

**My Experience as a Christian through Yoga Teacher Training**

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Hello, my name is Sharon and I'm a Christian... and a yogi. In fact, in recent months yoga has become a holy experience for me; an opportunity to connect with God in a very real way.

Let me explain how I came to this place. In the winter of 2013-2014 my mom and my sister started practicing yoga regularly, for exercise. My mom in particular started noticing positive physical changes as she practiced; as someone who has a strong interest in maintaining a healthy lifestyle this caught my attention. I started to practice yoga in the spring of 2014, and, although I enjoyed the physical challenge, I sensed there was much more to yoga but I was not yet sure what that was. So, with a deep desire to understand, I went to Bali, Indonesia in July to participate in a Yoga Teacher Training.

Yoga means "to yoke;" it is connecting the body, mind and spirit (or breath). Yoga is not just an exercise program nor is it a religion, but it is an ancient tradition that provides people with an approach to healthy living – body, mind and spirit.

In Yoga there are eight limbs which when followed help with living a purposeful life. Personally, I've found that these eight limbs have helped me explore my Christian faith and examine the truths in the bible in a very dynamic way.

The first limb is known as the yamas. There are five yamas which provide a way for us to conduct ourselves in our relationships and interactions with other people. In Matthew 7:12 Jesus said "Do to others whatever you would like them to do to you. This is the essence of all that is taught in the law and the prophets." The yamas ask us to act with ahimsa (non-violence), satya (truthfulness), asteya (non-stealing), brahmacharya (chastity), and aparigraha (non-grasping).

The second limb is the niyamas. These five guidelines are directed at how we can create self-discipline and grow in our spiritual lives. In 2 Timothy we are told "For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline." I have always struggled with creating daily disciplines in my life and, perhaps as a result, have often struggled with anxiety and fear – it's something I continue to work on. The niyamas are one way that I can build more discipline in to my life. The niyamas are saucha (cleanliness), santosha (contentment), tapas (fiery discipline), svadhyaya (study of scriptures – I choose the Bible), and isvara pranidhana (surrender to God).

The third limb is often what people think of first when they hear the word yoga – it is asana. The asanas are the postures and physical practice of yoga. Asanas also help develop self-discipline and concentration. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20 states

“Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body.” Growing up in the church the only time that I ever heard this verse referenced was when our youth group leaders were warning us about the dangers of premarital sex. I always felt there was more to this verse, and I was confused as I heard church leaders condemn those that were having sex outside of marriage but abuse their own bodies through the over-indulgence of food, inactivity, and, on occasion the misuse of alcohol. For me the asanas have become a physical discipline with which I can honour God with my body through my connection to breath (Spirit) in the postures.

Next, we have the fourth limb of pranayama. Pranayama is the breath control techniques in yoga that can help us make the connection between our body, mind and spirit. In my pranayama practice, whether it's sitting and breathing or during my asana, I'm constantly reminded of Michael W. Smith's song “Breathe.” He writes “This is the air I breathe, this is the air I breathe, Your Holy presence living in me.” Acts 17:25 states that “He himself gives life and breath to everything, and he satisfies every need.” Jesus is the very air I breathe, and when I take a moment to come back to my breath I am reminded that every single need I have in life is met in Him.

As someone who is new to the path of yoga, I still struggle to completely separate the next 3 limbs – pratyahara, dharana and dhyana. And, as a yogi and a Christian I often find these practices the most challenging. Pratyahara is withdrawing from the senses in to a place of complete relaxation which leads to dharana and dhyana, or concentration and mediation. In my Christian walk I've constantly struggled to set aside a daily “quiet/devotional time” and developing a prayer list that was more than me sounding off my shopping list of things I want. Through asanas and pranayama, I'm slowly learning to focus on breath and develop concentration. I'm slowly learning to quiet the constant stream of thoughts and worries that run through my mind and focus on my breath. I'm slowly learning to just “be still.” Psalm 46:10 says “Be still, and know that I am God!” Stillness is not something that I have ever been good at, but I hope that as I practice relaxing, concentrating and coming back to my breath that I will be still. I hope that I will no longer have a prayer life that centers on me speaking/asking, but one where I am also quiet enough in my body and mind to listen.

The final limb is Samadhi. Samadhi means liberation, and I've read that this limb refers to the peace that Philippians 4:7 talks about. This verse says “you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.” The bible asks us not to worry, to pray and to have gratitude. The eight limbs of Yoga have been helping me to live in a way where I am able to take my concerns to God

and to have gratitude throughout my day – and when challenges come my way I am slowly getting better at coming back to my breath and realizing that all I have is enough in Jesus.

I read this quote as part of my morning mediation: “By choosing to practice yoga we are saying that our spiritual growth is important to us. We are making it a priority. Our practice is a shelter we build for our spiritual selves. It is the work we do to safeguard and support the possibility of spiritual growth. The winds of life constantly wear away the shelter, but if we stick to our tools, the shelter will hold” (Gates & Kenison, 2002).

I’m looking forward to continuing on this journey. I’m not sure how much I’ll teach yoga, or if it will remain a personal practice for me. Regardless, yoga has become part of spiritual growth deepening my faith, and becoming more confident in who God has made me to be.