

## January, 2015

The Athletic Department is often asked, “Why does Wheaton College offer Yoga classes?” Controversy surrounding this Group Fitness class at a Christian Institution of Higher Education often stems from a conflict of terms. Traditionally understood, yoga is “a Hindu theistic philosophy teaching the suppression of all activity of body, mind, and will in order that the self may realize its distinction from them and attain liberation.”

In recent decades, traditional yoga has been embraced in the fitness world and transformed from a worldview into “a system of exercises for attaining bodily or mental control and well-being.” Merriam-Webster lists both definitions.

Undeniably rooted in Hinduism, yoga originated millennia ago in cultures very different from our own modern, western civilization. The Sanskrit word, *Yoga*, means “to Yoke”, implying *to join*. Given the various schools of yoga in ancient history, the meaning may have implied the individual joining with one’s true self, the larger universe (Brahman) or a Hindu god (Shiva).<sup>1</sup> One common postural sequence, the Sun Salutation (Sanskrit: *Surya Namaskara*), originated as worship to the solar deity, Surya. Posture names reflect an emphasis on the natural world: birds, mammals, and other postural qualities.

In twenty first century western culture, the ancient system of postures and breathing is largely void of religious overtones. Private studios, eager to capture a wide audience, shy away from religion, keeping with physical and emotional well-being gained from the physical movement. Sanskrit terms, rooted in Hinduism, remain with yoga as practiced in contemporary culture, though use of these ancient (and sometimes religious) words is dependent upon the studio and individual instructor.

Through copyrighted movement sequences and various accreditation agencies, our capitalistic society swaddled ancient yoga with current cultural threads. Yoga, as practiced in many studios, trends more towards modern Psychology than Ancient Hinduism. Instructors, borrowing from the therapist toolbox, utilize Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, and Progressive Muscle Relaxation. This “Westernized” form of yoga is gaining credibility as a form of complementary medicine for both physical and mental health. In addition to the physical health benefits of increased strength and flexibility, advocates claim that

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<sup>1</sup> In 2012, The *New York Times* published an article indicting Yoga as fanning the sexual flames of its practitioners, based on historical roots and the indiscretions of current leaders (February 27, 2012). Many yoga instructors largely discredit the author’s historical analysis, claiming that modern forms are rooted in a different tradition of yoga.

mental health benefits include increased stress management<sup>2</sup>, decreased performance anxiety<sup>3</sup>, and general mood improvement<sup>4</sup>.

At Wheaton College, we seek to bring yoga under the Lordship of Jesus Christ as a system of physical movement, breathing and mental stillness, rather than grounding yoga in pagan religion or secular philosophy. Yoga instructors teaching at Wheaton College profess faith in Jesus Christ and sign the Wheaton College Statement of Faith and Community Covenant. Our belief in Christ focuses and informs us in all areas, including how we practice Yoga.

We practice yoga with these tenets of faith in mind:

- **God's Physical Creation is Good.** In Genesis 1, we read of God Creating the World. We repeatedly read, "*And God saw that it was good*".
- **Our Bodies, as God's Creation, are Good.** Paul tells believers to "offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God" (Romans 12:1) and reminds us that [our], "... body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God?" (1 Corinthians 6:19)
- As opposed to other forms of physical activity, Yoga encourages participants to **Be Still.** In Psalm 46.10, God commands us "Be still and know that I am God". Yoga offers participants a rare moment to cease striving, take rest, and listen. During that rest, we feed on the Fruit of the Spirit. Galatians 5:22-23 tells us "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Yoga postures are best practiced when the Fruit of the Spirit is manifest in the practitioner.
- **God's Faithfulness invites rest, not anxiety.** Matthew 6:25-27 provides appropriate context for practicing the sometimes uncomfortable postures of yoga, "Therefore I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on...And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life?"

In addition to the copyrighted Zumba and Turbo Kick Group Fitness classes, Wheaton College offers yoga as an alternative (non-aerobic) form of physical activity. The movement sequences, breathe control and mental stillness offered in the context of Christian faith and Scripture are beneficial to a healthy lifestyle. For these reasons, Wheaton College believes offering yoga courses contributes to the college mission to serve Jesus Christ and advance His Kingdom by educating the whole person through a redeemed form of yoga that addresses physical, emotional and spiritual needs.

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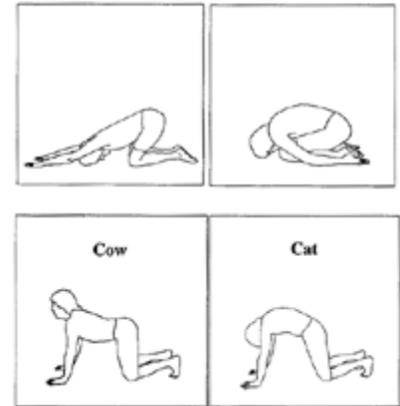
<sup>2</sup> Yoga for Stress Management Program as Complementary Alternative Counseling Resource in a University Counseling Center. *Journal of College Counseling*, 2006 9(2), 181-187.

<sup>3</sup> Yoga Ameliorates Performance Anxiety and Mood Disturbance in Young Professional Musicians. *Applied Psychophysiology and Biofeedback*, 2009 34(4), 279-289.

<sup>4</sup> Mood Alterations in Mindful versus Aerobic Exercise Modes. *Journal of Psychology: Interdisciplinary and Applied*, 2003 137(5), 405-419.

**Examples of yoga** (*Italics indicate pose demonstrated in picture*)

- **Start of Class:** Participants sit cross-legged on mat or in *Child's Pose* and encouraged to find mental stillness while deepening and slowing breath. At Wheaton College, instructors may lead a prayer, offer Scripture or a word of spiritual encouragement or affirmation.
- **Spine Warm-up:** Participants begin to move slowly in concert with established breath. Movements may be neck stretches, gentle twists or *Cat-Cow*.



- **Postural Sequence:** Participants move through a sequence that involves Mountain Pose, Forward Fold, Chaturanga (Stick), Upward Dog, Downward Dog. The entire sequence may comprise 30-50% of a class, depending on variations used by instructor. Variations to the basic sequence include addition of Warrior postures (I, II, III and lunge), Triangle (revolved triangle), Side Angle, balancing postures, and wide-legged stretches. During the basic sequence, participants may be challenged to add push-ups while transitioning between postures, or rest in *Child's Pose* if the practice becomes too challenging as indicated by shallow, fast breathing.



- **Balancing Sequence:** Sometimes offered within the Postural Sequence, every yoga practice includes balancing postures. Balancing postures require mental concentration and a focused gaze. Balancing postures may include *Tree*, Half Moon, Eagle, Warrior III, or any number of arm balancing postures (e.g. Crow, Peacock, headstand, handstand)



- **Hip Opening Sequence:** Hip Opening Postures allow practitioners increased flexibility in the hip girdle which often translates into postural awareness and decreased back pain. Many postures practiced during the Postural Sequence include hip flexibility. A series of postures towards the end of class often build on those poses earlier in the class. These postures may include Pigeon, Lizard, Frog, or Seated Twist.



- **Inversion Sequence:** Most Yoga classes typically end with inversion postures. Bridge Pose, Shoulder Stand or *Plow*.



- **End of Class:** All yoga classes end with Savasana, or Corpse Pose. Participants gently rest on the back, relaxing each and every muscle in the body. At the end of class, the instructor gradually calls participants out of this pose through small movements of fingers and toes. Classes typically end with a final word from the instructor. Classes at Wheaton College may end in prayer or word of spiritual encouragement.

