

Is Yoga Demonic?

Many Christians believe the practice of yoga to be a form of false worship that will eventually draw the practitioner away from his faith in the true God and open himself up to demonic influences and even demonic oppression. Indeed, it's not difficult to find articles, podcasts and online videos of Christian pastors and talk-show hosts warning Christ followers about the spiritual dangers of yoga.

Oftentimes they will have former yoga instructors as expert witnesses to the spiritual dangers and deception behind their former practices. Perhaps a well-meaning friend has sent you a link to one of these articles, podcasts or videos.

The first thing to note about these former yoga instructors who quit practicing and teaching yoga after coming to faith in Jesus is that their former practice was steeped in a non-Christian or non-Biblical worldview. They studied and practiced under non-Christian yogis, and often made pilgrimages to Indian ashrams, Buddhist temples or participated in New-Age meditation retreats as part of their pre-Christian spiritual journeys. For them, yoga is so much a part of their former worldview, it is wise for them to separate from the practice until their faith has matured.

While the Bible does not speak about yoga, there is an issue that faced the early Church which has parallels to this discussion. To this day, observant Jews are careful to purchase kosher foods; that is, food grown or raised and prepared according to the requirements of Jewish law. In the first century, a Jew would not purchase meat in the general marketplace as the animal may have been dedicated or sacrificed to a pagan god, thus making it unclean. As Gentiles began to enter the fellowship of Jewish Christians, the issue of eating meat sacrificed to idols was one of several that threatened to split the Church. Acts 15 records the first council to resolve issues within the Church. The apostles and elders decided on a position that balanced the burden placed on Gentile Christians by recommending abstinence from a limited number of practices that offended the sensibilities of Jewish Christians—eating food sacrificed to idols, the eating of blood, eating meat from strangled animals, and sexual immorality (Acts 15:28-29). About a decade later, Paul wrote to the Christians in Rome, “As one who is in the Lord Jesus, I am fully convinced that no food is unclean in itself. But if anyone regards something as unclean, then for him it is unclean” (Romans 14:14). He concludes Chapter 14 writing, “Blessed is the man who does not condemn himself

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by what he approves. But the man who has doubts is condemned if he eats, because his eating is not from faith; and everything that does not come from faith is sin” (Romans 14:22b-23). Applying this principle to yoga, the Christian who has doubts about practicing yoga should abstain. Furthermore, I am certain Paul would advise a Christian against practicing yoga under an instructor who is guiding you into non-Christian spiritual beliefs and practices (see 1 Corinthians 10:18-22 and 2 Corinthians 6:14-18). So, this calls for discernment if you choose to practice yoga.

Now, if Paul had addressed the question of practicing yoga rather than the eating of unclean food, would God’s Spirit have led him to say “I am fully convinced that yoga is not unclean in itself”? Let’s examine the evidences offered to support the charge that yoga is demonic.

(1) Many yoga poses are named after Hindu gods, so when the pose is named in Sanskrit you are unknowingly expressing devotion to a false god. For example, *Hanumanasana* (Monkey Pose) is named after Hanuman, a divine entity in Hinduism resembling a monkey. The Sanskrit name commemorates the myth that Hanuman made a giant leap from the southern tip of India to the island of Sri Lanka. Outside of the yoga community, this stretch is called a full front split, or simply splits. Is everyone who practices splits doing something inspired by demons, or are only yoga practitioners guilty of a demonic practice because of the origin of its name? That’s just one pose, but for any asana named after a Hindu god, I can point you to the similar posture or stretch known by a different common name performed by athletes, dancers or acrobats. And, there are dozens of familiar yoga poses such as *Ananda Balasana* (Happy Baby Pose) that are not necessarily named for a Hindu god, although generally all yoga poses have been linked to a Hindu mythological story.

Are you aware that the Old English names of the days of the week honor various pagan gods?

Sunnandæg, (sun’s day) after the Germanic god of the sun (*Sunna*)
Mōnandæg, (moon’s day) after the Germanic god of the moon (*Máni*)
Tiwesdaeg (Tiw’s day) after the one-handed Norse god (*Týr*)
Wōdnesdæg (Woden’s day) after a Germanic god (*Woden*)

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pūnresdæg (thunder's day) after the Norse god (*Thor*)

Frīgedæg (Frige's day) after the Anglo-Saxon goddess (*Frige*)

Sæturnesdæg (Saturn's day) after the Roman god (Saturn)

By this logic, every time you write or speak the name of a day of the week, you not only invoke the name of a pagan god, you are expressing devotion to that god, albeit unknowingly. The same would be true for several names of the months of the year, the planets of the solar system, and even the most sacred day in the Christian calendar—Easter. Yes, Easter is named for the Old English goddess *Eostre*, a fertility goddess who was celebrated at the beginning of spring. Have you ever wondered about the fertility symbols (eggs and bunnies) associated with Easter? *Eostre* derives from *Ishtar*, the Assyrian goddess of fertility and sex. Truly, the use of such names does not convey honor or devotion to the pagan gods for whom they were named unless that is your specific intention. Personally, I wish the Church would drop the use of Easter in favor of Resurrection Day, as many have, or recognize that Jesus rose on the Day of Firstfruits (Leviticus 23:9-14), which is the day after the Sabbath during the week-long festival of Unleavened Bread. That's why Paul calls Christ "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Corinthians 15:20), for He is the firstfruits of the promised resurrection.

(2) Meditation and chanting are designed to empty your mind which opens you up to demonic influences and oppression. Meditation and chanting are spiritual practices, but they are not unique to yoga. Indeed the Bible encourages believers to meditate on God's Law (Joshua 1:8; Psalms 1:2; and 119:15, 23, 48, 78, 97, 99), God's Love (Psalm 48:9), God's Works (Psalms 77:12, 119:27, 143:5 and 145:5), and God's Promises (Psalm 119:148). And while there are few references to chanting in the Bible (e.g. Ezekiel 32:16), the Church has a rich history of chanting. Chanting is simply the repetition of a sound, word or short phrase in a singsong tone. Chanting as a spiritual practice is used not as a means of emptying one's mind, but as a means of clearing one's mind of the noise that keeps us from hearing God's still voice. Others within the Church have used religious icons such as a cross, a picture of Jesus, or a candle to gaze upon for the same purpose of clearing one's mind prior to entering a state of meditation. It is only since the introduction of yoga to Europe and America that the Church in the West has retreated from these spiritual practices fearing their use as occultic. Even within

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yogic philosophy, the purpose of meditation and chanting is not to “empty one’s mind.” That is not to say that New Age cultic practices do not seek spiritual guides (which we believe to be demons) to obtain esoteric knowledge, wisdom, healing or power. Once again, it is the object of one’s meditation and the purpose of one’s chanting that defines the practice as Christian or anti-Christian.

(3) Yoga is antithetical to Christianity, you cannot change its intent, because at its root it is a spiritual practice that developed outside a Biblical worldview. Under this argument yoga is often compared to playing with a Ouija Board or holding a Christian séance. A séance is a group of people who attempt to make contact with the spirits of the dead, usually through the agency of a medium. Such occultic practices are clearly prohibited for God’s people (Leviticus 19:31, 20:6, 20:27; Deuteronomy 18:9-14; 2 Kings 23:24; 1 Chronicles 10:13; 2 Chronicles 33:6; Isaiah 8:19). There is nothing in yoga philosophy that instructs practitioners to consult spirits of the dead. Yoga did originate as a spiritual practice of meditation to seek the Divine, and it has evolved to incorporate the stretching postures (asanas) and breathing practices (pranayama). In fact, gymnastics and acrobatics have had a significant influence on introducing new asanas to yoga since the 1800s.

(4) The very essence of the word yoga cannot be separated from its roots in a demonic religion. Christian critics of yoga recognize that in most gym-style yoga classes the focus is on stretching and breathing with no spiritual instruction, meditation or chanting, and will readily admit that their problem is with the word “yoga” itself and its association with Hinduism and Eastern mysticism. They’ll often say, “Why do yoga, when there are so many other forms of exercise? Go for a run, lift weights, ride a bike, do stretching exercises if you prefer, but don’t do yoga.” So, many Christians, whether to avoid conflict or because of their own doubts, attend “stretching” classes that have all the appearances of a yoga class, but rationalize it’s not yoga because it’s not called a yoga class.

Scholars generally agree that the word yoga is derived from the Sanskrit word for yoke (*yuj*). A yoke is a device (usually wooden) used between a pair of oxen, or other beasts of burden such as donkeys, mules, horses, and water buffalo, to enable them to pull a load such as a cart or plow. The yoke has been a common farm device used throughout the world for thousands of years. Depending on the English translation, the word yoke appears up to 60 times in the Bible. Because

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the image of a yoke of oxen connotes subservience under a heavy burden, the Bible uses this imagery as a metaphor for servitude to a human master or foreign nation (see Exodus 6:6-7; Leviticus 26:13; Deuteronomy 28:48; 1 Kings 12:4; Isaiah 9:4, 10:27, 14:25, 47:6, 58:6, 58:9; Jeremiah 27:8-12, 28:2-14, 30:8; Ezekiel 30:18, 34:27; Hosea 10:11; Nahum 1:13; and 1 Timothy 6:1). Because sin is a form of spiritual slavery, the Bible uses the image of a yoke here, too (Lamentations 1:14). Since a yoke joins a pair of animals side by side, it's important to yoke similar animals of equal size and strength. This is even commanded in the Bible: "Do not plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together" (Deuteronomy 22:10) and this image serves as the metaphor behind the command to not be united spiritually with an unbeliever (2 Corinthians 6:14). It is this notion of yoking—to become united with the Divine—that is understood to be the original and primary purpose of yoga. But, why should Christians fear being united with God? Jesus prayed for this type of union among his followers (John 17:20-26) and he extends this invitation to everyone: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matthew 11:28-30).

While I cannot speak to the motivation or anecdotal experiences of former yoga teachers who now warn Christians of the spiritual dangers of yoga, the charge that yoga is demonic is generally born of ignorance and fear. I sincerely believe Paul would affirm that yoga is not unclean in itself. Yet, he would caution you to settle the issue for yourself before you engage in a yoga practice, and to discern the spirit of the person who is guiding you.