

# Is Yoga a Religion?

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

Some Westerners who are practicing Christians or Jews are concerned about Yoga being an Eastern religion. They fear that by taking up the practice of Yoga, they might undermine their own religious faith. Are their fears warranted? Is Yoga a religion? The quick answer to both questions is: Instead of undermining their personal faith, Yoga can actually deepen it. In the following I will offer a more detailed explanation.

Let me begin with the extremist position of Christian fundamentalism, which regards Yoga as a dangerous import from the East that should under all circumstances be shunned. Often Yoga is lumped together with New Age teachings, which are seen as a threat to the Christian establishment.

Yoga, it is quite true, has historically been associated with India's three great religious-cultural traditions—Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Thus the teachings of Yoga are infused with many concepts that have a Hindu, Buddhist, or Jaina flavor. The most striking examples, which often are a stumbling block for Westerners, are the ideas of karma and reincarnation and the notion of there being many deities in addition to the one ultimate Reality. First of all, there have been Yoga masters who dismissed the ideas of karma and reincarnation, and the deities of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism can be compared to the angels of Christianity and Judaism. Thus in order to practice Yoga, you need not believe in karma or reincarnation. **You need not believe in anything other than the possibility that you can transform yourself:** that you can go beyond your present understanding and experience of the world and, more significantly, beyond your current egocentric state of being.

At the heart of all forms of Yoga is the assumption that you have not yet tapped into your full potential as a human being. In particular, Yoga seeks to put you in touch with your spiritual core—your innermost nature—that which or who you truly are. That nature is described differently by the various schools of Yoga. Rather than being expected to believe in any of the traditional explanations, you are free to allow your personal experience and realization to shape your understanding.

Over the millennia, Yoga has expressed itself in various philosophical and theological systems—none of which can be said to define Yoga itself. For Yoga is first and foremost a practical spiritual discipline that emphasizes personal experimentation and verification. In other words, direct personal experience or spiritual realization is considered senior to any theory or conceptual system.

For this reason, Yoga can and in fact has been practiced by people with widely differing philosophies and beliefs. Some Yoga practitioners believe in a personal God who created the universe, others favor a metaphysics that regards the world as illusory and the ultimate Reality as singular and formless. Yet others (notably the yogis of Theravada Buddhism) refuse to speculate about metaphysical matters. Accordingly, some Yoga practitioners are more religious than others. **But Yoga itself is simply a tool for**

**exploring the depth of our human nature, of plumbing the mysteries of the body and the mind.**

Yoga, the spirituality developed on the Indian subcontinent, has traditionally been transmitted as an esoteric discipline requiring initiation and discipleship under a qualified teacher (*guru, lama*). To achieve the levels of personal or transpersonal transformation taught in Hindu, Buddhist, or Jaina Yoga, it is essential to receive yogic wisdom and empowerment through initiation and discipleship. Not everyone, however, will either be capable of or wish to engage yogic practice so intensively. Traditional Yoga recognizes that spiritual seekers come varyingly qualified and with different needs or goals.

How can Yoga enrich the religious or spiritual life of a practicing Christian or Jew? The answer is the same as for any practicing Hindu, Buddhist, or Jaina. Yoga aids all those who seek to practice the art of self-transcendence and self-transformation, regardless of their persuasion, by balancing the nervous system and stilling the mind through its various exercises (from posture to breath control to meditation). Yoga's heritage is comprehensive enough so that anyone can find just the right techniques that will not conflict with his or her personal beliefs. More than that, religious-minded folk will find in Yoga many ideas and sentiments, especially about moral life, with which they will easily resonate. Who could find fault, for instance, with the yogic recommendation to pursue a virtuous life dedicated to nonharming, truthfulness, compassion, charity, tolerance, and freedom from greed, anger, and jealousy, and so forth?

Millions of Christians and Jews around the world are already practicing Yoga mostly in the form of Hatha-Yoga postures and breathing or meditation, and there even is a "Christian Yoga." Yoga postures are being taught at many branches of the YMCA and at various Jewish centers.

So, if you are a practicing Christian or Jew (or belong to any other religious tradition), take from Yoga what makes sense to you and deepen your own faith and spiritual practice. But keep an open mind about the experiences and insights arising from your practice of Yoga. **Remember: all theories, explanations, and beliefs are merely conceptual frameworks superimposed on reality.** We ought not to cling to them too tenaciously lest they should prevent us from seeing what is really the case.

All the great religious traditions of the world have their spiritual explorers. Yoga is India's gift to those wishing to become psychonauts—travelers in the inner space of consciousness. If you genuinely desire to know yourself more profoundly and make sense of the world in which you live, Yoga is a reliable, well-tested vehicle.

See also [The Yoga of Jesus](#).

