



Do Yoga Exercises Work With Christianity?

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Susan Bordenkircher, Brooke Boon, and other promoters of “Christian” yoga believe that their approach to yoga is the exception to the rule that Arumugaswami describes. As CRI’s research specialist in Eastern religions for over three decades, I beg to differ. If yoga is inherently unchristian, then no effort to Christianize it can ultimately succeed. Indeed, I noticed several elements in Christian yoga that are properly Hindu and not Christian.

For example, Boon writes, “God calls us to be bold in our walks but reminds us that we are strengthened most when we surrender. Manifesting that principle in our bodies through the physical postures helps us to manifest it in our spiritual and emotional bodies as well.”¹⁴ The idea that human beings have additional bodies besides the physical is foreign to Christianity (the soul is not a “body”), but an important feature in yoga as well as Western occult theory. If you doubt this, simply type “emotional body spiritual body” into the Google search engine on the Internet. Every result will pertain to yoga or occultism.

A more troubling example of this occurs after Boon lists the “eight steps of classical yoga” as taught by Patanjali, with the eighth being “absorption-the realization of the essential nature of the self.”¹⁵ She proceeds to affirm that “yoga is a system of techniques that can be used for a number of goals, from simply managing stress better, learning to relax, and increasing flexibility all the way to becoming more self-aware and acquiring the deepest knowledge of one’s own self in Christ.”¹⁶

As this series has made quite clear, knowledge of one’s true self is the ultimate goal of classical yoga, as it is in all gnostic systems; but when has it ever been a goal of Christian spirituality? Can Boon “baptize” this yogic quest for self-knowledge by inserting the words “in Christ” or by adding, as she goes on to do, “while consciously seeking a deeper relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ?”¹⁷ Adding Christ into the equation does not make the pursuit of self-knowledge in “Holy Yoga” any more of a Christian practice than adding sprouts to a greasy hamburger makes it health food.

Hindu influence on teachers of Christian yoga is also evident when they transfer the yoga concept of *bodymind*, which is based in pantheism, into Christianity, where it has no basis. In classical yoga this doctrine means that the body and mind compose one substantial entity (see part one). Because of this teaching, not only are the postures of yoga created for the end result of mind control, but it is also believed that the mind or soul cannot reach its potential if the body is beset with weakness. For this reason B. K. S. Iyengar said, when asked by a reporter about his daily five-hour yoga practice at age

eighty-six, “My friend, if the body collapses, the mind cannot hold on...I am doing with sheer will power to maintain both body and mind.”¹⁸ Sri K. Pattabhi Jois likewise emphasizes that it is not possible to master the first two limbs of yoga (moral restraint and religious observance) “when the body and sense organs are weak and haunted by obstacles....A person must first take up daily asana practice to make the body strong and healthy....With the body and sense organs thus stabilized, the mind can be steady and controlled.”¹⁹

We find this same emphasis on bodymind (or bodyspirit, as pioneering Christian yogi Nancy Roth calls it) in Christian yoga teachings. Bordenkircher writes:

As your range of motion decreases, your ability and desire to do certain tasks will likely be affected. Your attitude may be negatively affected. As your weight increases (as is the case for most of us who don't exercise), your relationships may even suffer as you struggle with self-image and esteem.

Ultimately...the pain and discomfort you may feel in your skin can be the cause of division between you and God. How are you to share the love of Jesus, the peace of God, and the freedom you have through salvation if all you feel is uncomfortable and cranky? Do you exhibit freedom in Christ if you are bound by the limitations and inabilities of your out-of-tune body? If you represent Jesus to the world, what kind of message are you sending: one of brokenness or one of healing?²⁰

Bordenkircher is speaking in terms of Christian values and so she no doubt thinks she escapes the influences of Hinduism. What she is teaching, however, is something she likely picked up in a yoga environment, certainly not from a contextual study of the Bible. The Bible does teach that our bodies and souls are interdependent and form a whole and that Christians are temples of the Holy Spirit. It does follow from this that we need to take care of our bodies. It also is true that when our bodies are in poor shape or health it can be more difficult to walk in the Spirit and to serve the Lord effectively. It is not true, however, that our moral decisions are determined by our bodily condition or that Christian sanctification flows from, or depends on, a sound body.

What Bordenkircher is teaching can be refuted in three words: Joni Eareckson Tada. Has not God been glorified over the past four decades as this quadriplegic woman radiates the love, joy, and strength of Christ through the “limitations and inabilities” of her body? Is not the glorification of God the chief end of the Christian life? God refused to remove Paul's “thorn in the flesh” (2 Cor. 12:7-8),²¹ which many Bible scholars believe was a bodily condition (cf. Gal. 3:14-15), for the express reason that ““my grace is sufficient for you, for [My] power is perfected in [your] weakness”” (2 Cor. 12:9). “Therefore,” Paul said, “I am well content with weaknesses...for Christ's sake, for when I am weak, then I am strong” (v. 10). Christians are called to be spiritually victorious regardless of the condition of their bodies, and they can do it because the yoga doctrine of bodymind is not true.

Christian-Hindu Syncretism: Improving on God's Plan?

Bordenkircher proceeds to make her position clear: "I contend that there is no practice like yoga for integrating the mind and body in unity."²² Are we to infer from this that what God provided in Scripture is inferior to what Indian sages provided in yoga? She would no doubt reply *no*, but what else are we to think when she adds that "what makes the practice unique is the correlation of the mind with the body in order to create health on the inside as well as the outside. To put it simply, the key is the breath. Your breath determines your movement and at the same time acts as the catalyst for a perspective change, a focus shift that results from the stillness and quiet. Add to this an intention for Christ-centered worship, and you have a recipe for wholeness."²³

Boon makes similar claims: "Yoga can be thought of as a philosophy. It's the idea that by bringing a union of focus between mind and body, while simultaneously making the mind and body stronger and more flexible, we become more authentic people, able to hear God and experience Him in previously impossible ways."²⁴

According to its leading promoters, then, Christian yoga unifies the Christian's inner self and thus promotes spiritual growth, something Christian sanctification is supposed to produce. If this is so, it is fair to ask why yoga originates in Eastern religion and is absent in the Bible. Roth, Bordenkircher, and Boon are trying to infuse Hindu concepts and disciplines with Christian meaning. By doing so, they are unmistakably implying that Hindu religious structures are valid, and by merging them with Christian content they not only improve on Hinduism, but also on Christianity. This is religious syncretism, pure and simple.

The Myth of a Pristine, Pre-Hindu Yoga

To argue that yoga predates Hinduism and therefore is spiritually safe is not tenable, for the following reasons:

1. What makes the promoters of Christian yoga think that pre-Hindu yoga was spiritually safe? The fundamental reason why mixing Hinduism with Christianity is objectionable is because Hinduism is a pagan religion, but so was the Stone Age shamanism practiced in the Indus Valley 5,000 years ago. This argument therefore makes a distinction without a difference.
2. The word "yoga" needs to be more carefully defined, as it is being conveniently subjected to gross equivocation. All we really know about "yoga" in India 5,000 years ago is based on stone seals that depict figures sitting cross-legged in what is presumed to be meditation. We cannot categorically separate this Stone Age shamanic culture from Hinduism, since Hinduism evolved out of it and other indigenous sources. We infer from these figures that yoga existed, but what actually existed besides meditation? There is no evidence that raja or ashtanga yoga, with its eight limbs, existed prior to the second century BC or thereabouts, when Patanjali set it forth in his Yoga Sutras. The stretch postures that Westerners tend to think define yoga do not appear until around the fifteenth century AD in

- the Hatha Yoga Pradipika. It is therefore meaningless to say that yoga predated Hinduism because what *we* mean by “yoga” clearly developed in a Hindu context.
3. Even if original yoga could be demonstrated to be non-Hindu, Boon explicitly says that Holy Yoga is based on hatha yoga and bhakti yoga,²⁵ both of which originated in a mature Hinduism.

Boon laments that “Satan has been so effective in co-opting yoga for himself and making Christians scared of it.”²⁶ Oh? Does he also co-opt voodoo, channeling, astrology, LSD, and idol worship? Some practices are inherently idolatrous, occult, and/or spiritually dangerous.

There has rarely been a religious practice that was developed with more rigorous, systematic precision to accomplish the goals that flow from that religion than yoga. As we saw clearly in part one, the whole elaborate, eight-limbed practice of yoga is designed for the purpose of quieting all thoughts so that the practitioner no longer identifies with his (or her) temporal, phenomenal ego and consciously can unite with his supposedly eternal, divine Self. As someone who has experienced this in his pre-Christian past I can join my testimony to those of thousands of others who maintain that *the practice itself* produces the experience of “cosmic consciousness,” the sense of oneness with the Universe, a new openness to spirit contact, and psychic phenomena.

Altered states of consciousness are the means through which unregenerate people have spiritual experiences, and since these experiences are not through the mediation of Jesus Christ, from the Christian perspective, whatever is being experienced is not the Holy Spirit. Christians, on the other hand, are indwelt by the Holy Spirit and do not need to go “out of their minds” to experience God. They are already in a relationship with Him and if they draw near to Him by faith they will find that He draws near to them (James 4:8; cf. Gal. 3:2).

To argue, therefore, as Boon does,²⁷ that yoga is a universal practice that is no more exclusively Hindu than prayer is exclusively Christian ignores the critical differences between the two. It is no accident that yoga arose in one specific culture and then spread across the world from there, whereas prayer spontaneously appears in virtually all human cultures throughout history. Prayer is simply talking to God or whatever “higher power” one believes in; yoga is a system of disciplines designed by world-denying (ascetic) mystics to escape maya (illusion) and achieve gnosis (mystical knowledge of their own divinity).

Is It Good to “Get Out of Our Heads”?

Boon maintains that “Holy Yoga helps us pray by teaching us to cultivate a quiet heart and mind. As Thomas Ryan put it, ‘It invites cerebral Western world people to “get out of their heads.”’ This is crucial in helping us master one of the most important yet neglected aspects of prayer-listening. We cannot hear God speaking to our hearts if our minds are cluttered with requests, worries, and complaints.”²⁸

Boon says, “Like all of yoga, the practice of meditation is a gift of God that others have co-opted for their uses and to suit their own ends. . . . Meditation is an exercise in contemplation. It is a silent or contemplative form of prayer in which we focus on God, a specific attribute of God, or a passage of Scripture. We think, pray, then allow our hearts and minds to be open to hearing God’s voice in the silence.”²⁹

Boon is profoundly confused on the subject of meditation, and, unfortunately, she is spreading her confusion around. Part of her definition of Christian meditation is correct. It is an active mental process that involves reflecting on the attributes, works, and words of God, but she has bent the definition to include elements of Eastern meditation. She prescribes yogic techniques such as focusing on one’s breathing or visualizing an idyllic scene, a picture of the cross or of Jesus, or a candle. “The idea is to hold that visual in your mind as a point of focus to bring back your attention when your thoughts have wandered,” she says.³⁰ She endorses the repetition of words as “another means of clearing the mind of distractions, calming the body, and attempting a complete heart-mind-body connection with God.”³¹ These are the exact techniques that Eastern gurus such as the late Maharishi Mahesh Yogi of Transcendental Meditation have always taught their disciples as a means of quieting the mind and dealing with distractions.

This merging of two utterly distinct practices is what breeds the confusion. Christian meditation more likely would accompany Bible study than prayer. There is indeed a place for listening in Christian devotions, but it is commonly considered a component of prayer and is not properly called meditation. Boon is right that at times we need to quiet our anxious thoughts and listen to God, but this is an art that Christians have cultivated throughout church history through the sustained *practice* of prayer. An Eastern discipline designed to empty the mind of *all* thought is neither necessary nor helpful to Christian prayer.

Mental disciplines such as those practiced in Eastern meditation are spiritually dangerous even when practiced by Christians—even when they are trying to keep their minds on God, which is hard to do anyway when one is focusing on an activity such as breathing or on an object such as a candle. Mentally focusing on activities or objects until the very concepts of them fade away, which is the standard objective of Eastern meditation, creates a mental void that gives the Devil an opening to influence one’s thoughts. This is one reason why God’s Word never instructs us to use yogic techniques to hear His voice. *Again, such mind-altering techniques are not necessary for someone in whom His Spirit dwells.*

Boon’s endorsement of Eastern methods of meditation may stem from something else she has uncritically absorbed from her background in yoga: an exaltation of experience and intuition at the expense of Scripture and reason. She writes that

so much of God is a mystery, existing outside of anything we can understand. People throughout history have devised ways to delve into that mystery, to try to experience it even if they could not grasp it. Instinctually, people have known that there are ways to experience God that defy logic and reason.

We value our minds above all else. If we can think it and know it intellectually, then it must exist. But we have to remind ourselves that God exists far outside this capacity to think. That's why disciplines such as prayer, fasting, and meditation have been developed over the centuries by devoted Christ followers. They take us beyond what we can think into a realm of experience that is of the heart and body and soul. These disciplines draw us closer to God through means that are more mysterious than simply reading the Bible or praying.³²

Does much of God exist beyond our ability to understand? Yes. Does that mean we leave our understanding behind and trust our feelings to experience God more? No! Boon's prose here contains a subtle denigrating of Bible study and prayer, yet these are the most critical means we have at our disposal to know and experience God. Unlike the God of yoga, who exists beyond the dualities of logic and morality, the God of the Bible is rational and volitional as well as capable of feeling. He created us in His image and He expects us to employ all of our faculties whenever we approach Him. Boon was right to quote Mark 12:30 at the beginning of her book, but she needs to meditate on the fact that Jesus tells us to worship God not only with all of our heart, soul, and strength, but also with all of our mind.

Presuming to Be Teachers

I am taking Boon and Bordenkircher to task for promoting serious error in the body of Christ, but I don't want to convey that they are necessarily wolves in sheep's clothing. They both may be committed Christian women who sincerely believe that they are bringing glory to God and doing a service to His people. The kind of error they are perpetrating is the kind in which any Christian could become ensnared if she (or he) launches into a ministry based on her enthusiasm for some activity before properly submitting it to scrutiny by the body of Christ. Boon is aware of CRI, as she quotes twice from Hank Hanegraaff's *The Prayer of Jesus*. It's too bad she (apparently) didn't consult with a qualified discernment ministry before going public with Holy Yoga, and it's too bad that neither did Bordenkircher, or their publishers.

Boon admits, "I am not a theologian, a pastor, an elder, or even a seminary student...I'm still learning-about Christ as well as about yoga. I hope we can be on this learning journey together."³³ Why then did she take a practice that is extremely controversial and launch a public ministry promoting it just a few years after her conversion? Since yoga is a spiritual practice, yoga teachers naturally assume the role of guru or teacher, especially if they go beyond teaching asanas and expound on spiritual matters, which Christian yoga teachers do. Boone and Bordenkircher are teaching on Christian doctrine, practice, and the spiritual life, despite Scripture's warning, "Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly" (James 3:1 NIV).

Not only that-they are proposing a revolutionary approach to spirituality. As we have seen, what they call "body worship" cannot be substantiated from Scripture. The most they can cite to back such teaching are a few isolated teachers within church history, and

that largely from the medieval Catholic mystical period. They do not seem to realize that much of the medieval mystical tradition, including the book *Cloud of Unknowing*, on which Roth relies,³⁴ was heavily influenced by Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, whose sixth-century A.D. writings were infused with the pantheistic Greek philosophy known as Neo-Platonism. Much of Christian mysticism is suspect from an evangelical, biblical perspective, yet Christian yoga authors turn to it again and again to substantiate the Christian nature of their approach to yoga.

Bordenkircher and Boon took Roth's interfaith experiments and the dubious sources she cites, combined those with their own subjective experience of mixing yoga with Christian worship and what they felt the Lord was showing them through it, and launched an international movement. How does the body of Christ respond? In Bordenkircher's case, a respectable evangelical publisher, W Publishing Group, publishes her book, and Max Lucado writes an endorsement! In the postmodern, religiously pluralistic culture in which Christians now live, the need for discernment is at an all-time high, yet the exercise of discernment evident in the church seems to be at an all-time low.