

WHY THE DEMAND FOR “NOT-YOGA”? BY BOB WALDREP



AL.COM, the online source for several Alabama newspapers, including the *Birmingham News*, recently posted an article with the headline, “Yoga Remains Prohibited in Alabama Schools”¹ by Leada Gore (8-19-2019). Apparently it was, prompted by a press release issued by Rajan Zed, a self-promoting, “Hindu leader” and president of the Universal Society of Hinduism – an organization he established in Reno, Nevada in 2011.

Ms. Gore had previously addressed this topic for AL.COM in an August 2018 article, “Why Yoga Can’t Be Taught in Alabama’s Public Schools”, in which she rightly identifies Zed as an Indian American spiritual leader”.² Of course, this article also was prompted by a press release from Rajan Zed.

Zed’s press releases and the subsequent news stories generated by Gore and other reporters have postured this as if Alabama’s school children are being deprived of some great benefit. Through the articles, and discussions they have generated, one might believe yoga is nothing more than an exercise program that helps develop physical and mental health and relieve stress.

As we will see, this is the typical view held by Americans when it comes to yoga. But, is that really the exclusive goal of yoga or is there more to the story that isn’t being told?

In both press releases Zed urged the Governor and the Superintendent and Vice President (President Pro Tem in the 2019 version) of the Alabama State Board of Education to, “...seriously and urgently revisit the issue and work towards formally introducing yoga as part of curriculum in all the public schools of the State, thus incorporating highly beneficial yoga in the lives of Alabama’s students.” Both also stated that yoga traces its roots to “around 2,000 BCE to Indus Valley civilization” and, “...was a mental and physical discipline.”³

The accuracy of the latter statement is critical to Zed’s appeal to teach yoga to Alabama’s children. As a Hindu, he surely realizes

to make it acceptable it must be stripped of any connection to religion and/or spirituality – a point Gore and others seem to have missed or intentionally chose to ignore.

Yoga Prohibited In Alabama Schools

The background and heart of this issue is the 1993 Alabama Administrative Code Section 290-404-040.02 which states, “School personnel shall be prohibited from using any techniques that involve the instruction of hypnotic states, guided imagery, meditation or yoga.” It also includes these definitions:

“Yoga – A Hindu philosophy and method of religious training in which eastern meditation and contemplation are joined with physical exercises, allegedly to facilitate the development of body mind spirit.”

“Meditation – An altered or dissociative state, of consciousness often synonymous with hypnosis associated or derived from the mystical traditions of the East, sometimes called transcendental meditation, normally induced by progressive relaxation (H. Benson’s Relaxation Response), focusing on deep breaths and a mantra (repeated word or phrase).”⁴

The State Board of Education held firm on this rule when it was extended to include after hours in a June 21, 2006 Memorandum to County and State Superintendents from, then State Superintendent of Education, Joseph B. Morton. Addressing the concern that some school systems were considering offering yoga as part of a community education program meeting after hours on school grounds, Morton concluded:

“In reviewing the current AAC Rule 290-404-040.02, it appears that offering yoga could be a violation of the AAC, even if it is offered after school to existing public school students...Our best advice and guidance from the Department of Education is that yoga not be offered during regular school hours or after regular school hours to public school students on a public school campus in Alabama.”⁵

It should be noted that the definition of yoga in the AAC Rule includes that it is Hindu, utilizes eastern meditation – which is also prohibited – and involves not just the body

and mind but the spirit, as well. These are key areas that are disputed by those who are trying to introduce yoga into the classroom and into after school programs.

It is noteworthy that a work around for yoga being taught in Alabama public schools seems to have already been introduced. *The 2009 Alabama Course of Study* provided examples of courses that might be offered as physical education electives. Included in the Fitness and Conditioning section was “Pilates (*stretching)”. The asterisk inserted before “stretching” is very interesting. It points to language at the page bottom which states:

“Course may not be called yoga; however, **only yoga technique poses/ exercises and stretches may be included in the content.** Yoga is prohibited and may not be taught on public school property.”⁶ (emphasis added)


This certainly appears to say you can teach yoga – you just can’t call it yoga. It also implies that yoga is, or can be reduced to poses, exercises, and stretching. This view or version of yoga is what proponents are currently trying to introduce into Alabama public schools.

In his 2019 press release, Zed refers to the agenda of a February 14, 2019 work session of the Alabama State Board of Education which included an item to, “Amend Alabama Administrative Code Regarding Yoga Rules.” Zed notes, “According to reports, the Board took no further action, nor did any related item appear on a business agenda or work session agenda in any subsequent meeting.”⁷

Why was Zed so interested in this amendment and its failing to be heard? Might it be because, if passed, it would have opened the door for just what Zed and others hope to accomplish – whether knowingly or unknowingly – introducing our children to an eastern religion discipline.

Consider these changes this amendment would have implemented. First, it proposed to change the prohibition of “yoga” in the current 1993 rule to the prohibition of “Spiritual Yoga”. The amended version would define so-called “Spiritual Yoga” as, “...a practice that combines certain Eastern philosophy and methods of religious training with

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physical exercise alleged to facilitate the development of the mind-body spirit.”⁸ (Note, by the definition, the attempt here is to make it appear there are two types of yoga – “spiritual” and non-spiritual.)

The amended version would also allow for “yoga stretches, exercises, and poses intended to improve flexibility and strength as a teaching technique...if the instruction does not include a religious component.”⁹ It would also allow for these classes and techniques to be done on campus before or after school hours.

In essence the amendment, though claiming to prohibit ‘Spiritual Yoga’, would be allowing a spiritual practice to be taught Alabama’s children through the public education system. A point made by Eric Johnston of the Southeast Law Institute in a letter to the Governor and Board of Education members in response to this proposed amendment. In his letter, Mr. Johnston pointed out:

“There is no such thing as spiritual yoga. There is ‘yoga.’... [and] Yoga includes the spiritual part along with the physical part. The use of the word yoga means religion. The adjective ‘spiritual’ has nothing to do with religious practices.”¹⁰

The failure to get the amendment through the State Board of Education did not mean this current push for yoga was finished. On April 16, 2019, HB449, a Bill to “authorize local board of education to offer yoga to students in K to 12” was introduced into the Alabama State legislature by Democrat Representatives Gray, Hall, Coleman, Morris, Rogers, Kitchens, Sullivan, Blackshear, Alexander, Rafferty, Hatcher, Simpson, Boyd, Lawrence, Daniels, Clarke, Warren and Hollis. In part it provided:

“All instruction in yoga shall be an elective activity...limited exclusively to poses exercises and stretching techniques... [and] poses shall be limited to sitting, standing, reclining, twisting, and balancing [and all of these] ...shall have exclusively English descriptive names. Chanting,

mantras, mudras, use of mandalas, and namaste greetings shall be expressly prohibited.”¹¹

Though this bill never made it to the floor for a vote, the fact that so many representatives were trying to get it there indicates the growing effort to teach yoga in the classroom by “de-spiritualizing” it – removing its attachment to Hinduism, you might say.

As Eric Johnston rightly noted in his letter to the Board of Education, yoga is inherently “spiritual” which is the crux of the issue. Even Zed, in his press release, had to acknowledge this truth. He knew that not only does it trace its roots to the Indus Valley but also wrote, “yoga [was] introduced and nourished by Hinduism”.¹² Hinduism, of course, is a religion.

There is no such thing as spiritual yoga. There is “yoga”.

Eric Johnston in a letter to the State Board of Education

Is There a Non-Spiritual Yoga

In yoga’s mother religion of Hinduism there is not a “spiritual” yoga and a “non-spiritual” yoga. Yoga literally finds its definition in the spiritual dimensions of Hinduism. That being the case, if someone proposes teaching a yoga that is not spiritual – it is not yoga.

In other words, if those who are proponents of teaching yoga in grades K-12 could, in fact, strip out all the spiritual dimensions of yoga then it would no longer be yoga but, “not-yoga”. And, if they made it “not-yoga” then what exactly are they a proponent of being taught – why do they insist on calling it yoga if they have truly removed the very thing that makes it yoga?

Consider the Christian practice of Communion or the Lord’s Supper. It involves adherents consuming a cracker or piece of bread along with wine or juice in remembrance of the broken body and shed blood of

Jesus Christ. Obviously, this is a deeply spiritual practice.

But, could someone consume crackers and juice without having a spiritual attachment to it? Certainly, in fact, children do it every day in Alabama schools. However, those who do so do not refer to it as “communion” from which all spiritual aspects have been removed; no, they call it what it is – a snack. (Imagine the outcry if a group proposed that snack times consisting of crackers and juice be called communion.) Likewise, those who say they teach a yoga without a spiritual connection should stop referring to it as yoga and call it what it is – stretching and breathing.

There seems to be only two options, either you want yoga in the classrooms and truthfully acknowledge that means exposing our students to Hinduism, or you don’t want yoga/Hinduism taught in the classroom – exercise, yes; stretching, okay; yoga/Hinduism, no. What should not be an option is what Zed is proposing, denying that yoga is spiritual and trying to reinvent it to make it seem acceptable for the classroom. He is trying to replicate in the classroom what is taking place in other areas of our culture, a growing acceptance of yoga.

In his 2018 press release he notes the progress being made by asserting an Internet search will show several Universities in Alabama have various types of yoga classes. He is correct about this. No doubt, some are led by well-intentioned instructors who do not understand yoga is spiritual and believe it is just a good exercise or stretching program. However, some are blatantly teaching eastern religion such as the University of Montevallo’s annual Yoga Festival (Moyo Fest).

The 2019 Moyo Fest included area yoga instructors who are trained in and teach such yoga traditions as Kundalini (a divine energy located at the base of the spine) and Ashtanga (eight-limbed, includes meditating on god, one’s divine self). One of the classes offered was “Healing Meditation and Gong Bath” which, according to the class description, “[used the] powerful healing mantra Raa Maa

Culture Tracks

AMERICANS AND WESTERN EUROPEAN VIEWS REGARDING EASTERN RELIGION BELIEFS

VIEWS HELD BY AMERICANS (2009 PEW REPORT)		WESTERN EUROPEANS VIEWS (2017 PEW REPORT)	
23%	believe yoga is a spiritual practice (21% of Christians) (70% believe yoga is just exercise, not a spiritual practice)	26%	(median) believe yoga is a spiritual practice (Sweden is highest, 40%; UK lowest, 18%)
24%	believe in reincarnation (22% of identifying Christians)	20%	(median) believe in reincarnation Portugal highest, 31%; Germany lowest, 15%)
26%	believe spiritual energy is in physical things, such as trees, crystals, etc	23%	(median) believe spiritual energy in physical things (Spain, highest 49%; Germany lowest, 17%)

Full Report America <https://www.pewforum.org/2009/12/09/many-americans-mix-multiple-faiths/>

Full Report Western Europe file:///C:/Users/bobwa/Downloads/Being-Christian-in-Western-Europe-FOR-WEB%20(1).pdf

Daa Saa”.¹³ Oddly, Zed fails to mention any of these spiritual connections choosing instead to stick to his script that these college yoga classes are “aimed at strengthening the mind-body connection.”

In addition to Universities offering yoga, in his 2019 press release he notes “some Alabama churches had also reportedly offered/announced yoga programs.”¹⁴ His statement is not only correct, it is particularly troubling as many of these churches present these as Faith-based or Christian yoga. In addition to churches, there are several “Christian” Yoga groups that have wide followings.

By presenting yoga and Christianity as being compatible, whether intentionally or not, they are in a sense promoting Christianity and Hinduism as being compatible. Essentially, it is an assertion that Christians have taken Hinduism, or Hindu’s yoga, as its own – Christian-Hinduism, you might say.

Zed is implying that, if Alabama colleges and churches use yoga – how bad can it be? The intent is to present yoga as a mainstream practice that can be utilized by anyone without any consideration to or concern that it is spiritual or religious. On this point, it is noteworthy that in both of his press releases Zed appeals to an ancient master of yoga, Patanjali, to prove or imply that yoga was from its earliest days physical and mental – not spiritual. On this point he wrote:

“According to Patanjali who codified it in *Yoga Sutras*, yoga was a methodical effort to attain perfection, through the control of the different elements of human nature, physical and psychical.”¹⁵

The *Yoga Sutras* (believed to have been written somewhere from 200-400 BCE), is a reference familiar to many Hindus, New Agers and other followers of eastern religion, and to yoga practitioners. Taking Zed’s statement on its own, one would be led to believe that this book presents yoga as being about the physical and mental. Zed would have us to believe, even in Hinduism the focus of yoga is to attain “perfection” in body and mind only. But is that really what is taught in the *Yoga Sutras*, as he infers?

The Hindu American Foundation (HAF) has a stated goal to educate the American public about Hinduism. Consider the following statements about yoga and the *Yoga Sutras* from the “Hinduism 101” section of their website: (All emphasis is added)

“In Hinduism, yoga encompasses a variety of systems of philosophy-based practices which outline how an individual can **unite body, mind, and soul**, or **his or her actions and thoughts with divinity**, in the quest for **moksha** (liberation/enlightenment). [Enlightenment is commonly believed to be a release – the realization of one’s own divinity or part

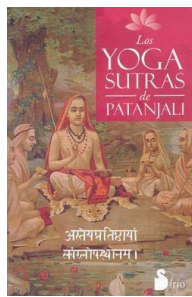
of the Universal Consciousness.]

“Many mistake asana or **posture** to be yoga, but **yoga is a spiritual practice** that encompasses far more.”

“Hindus are encouraged to find a yoga that fits their individual temperament and personality and which best utilizes their strengths to ultimately get closer **to achieving moksha**.”

“The help of a **guru, or spiritual teacher**, is important, as Hindus believe a guru can guide them to their unique **yogic path** and teach them the techniques necessary for **spiritual progress**.”¹⁶

But what about the *Yoga Sutras*, is it an exception focusing on the mental and physical as Zed would lead us to believe, or does it also recognize that yoga is spiritual? Here is what HAF states:



“Sage Patanjali compiled the *Yoga Sutras*, a text which is understood to be one of the earliest codifications of extant yogic practices. He outlined yoga as an eight step **spiritual system** or ashtanga. Hindus believe that by clearing the conscience

through ethical behavior, stabilizing the body through correct **meditative posture**, and **controlling the breath** to steady the nervous system, **the individual is ready to experience God**.”¹⁷

Depak Chopra is a best-selling author and New Age and alternative medicine guru. He has also taken exception with HAF on their position that yoga comes from Hinduism. However, he does not disagree that it has a spiritual component. Concerning the *Yoga Sutras*, his Chopra Center states:

“The **true meaning of Yoga** is the union of **body, mind, soul, and spirit**. According to Yoga, we suffer because of not knowing our true Self and because of the illusion of separation of our individual consciousness from Universal Consciousness or *Brahman*. The *Yoga Sutras* are a practical textbook to guide your **spiritual journey** of remembering.”¹⁸ (emphasis added)

Roger Gabriel, a Chopra Center Educator, further clarifies this, writing:

“In his illuminating text, the *Yoga Sutras*, the sage Patanjali introduces a systematic path to regain **Higher Consciousness**. This has since been called *Raja Yoga* or the Royal Path, a journey of techniques and lifestyle guidelines to awaken the mind to its true Self. Within the text, Patanjali provides a concentrated set of instructions known as the Eight Limbs of Yoga, culminating in a state of freedom, liberation, ecstasy, and enlightenment—*Samadhi*, the realization of

all your **spiritual practices**.”¹⁹

The spiritual aspect of the *Yoga Sutras* is further affirmed on the yoga resource site beYogi which states:

“[In *Yoga Sutras*] Patanjali gave yogis *ashtanga yoga*, which you may know as the eight limbs of yoga. This body of wisdom explains a natural progression of techniques to train the body, mind, and senses for **spiritual evolution**.”²⁰

A search of other Hindu websites and books will reveal the same or similar language regarding yoga and the *Yoga Sutras*. Rather than presenting yoga as being simply a good physical and mental exercise, Patanjali and the *Yoga Sutras*, clearly support it is also very much spiritual. Either Zed is one of the few Hindu or eastern spiritual leaders who doesn’t understand this and wrote out of ignorance; or, perhaps, his language was crafted to misdirect the news stories of reporters who would rely upon the information in his press releases.

Not only is yoga spiritual it is also increasingly popular among Americans. The National Center for Health Statistics (NCHS) released a 2017 poll that indicated the number of Americans who had engaged in yoga had increased by almost 5% from 2012 to 14.3%, or to 35.2 million adults. Zed appeals to this report’s finding of yoga’s popularity to support his demand for yoga in the classroom. His use of this report is interesting considering the poll’s definition of yoga is very much like that in the 1993 Alabama code – something he again fails to mention. Consider the following NCHS poll definition:

“Yoga: A combination of breathing exercises, **meditation**, and physical postures, of **Hindu origin**, used to achieve a state of relaxation and balance of mind, body, and **spirit**.”²¹ (emphasis added)

It would seem that anyone who has a problem with the 1993 AL Code definition for yoga would certainly have a problem with the NCHS definition, as well. Apparently, not Mr. Zed who, as of this writing, has not issued a press release calling upon the NCHS to recant its definition of yoga.

The NCHS poll is revealing as to who is most likely to use yoga. It found Non-Hispanic Whites who used yoga (17.1%) more than doubled the combined number of Non-Hispanic Blacks and Hispanics who used yoga. Likewise, the number of women who used yoga (19.8%) more than doubled that of men and the largest age group who used yoga was 18-44.

Though it reveals who is using yoga, the NCHS poll doesn’t reveal what Americans believe about yoga. A 2009 poll by Pew Research²² helps provide the answer. It determined that only 23% of Americans believed yoga is spiritual – 70% believed it is not

spiritual and the remaining 7% were undecided. Even among Christians just 21% said they believed it was spiritual.

The NCHS poll identified the typical American yoga “consumer” and likely proponent of its benefits among their peer group) as white females under the age of 44. The Pew Poll found women (27%) are also the largest segment who believed yoga was spiritual. Perhaps most interesting – and on point for the present discussion – the Pew Poll also found that, of those who believe yoga is spiritual, 57% were in the age group of 18-49 which overlaps that which the NCHS found most uses yoga, ages 18-44.

Take the statistics related to the general public, factor in over 70% of Alabama public school teachers are under the age of 49 (2012 National Center for Education Statistics ²³) and 80% are white females (2018-2019 Alabama State Board of Education ²⁴) and then add the fact that they, like the general public, are constantly fed an inaccurate portrayal of yoga by disruptors (like Zed) and the media, and it is little wonder the desire to abolish the rule forbidding yoga in the classroom keeps popping up.

From the NCHS and Pew polls it can be concluded that many who use yoga genuinely believe it is either not spiritual or it can be separated from the spiritual. These polls also reveal that a significant number of Americans who use yoga know it is, indeed, spiritual and practice it as such. It seems absurd to think that someone who believes it offers great spiritual benefit would not want to share that with others. Similarly, one who is benefitting from yoga on a physical level would surely want to learn more about its “other” benefits.

Clearly, as Americans’ fascination for yoga grows, the overwhelming majority continue to be unaware, or choose not to admit, it is spiritual. This is not the case among Asian Americans affiliated with an eastern religion. A 2012 poll by Pew Research ²⁵ found that even though yoga is more commonly associated with Hinduism, 58% of Asian-American Buddhists see yoga as a spiritual practice. This report found that among Asian-American Hindus (93% of whom trace their heritage to India) 73% see yoga as spiritual. Even 42 % of Asian-Americans not affiliated with a religion recognize it as spiritual.

It seems strange that the majority of Americans, by claiming yoga is not spiritual, are dismissing what this group believes and knows – that yoga is spiritual. In essence,

those who say yoga is just exercise are saying to the Asian-American community – you are wrong and don’t really know yoga. For, isn’t that what they say about everyone else who says yoga is spiritual?



Why the Push for Yoga

Other than being ignorant of spiritual matters and not being informed, what is driving this seemingly blind acceptance of yoga? While the reasons are varied, there are at least three that are primary.

First, those promoting yoga as being non-spiritual are effectively advocating their message, no matter what the motivation.

Second, the majority of Americans have no connection to yoga except for the positive portrayal it is given in commercials, television shows, movies, and media stories, like Ms. Gore’s, which give only one side of the story – that being, yoga is a great physical exercise and/or relaxation technique.

Third and, perhaps, the main one – money. Yoga has become a multibillion-dollar industry, which may very well be a key factor in the move to make yoga not “spiritual”.


On this last point, consider the words of HAF’s managing director, Suhag Shukla, writing for the Huffington Post in January 2012 under the heading “Yoga Won’t Wreck Your Body But May Make You More Hindu”:

“Almost three years ago, the Hindu American Foundation launched its Take Back Yoga Project (TBY) ²⁶. The initial aim was simple: to bring about acknowledgement of yoga’s Hindu roots by highlighting not only the delinking of yoga from its spiritual framework by the yoga industry, but also the erroneous idea that yoga is primarily a physical practice based on asana. But as more than 20 million Americans dabble in “yoga” and the \$6 billion yoga industry continues to bloat, the importance and scope of TBY has evolved from one of identity to that of filling in the public knowledge gap.” ²⁷

Based on the statistical demographics, it is

no surprise Zed found so many yoga groups on college campuses or that he may believe the time is ripe to push the agenda to see it taught in K-12. One cannot help but wonder if his goal is truly motivated from the belief yoga is not spiritual or is it intended to further desensitize and indoctrinate Non-Hindus to the practice of yoga and through that becoming more open to his own religion of Hinduism.

When it comes to selling yoga, Americans are being sold a bill of goods – they are not getting all the facts. If properly placed within its Hindu origins the spiritual dimensions of yoga are undeniable. The fact someone is unaware of this, or that the majority of people do not agree with it, does not make it any less true.

Hindu yogis or practitioners of yoga, understand that yoga takes the teacher and the student on a spiritual journey. Perhaps those who take yoga, “simply for the exercise benefit” would do well to heed the advice of another great Yogi, baseball Hall of Famer, Yogi Berra, who once said, “You got to be very careful if you don’t know where you’re going, because you might not get there.” 

End Notes

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