



Yoga Fact Sheet

***Hinduism** is the world's oldest surviving religion with a billion practitioners, making it the third largest world religion. Many Hindus believe that *Brahman* is "God," or the infinite, all-pervading divine reality behind everything in the universe. *Atman*, universal spirit, or one's Self, is an aspect of Brahman. Many schools of Hinduism teach paths (or *yogas*) for realizing one's union with the divine, or the equivalence of Self (Atman) and Whole (Brahman).

***Religion** functions to explain ultimate problems of human life; connect individuals with suprahuman energies, beings, or transcendent realities; or cultivate spiritual awareness or virtues of ethical/moral character. There are two broad families of religion in America today: 1) *belief/Word* (e.g. Protestant Christianity) and 2) *practice/experience* (e.g. Hinduism). Protestants may not recognize practice/experience-oriented religions as religious because they think of religion as requiring that one believe and say certain things (doctrines/creeds); yet, for many Hindus/yogis, ritual practice expresses and instills religion *even when no words are used* because knowledge of the divine comes from experience, rather than intellectual study.

*The Sanskrit word "**yoga**"—meaning "to yoke"—is taken from Hindu scriptures (*Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita*) to refer to spiritual "paths" to leave behind joy/sorrow and overcome death by **yoking with the divine**, or coming to know the supreme Lord Krishna (an aspect of Brahman).

*Still today, most yoga traditions share the religious goal of **salvation**: defined as becoming one with God; realizing the true "Self," which is divine; liberation from suffering existence (by ending reincarnation); or spending eternity in relationship with the divine (Brahman).

***Ashtanga**, or eight-limbed, yoga, was developed by Krishna Pattabhi Jois (1915-2009). The eight limbs (taken from the Hindu *Yoga Sutras*) are: 1) *yama*: moral restraint, 2) *niyama*: ethical observance; 3) *asana*: posture; 4) *pranayama*: focused breathing; 5) *pratyahara*: calming the mind; 6) *dharana*: attention; 7) *dhayana*: meditation; 8) *samadhi*: union with God. Ashtanga focuses on the first four limbs, especially *asana* and *pranayama*, because it is believed practicing postures and breathing leads spontaneously to all the other limbs—ultimately union with God.

***Postures** (*asanas*) are in "appearance an external and physical discipline," but serve the deeper purpose of "liberation and greater awareness of our spiritual potential" by helping practitioners "come to experience God inside." Many postures are named after and symbolize **animals** because in Hinduism animals are vehicles of gods and goddesses or aspects of Vishnu or Shiva (who are in turn aspects of Brahman, or God).

***Sun Salutations** (*Surya Namaskara A/B*) aka **Opening Sequence A/B** are symbolic rituals of devotion developed as a salute or prayer to the sun god *Surya* (Sanskrit for Supreme Light). *Surya* is worshipped at dawn by most Hindus and has temples dedicated to him across India. The devotee adopts a praying hands position (*anjali mudra*), reaches up toward the sun in praise and petition; bows in surrender and worship; and rises up remembering the true sun is within. P.K. Jois gave two reasons for starting practice with Sun Salutations: the physical reason is to warm up the body; the more important spiritual reason is to “pray to the sun god.”

*The **lotus** position (sitting with feet crossed above or beneath the knees, depending on one’s flexibility) symbolizes spiritual purity and enlightenment and is believed to aid the flow of spiritual energy (*prana*), facilitating meditation and ultimately *samadhi*, or union with God.

*The **corpse** (*shavasana*), or **resting**, pose (lying on one’s back relaxing every muscle) symbolizes death of ego and promise of awakening to an enlightened state of consciousness. Thinking about one’s death gives a sense of purpose and inspires good use of remaining time.

***Sanskrit** is viewed by Hindus as a sacred language (much as Muslims view Arabic as a sacred language). Because it is believed that each Sanskrit letter has a specific sound frequency and each word is encoded with consciousness, teaching Sanskrit names for poses is thought to create a spiritual connection to the poses.

*The purpose of deep, focused **breathing** (*pranayama*) is to “let the *prana* flow.” *Prana*, or vital breath, is believed to be an external manifestation of Atman, or universal spirit.

*Yoga flows (*vinyasas*) of postures and breathing are religious **rituals** (symbolic actions) that create religious moods and motivations by confirming a *worldview* (overall picture of reality) and instilling an *ethos* (life philosophy of how one should live). Yoga sequences, such as Sun Salutations (*Surya Namaskara A/B*) that open class and lotus and corpse poses that close class are to be performed in the same manner and order each time—like a liturgical order of service or interpretive dance—because repetition of rituals communicates meaning even without words.

*Postures and breathing are believed to move **Kundalini** (female serpent energy, or a goddess, symbolized by the **cobra** pose) through nonmaterial energy streams (*nadis*), joined at spinning vortexes (*chakras*). Yoga awakens Kundalini, so that she uncoils and travels up the spine, opening chakras, until she reaches her male lover, Shiva, in the crown chakra. When Kundalini and Shiva unite, one attains *samadhi* (union with God) or *moksha* (liberation from reincarnation).

*A **mudra** is an energetic seal, or symbolic gesture, that directs spiritual energy (*prana*). *Mudras* are performed not only to express religious feelings, but to *produce* feelings in the practitioner.

*The **anjali mudra**, praying hands position, is a gesture of reverence held at the heart, third eye, or crown chakra, while slightly bowing one’s head. The gesture means the same thing as saying **Namaste** (“I bow to the god, or divine light, within you.”). Although used in greetings and farewells, the *mudra* and/or word *Namaste* mean more than hello or goodbye. Joining the palms together symbolizes yoking the practitioner with the divine in all things. Enacting the *mudra* *causes* the feeling of reverence to emerge within, *automatically* yoking one to the divine.

*The **jnana mudra**, gesture of knowledge or wisdom, may be held with the hands while sitting in lotus position. Forming a circle with thumb and index finger symbolizes subordination of the individual spirit (represented by the index finger) by the Universal Spirit (represented by the thumb) and *brings about* unification of the individual with the universal consciousness.

***Mantras** are praise and prayers that through their meaning, sound, and chanting style focus the mind on holy thoughts or express devotion to God or deities. The Sanskrit **Om** (or *Aum*) is viewed as a sacred sound that *is* Brahman. **Chanting Om** helps one yoke with Brahman.

***Mindfulness** is the seventh aspect of the eightfold path of Buddhism and the “heart of Buddhist meditation.” Mindfulness relieves suffering by calming the mind to prepare for enlightenment.

***Mandalas** are circular pictures described in the Hindu *Rig Veda* used for visual meditation. Mandalas may be interpreted as abodes of a particular deity, and are believed to not only represent the deity but actually call it into one’s presence. Mandalas should be visually appealing to absorb the mind, as in hypnosis. Drawing or coloring one’s own mandala is believed to lead to an altered state of consciousness conducive to meditation and enlightenment.

*Isn’t one’s “**intent**” in practicing yoga all that matters? Religious intentions may develop *through* the performance of rituals, rather than initial intentions determining *whether* actions are religiously meaningful. Repeatedly performing sequences of yoga postures/breathing is designed to train the mind and change spiritual realities. According to P.K. Jois, “You can lecture, you can talk about God, but when you practice correctly, you come to experience God inside. Some people start yoga and don’t even know of Him, don’t even want to know of Him. But for anyone who practices yoga correctly, the love of God will develop . . . *whether they want it or not.*” P.K.’s son Manju Jois says, “Hinduism is very, very hard to understand.” That is why “the yoga asanas are important - you just do. Don’t talk about the philosophy – 99% practice and 1% philosophy. . . You just keep doing it” to “automatically . . . draw you into the spiritual path . . . now it will be easier to practice yama and niyama, *you won’t even know you’re doing it.*”

*Sociological research (e.g. Henrichsen-Schrembs and Versteeg, 2011) confirms that regardless of why people begin doing yoga, “a **shift seems to take place**,” leading people to “a whole new spiritual awareness and totally identifying with the yoga philosophy.” Physical postures and focused breathing are a “gateway” into and a “vehicle” for religious teachings. Beginner classes may not say anything about yoga philosophy—which is introduced in “advanced” classes.

*What about **Christian Yoga**, Holy Yoga, Christoga, WhollyFit, Praise Moves, etc.? Relabeling yoga as “Christian” may not remove religious meanings associated with postures and breathing borrowed from non-Christian religions such as Hinduism.

*Claims that **scientific research** supports yoga are based on poor-quality studies. Higher-quality studies show that yoga can be dangerous, causing injuries, death from stroke, and psychotic episodes. The American Yoga Association warns that yoga is unsafe for children under 16; the Mayo Clinic singles out Ashtanga yoga as inappropriate for children. There is scientific evidence that non-religious exercise (e.g. running, jump rope, soccer, aerobics, weight training) benefits

physical health and self-esteem of children/youth, and the more vigorous the better. There are also studies showing that prayer and Bible reading are more effective than physical exercise in improving physical/mental health and lengthening life; teenagers who attend religious services at least weekly have fewer problems with substance abuse, are less violent, commit fewer crimes, and are less likely to get into trouble with school or legal authorities. Even if science did show that yoga is beneficial, this would not make it non-religious.

*The **EUSD yoga** program was established through a \$533,000 grant from the **Jois Foundation** to teach Ashtanga yoga and create a comprehensive life skills curriculum based on key yoga life concepts such as *yama* and *niyama* (ethical principles derived from Hindu scriptures).

*The agreement between EUSD and the Jois Foundation specified that Ashtanga yoga instructors must be **trained and certified by the Jois Foundation**. Why? K.P. Jois taught that Ashtanga yoga must be passed down through *parampara*, or uninterrupted succession from guru to student (in a lineage from Shiva to K.P. Jois to Sharath Jois and his students) because the guru is the intermediary between the student and the Divine.

*The 2011-2012 EUSD pilot program included introduction of the “eight limbs” of Ashtanga; moral teachings based on *yamas* and *niyamas*; instruction in Ashtanga Sun Salutations, Primary Series, lotus, and corpse (“resting”) postures based on a Jois Ashtanga Institute poster; reading from a textbook that explains how postures symbolize Hindu gods; chanting *Om* and placing hands in *jnana mudra* while meditating in lotus position; and use of Sanskrit terms.

*The fall 2012 EUSD Ashtanga yoga program included character teachings based on *yamas* and *niyamas*; the Ashtanga Sun Salutations, Primary Series, lotus, and “resting” postures; focus on vital breath (*prana*); use of posters from the Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute and of an eight-limbed Ashtanga tree; placing hands in *jnana mudra*; use of Sanskrit terms; guided meditations and mindfulness meditation; and coloring of *mandalas*.

*The spring 2013 EUSD yoga program still begins and ends with Ashtanga Opening Sequence A/B, includes poses from the Primary Series (some, but not all, of which have been renamed), and closes with four lotuses and the “resting” corpse pose; the *jnana mudra* and *anjali mudra* are still practiced; there is still emphasis on focused breathing and mindfulness; children chant *Om/pray* while meditating in the lotus, and use Sanskrit terms including *Namaste*; instructors teach sound meditation (using bells), guided meditation, and visualization.

*As long as EUSD’s “health and wellness” program is called “yoga,” the program label will send a positive message about yoga—a Sanskrit term that means yoking with the divine. Even if the yoga taught in EUSD classrooms had all the “religion” stripped from it (which is not the case), the EUSD program would convey a positive view of other forms of “yoga” children might encounter. The American Academy of Religion Yoga in Theory and Practice group notes the “**pervasiveness of spiritual and religious ideologies**” in the “contemporary yoga scene.”