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Does Yoga



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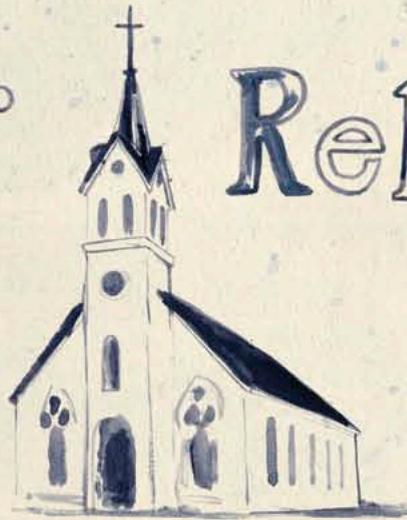
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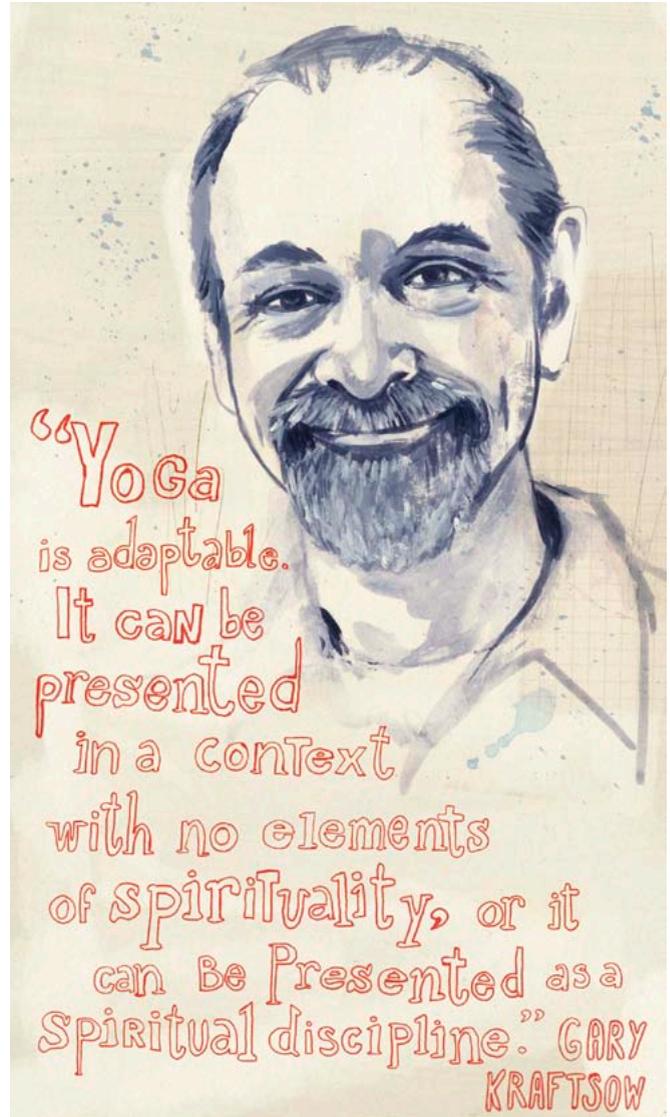
IS YOGA A RELIGION?

Most American yoga students would answer this question with a simple no. As practitioners, we aren't required to adhere to a particular faith or obliged to observe religious rituals such as baptisms or bar mitzvahs. We aren't asked to believe in God, to attend organized worship services, or to learn specific prayers.

And yet, Patanjali's* Yoga Sutra, an ancient text that is widely referred to in yoga classes today, clearly presents a moral code for yogis to follow and outlines the path toward a mystical state of enlightenment known as *samadhi*, or union with the Divine. The yoga tradition also recognizes the path of bhakti yoga* the branch of yoga whose adherents devote themselves to a personal form of God. Its practices include chanting to deities, setting up altars, and even praying.

So, even if yoga is not practiced like a religion today, did it descend from a religion and morph into a form of spirituality? Is it naive to think of yoga as a wholly secular activity? These are questions essential to explore, as yoga is increasingly taught in schools, hospitals, and secular institutions across the country. Some religious leaders and parents have expressed concern about yoga in schools, leading yoga teachers to strip the practice of anything remotely foreign or spiritual. But can you teach this way and still call it yoga?

We asked practicing yogis and scholars to give us their thoughts on the intersection of yoga, religion, spirituality, and mysticism. Their answers reveal a spectrum of opinions as deep and wide as the current practice of yoga itself.



conversation hosted by Andrea Ferretti

The Panel

Brooke Boon is founder of Holy Yoga, a nonprofit Christian ministry that promotes intentionally connecting the body, mind, and spirit with Christ. After years of study under teachers such as Baron Baptiste and John Friend, Boon developed her own teacher training program that has certified more than 400 Holy Yoga teachers.

David Frawley is founder and director of the American Institute of Vedic Studies in Santa Fe, New Mexico, which offers courses and publications on Ayurvedic medicine, yoga, meditation, and Vedic astrology. A renowned Vedic scholar, he continues to conduct research into Vedic texts and is a well-known proponent of Hinduism and Sanatana Dharma.*

Gary Kraftsow is founder and director of the American Viniyoga Institute in Oakland, California. In addition to holding a master's degree in depth psychology and religion, Kraftsow has studied Tantra with the mystic-scholar V.A. Devase-napathi and yoga with T.K.V. Desikachar. He has been training yoga teachers for more than 30 years.

Stefanie Syman is a writer who has been practicing Ashtanga Yoga for 15 years. In *The Subtle Body: The Story of Yoga in America*, she pieces together yoga's history in America and the many permutations it has undergone, from its overtly spiritual beginnings in New England to its 1960s heyday to the gyms and studios of today.

YOGA JOURNAL Did yoga originate from Hinduism?

Gary Kraftsow The big issue is how you define terms. The origins of Hinduism, Buddhism, and yoga are Vedic,* which predates the kind of formulation of what we call “modern Hinduism.” I think that, although the sources of Hinduism and yoga are the same, yoga as a tradition predates the formulation of what modern Hindus think of as their religion.

David Frawley Well, the main point I would make is, as Gary says, how do you define terms? In terms of the classical yoga,* predominantly it comes from the Hindu tradition. Modern yoga, however, particularly as practiced and understood in the West, often has a different meaning. It’s more on the asana side, and it has moved away from the spiritual and religious connection in some groups, so it can have a different definition and a different meaning for people. But even a lot of the modern yoga still has a kind of spiritual aura and connections to India. We see that particularly in the *kirtan* [devotional chanting] movement.

It’s also important to note that yoga has a tradition of dharma.* And religion in the Western sense, as a belief system, is often different from a dharma tradition. Dharma, like yoga, is a difficult term to translate. Some call it natural law or the law of the *consciousness universe*. All dharmic traditions emphasize universal ethics like *ahimsa* [nonviolence], the theory of karma and rebirth, and a culture of meditation. But not all—for example, Buddhism—postulate any God or creator of the universe. Though recognizing a cosmic creator (known as Ishvara), most Hindu and Vedantic* yoga traditions emphasize Self-realization, rather than worship of God, as their main focus.

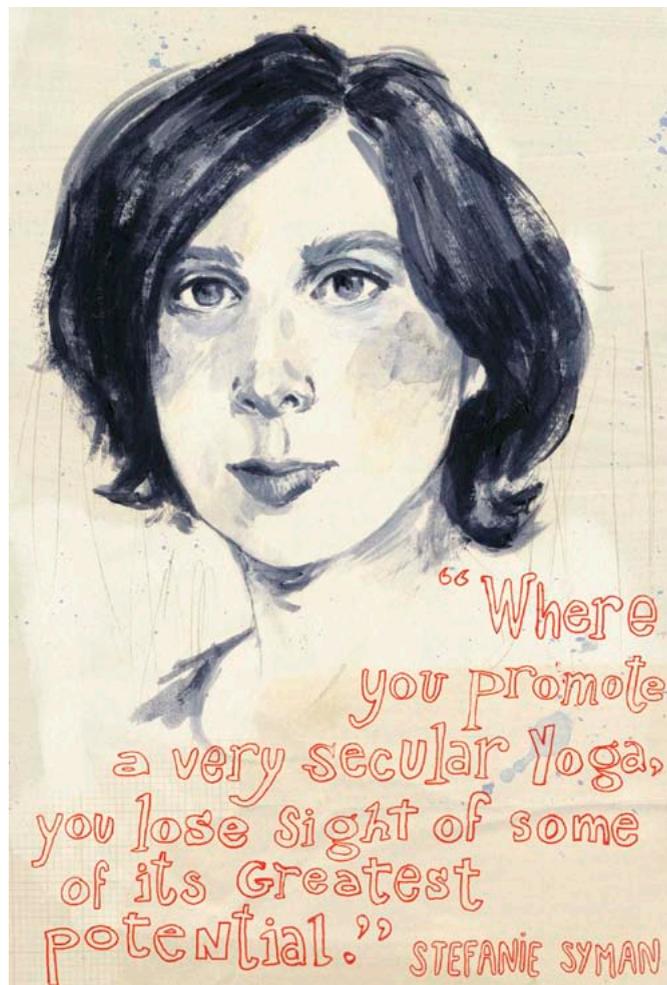
So, yoga’s not a belief system. And many of the other traditions coming out of India—Hindu and otherwise—are not belief systems like Christianity, which has one singular perspective that followers have to adopt. Dharmic traditions emphasize knowledge and direct experience at an individual level over outer belief structures. Dharmic traditions emphasize the same type of freedom in our approach to spiritual truth that we have in

our outer lives today. We are free, for example, to choose the food that we wish to eat or the job that we wish to follow. Dharmic traditions are pluralistic in that they provide a variety of paths for different types of people and do not have one standard approach for everyone.

YJ Should parents who follow a non-Hindu religious faith be concerned that the yoga taught in their child’s school might interfere with religious ideas they are teaching their children?

David Frawley Well, it depends again on what you’re teaching as yoga. Obviously, yoga has a number of levels and dimensions: yoga asana, pranayama, yoga meditation to clear the mind—even an atheist can do these. These practices don’t necessarily have a religious connotation, but they do have a spiritual connotation. But overall, I think if we teach yoga in

* Don’t know your Vedas from your sutras? For a glossary of terms marked with an asterisk, go to page 87.



a way that is not overtly religious, there should not be any problem in teaching [it] in schools or in other public locations.

That being said, there are also yoga groups in private who, of course, can teach whatever they want. If we then go on to meditation, mantra, chanting, and other things, then those [are] more in the spiritual or quasi-religious domain and may pose more trouble for certain groups in the West.

Gary Kraftsow You know, I'd like to add this one comment: Yoga was never secular, traditionally. It was always connected to spirituality, and spirituality was never separated from religion. But the spiritual dimensions of yoga were used by many different religions. Although religious-specific faiths taught yoga, the actual yoga teachings were used by many different religions. So I think this distinction between yoga as a spiritual journey that supports religion versus yoga as a religion is very useful.

And then the current modern context is that yoga is secular. Yoga is adaptable. So yoga can be presented in a secular context that has no elements of

spirituality, or it can be presented as a spiritual discipline that supports the Christian faith or the Buddhist faith or the Hindu faith.

David Frawley I'd like to add that classical yoga is concerned with religious experience or spiritual realizations at an individual level, rather than promoting one *en masse* faith. So, in that regard, yoga has a certain adaptability and universality, and we can apply yoga in many contexts. At the same time, yoga does have a certain philosophy. Yoga is not exclusive; it doesn't insist upon a particular belief, but a lot of classical yoga philosophy does bring in concepts like karma and rebirth that certain religious communities may have difficulty with. We should bear that in mind.

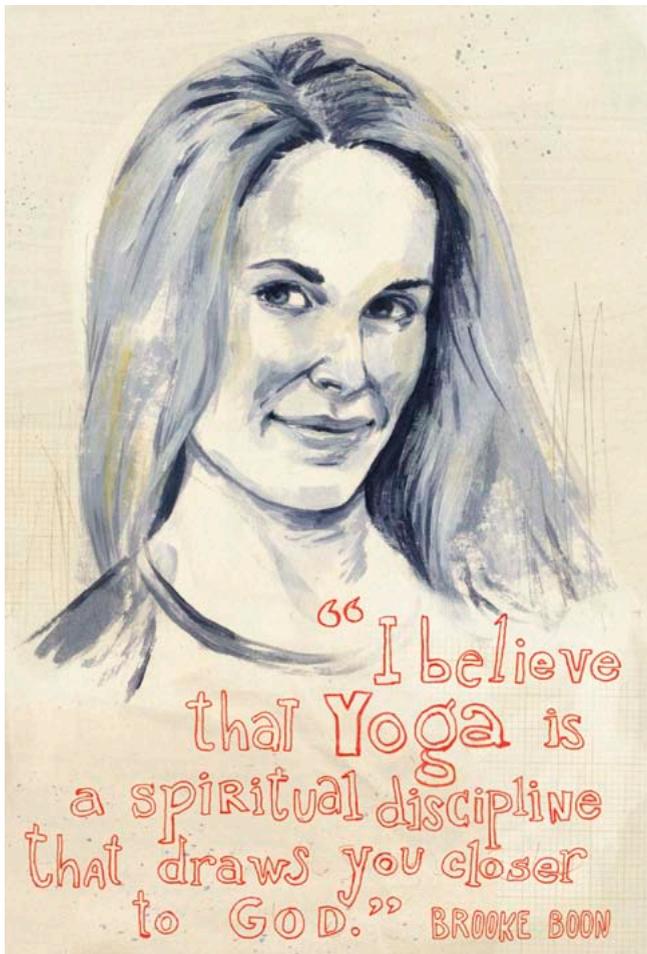
YJ So, do you believe, then, that the concept of yoga as Self-realization conflicts with the Judeo-Christian belief of God realization?

Stefanie Syman If you are seeing yoga as a spiritual discipline and taking its claims seriously and are on that path—a classical yoga path, a path beyond asana, well beyond asana—then I do think, at a certain point, you get into some pretty big metaphysical and theological disparities. Which is not to say you can't teach yoga in schools in a way that is productive and [doesn't tread] on religion. It's just what you're teaching may not—You know, at what point, I wonder, is that still yoga?

Gary Kraftsow So, I just want to make a couple of comments that you may or may not be aware of. First of all, let me start with a quick anecdote: Krishnamacharya* was a very old man when I was studying with him, and he basically said that when you gain discriminative awareness, you have Self-realization, which is equivalent to God realization. And so, for him, the goal of yoga was merging with God. But I look at one of his students, S. Ramaswami, and for him the goal was Self-realization separate from God realization. So, it's not that in classical yoga there's one definition of what the goal is.

I think the only disparity is if you assume that there's one yoga doctrine about the goal of life. But what I'm saying is, historically, there is not. Different religions that formulated their goals differently all used yoga.

David Frawley Yoga is more aligned with

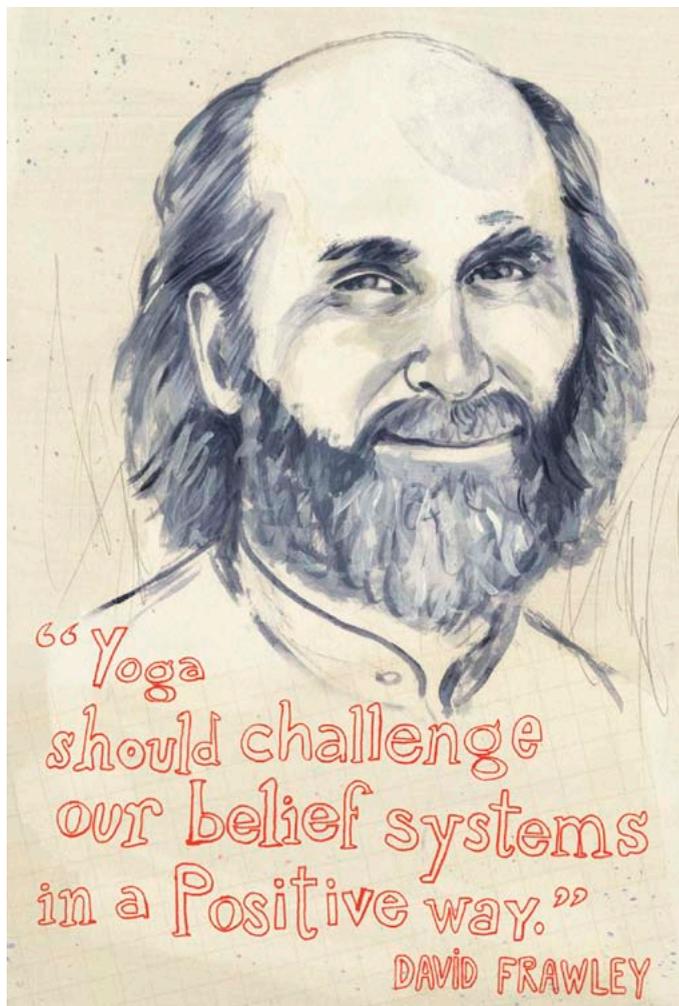


the mystical experience, and Self-realization developed through that. Although all religions have a mystical dimension to some degree, certain sects do not accept mystical revelation. So it's usually those groups that are opposed to mysticism that have some issues with yoga.

Stefanie Syman I think, David, that's a very excellent point. I had the experience of speaking with a prominent Baptist leader, and he basically said that no one should practice yoga. He just cannot accept that yoga should be available to Christians for their own type of revelation. So, I agree; it's not anything inherent in yoga, but as a practitioner of a different faith, you may find some conflict, depending on your tradition.

YJ So, there are shades of belief within the yogic experience. Brooke, do you feel that there are shades of belief within the Christian experience, especially as it pertains to yoga?

Brooke Boon Without a doubt. I think most Christians are uneducated about yoga, and what they have heard is rooted in fear: that it
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Glossary

bhakti yoga Generally called the yoga of devotion. From the Sanskrit *bhaj*, which means “to partake of,” bhakti yoga is one of several yogic paths said to lead to enlightenment. Bhakti emphasizes practices like chanting, devotional meditation, and prayer as a path toward union with the Divine.

classical yoga Also known as eight (*ashta*)-limbed (*anga*) practice. Classical yoga typically refers to the yogic path that was set forth by Patanjali. The eight limbs are restraint, observance, posture, breath control, sense withdrawal, concentration, meditative absorption, and *samadhi*.

dharma Has many different meanings depending on how it is used. Dharma is often referred to as “righteousness” or “virtue.” In this article, dharma is used to describe the belief that the universe contains one con-

sciousness, which is different from a specific God.

T. Krishnamacharya Often called the father of modern yoga. Sri Tirumalai Krishnamacharya attended the Royal College of Mysore before devoting himself to esoteric yoga studies. He later became the yoga teacher to a royal family in Mysore, where he taught a unique blend of asana, pranayama, meditation, devotional practices, and philosophy. His students included Iyengar Yoga founder B. K. S. Iyengar; Ashtanga Yoga founder K. Pattabhi Jois; and his son T.K.V. Desikachar, renowned in his own right as a teacher of therapeutic yoga and yogic scriptures and philosophy.

Patanjali The man credited with compiling, systematizing, and putting into written form the yoga philosophy now known as classical yoga. While virtually nothing is known about him

(or if he was, indeed, even a single individual), Patanjali is thought to have created the Yoga Sutra, an important yogic text, about 2,500 years ago.

Sanatana Dharma The original name of what is now popularly called Hinduism. The word *sanatana* means “perpetual” or “continuous,” and *dharma* is often interpreted as “virtue” or “righteousness.”

triune God The holy trinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in Christian doctrine.

Vedas/Vedic/Vedantic The Vedas are the oldest scriptures of the sacred canon of Hinduism. *Veda* means “knowledge.” *Vedic* means “pertaining to the Vedas.” *Vedantic* refers to a system of philosophy that is based on the Vedas.

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is Hindu; it can't be separated; that somehow the postures, the movement of the body or the breath, or yoking is to something other than the God of their own faith, and so it gets very confusing. They have a lot of fear.

[At Holy Yoga] we simply say, "God is sovereign." If you believe that God is sovereign in terms of the triune* God, you can stand in that and you can exercise the spiritual discipline of growing closer to God in intimacy and awareness.

That doesn't go over well in a lot of Christian communities. But this is what it is for us. It's about God realization, who Christ is, that coming-alive in an intimate way of Self-realization in response to who God is. So, in answer to your question, there is definitely a difference in different sects of Christianity.

YJ Brooke, do you feel that any of hatha yoga's basic rituals, such as breathing practice or meditation, conflict with your personal practice or religion?

Brooke Boon No, not at all. In fact, I believe that we were created in the image of God, for the glory of God, for the worship of God. And all of the things that we're talking about in terms of Western yoga that we practice in gyms and in studios—the pranayama, the meditation, and the asana—all three of those things are addressed in the Bible.

I believe that yoga is a spiritual discipline that draws you closer to God. And so, if that is true, then the intention of my heart trumps the posture of my body. I think if some of these people [who] are fearful about yoga looked to the word of God in terms of the modalities of yoga, I think it would ease the apprehension.

YJ So, in your mind, the intention of the practice is as important as the rituals of the practice.

Brooke Boon I think it's more important.

Gary Kraftsow I agree with her completely. In yoga I think the intention is the whole key, so it's all about intentionality.

Brooke Boon God looks at the heart

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and not the body. It always comes down to intentionality.

David Frawley Yes, and even in yoga, the heart is the place of unity in which the entire universe dwells inside us.

YJ Beautiful. So, going on a slightly different trajectory for a moment, I'm curious how you feel about people taking some of the spirituality out of yoga. If yoga is being taught in a school and the teacher is not allowed to say *Namaste* or they have to create different names for things, like "bunny breathing" instead of "pranayama," do you feel like some of the essence of yoga is being lost?

David Frawley Certainly. I mean, the deeper practices of yoga philosophy are all very important. In fact, yoga is primarily meditation, it is primarily deeper spiritual experience, and it has its own profound philosophy of life.

That being said, I can understand why they might do it, but they should recognize that there are those for whom yoga is a sacred spiritual practice, and they have trouble with it being simply secularized or, even worse, commercialized.

I think it's important to realize that there is the other yoga community out there for whom yoga is a spiritual and even sometimes a religious discipline, as well. And we can use the secular yoga for its benefits, its health benefits, which certainly should be there for all humanity, but we should recognize that yoga as a term can mean more than that, as well.

Gary Kraftsow But, you know, yoga is for everyone. So it's totally appropriate for me to help somebody with back pain who's not interested at the moment in anything deeper; it's consistent that you adapt the practices to suit the individual where they are. So, it's fine to do it as long as it's done respectfully so [that] those for whom it is more sacred and even perhaps religious don't feel that their sacred symbols are being disrespected.

YJ So, you can teach asana to people of any faith, but do you think it's possible to teach the deeper aspects of yoga in a way that doesn't cross



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boundaries of ideology and belief?

Gary Kraftsow Yeah, I think absolutely. There's a lot of money and research now from the government and various organizations—our military even—going into this field of mind-body medicine. When we say that asana is just exercise, we shouldn't belittle exercise. They're showing that exercise of many kinds, not just asana, is more powerful in many cases than psychiatric pharmacology in certain kinds of depression. I think we can definitely teach a mind-body connection and teach deeper aspects of yoga without any language that would conflict with anyone's ideology.

David Frawley One more point is that I think yoga should challenge our belief systems. I don't think we have to say yoga doesn't challenge our belief systems. Yoga should challenge our belief systems in a positive way of creating more peace, understanding, discrimination, [and] higher awareness, and connecting us to a greater universal truth, rather than getting us caught in barriers and boundaries.

It should help us break down these social, political, religious, ideological, [and] philosophical boundaries. But it can't be neutral and inoffensive.

Even science can be offensive to certain religious groups. We can't say science will not be taught in those schools.

Gary Kraftsow Right.

Brooke Boon I completely agree with that, yes.

Stefanie Syman I think it's been very effective to promote yoga for back pain and depression, but I also think that it's kind of this double-edged thing, where you promote a very secular yoga and, in so doing, lose sight of some of its greatest potential, or certainly its purpose. We want to separate out the secular element from the spiritual elements, and I always wonder if that's totally possible.

Gary Kraftsow Well, I hear what you are saying, but if you have a deeper initiation into the broader tradition of yoga, then you recognize that what's relevant for one individual or group isn't the same as another. If you see what is going to be

appropriate for the individual or the group you're working with, you can adapt and give them what's going to serve them.

You don't want to shove mantra and prayer [at] someone who's not interested in it. The role of a teacher is to be able to assess appropriately the context that they're teaching [in] and adapt the tools appropriately so that it serves the people that you're working with.

So it's not like there's one thing and that we're doing some kind of fragmentation. I think the deeper initiation and understanding you have of yoga, your responsibility as a teacher is to make it available and accessible to the individuals that are coming to you for help at whatever level they're coming.

That's the emphasis of Krishnamacharya's teaching—that yoga is for the individual. It's not about the teacher; it's about the practitioner. And our job is to provide for them what's going to be useful for them where they are when they're coming to us.

Brooke Boon That's right. I think that

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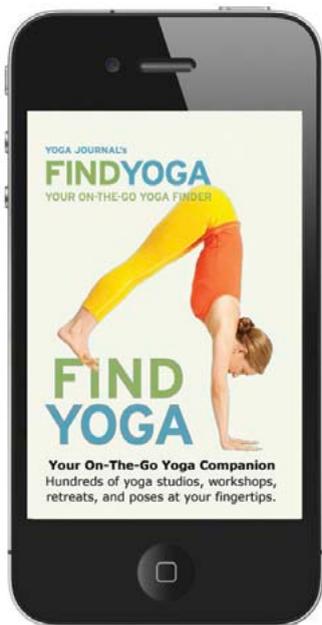
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if we don't secularize it at least a bit, then we're going to miss out on introducing a lot of people to this amazing spiritual discipline of yoga.

YJ There is a growing trend of incorporating Hindu iconography into yoga classes, such as Ganesh or telling stories of Hanuman or even chanting without translating the meaning of the chant. If a Christian person walks into a class like this, are they being asked to engage in things that conflict with their faith? Brooke, do you encourage your students to go to public classes?

Brooke Boon I absolutely encourage them to go to any classes that interest them. I think they find themselves most comfortable in Holy Yoga classes, [and] if that's the case, then I tell them that they should stay in a Holy Yoga class. But for me, I've practiced in studios. Do I participate in the chanting? No. One of my primary trainings is in Anusara Yoga and the other [is in] Ashtanga. I don't chant; it's

not for me. Does it mean that it's wrong? Absolutely not; it just means that I don't participate because it's not conducive to my faith and what I'm comfortable with.

Gary Kraftow A lot of the yoga teachers are just mechanically saying things like Namaste and chanting Om or [they have] a statue of Ganesh in their studio, without any deep understanding of what these things actually mean or represent. So, I think that there is a lack of education, and there's sometimes an unfortunate sort of grafting [of] things that come from Hinduism onto yogic classes, without any real deep understanding of the meaning behind it. And I think that's a problem.

David Frawley Overall, I would say that the devotional element is essential to yoga, and if people are finding something of value in it, then I don't think it's a problem. See, we live in a global culture today; in the past, we had to follow the religion of our ancestors. Now, you have people in India becoming Christian; you have people in America influenced by Hinduism, Buddhism, joining the Eastern religions,

and so forth. I don't think this has to be a problem. This is part of a global movement and we should see the value in it.

YJ Any final thoughts?

David Frawley I would like to add one point. A lot of the Western religions feel that yoga or Hinduism or Buddhism are polytheistic, and that isn't true; they are pluralistic. They have a variety of names and forms and approaches to the one reality. These are not separate gods or separate deities in conflict with one another or anything like that. So, I think we have to teach yoga with that pluralistic point of view and [with] the understanding that pluralism not only extends within Eastern traditions but can extend through all religious, scientific, [and] philosophical traditions. That gets us out of this need to either accept a particular form or deny a particular form—they're just part of the many options.

Gary Kraftow That's so beautiful. It's such an important statement, David. Thank you. ❖

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