



GUIDES TO CHRISTIAN ETHICAL DECISION-MAKING

This guide (and others in the series) is an initiative of the Office of the Bishop and the Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions of the Lutheran Church of Australia and New Zealand. It is intended to help church members consider how they might respond to contemporary ethical issues. It is meant for use in personal reflection and is not an 'official' statement of the church on the topic. I am grateful to Nick Schwarz, Assistant to the Bishop – Public Theology, for his ongoing work on this project and to the people he consulted.

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YOGA

Seriously? How is doing yoga an 'ethical issue'?

Yoga has its origins in non-Christian spiritual practices. Christians who know of these origins often want to feel confident that they aren't breaking any of God's commandments by doing yoga or exposing themselves to harmful spiritual forces. In this guide, we briefly consider the many types of activity that go by the name yoga so that Christians interested in yoga can better assess them and decide whether to be involved.

Basics of yoga

What is yoga?

Yoga comes in many forms. Most involve exercise, controlled breathing and relaxation or meditation. A yoga class typically has an instructor leading class participants through a sequence of sustained postures, each performed precisely and with a focus on breathing control. It ends with a period of guided relaxation or meditation.

Yoga has its origins in India. The word yoga comes from Sanskrit, the ancient language of the Hindu religious writings. It means 'yoke' or 'union'. Yoga was traditionally a spiritual or religious practice. It was a means of achieving 'spiritual enlightenment' and liberation from the law of karma and the cycle of death and rebirth.¹ Yoga practitioners aimed to achieve these goals by 'yoking' or uniting their spirits or souls with the spirit or soul of the universe (which they understood as representing the divine) and becoming 'one with the Supreme Being' or 'one with Universal Consciousness'.

Yoga was spread around the world by Indian yoga masters and their disciples during the 20th century. The forms of yoga practised in Western countries today are a mixture of old and new. Yoga is evolving as commercial yoga enterprises try to attract a broader range of people.

Some forms of yoga are more traditional or classical, more obviously connected to yoga's roots in Indian religion and spirituality. In these forms of yoga, the meditative or spiritual practices and the spiritual goals figure prominently.

In other secularised forms of yoga, the connection with Indian religion and spirituality is less apparent; the focus might be on a 'harmonious balance of body, mind and spirit' or just on 'wellness of body and mind'. Classes often incorporate elements from Pilates, other forms of therapeutic exercise, and even martial arts. The goals of participants have more to do with improved posture, balance, strength, flexibility and reducing mental stress than seeking 'oneness with the Supreme Being' (or similar high religious or spiritual goals).

How did yoga become popular in the West if it originated in India?

Yoga was introduced to the United States in the late 1800s by an Indian monk from Calcutta called Swami Vivekananda.

In subsequent decades, more Indian yoga masters and their American and European disciples promoted their versions of yoga in the West. They broadened yoga's appeal by offering beginners a version mostly free of religious elements and emphasising its health benefits. They hoped people who took up yoga and enjoyed it would be motivated to explore yoga's spiritual dimension.

Yoga and related disciplines like transcendental meditation benefited from the counterculture movement of the 1960s when many disillusioned young Westerners looked to Indian spirituality and culture in their search for fulfilment.

The esteem for Eastern spirituality was then sustained through the 1970s and 80s by the New Age movement.

Yoga's popularity can be attributed, in part, to the common human tendency to be attracted to and impressed by the exotic and to disdain the familiar.

Since the 1990s, yoga has grown into an industry worth billions of dollars each year. Yoga has come to be associated in people's minds with holistic health and wellness, with beauty, grace, and serenity. It appeals, in particular, to people who say they are 'spiritual but not religious', who are looking for something more 'transcendent' than ordinary exercise. Yoga offers some of the comforts of religion, such as ritual and

¹ The concept of karma is common to both Hinduism and Buddhism. Karma is essentially the belief that you reap what you sow. If you want good things to happen to you, you must build up credit by thinking and doing good. If good does happen to you, it is because of past good deeds coming back to you. Likewise, if you do bad things, you can expect bad things to befall you. If bad befalls you, it is because of past bad deeds coming back to you. Karma is linked to Hindu and Buddhist belief in reincarnation, the rebirth of the soul multiple times in different bodies. The degree to which a person accumulates good or bad deeds determines the form they are born into in the next life, whether it be plant, animal, human or divine. The balance of our good and bad deeds carries over from one life to another. If bad things befall you in this life, you may be reaping what you sowed in a previous life.

community, and benefits like feelings of energy and euphoria that might be experienced in a spiritually uplifting church service, but without needing to affirm religious teachings and codes of behaviour.

Some key yoga concepts and their meaning

- An *asana* is a yoga pose or body posture. Asanas can be sitting (for example, meditative poses) or various other positions, including reclining, standing, inverted, twisting and balancing. A variety of spiritual and physical benefits are claimed for different asanas. Asanas may go by English names (for example, tree pose, warrior pose, triangle pose, cobra pose, dog pose etc) or Sanskrit names like Vrikshasana and Virabhadrasana. Many asanas are said to be linked to particular Hindu sages or deities.
- *Pranayama* is the practice of controlled breathing. In Sanskrit, *prana* means 'vital life force' or 'life energy'; *yama* means to gain control. Thus, pranayama is the practice of 'controlling and elevating the life force'.
- A *mudra* is a pose usually involving the hands and fingers, which has religious significance. In some forms of yoga, mudras are used in conjunction with pranayama (controlled breathing) and meditation. The most famous and commonly practised mudra is the Gyan mudra, where the tips of the index finger and thumb are touched together to form a circle, and the remaining fingers are outstretched with the palm facing upwards. The Gyan mudra symbolises the union of the self (Atman) with the supreme consciousness (Brahman), ie the self and God are one.
- *Mantras* are sacred chants used during meditation, which are often of Hindu origin. Mantras are believed by practitioners to have religious, magical or spiritual powers. Mantras are based on the idea that the divine can be manipulated or controlled through the right incantation and number of repetitions. The mantra Om (or Aum) is considered the most sacred mantra of Hinduism. Its sound is said to be the original sound of creation and invokes the Hindu gods Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva.
- *Moksha* is the ultimate goal of yoga, ie enlightenment or transcendence, liberation from *samsara*, the cycle of death and rebirth, and a blissful state of oneness with Brahman, the One Supreme Self.
- *Chakras* are 'spiritual energy centres' located along the spine, from the base of the spine to the top of the head. They are important in a form of yoga called kundalini yoga (see more on kundalini yoga in the section below).

Types of yoga

As noted above, there are many different schools or types of yoga, some still clearly linked to Indian religion and spiritual practices, and some in which those links are less obvious or not obvious at all. Below we list and briefly describe some of the variants. We could add dozens more. The explosion in yoga variants has led some Indians to complain about their traditions being corrupted or trivialised and the word yoga used simply for purposes of marketing.

- Hatha yoga: the 'physical' yoga tradition most familiar in the West, involving asanas (postures) and pranayama (controlled breathing). Traditionally, Hatha yoga involved more 'spiritual' elements, but these feature less prominently in modern Western contexts. Other predominantly physical practices of yoga stem from the Hatha yoga tradition, such as Vinyasa, Ashtanga and Iyengar yoga.
- Bhakti yoga: a devotional or worshipful form of yoga involving devotional chanting and prayers directed to specific Hindu deities.
- Jnana yoga: a spiritual practice with the emphasis on achieving moksha (spiritual liberation or enlightenment) through the study of scriptures and deep inquiry into the nature of the self, which is inseparable from the divine.
- Karma yoga: a spiritual practice with the emphasis on achieving moksha through good deeds.
- Raja (or royal) yoga: a practice of mind and body control with a focus on meditation and energy flow, which combines physical, mental and spiritual elements.

- Kundalini yoga: a form of yoga in which meditation and breathing techniques are performed to 'open up the chakras and activate the kundalini'. The kundalini is said to be a dormant spiritual power in the form of a coiled-up serpent or snake that lies in the lowest chakra at the base of the spine. Kundalini yoga practices are said to enable the practitioner to control and move the kundalini from its chakra at the base of the spine up through a channel to the highest level, bringing moksha (or enlightenment/oneness with the divine).
- Christian yoga and holy yoga: forms of yoga that combine aspects of the traditional practice of yoga – particularly the poses, meditation and breathing exercises – with Christianity. Sanskrit words with Hindu associations are replaced with words in English (or whatever language is spoken by the practitioners). Classes may involve scriptural meditation, Christian music and prayer.
- Office yoga: a variety of poses or stretches and breaks for meditation that can be done during the work day.
- Pregnancy yoga: exercises, stretches, breathing techniques and meditation claimed to help pregnant women through their pregnancy and delivery. Typically, these classes also incorporate exercises to strengthen the pelvic floor, which are not part of traditional yoga practice.
- Baby yoga: therapeutic exercises and relaxation for postnatal mothers and guided movements mothers can perform with their babies to 'optimise physical and postural development'.
- Laughter yoga: a 'fun and effective exercise program that can be adapted for anyone and everyone's wellbeing' that has 'nothing to do with bending yourself into a pretzel shape'.

Christian perspectives on yoga

Christians differ on whether it is acceptable or wise for Christians to do yoga. If you ask Christians who have firm opinions one way or the other about their views on yoga, they will probably respond with the question, 'What type of yoga are we talking about?'

In this guide, we have assembled Christians' views on yoga into two broad groups.

In the first group are Christians who think the best policy is to avoid most – if not all – types of yoga. They consider yoga to be unacceptable for Christians because of its links with non-Christian religion and spirituality and unwise because they say it exposes practitioners to spiritual risk. To emphasise the dangers, they often cite the testimonies of former practitioners of spiritual forms of yoga who say they came under spiritual attack or experienced spiritual oppression by dark forces.

In the second group are Christians who think that most types of yoga practised in Western countries pose no threat to Christians because the connections to Hinduism of the physical and spiritual practices are now very remote or absent and because yoga can be adapted and customised by practitioners of any faith tradition. They encourage Christians concerned about spiritual risk to seek out Christian instructors teaching Christianised forms of yoga or secular forms of Hatha yoga with minimal or no meditative content.

We present these groups' positions in more detail in the sections below.

1. The view of Christians who think the best policy is to avoid most, if not all, types of yoga

Christians in this group commonly argue that doing yoga undermines Christians' faith. In their view, yoga is inseparable from Hinduism and a gateway to New Age spirituality.

They point to yoga practitioners yoking themselves (ie seeking connection or communion) with the 'Supreme Being' or 'Universal Consciousness', which is how Hindus understand the divine, but not how Christians understand God. For Christians, only Jesus is Lord, but in the Hindu scripture, the Bhagavad Gita, the 'Lord of yoga' is Shiva, the Hindu god of destruction and rebirth. Our God, the one true God, forbids engaging with other spiritual powers (see the First Commandment, Exodus 20:3), and Jesus calls on his followers to take *his* yoke upon them (Matthew 11:28–30).

Apart from wanting to obey God, Christians in this group warn it is foolish to expose ourselves to the influence of ungodly spiritual powers. Kundalini (serpent) yoga, in particular, is said to open Christians to demonic attack.

Table 1 below contrasts basic yoga beliefs with Christian teaching. It shows how exposure to yoga beliefs can influence Christians to compromise or abandon their Christian beliefs.

Table 1: Yoga beliefs contrasted with Christian teaching

Basic yoga beliefs	Christian teaching
It is okay to personalise our spirituality by mixing or blending beliefs and practices from different religions. (The academic word for this is syncretism .)	Personalising our spirituality by picking and choosing what we like from different religions is telling God we know better than him. Syncretism dilutes and distorts the truth of Scripture.
All faiths lead to God; they just reach him via different paths. (The academic word for this belief is universalism .)	We cannot be sure how God will judge people who follow other religions and have never heard the good news of Jesus. But we believe that God is perfectly just. Jesus said, 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6). 'Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved' (Acts 4:12).
'God' or 'divinity' is in all things, including all people. (The academic word for this belief is pantheism .) Hence the greeting <i>namaste</i> , commonly used in yoga classes, which is said to mean 'I bow to the divine in you' or 'the sacred in me recognises the sacred in you'.	God created all things (Genesis 1:1) and is present everywhere (Psalm 139:7), but he is distinct from people and everything else he made.
Humans are innately good due to their connection to the divine.	As a result of the fall, humans and all creation are marred by sin.
After death, humans begin a new life in a new body that may be human, animal or spiritual, depending on the moral quality of the previous life's actions. (The academic word for this belief is reincarnation .)	Humans have one life on earth, after which they will be judged by God according to whether they accept Jesus as their Saviour (Hebrews 9:27).
Humans achieve salvation or liberation through their efforts to overcome their ignorance and recognise that they and God are one.	God alone is God. Fallen humans cannot earn their own salvation. We are saved by our faith that Jesus, through his death on the cross and his resurrection, makes us acceptable to God by exchanging our sins for his righteousness.
In theory, the same universal energy force can be used for evil, selfish and good purposes.	Drawing on illegitimate spiritual authorities for any purpose – good or evil – is detestable to God (Deuteronomy 18:9–12).

Some Christians who take this view oppose even 'Christianised' forms of yoga, arguing that yoga 'cannot be redeemed'. They say it is better for Christians pursuing holistic health and wellbeing to seek it via other means, such as healthy eating, regular exercise, daily meditation on God's word, and participation in the fellowship and worship life of a Christian church community.

2. The view of Christians who think most forms of yoga pose no threat to Christians

Christians who take this view argue that yoga is basically just a physical and spiritual discipline comprising three elements – breathing, movement and meditation – which can be practised independently of any religion or adapted and customised by people from different religious traditions. For example, Christians can develop Christian forms of yoga, and Muslims can adapt it so that it is compatible with Islam. But because most yoga businesses in Australia and other Western countries want to appeal to the broadest range of people, they are secular, ie not aligned to any particular religion.

To people who have doubts as to whether it is right for Christians to practise yoga, one Christian yoga instructor wrote:

All truth is God's truth and God is in the business of revealing his truth throughout the world. Therefore Christians can enter into the practices of yoga searching for God's fingerprints. How is God revealing himself? Where are the common truths and intersections with Christianity? It is true that Christians must be discerning when dealing with concepts birthed through another culture and worldview. However, it is also true that Christians should not be too quick to dismiss the wisdom found in these teachings. Essentially we must take care not to 'throw the baby out with the bathwater'.

Proponents of this view say that while it is true that in some forms of yoga, different poses are dedicated to different Hindu deities or sages, what is more important is the *intention* of the yoga practitioner. If the intention is not to invoke a Hindu deity but merely to stretch and strengthen the body, how can the action be wrong or dangerous? If the movement is Christianised by giving it a biblical name and ascribing to it a Christian meaning, then surely it is pleasing to God! After all, Christians participate in many cultural traditions and practices with links to non-Christian religions, such as competitive running (which was often linked to honouring or worshiping gods), drinking chocolate (which was a religious ritual among the Mayans), giving eggs (a pagan symbol of fertility) at Easter, and we use names for weekdays and months that are linked to pagan Gods, all without fear of bringing God's wrath down on us. God can redeem such things for his glory. Doing yoga can be an act of Christian prayer, praise and worship.

Proponents of this view acknowledge that meditation *can* be dangerous if it involves opening our minds to ungodly powers, but say Christian yoga involves 'yoking ourselves to Christ'. Christian yoga practitioners 'meditate on the precepts of God and open themselves to the Holy Spirit so he may dwell in them and grow them in the likeness of Christ'. Christian yoga meditation is not 'emptying the mind', but it is 'decluttering it and filling it with things that are good, truthful, noble and praiseworthy from God's word' (Philippians 4:8).

Although Christians who hold this view believe that secularised and (especially) Christian yoga are generally safe for Christians, they accept that Christians introduced to yoga might conceivably seek to learn more about classical or traditional forms of yoga or about New Age philosophy, and in so doing harm their faith. Their advice to Christians who are worried about whether it is okay to do yoga is to pray and seek God's guidance. If they believe that even doing Christian yoga will put them at risk or cause others to stumble in their faith, then they should avoid it.

Make a decision

If you are considering taking up some form of yoga, here are some questions for you to consider:

1. Why are you thinking about doing yoga?
 - a. Social benefits (for example, sharing time with friends or meeting new people)
 - b. Exercise (for example, in a safe place, supervised by a trained person who can show you what to do and correct flaws in your technique)
 - c. Meditative/spiritual aspect.
2. If doing yoga raises concerns about being faithful to God and protecting yourself from spiritual danger, could you obtain what you hope to get from yoga by doing one or more other activities that raise no such concerns?
3. Could you arrange to observe a class, do a trial class or talk to a class instructor to see if you are comfortable with what is offered?
4. Are you confident that, if in a class, you are asked to say or visualise things that clash with your beliefs, you could substitute Christian sayings or visualisations?
 - a. If you consider yourself a Christian whose faith is strong, tested and mature and, therefore, participating in more traditional spiritual forms of yoga is safe for you, are you setting a good example for Christians whose faith is weaker?

Review your decision

If you decide to participate in some form of yoga, over time, you will form a view about whether it has improved your mobility, strength or balance and whether it helps you manage stress. If the type of yoga involves 'spiritual practices', can you similarly form a view about their effect on your faith in Jesus and your commitment to following him?

Further reading and viewing

A nuanced view of yoga from Australian Baptist theologian Dr Ross Clifford

- 'Yoga, Martial Arts and Alternative Therapies: How should Christians respond?', <https://hope1032.com.au/stories/faith/2016/yoga-martial-arts-alternative-therapies-christians-respond/>, a chat with Baptist Theologian Dr Ross Clifford, co-author of *Taboo Or To Do? Is Christianity complementary with yoga, martial arts, Hallowe'en, mindfulness and other alternative practices?*, <https://www.amazon.com.au/Taboo-Christianity-complementary-mindfulness-alternative-ebook/dp/B01LWRRHFI/>

Statements from Christian churches

- Anglican Diocese of Sydney Social Issues Committee 2015, 'Yoga and other such activities', <http://socialissues.org.au/pdf/reports/1.21.Yoga.OtherSuchActivities.Rep2015.pdf>
- Lutheran Church Missouri Synod 2005, 'Yoga: History, Beliefs and Practices', <https://files.lcms.org/dl/f/16B5F481-5777-442B-B2AF-45A053EA74BC>

Advocates of Christianised yoga

- 'Can Christians practise yoga? A Christian yoga teacher's exploration of this question', <https://gettingstill.com/can-christians-practice-yoga-a-christian-yoga-teachers-exploration-of-this-question/>

Christians generally opposed to involvement in yoga

- Premier Unbelievable, 'Should Christians practise Yoga?', interview with Mike Shreve and Chris James, <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/unbelievable/unbelievable-should-christians-practise-yoga-mike-shreve-and-chris-james/12490.article>
- Mike Shreve 2021, *Seven Reasons Why I No Longer Practice Yoga*, <https://www.amazon.com.au/Seven-Reasons-Longer-Practice-Yoga-ebook/dp/B085G46PXP/>
- Laurette Willis, *The Truth about Yoga: Peaceful practice or dangerous deception?*, <http://praisemoves.com/truth-about-yoga.pdf>

Interested in Christian meditation?

- Links to resources from Australian Lutherans:
 - Lisa McIntosh, 'Christian meditation: Meeting Christ in Scripture', *The Lutheran*, March 2021, pp 5–7, <https://thelutheran.com.au/tag/meditation/>
 - Pastor Tim Jarick, 'Mysticism, Monks and Marty: Meditation in the Lutheran Tradition', http://www.timjarick.com/uploads/1/1/2/5/11254065/meditation_in_the_lutheran_tradition.pdf and the Meditations webpage on Tim's website, <http://www.timjarick.com/meditations.html>
 - Pastor Stephen Abraham's YouTube channel, <https://www.youtube.com/@StephenAbrahamMusic/featured>
- Other resources:
 - World Community for Christian Meditation (Australian branch) website, <https://wccmaustralia.org.au/>