. Upon investigation, I discovered that most of these churches were built by missionaries during the peak of traditional missionary activity prior to WWII. Though at that point I was without language skills and understanding of Hindu culture, I knew deep down that those empty buildings were a reflection of something terribly wrong.

The mission agency my wife and I were under in India insisted by policy that we become part of a local church. Dutifully, we attended one for almost three years. However, as we became more acquainted with the Hindus around us, we began to see one of the reasons why the Christian church was having so little impact on the people. The gospel message was being offered in the garbs of western culture. The worship style, the way the truth was communicated, and the way the church gathered was not much different than a mid-western Methodist church in Kansas. The only difference was that the church was using the local, colloquial language.

Upon further investigation, we learned that in our city of three million people, the small group of Christians -200 people gathering in six failing churches- had only seen a few Hindus come to Christ during the last 20 years! This lack of fruit was attributed to spiritual blindness, demonic strongholds, and hardened hearts, among other things. As we began to spend time with Hindu people, however, we were discovering qualities that were quite the opposite.

Dianne and I made a decision that put us at odds with our own mission agency. We would stop attending the “church” and begin spending time with Hindus. Some of the concerns that were expressed for that decision were that it would erode our faith, make us more vulnerable to spiritual attack and bring disunity to the existing Christian community. And yet we were absolutely convinced in our hearts that if we were going to have an impact on the Hindu community, then we were going to have to spend time with Hindus. Sundays proved to be the best time to do it!

As we began to spend more and more time with Hindus, we were confronted with another interesting tension. Hindu women have a number of symbols that they begin to wear after marriage. There is the traditional sari, the mangulsutra (necklace), toe rings, bangles, bindi (decorative piece on forehead), sindur (red powder on the edge of hairline) and a variety of other things a Hindu married woman would wear. Years earlier, when the first Hindus embraced Christianity, they were not only extracted from their communities into mission compounds, but also asked to forsake most of these symbols, since the Hindu marriage ceremony had idolatrous components attached to it.

When my wife Dianne and I arrived at one village to share Christ, a village that would eventually become the spring board for over 35 house churches in the area, the people there believed that she and I were living together immorally. Their reason—she did not wear the traditional symbols of marriage. Since most American movies depict westerners living immorally, they just assumed we were living true to our own culture. Meanwhile, the message of the gospel was losing credibility.

As we began to understand this, Dianne started to wear some of those symbols to gain greater credibility with the women she was reaching. The women there greatly appreciated it and began to see us in another light. However, as she did that, we came under attack from both the Indian Christian community and many of our fellow missionaries. Both communities were struggling to see that many of these symbols had more relevance and meaning than being associated with the gods of Hinduism. In short they struggled with the idea that some of these symbols could be embraced with the power of Jesus Christ.

We discovered this in other areas as well. The teaching pastors of the traditional Christian Indian church in India adopted much of the same style as their western counter parts. The pastor in the traditional church would often stand behind a pulpit and passionately raise his voice and yell to communicate passion for truth. On the other hand, the gurus of India would sit quietly before their audience exuding serenity and peace with moments of silence and reflection. The worship style of the traditional Christian Indian church would have people sit, stand, and sing out of books in short bursts, much like their Methodist and denominational counterparts. By contrast, Hindus would sit and sing for long periods of time reflecting on certain spiritual themes while the guru would exhort them in a format known as satsung (truth telling).

This cultural disparity extended into many other areas. E. Stanley Jones (1894-1973), an American missionary who served many years in India, was one of the first pioneers to suggest that the traditional Christian approach in India was failing because of its insistence on presenting the gospel with the garbs of western culture. He established ashrams and suggested that some of the aspects of Hindu culture should be seen as an ally with the gospel rather than an enemy. In his best selling book, *Christ of the Indian Road*, he wrote this:

*...standing among the shadows of Western civilization India has seen a figure who has greatly attracted her. She has hesitated in regard to any allegiance to Him, for India has thought that if she took one she would have to take both - Christ and Western civilization. Now it is dawning upon the mind of India that she can have one without the other - Christ without Western civilization. That revelation is of tremendous significance to them - and to us. "Do you mean to say," said a Hindu lawyer, "that you are not here to wipe out our civilization and replace it with your own? Do you mean that your message is Christ without any implications that we must accept Western civilization? I have hated Christianity, but if Christianity is Christ, I do not see how Indians can hate it." (E. Stanley Jones, *Christ of the Indian Road*, Abington Press, 1925, 17).*

Contextualization or syncretism—how do we discern between the two?

When we look at Hinduism with its centuries of history, vast scriptures, diverse practices, pantheon of gods, variety of sects, and complex world view, it is easy to understand how the first missionaries to India would conclude that the best route to take would be to present Christ and invite people to separate from it and embrace Christ with the garb of western Christianity. I'll never forget how I felt its complexity one day when a Hindu friend walked into my home during Christmas and seeing our Nativity got on his knees and began worshipping like he was in front of an idol shelf in his very own home! Yes, "Toto, we were not in Kansas anymore!"

When the outsider enters into Hindu culture, the temptation is to believe that there is nothing within Hinduism and its complex expressions that can be embraced and useful. We see many of Hinduism's practices often accompanied by idols and so we pull away without taking a closer look at how many of the cultural aspects within Hinduism can be become tremendous open doors to the gospel message. And so with well meaning intent, many who can only express their faith in western garb never enter in. Hence, the precious gift of the gospel is rarely understood by the Hindu mind, since they only see western Christianity, not the person of Jesus Christ.

But those who want to be relevant know that to communicate the gospel, there has to be a sensitivity to the culture to which the message is being communicated—hence we have that great missiological concept—contextualization. Contextualization simply defined is an attempt to take the gospel message, make it relevant to its hearer and adapt it to the culture of its hearer.

Contextualization only slides into syncretism when embracing or adapting certain practices compromises core tenets of the faith; such as the exclusive nature of Jesus as the only way, truth and life to God; His atonement and resurrection; the word of God as truth; and future judgment. While we rightly should enter cautiously, experience has taught many that without contextualization in the Hindu world, the gospel becomes irrelevant and is simply another cultural expression of the west that previously held India captive under colonial rule.

Scriptural support for contextualization

The apostle Paul, whose ministry was to both the Jewish and Gentile world, had the thorny task of taking a message that was thoroughly Jewish in its cultural disposition and adapting it to a Gentile audience.

Perhaps the best passage of Scripture to help us understand Paul's heart on this is from

1 Corinthians 9:19-23:

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

And so we find Paul, a man who was thoroughly Jewish, a Pharisee of Pharisees, from the tribe of Benjamin, trained by one of the great rabbis of the ancient world, yield his Jewish culture for the sake of helping Gentiles come to know Christ. And yet as Paul adapted Gentile practices, he never was guilty of syncretism, but was always able to make the message relevant to his audience without yielding to practices that led to idolatry and false worship.

Can aspects of Hinduism be embraced and used for the glory of God?

There are hundreds of practices and stories from within Hinduism that are intertwined with worship to various gods. From the great epochs of the Ramayana and Mahabharata and the Vedas and Upanishads, to the extensive meditation practices of sitting still and chanting, to the various rituals associated with darshan (a form of prayer) and temple worship. Most of what is practiced by Hindus has a rich history and association with idolatry and the philosophy of eastern pantheism and dualism. And so when we enter into Hindu culture, it is often very difficult for the outsider to see any qualities that can be embraced without compromising one's faith in Christ. But the question remains: is it possible through Jesus Christ that some of the forms and practices of Hindu worship can be used for His glory without bending one's knees to the false idols of Hinduism and eastern pantheism?

My suggestion is not only yes, but that adapting various practices with Christ at the center will help open the door for the Hindu worshipper to see and understand who Jesus is, and also be a great avenue for Jesus to be worshipped and adored. I have personally experienced this in our church planting ministry in India. When various forms of Hindu worship were utilized, it increased the receptivity of the audience and made Jesus all the more wonderful to them.

Let me give you just two examples. When the western missionaries came to North India, the first people who came to Christ were from the region of the Punjab, where the language was heavily influenced by Punjabi and Urdu. Many of the songs developed at the turn of the 19th century became the main songs of worship in North India's churches. In the first house church we saw established we used some of those songs, since we learned them during our first three years while attending a traditional church.

During one of our worship services, I stopped everyone in the middle of our singing and asked how many understood the words of what we were singing. Out of 20 who were attending, only 2 understood what they were singing. After that, I began to encourage them to write their own songs. One man began adapting Hindu bajans (songs) to various Scriptures and thoughts about Jesus. I remember when one Indian pastor from the traditional church visited one week, he pulled me aside and told me that I was misleading them because I allowed them to adapt various melodies and rhythms from Hinduism. Even though many of those songs and melodies were originally songs to Hindu gods, through the Spirit of God and the transforming power of Jesus, these new believers were able to embrace an aspect of their culture for God's glory.

Another example that is being practiced by some who are seeking to contextualize the gospel to their Hindu audience is the use of the coconut during the Lord's Supper, instead of the traditional wine or grape juice and bread. In many Hindu temples, the priest will break a coconut with prayer on behalf of a worshipper, who is seeking to offer a sacrifice to the gods for forgiveness or restitution for sin. Taking the coconut and using it as a teaching tool to help the Hindu coming to Christ understand the broken body of Christ and His shed blood not only becomes incredibly meaningful but also a way for those within Hindu culture to better understand the gospel message.

Within Hinduism there are various styles of prayer, the lighting of incense, methods of story telling, worship in song, fasting, and many other practices that become incredibly meaningful to the Hindu when adapted with Christ at the center. It enables them to see Jesus more clearly when the western garb of Christianity is removed and they are able to worship in a way that is meaningful to them.

OK, so what about using yoga for God's glory?

The term yoga can be traced back centuries before Christ to Aryan civilization and several branches of Buddhist and Hindu philosophy. Yoga literally means to 'yoke' oneself or to have 'union' with that which would lead one to greater spiritual awareness and knowledge, which in turn would lead one to self-realization or enlightenment. One could yoke oneself to varied spiritual disciplines to achieve such knowledge, e.g. the study of scripture, meditation and contemplation, and right action.

Around 200 BC an editor by the name of Patanjali compiled a handbook of yoga as a school of thought and discipline in a work called the Yoga Sutra. For the most part, the practice of yoga in India and the west today finds its foundation in Patanjali's work (Troy Organ, *Hinduism*, New York: Barron's Publishing, 1974). In the Yoga Sutra, Patanjali explained in that there are eight practices or limbs (angas) which range from moral restraint and physical postures, to breath work and the discipline of the mind. These practices are said to lead one from the bondage of desire and ignorance to the freedom of self-realization. When yoga is practiced and talked about in the world today, for the most part it is the practice of breathwork and physical postures that Patanjali first compiled, which have been further developed by many gurus over the ensuing centuries.

The question is, can yoga, despite all its philosophical and cultural moorings to Hinduism, be embraced and used as a tool for God's glory? Is it possible to take yoga and place Christ at the center and use it to share His love and salvation with those who would otherwise never enter the doors of a church building or Christian community? My argument here in this paper is a resounding yes. And the force of my argument rests in understanding the basic principle of contextualization that distinguishes between form and function (meaning).

Form has the idea of a particular practice that a people or society embraces which has its roots and meaning from its own culture, religion, and philosophy. Within Hinduism there are dozens of forms, e.g. breaking a coconut, worshipping with a particular style of music, lighting candles and incense, using Sanskrit, observing holy days, and practicing yoga and mediation. The form takes on a particular function, or meaning, as it is learned by those who practice it.

Here in the west, we have a long history of taking various forms that had one meaning in the ancient, pagan world and importing new meaning into them in Christ. For example, the celebrations of Easter and Christmas at one time aligned themselves with winter solstice and the worship of the fertility goddess Oshun. Aspects of Augustine's and Thomas Aquinas' theology find their framework in Aristotelian and Socratic thought. The way some of our churches and modern democracies are organized find their origin more from ancient pagan Rome and Greece, than the Word of God.

While various forms can be amoral and neutral, the meaning and function we import into them are not. This is where the beauty of the gospel has tremendous ability to enter into various cultures and use their forms and embrace them for the glory of Jesus Christ. It was the love of Christ that compelled Paul to stand on the steps of the Areopagus in Athens and quote from their Stoic philosophers to win their hearts for God (Acts 17:16-34). It was Paul's love of his fellow Jew that led him to take a Nazarene vow (Acts 18:18), even though he repeatedly preached that we are no longer under the law through Christ.

While Paul argued that we are free in Christ to embrace various pagan forms, (such as the eating of meat that had been previously sacrificed to idols), the warning he extended with those freedoms was that we should never do so if they would cloud the gospel message. "We are no worse off if we do not eat and no better off if we do, but take care that this right of yours does not somehow become a stumbling block to the weak." The weak here in this context are those who are new believers or unbelievers who would be confused by the use of the freedoms we have in Christ, since they do not possess the knowledge of Christ that we do (1 Corinthians 8).

Importing the message of the gospel into the practice of yoga

Can we enter into a Hindu form, into a practice which is called yoga, and embrace it for the glory of Christ? Is it possible to enter into the lives of those who see yoga as a positive practice and impart new meaning to it so that they may hear the gospel and share in the wonderful glory of God in Christ? Is it possible to use yoga to reach out to those who are leaning on the empty philosophies of New Age in the west and the emptiness of idolatry and eastern pantheism in the east?

Over the last several years, there have been a several new ministries that have begun to take the form of yoga and try to place Christ at its center. There is Outstretched Inc., which states that its mission is the "Christ-centered pursuit of physical healing and spiritual growth through a practice of yoga." Holy Yoga, another ministry, gives the following mission statement: "Holy Yoga is an experiential worship created to deepen people's connection to Christ. Our sole purpose is to facilitate a Christ honoring experience that offers an opportunity to believers and non-believers alike to authentically connect to God through His Word, worship, and wellness."

As a response to these efforts there have been a number of well-meaning pastors, ministry leaders and academicians who have thrown up the red flag, saying that these efforts can potentially mislead those who profess Christ to participate in idolatry and false worship. Their concerns are rightly placed if indeed that is where it would lead people. What Christian leader in their right conscience before God would not send out a warning if a ministry that claims to be of God is really leading people into the enemy's camp?

Mark Driscoll (founding Pastor of Mars Hill Church) and Albert Mohler (president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary) have come out strongly against bringing Christ into yoga. Their concerns are warranted, if indeed those who profess Christ are embracing eastern philosophy and idol worship and are denouncing the orthodox tenets of the Christian faith. Driscoll put it this way: "...yoga is a religious philosophy that is in direct opposition to Christianity. Thus, in its true form yoga cannot be simply received by any Christian in good conscious. To do so would be to reject the truths of Scripture and thus Jesus himself." (<http://pastormark.tv/2011/11/02/christian-yoga-its-a-stretch>).

Mohler's argument is similar when he said, "...stretching and meditative discipline derived from Eastern religions is not a Christian pathway to God" (Huffington Post, 10.7.10, Albert Mohler Southern Baptist Leader on Yoga: Not Christianity). The force of both their arguments is that yoga as a form of Hindu worship is beyond redemption and beyond importing new meaning into it so that others may know Christ.

When you look at their warnings, the overriding assumption is that the form and practice of yoga, because of its history in Hindu philosophy and idol worship, is absolutely outside the scope of Christian practice. I believe it is the same mistake the missionaries from the west made when first going to India. Rather than entering into Hindu culture and embracing various forms of Hinduism to win people to Christ, they assumed that all aspects of Hindu culture are beyond the scope of Christian worship and should simply be abandoned. As a result, from the Hindu's perspective today, to embrace Christ also means to deny their Indian culture and embrace the western Christianity.

Is it possible to lead a group of people through a session of yoga, using Scripture and prayerful reflection on Jesus Christ, and then introduce the central aspects of the gospel, like the divinity of Jesus Christ, redemption through His blood, the hope of the resurrection, and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit? Absolutely! In fact there are a number of believers practicing yoga who are doing just that thing.

Susan Neal, founder of the ministry Scripture Yoga, wrote this in that regard: "God knows our hearts. He knows who we are worshipping when practicing Christian yoga and listening to His Word and thinking about Him. God judges our hearts... practicing Christian yoga outwardly doesn't make one right with God; although, it does provide an avenue for God to import His Word into our hearts" (www.christianyoga.com).

The form of yoga is simply a practice—not essential to our relationship with God

Essential to our relationship to God is our faith in Jesus Christ and His finished work on the cross. Our relationship with God is "...not of blood nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13). We are born again into a new relationship with God, not by flesh, but by the Spirit of God (John 3:6).

There is only one mediator between God and man, that is the person of Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5). There is only one way, one truth and one way to God the Father and that is through Jesus (John 14:2). We heartily disagree with those who would suggest that yoga is a means of salvation or a way to restore man's broken relationship with God.

We do believe, however, that various forms of worship and culture can be neutral players in our mission to a fallen world—it all depends on the meaning we import into the form. This is where wisdom comes in. We must always evaluate whether the freedoms we have in Christ are being used to help or hurt the cause of Christ. When they rob Christ of His glory and mislead people into doctrinal error, then we have sunk into the dangers of what is called syncretism. But when we can utilize various forms to be better understood by the audience we are reaching, our efforts become a healthy expression of contextualization that help those outside of Christ come to know Him and share in His glory.

Yoga as a form can be a neutral player as we reach out to both the Hindu world and those ensnared by New Age philosophy in the west. It is possible to use yoga without importing its history of eastern pantheistic philosophy, idolatry and ideas that stand in opposition to the gospel of Jesus Christ. And while the road towards healthy biblical contextualization is not without its hazards, when we place Christ at the center and are saturated with the Word of God and His Spirit, we can say with the Apostle Paul: "I have become all things to all people that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them its blessings" (1 Corinthians 9:22-23).