

Yoga Bharati



Detroit Chapter

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Excerpt from a Q & A session with our dear teacher, Mr. Raghuram.

If I practice yoga, am I considered a Hindu?

As the Eastern thought of yoga pervades the West, this question has become increasingly common. I have encountered this question numerous times and, usually, answered according to the situation; sometimes yes and sometimes no. Not that one is true and the other false; or that one is correct and the other wrong. I simply answered in the context of the question.

Recently, my friends from the West asked me this question and indicated its predominance in their community. It was then that I began pondering and answering in greater detail. Is Yoga a religion? The simple answer is NO. Yoga is not a religion in and of itself, but to understand why, we must examine the question further.

First, we need to understand the word "religion." It is difficult to translate the word "religion" into any of the Indian languages. Why? Simply because there is no Indian concept called "religion," as it is defined by the English language. Like many other words in Sanskrit, an ancient Indian language, it cannot be directly translated into English. Thus, the Sanskrit word's true meaning and concept is lost in translation or misinterpreted, and we end up using the available words to create a loose translation.

The same thing happened with the word "Dharma," which is the Sanskrit word used to represent religion. This word Dharma is a very deep concept. The concept of Dharma itself is more than 7,000-10,000 years old, whereas, the concept of religion was born no more than 2,000 years ago. So, how can we understand a concept that is over 10,000 years old by a word that has a history of only 2,000 years?

Yoga is a concept which is discussed in texts that have profound discussions about Dharma, the philosophy of human beings. Whether it is Yoga or Dharma, they both come from the same texts, called Vedas, Upanishads, Bhagavad-Gita, Ramayana, and Mahabharata. To think that Yoga belongs to a religion is like saying the Grandfather looks like the newborn grandchild. While religion often limits us, Yoga expands us. Dharma begins to organize the life of a human being in a structured way. It guides us to enjoy the creation around us with an elevating experience. It prevents us from becoming slaves to or drawn in by the world and from becoming self-centered. In the march of life, one can grow to

manifest his/her inner godliness aspect. Yoga has been indicated as an effective tool to reach this state. Hence, it is a way of life and not a religion.

As one of the leaders of religion defined it, "have faith in a prophet and his sayings. Follow one book which is the recording of the message of god through the messenger or the message of God himself as an unquestionable authority or dictation or dogma and falling out from itself is sin..." This is religion. For this reason, religion becomes very narrow. Any idea which falls outside of the religious text or teachings of the religious leader, regardless of its logical and experiential validity, will not be approved; whereas, yoga is logical and rational. We can verify the ideas of yoga by our own experience. In that sense the philosophical discussions that go on in the texts of yoga are developed in a very logical way, though they are based on the experience of a few great seers and saints.

All religions have the a certain element of faith, so the teachings stated by a leader of the religion is assumed to be correct, regardless of later experiences which prove the teachings to be incorrect or irrational. The other aspect of religion is that which helps a person to develop self-discipline. When we ignore or neglect the faith aspect and concentrate on the discipline aspect of religion, we find much commonality throughout all of the religions: including love others, show compassion towards all creatures, etc. These aspects are similar to the yogic concept of Ahimsa, or non-violence. Hence, when we delve into the principles of yoga and we discuss non-violence and compassion, people begin associating the concept of yoga with religion.

People also begin noticing that many yoga practitioners are vegetarian. Since the world knows that a large number of Hindus are vegetarian, and often vegan, doubt again arises. Unfortunately, those who are religious do not differentiate the two aspects of faith and self-discipline. If more people were able to give up the faith portion of the religion and take only the discipline aspect, then not only yoga, but even the religions, can be understood from a broader perspective.

Many people ask this question, but often do not find the answer important. They have already decided in their mind that yoga is a religion.

I also heard a yoga master say that the Yoga Suthras of Patanjali are 'the bible' of yoga. He may have said it with good intentions of providing a loose analogy only and not to emphasize that you have to have blind faith in what is said there. But a person who already sees yoga as a religion asked me, 'Is Patanjali the prophet in yoga?' Such people try to apply their preconceived notions to what you say and leave the facts behind.

My friend, Mullah Nasruddin went to Haj and returned to the town after six months. He heard that his good friend died very recently in his absence. He went to the bereaved lady to give her his condolences. She recollected with tears in her eyes what happened that fateful day. She said, "Everything was alright with your friend that day. He was so healthy and normal. It was a holiday and he wanted to have Masala Dosa (a South Indian meal). I told him there are no onions to put into the potato vegetables for the dosas. He told me not to worry and that he would go out and get it. That is all. He never returned home alive. He

suddenly developed chest pain. Every thing happened in the market only." Mullah, after a minute of silence, consoles her, "Don't worry, make the potato vegetable without onions!"

The main issue is left behind and the minor issue is taken forward. In the same way, whether yoga is logical, practical, and experiential loses its importance, but the question 'Is yoga a religion?' becomes important! The answer to, 'Is Patanjali a prophet?' becomes the deciding factor for us to take to accept yoga!

Yoga has had the contributions of many great saints and its understanding currently continues to be refreshed by many people. In that sense, it is an earnest hope that the understanding of yoga can help the world population rise above the barriers of religion to embrace, appreciate, and respect various faiths and concepts of divinity through practical experience and practice.

Hence, I must answer, No, yoga is not a religion; it is an ancient concept conceived and practiced far before the advent of religion. It is a way of life. Therefore, let us not discuss the credibility of Yoga for mankind by measuring it in terms of religion and in terms of conversion to or from religion to religion. The culture which has given Yoga did not have the word called "religion" and has taken care of the progress of human beings for thousands of years. I am sure that these concepts of Yoga can take the world even further for thousands of years to come.

Love
N.V.Raghuram