



Yoga & Religion



Yoga is often misconstrued in the West as a religion. But is there a link? Sue Jackson explores this question with Leanne Davis of the Krishnamacharya tradition and talks to some other modern day yogis.

What is yoga? What is religion? Is yoga a religious or a spiritual practice – and are the practices of religion and spirituality the same or different? These are complex questions, for which there are undoubtedly many answers and many perspectives. Taking simple definitions of religion and spirituality from the *Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary*, these two concepts can be seen to be distinct. Religion is defined in the dictionary as a particular system of faith and worship; being of an established Church; human recognition of superhuman controlling power, and a personal God entitled to obedience and worship. The word ‘spiritual’ is defined as having the higher qualities of the mind and concerned with or based on spirit (as opposed to matter). It is involved with elevating character, person, or thoughts.

The yoga of Patanjali

“Yoga”, says Leanne Davis, a scholar of Patanjali’s yoga sutras, “develops an understanding of the mind that creates the human condition”.

It describes practices for overcoming the habitual thought/-

behaviour patterns that prevent us from seeing clearly and living happy, fruitful lives. As Leanne explains, since the yoga that is based on Patanjali’s sutras (known as Classical Yoga) does not require a belief in God, or worship of a God, or belonging to a church, yoga can be seen to be more closely aligned to spirituality. The yoga of Patanjali helps us to develop higher potentials of the mind, increases self-understanding, and allows for a self-empowered approach to our lives.

Leanne has spent many years studying yoga and eastern philosophy, including training in the Krishnamacharya tradition. Having studied the sutras in depth, Leanne believes that by focusing on these texts, we see clearly that yoga is not a religion. “Yoga has no God,” says Leanne. “Yoga can support your religious belief, but yoga isn’t going to give you a religious belief.” Citing the yoga sutras¹, Leanne states that a belief in God is one choice offered to those aspiring to follow the yogic path – one of several methods for calming and clarifying the mind. Other ways of stilling the mind and raising

consciousness cited in the sutras include such things as focusing on the breath, enquiring into the senses, or seeking the counsel of others². Even the concept of God described by Patanjali is somewhat different from the frequently held perception of God as creator, sustainer, and destroyer. Leanne describes the concept of God presented in the sutras³ as being closer to a state to aspire to, a

their religion), that yoga is a form of exercise with a religious background. One that is in opposition to their religion. This has led some religious leaders to ban yoga from being practised in their halls. A more radical step was taken in Malaysia in 2008, banning yoga for people of the Muslim faith. It is rather ironic, then, that over two thousand years ago, when Hinduism and

not necessary to endorse any particular concept of God, but that one should have respect for such concepts. “Although yoga has its source in Indian thought, it neither dictates that a Hindu must practice it, nor that a non-Hindu is prohibited from such practice.” Further, argues Desikachar, “Yoga is universal, in that it is the means to attain a desired new condition.” Leanne agrees, stating that, for her, yoga is “a system of liberation from the suffering associated with our worldly life, by applying physical and mental discipline”.

Swami Jasrajpuri is a Hindu monk. Originally from the south of Sydney, he is now living in India, where he has recently been ordained into the one of the highest spiritual titles in India, that of Mahamandaleshwar. As well as being a spiritual leader in the Hindu religion, Swami Jasraj runs the Yoga in Daily Life ashram in Rajasthan. Swami Jasraj acknowledges a connection between yoga and Hinduism. “Yoga is closely related to Hinduism; the two complement each other really well. But yoga can be with Hinduism, or without Hinduism.”

Rather than viewing yoga and Hinduism as being necessarily intertwined, Swami Jasraj sees yoga as independent from any particular religion: “For me, yoga is not about religion. It is a practice, and can be participated in

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state beyond the human condition – something to place our minds to, so we may experience a possibility in ourselves of something other than the limitations of the human mind. Importantly for Leanne, it states in the sutras⁴ that any enquiry/meditation/focus may be used to bring oneself to a state of yoga.

Yoga as a state

The often-cited, and foundational, definition of yoga comes from Patanjali's sutra 1:2, which describes yoga as a method for ceasing the fluctuations of the mind. There are many translations, and interpretations of this famous sutra, but the idea that yoga helps to clarify and focus the mind permeates most, if not all, interpretations. TKV Desikachar, of the Krishnamacharya tradition, writes in his translation and commentary of this sutra, “Yoga is the ability to direct the mind exclusively towards an object and sustain that direction without any distractions”. This definition of yoga is devoid of any reference to belief in a God, or religion.

Yoga can be viewed as an early system of psychology, focusing on finding clarity of mind, so that whatever you choose to put your mind to, you will do so more effectively. Leanne believes that the part of the population that most strongly holds the view that yoga is a religion is the part outside of yoga. Most Australians who are drawn to yoga, says Leanne, probably come to it for the physical benefits. One reason people choose not to do yoga may be that they see it (or have been told by leaders of

yoga were developing, Hindus liked the tools and methods of yoga, but not its godless philosophy, says Leanne.

Some religious leaders misperceive the ‘clarity of mind’ goal of yoga as being a state of vacuity, an empty mind if you like. An ‘empty’ mind can be regarded as being open to infiltration by ideas or beliefs counter to those of one's religion. In fact, the yoga state of mind is a very clear and focused state. As Leanne says, “The clarity allows the person to see things as they really are.” If this is the case, then religious leaders might find yoga a useful tool for aiding the

“Yoga can support your religious belief, but yoga isn't going to give you a religious belief.”

understanding, and faith, of their followers. Desikachar views the impact of the practice of yoga, as “If you have a faith, it will make your faith stronger. If you have an analytical mind, you will think more clearly. If you're a Muslim, and you do yoga, you'll be a better Muslim. If you're a Christian, and you do yoga, you'll be a better Christian.”

Yoga as a practice

So, is it necessary to hold any particular beliefs in order to follow the yoga path? Desikachar's stance, described in his book, *Religiousness in Yoga*, is that it is

irrespective of one's religion. I know of priests who practise yoga meditation, because it improves their religion. Yoga enhances your relation to your philosophy, to your God.”

Perspectives from Australian yoga practitioners

So, how do Australian yoga participants view the relationship between yoga and religion? *Yoga in Australia*, the large-scale survey of Australian yogis, led by Stephen Penman in 2006, found the following associations between survey respondents and their religious beliefs.

From those who responded to the question on their religious or spiritual orientation, 36% of the 884 students, and 16% of the 204 teachers, indicated they followed Christianity. The percentage of survey respondents who indicated they held 'spiritual, but non-religious beliefs' was 28% of students and 54% of teachers. Christianity and spirituality comprised the largest

from Brisbane, and a practising Catholic. On a daily basis, she attends mass, meditates, and prays. When studying the Yoga Sutras, Emanuela found herself connecting the sutras to Bible teachings. "They seemed to complement each other. As I have deepened my knowledge of yoga, my faith has also deepened. Now, I don't think my life would be complete without either yoga or my

connection to the Catholic church, while at the same time being motivated to develop a faith that she considers involves her taking more personal responsibility. "I have the need to stand on my own two feet, to learn and explore what this life is about, and who I am."

Noush Baxter is a Brisbane-based yoga teacher who, like many deeply involved in yoga, believes we are naturally spiritual beings. "The spark of the divine rests within us, and that spark of the divine automatically draws us toward spirituality. The difference with religion is that religion is an organisation that uses spirituality, sets up a whole social organisation, hierarchy, structure, that brings people in, and uses the spirituality to enhance the religion." Noush believes that a functional religion uses spirituality in a positive direction: "When all those sparks of the divine meet up together in a religion, that can create an amazing force, and that's the force that people feel at the end of a good service, when they've sung their hearts out, and feel really unified and connected. And that's what spirituality is – it is a connection, connection to the divine. A functional religion enhances that sense of connection. That feeling of connection, to everything that exists, and to everyone, that is also one of the high states of meditation."

Noush recognises that the way in which spirituality may develop within a particular individual is a choice. "There are so many different levels, stages to our opening self-awareness of ourselves as spiritual beings. Maybe one level is to be in an organised religion, to need those structures and framework to make sense of your spirituality." Illustrating the *Yoga in Australia* finding of an association between years of practice and endorsement of spirituality, Noush describes her journey: "Over time, you may decide to step up, stand on your own two feet, and become more secure of your own innate spirituality."

Yoga is a foundation from which to understand our lives, with spirituality being one component of ourselves. Developing awareness and understanding in our lives may come from private contemplation, from being part of a spiritual community, or from an organised

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percentages of responses to the question of religious or spiritual orientation. Other orientations that contained more than 5% of the survey respondents were secular (25% students, 8% teachers), and Buddhist (6% students, 10% teachers). Hinduism comprised 1% of the student responses, and 4% of the teachers. Thus, there is no one religion that Australian yoga participants adhere to, paralleling the diversity of religious beliefs held by the Australian population. Approximately one-third of yoga practitioners, and half of the yoga teachers surveyed, did not align themselves with any particular religious tradition, but instead endorsed the concept of spirituality.

The survey asked respondents to identify reasons for beginning yoga, as well as reasons for continuing a practice. Those who saw yoga as a spiritual practice more than doubled once practising, leading Penman to conclude, "It does seem that people come to yoga for the physical, but stay for the spiritual." Yoga does offer more than a physical exercise, allowing participants to develop many aspects of themselves – physical, mental, and spiritual. Yoga, however, does not force upon its participants any particular religious beliefs, instead providing a system within which participants can make their own self-enquiry – an enquiry that may or may not contain a spiritual component.

Emanuela Heaton is a yoga teacher

Catholic faith. When I do my yoga practice, I can be brought back to myself and to my connection with God."

For Brisbane yoga teacher and long-time practitioner, Tricia Ryan, yoga has been associated with a change in attitude to religion. "It has made me take more personal responsibility. It is not a matter of what I used to do, in the culture of 'going to church'. It's more taking responsibility." For Tricia, hearing the simple statement, 'Yoga is about standing on your own two feet', was the first step towards transformation in her practices. Tricia's personal experience in the Catholic church led to disillusionment with organised religion, and she went from attending church four times a week to currently not at all. "I became disillusioned. As far as the basic Catholic church is concerned, I think there is a lot of depth and richness in its tradition. I respect, and I hold a sense of gratitude towards those admirable religious nuns and priests who were a part of my upbringing and formation, which I will always value. I continue to consider myself a Catholic, but not in the sense of the institution of the Catholic church today. I can no longer hold the view that the Catholic church proclaims the one true faith, and that indeed any one church has all the answers. I have found a sense of freedom in the acceptance of this uncertainty and the letting go of confining dogmatism liberating." For Tricia, her yoga journey has involved maintaining a

religion. This was observed in ancient times by the early sages, and systematised into what Leanne calls 'a manual for living' in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras.

Yoga: A unifying force?

Rather than viewing yoga as being connected to a particular religion, or of having a divisive religious influence, Leigh Blashki offers a unifying perspective of the role of yoga. Speaking at the 2009 Parliament of World's Religions, Leigh, director of the Australian Institute of Yoga in Victoria, argued that the concept of yoga, that of union, exists in almost all religions. According to Leigh, yoga can be used as a tool to break down barriers, of joining what are otherwise separate, different religious faiths. Leigh reminded his audience of the meaning of 'Namaste', the salutation often used by yoga teachers: "I honour the place in you where the entire universe resides. A place of peace and truth, and of love and light; where, when you are in that place in you, and when I am in that place in me, we are in the same place." Drawing on the implications of the meaning of Namaste, Leigh argued, "Yoga not only does not challenge other religions; the concept of yoga, the exact meaning of the word, offers a way for other religions to see, hear, and experience similarities. To come to that place that is exemplified by the word, Namaste."

Through understanding this concept, and the original purpose of yoga described by Patanjali, practitioners and teachers of yoga have the opportunity to bring unity, both to the many aspects of our individual lives, and to the world in which we live.

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