101591 - Is Yoga Haram?

the question

Is it permissible for us as Muslim women to practice yoga, as it is originally a kind of Hindu worship?

Summary of answer

Some contemporary scholars view that yoga is not allowed at all, others are of the view that it is permissible without any reservations. Yet others differentiated between some of its practices and others. For more, please see the detailed answer.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Is Yoga permissible?

There are differences of opinion among contemporary scholars on the ruling on practising yoga. Some scholars are of the view that it is not allowed at all, others are of the view that it is permissible without any reservations. Yet others differentiated between some of its practices and others; they allowed those that are in accordance with Shari'ah and forbade those that are contrary to it.

Origin of Yoga

None of them denied – as far as we know – that the origin of this practice stems from idolatrous Hindu beliefs then Buddhism. Hence those who allow it in all cases took away from it anything that has to do with beliefs and spiritual matters, and passed the ruling on it on the basis that it is regarded as physical exercise.

Those who forbade it did so because of its religious origins and the resemblance to those idol worshippers, and because of the harm it causes to the body, and other reasons.

As for those who differentiate between one type and another, their opinion is not acceptable because it is not possible to eliminate the bad and because people are not able to distinguish between what is permissible and what is forbidden in it.

So it is both spiritual and physical exercise which was originally aimed at reaching oblivion and entering into a state of connection with God!

In the book al-Yoga wa'l-Tanaffus (yoga and breathing) by Muhammad 'Abd al-Fattah Fahim (p. 19), it says:

"Yoga in the sacred Indian language means union and contact with God, i.e., union between the body, the mind and God which helps man attain knowledge and wisdom and develops his thought by developing his knowledge of life; it protects him from sectarianism, religious fanaticism, narrowmindedness and shortsightedness when searching; it makes him live a life of contentment both physically and spiritually."

In al-Mu'jam al-Falsafi by Jamil Sulayba (2/590) it says:

"Yoga is a Sanskrit word which means union; it is used to refer to a kind of spiritual exercise that is practised by the wise men of India for the purpose of union with the universal spirit. Yoga is not a school of philosophical thought; rather it is an artistic way of doing some exercises that release the soul from physical and mental gravity and take it step-by-step towards reality. The Yogi is the wise man who practices this way."

Both quotes taken from Mazahir at-Tashabbuh bi'l-Kuffar fi'l-'Asr al-Hadith wa Atharuha 'ala al-Muslimin.

In the definition of Yoga we see that it means union, i.e., union of man with the spirit, which is the universal spirit, by which they mean God. Hence the aim of this practice is to be a way of combining all other religions. Dr Ahmad Shalabi – who is a specialist in the religions of India –

says:

“The union of Buddha with the Hindu gods is nothing but a return to belief in ‘Jnana Yoga’ i.e., the ‘path of knowledge’ which sees truth in all religions and philosophies. But this truth is only a particle of the greater, complete truth. This school of thought does not object to any religion or philosophy; it thinks that any religion or philosophy is not everything and is not the whole truth. The one who believes in this way of thinking does not belong to any religion or school of thought, because he regards the followers of all different religions as his brothers, no matter how they differ. So Jnana Yoga is a way that encompasses all beliefs and refuses to be restricted by any of them. We should highlight the fact that propagating and promoting this way of thinking is aimed at fighting Islam indirectly. I have seen these attempts in several countries. Islam is the force that defeated both Christian and Buddhist missionaries, so if they can manage to divert people in one way or another – even in the name of Jnana Yoga that encompasses all beliefs and does not restrict itself to any one of them – that is a great victory for them. After they have managed to divert the Muslim from Islam at the end of this smart trick, then it is possible to make him doubt and then pull him into another sphere. So let the Muslim beware of Yoga and its trickery and those who promote it.” (Adyan al-Hind al-Kubra, p. 174)

We think that forbidding it altogether is the correct approach. We have studied the words of many concerning this practice, and we have decided to sum up the comments on it from a book that deals specifically with the ruling on this practice, by a writer whom we trust with regard to his methodology and beliefs; he is a doctor who knows what he is saying when he criticises it even from a health point of view. This writer is Dr Faris ‘Alwan and his book is called al-Yoga fi Mizan al-Naqd al-‘Ilmi, which was published by Darussalam in Cairo. Everything that we will quote below is from this book, but it should be noted that we cannot quote everything that it says in the book. Hence we will limit it to a definition of this practice and the discussion of the Islamic ruling on it; whoever wants to know more may refer to the book.

What is Yoga?

Yoga means union; one of its prominent teachers says that it is union of man with the spirit.

Yoga involves various exercises and rituals, but the most important and most famous of them is an exercise called Surya Namaskar [known in English as the “Sun Salutation”], which means in Sanskrit: “prostration to the sun on eight parts of the body”. And they defined these parts as the two feet, the two knees, the two hands, the chest and the forehead.

It is preferable for the one who practices yoga to be naked, especially the chest, back and thighs; to face the sun when it is rising and when it is setting if he wants Yoga that is sound and beneficial; and to fix his gaze and focus his attention on the disc of the sun, and be attached to it completely, which includes his body, his faculties, his mind and his heart. If he is in a built-up area and cannot see the sun, he is allowed to draw the disc of the sun in front of him on the wall. One of them said: If the one who is practising yoga is a believer in a religion and is concerned about committing an act of disbelief, there is nothing wrong with him drawing any image in front of him and focusing on it completely!

Yoga also includes pondering one’s body deeply and thinking of and examining every part of the body, starting with the toes and going up to the head when waking up and before getting up from one’s bed, and doing the opposite, from the head down to the toes just before sleeping, and it is not allowed to forget or be distracted from this important task!

Whoever wants to benefit from yoga should also be vegetarian.

And he has to repeat specific words out loud whilst doing these exercises. These words are called mantras, the most famous of which are the beeja mantras, which are hram, hreem, hraim, hraum, hara. Some syllables are also repeated in yoga, such as Aum (or Om).

In addition to that, it is essential to repeat the twelve names of the sun, because this is a major and important part of Yoga.

Names of the sun include:

Rafanama, which means, “I bow my head to you, O one whom everyone praises.”

Suryanama, which means, “I bow my head to you, O guide of all.”

Bahaanafinama, which means, “I bow my head to you, O bestower of beauty.”

Safeetarnama, which means, “I bow my head to you, O bestower of life” etc.

And they claim that this repetition is very beneficial.

One of those who practices yoga says that he wakes up at 3.30 a.m. and continues practising yoga and offering its special prayers until 6:15 a.m. And in the evening he does the same thing from 6 p.m. until 6:30 p.m.

Thus he spends three and a quarter hours every day practising yoga, and he says that some of them spend more time than that, claiming that the more time they spend on it the more beneficial it is. (Al-Yoga fi Mizan al-Naqd al-‘Ilmi, p. 13-18)

The Islamic ruling on practising yoga

To sum up, it is not permissible for the Muslim to practice yoga at all, whether he does it on the basis of belief or imitating others, or because he is seeking a particular so-called benefit. That is due to a number of reasons which we may conclude from what is mentioned above, and which we will sum up as follows:

Reasons for the prohibition of Yoga

1- Because Yoga is contrary to Tawheed and involves associating other deities with Allah, may He be exalted, and because it involves prostrating to the sun and repeating its names.

Allah says (interpretation of the meaning):

“Say (O Muhammad): I am commanded only to worship Allah (Alone) and not to join partners with Him” [al-Ra‘d 13:36]

“If you join others in worship with Allâh, (then) surely (all) your deeds will be in vain, and you will certainly be among the losers” [al-Zumar 39:65].

2- Because it involves imitation of idol worshippers and resembling them, and the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “Whoever imitates a people is one of them.” Narrated by Ahmad, Abu Dawud and al-Tabarani from Ibn ‘Umar (may Allah be pleased with him).

3- Because some of its practices are harmful to most people and lead to serious health consequences for them. Some of its practices involve sitting in a very strange and shameful way, and sitting in a lazy way, oblivious to what is going on around one. This is also harmful from a health and psychological point of view. The Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “There should be neither harming nor reciprocating harm.” Narrated by Ahmad and Ibn Majah from Ibn 'Abbas (may Allah be pleased with him).

4- Because it is a waste of time doing something that does not bring anything but harm and loss in this world, and calamity and despair in the Hereafter. The trustworthy Messenger (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “A person’s feet will not move on, on the Day of Resurrection, until he has been asked about four things: his life and how he spent it, his knowledge and what he did with it, his wealth and from where he acquired it and on what he spent it, and his body and how he used it.” (Narrated by al-Tirmidhi from Abu Barzah)

5- Because it is a clear call to imitate animals and detracts from human dignity, such as: adopting nakedness, resting on all fours in most of the exercises (Surya Namaskar or sun salutation) and the special posture in the third and eighth exercises.

6- Because many of those who tried to practice what is called scientific yoga or behavioural therapy fell into the pit of drugs and addiction, and this remedy has been proven to be ineffective and of no benefit.

7- Because it is based on lies and charlatanry; its promoters rely on deceit and twisting the facts in spreading it. Thus it attracted the attention of a large number of those who are simple-natured and many of those who are weak in faith.

8- Because a few of those who practice yoga or some other esoteric or deviant trends may perform extraordinary feats, people are deceived by it. But in most cases they are only using

devils among the jinn as in the case of magic and so on, and this is haram according to Islam.

9- Most of the advice given by the promoters of yoga is harmful to the individual, including the following:

(a) Nakedness and what it causes of cultural, sexual, psychological and physical diseases.

(b) Exposing the skin to the sun. We have seen the harm that this causes, especially when there is lengthy exposure to the sun.

(c) Fixing the gaze on the disc of the sun, which causes severe damage to the eyes.

(d) Encouraging a vegetarian diet for which Allah has not revealed any authority. (Al-Yoga fi Mizan al-Naqd al-'Ilmi, p. 84-86)

For more on practicing sports and some related issues: 115676 , 40527 , 10427 , 106910 , 4259 , and 10238 .

And Allah knows best.