

Yoga and Christianity: Exploring Foundational Beliefs



Faithful Flow

Awaken Your Faith, Ignite Your Practice

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<https://faithfulflow.com/yoga-and-christianity-exploring-foundational-beliefs-part-1/>

<https://faithfulflow.com/yoga-and-christianity-exploring-foundational-beliefs-part-2/>

<https://faithfulflow.com/yoga-vs-christianity-exploring-beliefs-part-3/>

There is more to yoga beyond the three pillars of meditation, breathwork, and poses. Behind these basic health and wellness tools, there is a philosophical framework that some yogis use to guide their understanding of and interaction with the world. Some yoga philosophies align with the Christian worldview, and some do not. Let's take a look at some of these foundational yoga beliefs and compare them to their counterparts in the Bible.

Much of yoga philosophy comes from the Yoga Sutras, a collection of statements and observations that is generally attributed to the ancient sage Patanjali. Like the Bible, these statements were passed on through oral teaching before being compiled into a cohesive text.

Foundational Beliefs of Yoga Compared to Christianity

Nature of Man:

The Yoga Sutras teach that the true nature of man is divine (*Purusha*). This divine nature is often obscured by ignorance and attachment (*avidya*). Liberation (*moksha*) or freedom from these attachments and thoughts is achieved by realizing one's true nature beyond the fluctuations of the mind (*chitta*).

This ignorance is not merely a lack of knowledge, but rather a misunderstanding of reality. Overcoming attachments is a central aim of yoga practice, with the cultivation of self-awareness, wisdom, and discernment serving as antidotes to ignorance and paving the way for spiritual liberation. *Purusha* is described in Sutra 1.3, and the concept of *avidya* (ignorance) is discussed throughout the text.

The Bible teaches that humans are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27), imbued with inherent dignity and value. We are called to reflect God's divine attributes such as love, compassion, and righteousness in our interactions with others.

We have all sinned against God (Romans 3:23), and sin rather than ignorance or attachment is our greatest battle. Redemption is found through faith in Jesus Christ, restoring humanity's relationship with God.

Human Will:

The Yoga Sutras emphasize individual will and self-discipline in overcoming obstacles on the path to liberation. They highlight the power of individual agency in shaping your thoughts, actions, and, ultimately your destiny. The Sutras advocate for the development of focused intention (*sankalpa*) and unwavering determination (*virya*) to navigate the challenges of the mind and align oneself with the path of yoga.

The Bible presents a complex understanding of human will. It acknowledges both its capacity for moral agency and its susceptibility to sin and temptation. Throughout the Bible, individuals are called to align their will with God's purpose, to seek righteousness, and to obey God's commandments.

However, it also recognizes the fallen nature of humanity, prone to rebellion and disobedience. Despite human frailty, the Bible offers hope for redemption and transformation through faith, repentance, and belief in Jesus. Revealing that true freedom is found in submission to God's guidance rather than in self-centered desires.

Philippians 2:13 (CSB) "For it is God who is working in you both to will and to work according to his good purpose."

Good vs Evil/Sin:

The Yoga Sutras primarily focus on the concept of suffering (*duhkha*) and the means to transcend it rather than framing the discussion in terms of good and evil. However, the Sutras acknowledge the existence of afflictions (*kleshas*) which are mental states that contribute to suffering. These *kleshas* include ignorance (*avidya*), egoism (*asmita*), attachment (*raga*), aversion (*dvesha*), and fear of death (*abhinivesha*).

While these *kleshas* are not explicitly labeled as "evil," they are seen as obstacles to spiritual growth and self-realization. The Sutras emphasize the importance of overcoming these afflictions through practices such as self-discipline, meditation, and ethical living, thereby transcending the duality of good and evil and attaining a state of inner peace.

The nature of good and evil as manifestations of ignorance is discussed in various sutras, including Sutras 2.5-2.11.

The Bible presents a clear distinction between good and evil, rooted in God's moral law. God is the ultimate source of goodness, righteousness, and moral order, while evil is seen as rebellion against God's will and the consequence of sin. Genesis gives us the narrative of the Fall, where humanity's disobedience to God's commands led to the introduction of evil and suffering into the world.

Scripture provides moral guidance, outlining virtues such as love, compassion, justice, and integrity, while condemning actions such as greed, hatred, dishonesty, and violence as manifestations of evil. It emphasizes the importance of free will and personal responsibility, urging individuals to choose righteousness and resist temptation in order to align themselves with God's purposes and experience the blessings of a virtuous life.

Ultimately, the Bible offers hope for redemption and restoration, teaching that through faith, repentance, and obedience to God's commandments, humans can overcome evil and participate in the realization of God's kingdom on earth.

Isaiah 5:20 (CSB) “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who substitute darkness for light and light for darkness, who substitute bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.”

Moral and Ethical Guidance:

The Yoga Sutras provide moral and ethical guidance through the Yamas (restraints) and Niyamas (observances), emphasizing virtues such as non-violence, truthfulness, and self-discipline. The Yamas and Niyamas are outlined in Sutras 2.30-2.45.

The Yamas consist of moral restraints, including non-violence (ahimsa), truthfulness (satya), non-stealing (asteya), sexual restraint or right use of energy (brahmacharya), and non-greediness (aparigraha). The Niyamas comprise ethical observances, such as cleanliness (shaucha), contentment (santosha), austerity (tapas), self-study (svadhyaya), and surrender to the divine (ishvara pranidhana).

By adhering to these moral and ethical principles, practitioners create an environment that supports spiritual growth, cultivates inner purity, and aligns themselves with the universal principles of harmony and righteousness. Ethical living is seen not only as a means to personal development but also as a way to contribute positively to society and create a more peaceful and just world.

The Bible provides comprehensive moral and ethical guidance aimed at guiding individuals in righteous living that honors God and sustains community. The framework for the moral law is rooted in God's character.

Matthew 22:37-40 (CSB) "He said to him, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands."

The Old Testament lays out moral, civil, and ceremonial laws. The Old Testament prophets often emphasized justice, mercy, and compassion. In the New Testament, Jesus further expounds on these moral teachings, emphasizing the importance of love, forgiveness, and humility. He teaches the principle of the Golden Rule, urging individuals to treat others as they would like to be treated.

The apostles, particularly Paul, also provide practical guidance for ethical living in their letters, emphasizing virtues such as kindness, patience, honesty, and self-control. Overall, the Bible's teachings on moral and ethical guidance serve to orient individuals towards virtuous living, promoting justice, compassion, integrity, and love as foundational principles for personal conduct and community life.

Meditation and Prayer:

The Yoga Sutras provide guidance on meditation as a central practice for achieving spiritual growth and self-realization. Meditation is one of the eight limbs of Ashtanga Yoga, following the practices of ethical living (yama and niyama discussed above) and physical postures (asana).

Meditation in the Yoga Sutras involves focusing the mind on a single point of concentration, such as the breath, a mantra, or an object, in order to quiet the mind and attain inner stillness. Through consistent practice, practitioners cultivate a state of deep concentration (dharana) and eventually experience a state of meditation (dhyana), leading to profound insights and spiritual awakening.

The practice of meditation and concentration is discussed throughout the Yoga Sutras, particularly in Sutras 3.1-3.3.

The Bible emphasizes prayer and meditation as integral components of the believer's spiritual life. Prayer is a means of communicating directly with God, where we can express our desires, concerns, gratitude, and worship. Philippians 4:6 says, "Do not be

anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."

Throughout the Bible, various forms of prayer are modeled, including adoration, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication. Jesus, in particular, provides teachings and examples of prayer, such as the Lord's Prayer, emphasizing sincerity, humility, and faith in God's provision.

Meditation, on the other hand, involves contemplation and reflection on God's Word, character, and attributes. The Bible encourages believers to meditate on God's word day and night, allowing His teachings to dwell richly within them. Through meditation on Scripture, we gain wisdom, insight, and spiritual nourishment, transforming our minds and renewing our hearts.

Both prayer and meditation are seen as vital practices for nurturing a vibrant and intimate relationship with God, aligning your will with His, and experiencing His presence, guidance, and peace in daily life.

Divinity:

The Yoga Sutras describe *Brahman* as the absolute, eternal, and unchanging essence that underlies the entire universe. It is often equated with the concept of *Atman*, the true self or soul. The Sutras teach that realizing the true nature of *Brahman* is the ultimate goal of yoga practice, as it leads to liberation (*moksha*) from the cycle of suffering (*samsara*).

Practitioners are encouraged to transcend the limitations of the individual ego and recognize their inherent unity with *Brahman*. Through practices such as meditation, self-inquiry, and ethical living, individuals can attain direct experience of *Brahman* and realize their identity as divine beings interconnected with all of creation. The concept of Brahman is discussed throughout the Yoga Sutras, particularly in Sutras 1.7-1.9.

The Christian Bible teaches the existence of a personal God who created and sustains the universe. God is seen as actively intervening in human affairs and offers salvation and relationship through Jesus Christ. God is described as omnipotent (unlimited power), omniscient (knowing everything), and omnipresent (present everywhere), transcending human comprehension and existing outside of time and space.

The Bible emphasizes monotheism, the belief in one God in three forms: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, called the Trinity. God is portrayed as loving, just, and merciful.

John 1:1 states, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Works vs Gift:

Spiritual progress in the Yoga Sutras is primarily achieved through works including self-effort, discipline, perseverance, self-awareness, meditation, ethical living, and self-inquiry. Ultimately, practitioners are encouraged to balance self-effort with humility and surrender to the divine, recognizing that spiritual progress is both a result of their own efforts and a gift bestowed by the grace of the divine.

Christianity teaches salvation by grace through faith. Emphasizing that salvation is a gift from God rather than something earned through human works. Ephesians 2:8-9 (CSB) "For you are saved by grace through faith, and this is not from yourselves; it is God's gift— not from works, so that no one can boast."

Throughout the Bible, individuals are encouraged to demonstrate their faith through acts of compassion, justice, and service to others. While good works are seen as evidence of genuine faith and a transformed heart, they are not the basis for salvation but rather a response to God's grace. Thus, the Bible teaches that both works and grace play important roles in the life of a believer, with works flowing naturally from a heart transformed by God's gift of grace.

Salvation, Liberation, and the Afterlife:

In the Yoga Sutras, salvation and liberation are presented as the ultimate goals of spiritual practice, achievable through the path of yoga. Patanjali describes liberation (*moksha*) as the cessation of suffering (*duhkha*) and the realization of the true nature of the self (*atman*). This leads to a state of eternal bliss and freedom from the cycle of birth and death (*samsara*).

The Yoga Sutras focus on liberation from the cycle of birth and death but do not explicitly discuss an afterlife. The focus is more on merging with the divine or universal consciousness, as opposed to an individual afterlife.

The Bible's teachings on salvation, liberation, and the afterlife form a central theme throughout its texts, spanning both the Old and New Testaments. Salvation is presented

as deliverance from sin and its consequences, including spiritual death and separation from God.

In the Old Testament, salvation is often depicted as rescue from physical enemies or oppression, as well as restoration to a right relationship with God through repentance and faithfulness. The concept of liberation is intertwined with salvation, representing freedom from bondage to sin and the forces of evil.

The New Testament builds upon these themes, emphasizing Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of God's plan for salvation. Through His death and resurrection, Jesus offers forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God to all who believe in Him.

The Bible teaches the existence of an afterlife, with people destined for either eternal life in heaven or separation from God in hell, based on their relationship with Christ. Overall, the Bible's teachings on salvation, liberation, and the afterlife offer hope, redemption, and the promise of eternal joy for those who trust in God's saving grace.

John 3:16-17 says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

TL:DR

While yoga philosophy and Christianity share some similarities, they also have fundamental differences. They share common themes of morality, spiritual growth, and inner transformation but differ significantly in their theological frameworks, concepts of God, and paths to salvation/liberation.

- The Yoga Sutras teach that man's true nature is divine. It can be obscured by ignorance and attachment, which can be overcome by self-awareness, wisdom, and discernment.
- Yoga emphasizes individual will and self-discipline in overcoming obstacles.
- The Bible teaches humans are created in the image of God but have sinned against God and need redemption through faith in Jesus Christ.
- The Bible acknowledges the human will's capacity for moral agency and susceptibility to sin and temptation.
- The Bible clearly distinguishes between good and evil, which is rooted in God's character and law.
- Ultimately, the Bible offers hope for redemption and restoration through faith, repentance, and obedience to God's commandments.
- The Yoga Sutras and the Bible both offer moral and ethical guidance.
- The Sutras outline Yamas (restraints) and Niyamas (observances), emphasizing virtues like non-violence and truthfulness.
- The Bible focuses on loving God and others, with teachings and commands from the Old and New Testaments stressing obedience, justice, compassion, and humility.
- Both sources advocate meditation as vital for spiritual growth. The Sutras emphasize concentration and stillness, and the Bible teaches meditation as a way to reflect on God's word.
- The Bible underscores prayer as a principal way to commune with God. The Sutras do not mention prayer, as they are non-theistic in nature.
- The Yoga Sutras describe the ultimate goal of yoga practice as realizing the true nature of Brahman, leading to liberation from the cycle of suffering.
- The Bible teaches the existence of God, who offers salvation and relationship through Jesus Christ.
- While spiritual progress in Yoga is achieved through works, Christianity emphasizes salvation as a gift from God that is achieved only by grace and through faith.
- The Yoga Sutras focus on liberation from the cycle of birth and death, while the Bible teaches the existence of an afterlife.

It is important to consider these differences carefully when exploring the practice of yoga and how it aligns with your faith. Many yoga classes focus on yoga postures, meditation, and breathing techniques, which are forms of wellness care and do not contradict the Bible or Christian Theology.

However, some yoga classes or teachers include content based on yoga philosophy and spirituality that does not align with the Christian worldview or Biblical teaching. Participating in Christian yoga over secular yoga alleviates these concerns, as these classes incorporate only physical postures and breathing exercises and rely on Biblical wisdom for spirituality and philosophical guidance. Ultimately, the decision whether or not to participate in yoga should be made prayerfully and with careful consideration of your beliefs, convictions, and discernment.

By engaging in a comparative study, Christian yoga students can discern which aspects of yoga philosophy align with their faith and which should be ignored. Through thoughtful reflection and adherence to Biblical principles, students can navigate their yoga practice in a manner that honors God and their personal convictions. While yoga offers valuable techniques for physical and mental well-being, Christians understand that our ultimate guidance comes from God's Word, the Bible.



About the Author

Tonya is the founder of Faithful Flow. With a passion for teaching and writing, she believes that faith and yoga pair perfectly to create a fulfilling, balanced, and resilient life. Tonya is a travel enthusiast who loves the outdoors and adventure. When not on her yoga mat teaching or practicing, you'll find her hiking and exploring the great outdoors, curling up with a book, or volunteering at the local animal shelter. She is currently based in beautiful Coastal Mississippi, where she lives with her husband and three rescue dogs. Visit her website at www.faithfulflow.com to learn more about her work and passion for yoga.