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Is Yoga a Religion?

by Swami Jnaneshvara Bharati

[SwamiJ.com](#)

Question: Is Yoga a religion?

Answer: No, but the question is important to consider.

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Quotes and links:

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- [Mysticism, Yoga, and Religion](#)
- [Modern Yoga versus Traditional Yoga](#)
- [Philosophy, Not Religion](#)
- [The Meaning and Purpose of Yoga](#)
- [Sanatana Dharma](#)
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Yoga *is* in Religion. Religion is *not* in Yoga.

While Yoga may be in Religions, the many Yoga practices with body, breath and mind, along with their transcendent goal of direct experience, are generally neither characteristic of Religions, nor typically practiced by the adherents of Religions.



Yoga is in Religion. Religion is not in Yoga.

These are NOT ten different *religions*.

They ARE ten different *people*, each of whom arise from the same source, regardless of what, if any, religion they choose.



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The simple explanation

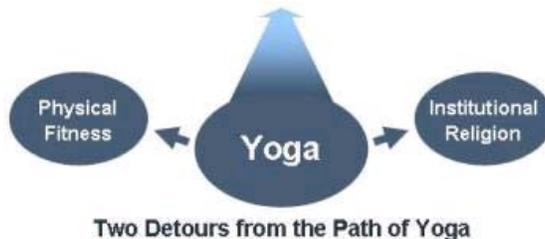
Question: Is Yoga a religion?

Answer: No.
Yoga is contained within religions.
Religion is not contained within Yoga.

To say that the word *Yoga* itself is a religion makes as much sense as saying that the words *Union* or *Holistic* are themselves religions.

It is important to note that there is not universal agreement on these points, nor the definition of Yoga, with many feeling that Yoga is *not* a religion, and many people feeling that Yoga *is* a religion. See the comments below related to commingling Yoga and religion. See also the quotes and articles linked below, where others are describing the relationship between Yoga and religion. See also the section about making your own choice regarding Yoga and religion.

See also [Philosophy, Not Religion](#)



See also [Modern Yoga versus Traditional Yoga](#)

If one day I say I am a Buddhist, the next a Christian, the next a Hindu, the next a Jew, the next a Muslim, and the next something else, has the "I" actually changed, or only the opinions of the mind? Who am I? That cannot be answered with a mere opinion of mind. It can only be experienced in the stillness and silence of direct experience, wherein these divisions evaporate.

What's missing with Yoga?

Here are a few of the things that are usually part of religions, but which are missing with Yoga:

- Yoga has no deity to worship.
- Yoga has no worship services to attend.
- Yoga has no rituals to perform.
- Yoga has no sacred icons.
- Yoga has no creed or formal statement of religious belief.
- Yoga has no requirement for a confession of faith.
- Yoga has no ordained clergy or priests to lead religious services.

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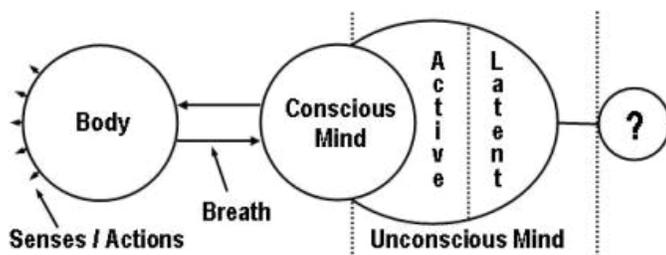
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Yoga has no institutional structure, leader or group of overseers.
 Yoga has no membership procedure.
 Yoga has no congregation of members or followers.
 Yoga has no system of temples or churches.

O man, realize that the kingdom of God is within you, the Lord of life is the highest of all. Anyone who has realized this, would like to go to his innermost self. And there is a way for that. I am not talking about Hinduism, I am not talking about Buddhism, I am not talking about Christianity, I am not talking about Islam. I am talking about something universal. The moment you realize that the absolute truth which is not subject to change, death, and decay is within you, then you attain a freedom, freedom from fears, all fears. That is called the state of enlightenment and that can be considered to be a state of perfection. Therefore, learn to go to the deeper aspect of your being. Everyone should learn to meditate so that he's free from many, many diseases. That meditation should be simple, a purely scientific technique, without putting any brand, like Hindu meditation, Buddhist meditation, Zazen, Zen meditation, Christian meditation or Jewish meditation. These teachers have destroyed the whole philosophy of meditation. Meditation is a simple method.

Swami Rama
[From Conscious Living](#)



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Religion can be extremely useful

To point out that Yoga is not religion, or that Yoga is in religion, but religion not in Yoga, are not facts opposed to religion. That one should or should not practice religion is not what is being described here. Religion can be extremely useful, and some would say absolutely essential. That one can practice Yoga either with or without religion is described further below.

See also the article:
[Philosophy, Not Religion](#)

Respecting religious choice: Practitioners of Yoga may be very clear about Yoga not conflicting with any religion. However, there are many thousands of denominations and sects within many diverse religions. Some of these groups have religious beliefs that might seem very different to ones own.

For example, some say that certain foods *should* be eaten, while others say that the same food item should *not* be eaten. Some suggest *polygamy*, while others require *monogamy*. Some *agree* with medical treatment, while others say that healing is only up to God, and that modern medical treatment should *not* be used. Some believe in social freedoms, while others believe more in religious discipline.

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So too, some consider basic practices like calming the autonomic nervous system through diaphragmatic breathing to be of a different *religion*, while others see this as a universal human process from which anyone can benefit. Some others consider making the body flexible to be a part of religion, while others see it is physical fitness, while still others see it as a part of systematic, non-sectarian meditation. Some of the customs of various religions may seem odd to the others, but these are the realities of the diversity of humanity.

Pointing out this diversity in this article is not intended to resolve these issues, nor to proffer a solution. However, it seems useful to accept that, to some degree, there are people who consider Yoga to be religion, even though we may know it is not. Maybe it is good to respect that choice of others.

If you are not a religious scholar (already knowing these terms), here are Answers.com links to some religious and philosophical terms that you might find insightful to explore (new browser windows will open so that you don't lose this page):

[agnosticism](#), [ancestor worship](#), [animism](#), [anti-clericalism](#), [antitheism](#), [apostasy](#), [atheism](#), [canon](#), [clericalism](#), [cult](#), [deism](#), [deity](#), [denomination](#), [dharma](#), [dialectical materialism](#), [dualism](#), [ecumenism](#), [empiricism](#), [fideism](#), [free thought](#), [heathenism](#), [henotheism](#), [heresy](#), [idealism](#), [ignosticism](#), [immanent](#), [kathenotheism](#), [list of religions](#), [materialism](#), [metaphysics](#), [monism](#), [monolatry](#), [monotheism](#), [mysticism](#), [neo-platonism](#), [non-dualism](#), [non-sectarian](#), [non-theism](#), [numinous](#), [paganism](#), [pandeism](#), [panentheism](#), [panendeism](#), [pantheism](#), [pelagianism](#), [phenomenology](#), [physicalism](#), [pluralism](#), [polydeism](#), [polytheism](#), [positivism](#), [pragmatism](#), [realism](#), [religious pluralism](#), [scholasticism](#), [sect](#), [sectarian](#), [syncretism](#), [the all](#), [theism](#), [theodicy](#), [theology](#), [theophany](#), [transcendent](#), [transeunt](#), [transtheism](#), [ultimate reality](#)

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Yoga means union

The word *Yoga* means *union*, and comes from "yuj" which means "to join," to bring together into union the various aspects of yourself that were never divided in the first place. From that comes the direct experience of yourself that is beyond the false identities stemming from the seemingly countless colorings of attraction and aversion. Another modern adaptation of this principle is the word *holistic*, meaning to become whole, or to realize your underlying wholeness.

Patanjali describes this in the Yoga Sutras where he defines Yoga as the mastery (nirodha) of the mind (Sutra [1.2](#)), allowing the true Self to then come shining through (Sutra [1.3](#)). Patanjali also explains that the purpose of Yoga is discrimination (viveka) among the inner processes (Sutras [2.26-2.29](#)). The process of mastering and integrating the mind may be a part of religions, but that does not mean that regulating your mind in this way is, itself, a religion.

Virtues in Yoga and Religion

Yoga also recommends meditation on, and cultivation of lovingness, compassion, goodwill and acceptance, as well as non-violence, truthfulness, training the senses, non-possessiveness, and other such virtues (Yoga Sutras [1.33](#), [2.30-2.32](#)). Religions also recommend cultivating such virtues. However, it is self evident that cultivating these ways of being or living are not themselves religion. When these are practiced in Yoga, the subtler, finer, truer aspects of our being are revealed, and this may or may not be seen in the context of religion. That choice rests with each individual person.

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What does the dictionary say?

Four definitions of religion: Below are four definitions of *religion*, taken from the [Encarta World English Dictionary](#), an online dictionary. Based on those definitions, is Yoga a religion?

Definitions of religion:	Is Yoga a religion?
<p>1. Beliefs and worship: "People's beliefs and opinions concerning the existence, nature, and worship of a deity or deities, and divine involvement in the universe and human life"</p>	<p>No: Yoga does not prescribe the worship of any specific "deity or deities." The word <i>divine</i> is defined (in dictionaries) as coming from, or connected with God or gods. Yoga does not give specific instructions for the "existence, nature, [or] worship". Yet, Yoga acknowledges that <i>bhakti Yoga</i>, the path of devotion is a valid aspect of Yoga. Yoga does <i>not</i> tell you where to direct that devotion, or the specific methods by which you should do it. That is left to personal religious preference. (See also the note below on the fallacy of composition, in that some will argue that Yoga is a religion because some may suggest or allude to a particular name of God or deity.)</p>
<p>2. Particular system: "A particular institutionalized or personal system of beliefs and practices relating to the divine"</p>	<p>No: Once again, <i>divine</i> is defined as relating to God or gods, and Yoga itself does not prescribe to what or whom one should direct their worship, nor does Yoga require it. Again, Yoga definitely acknowledges the value of <i>bhakti</i> Yoga, regardless of which form that takes for an individual person. It also may be true that one uses the word <i>divine</i> in other ways as well. Also, Yoga itself is not institutionalized as a religious system, although some of the principles are contained within many religions or other systems (such as the principles of kindness to other people, taking care of one's body, regulating breathing, or quieting the mind).</p>
<p>3. Beliefs or values: "A set of strongly-held beliefs, values, and attitudes that somebody lives by"</p>	<p>Maybe, but not really: One could argue that Yoga is a religion by the definition of religion as being a set of strongly-held beliefs, values, and attitudes that one lives by. On the other hand, this could also apply to many other things as well, including governmental, educational, psychological, social, cultural, or familial ways of living. Common sense tells us that these are not really what is meant by the word <i>religion</i> in the context of questioning whether or not Yoga is a religion.</p>
<p>4. Obsession: "An object, practice, cause, or activity that somebody is completely devoted to or obsessed by (<i>The danger is that you start to make fitness a religion.</i>)" [Italics are in the</p>	<p>Maybe, but not really: One could become "completely devoted to or obsessed by" Yoga, and thus this use of the word <i>religion</i> might apply. Once again, however, common sense tells us that this is not really the meaning of the word <i>religion</i>. Most people have a working, day-to-day, common language</p>



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dictionary.]

sense of the meaning of a *religion*, and it simply does not apply to Yoga.[top](#)

Yoga and ducks

An old saying: There is an old saying that, "If it looks like a duck, and it walks like a duck, and it quacks like a duck, then it must be a duck!"

<p>Only when you commingle Yoga and Religion does Yoga appear to be Religion.</p>

They look similar because of commingling: This is where the problem arises with Yoga and religion. Sometimes, when one encounters Yoga in particular organizations or groups of people, it can *look* very much like a religion. This is because some of the teachers and practitioners of Yoga and Yoga meditation commingle Yoga with religious practices. This is particularly true in the arena of *bhakti* Yoga, the Yoga of devotion. From the standpoint of *bhakti* Yoga, it is the devotion that is the point, not that a particular object is suggested for that devotion. Thus, one may practice *bhakti*, or devotion, from within his or her own religious preference.

Teachers presenting their own religion: When the teachers practice their own religion in the context of Yoga, and present that to their students, the students end up with a mixture of Yoga and religion. The student may know the theory (and truth) that Yoga is *not* a religion, while at the same time those same students are practicing the religion of their teacher in addition to practicing Yoga.

Yoga and religion get blended: Gradually, Yoga and the religious practices blend, and suddenly you have a religious duck named *Yoga*! This does *not* mean that Yoga or Yoga meditation is a religion. It *does* mean that a particular organization, lineage, or system may have taken on the coloring of religion, and within that sphere, there is religion being practiced.

Logical fallacy of composition: In the area of logic or deductive reasoning, one of the erroneous ways of arguing a point is the logical *fallacy of composition*. One version of the *fallacy of composition* is projecting a characteristic assumed by a *part* to be the characteristic assumed by the *whole*. For example, we might say that *some* people like a particular food, and then make the logical fallacy of saying that *all* people like that food, confusing the part and the whole. The way this happens with Yoga is that one might argue that since *some* teachers and aspirants, current or historical, have practiced Yoga in the context of religion, the *whole* of Yoga itself is therefore a religion. By understanding the *fallacy of composition*, it is easier to see through such arguments.

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Yoga and silence

Keeping the context of your own religion: Yoga systematically deals with all [levels of your being](#), leading you to a place of deep stillness and silence. From within this stillness and silence, you can more fully experience spirituality in the context of your own religion and personal beliefs.

[World](#) > [Senses](#) > [Body](#) > [Breath](#) > [Mind](#) > [Silence](#)

It's about removing obstacles: When we are *not* experiencing such a deep stillness and silence, it is because our world, senses, body, breath and mind have become *obstacles* to inner peace and spiritual awareness. (See Yoga Sutra [1.4](#))

Then comes spiritual insight: It is in the spirit of observing, accepting, understanding, and training ourselves in Yoga Meditation that these obstacles are gently, systematically removed. It is somewhat like gradually [thinning out a cloud bank](#) that is veiling the spiritual serenity that is

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naturally there. In this way, our world and the aspects of our own being can become *tools* rather than obstacles. This spiritual focus is the entire purpose of Yoga. (See the article, [Modern Yoga versus Traditional Yoga](#).)

Feeling closer to your own religion: Through this spiritual focus of Yoga, one may come closer to their own religious roots, although the practices themselves are not necessarily religious.

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Religion and mysticism

Exoteric and esoteric: One of the main reasons for the appearance of Yoga being like religion, is really a confusion between religion and mysticism. Within most religions, there are shades of gray within two poles, that are called *Exoteric* and *Esoteric*. (See the article [Mysticism, Yoga, and Religion](#))

Each religion has both: The *Exoteric*, or external religious practices are what most of us see as dominant in our cultures. Within all of the *Exoteric* religions, there are also *Esoteric* practitioners that are seeking direct experience. These seekers of direct experience are often outcasts from the *Exoteric* organizations of their own religion. This has happened throughout human history. The examples are easy to find in books and articles, and are not presented here.

Yoga is Esoteric: Yoga is itself a mystical seeking of the direct experience of inner realities or truths. However, Yoga itself is not telling an aspirant what religion to follow. It is involved with training in the *process* of working with senses, body, breath, and mind, such that the inner can be experienced directly (See the description of Yoga in [Yoga Sutra 1.2](#) and the description of the *seer* in [Yoga Sutra 1.3](#)). Yoga deals with the *Esoteric*, rather than the *Exoteric*. In this light, some of the practices of Yoga are contained within religions, while religion is not contained within Yoga.

Only an appearance of conflict: What appears to be conflict between a particular religion and Yoga is often not really valid, because of comparing an *Exoteric* religion with the *Esoteric* practices of Yoga. This appearance of conflict also occurs within religions themselves, usually due to the fact that the *Exoteric* followers have little understanding of the *Esoteric* seeker. The *Exoteric* follower has simply not traveled far enough to feel the deep-seated *Esoteric* longing of the mystic and yogi to know the deeper teachings and direct experience.

The Yogis and Mystic Seekers
must come to accept
that they are consistently in a minority.

Seeing in front and behind: In the principle of spiritual life being like climbing the steps of a ladder, or staircase, it is easy to see the steps behind you, while it is difficult to see the steps still in front of you. Thus, in the view of the *Exoteric* religionist, the *Esoteric* seeker or Yogi is seen to have strayed from the path, to be an evil person or sinner, or to have a psychopathological problem.

Learn acceptance of being in a minority: Like it or not, the practitioners of Yoga and the mystic seekers in our modern world, like those throughout human history, must accept that there is rejection by others who do not understand the subtler path. This is not likely to change, for the simple reason that the seekers of inner experience and truth are consistently in a minority.

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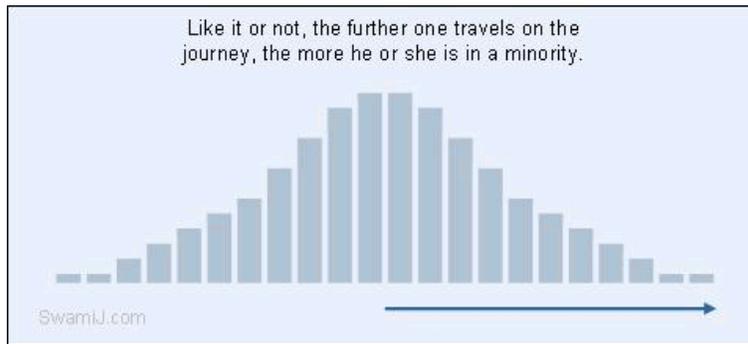
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How to deal with Yoga and religion

Make a personal choice: The Yoga practices of self-awareness, self-training, and self-discovery are non-sectarian, and are compatible with all religions. If you are familiar with the differences between Yoga and religion, it is easy to keep them separate, or if you prefer, to integrate them. The choice rests with each person as an individual.

Choices about Yoga and religion

1. Keep them separate.

If you wish to keep Yoga, religion, and spiritual matters completely separate, this is easy to do. It simply means practicing and studying your Yoga at places, and with people who share those same values and orientations of Yoga not being part of religion. Each person is free to follow their own religion in their own way.

2. Retain and blend your religion.

If you wish to practice Yoga, including its deeper, more authentic, so-called spiritual aspects, retaining and blending the religion of your youth, family, and culture, that too can be done quite easily (keeping in mind, however, that authentic Yoga will lead one towards the esoteric or mystic and of the spectrum of religion, as noted above).

3. Choose a new religion.

If you wish to integrate Yoga with a religion new to you, and you are with a teacher or organization whose values and orientations match yours, this too may be done.

Have clarity about your religion, and choose: It seems most useful to have inner clarity about one's own religious preferences. Then it is easier to choose whether to practice Yoga separately from religion, in the context of religion, or with no religion at all. Then, the aspirant can attain all of the benefits of both their religion and of Yoga. The benefits of Yoga are for everyone.

Yoga is for everybody: All of these options are available to each of us in our practice of Yoga. There is a simple reason that these options are available. That is, Yoga truly is not a religion, and thus, Yoga can serve all people of all faiths or beliefs.

Related Quotes and Links

Article Links:

- [Yoga and Religion - Swami Sivananda](#)
- [What is Yoga? - Swami Chidananda](#)
- [Religion and Spirituality - Swami Krishnanda](#)
- [Is Yoga a Religion? - Phil Catalfo](#)
- [What is Yoga? - yoga.org.nz](#)
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Quotes: Below are a few quotes from people suggesting that Yoga is not a religion. Obviously, not everybody agrees with this, and contradictory quotes can also be found easily. Once again, it leaves each person to decide for himself or herself whether or not to practice Yoga in the context of religion.

Swami Sivananda Saraswati: "**Yoga is not a religion**, but an aid to the practice of the basic spiritual truths in all religions. Yoga is for all, and is universal." ([link](#))

Georg Feuerstein: [To practice yoga] "You **need not believe in anything** other than the possibility that you can transform yourself." "...some Yoga practitioners are more religious than others. But **Yoga itself is simply a tool for exploring** the depth of our human nature, of plumbing the mysteries of the body and the mind. ([link](#))

Swami Chidananda Saraswati: "Yoga tends to bring out the inner unity that exists at the central core of all religions, and its **non-sectarian techniques** bring people closer in spiritual ties of inner unity." ([link](#))

T.K.V. Desikachar: "Yoga was rejected by Hinduism... because yoga would not insist that God exists. It didn't say there was no God but just wouldn't insist there was.... **Yoga is not a religion** and should not [affiliate] with any religion." ([link](#))

Swami Rama: Yoga is a systematic science; its teachings are an integral part of most religions, but **yoga itself is not a religion**. Most religions teach one what to do, but yoga teaches one how to be. Yoga practices, however, described in symbolic language, may be found in the sacred scriptures of most religions. (*Lectures on Yoga*, 1979, from Chapter entitled *What is Yoga?*)

Swami Satyananda Saraswati: In the last two or three decades, when yoga was introduced to the modern world, it was received with some scepticism. At first people thought that it was another religion. But in spite of this young people took up yoga and soon others began to notice its amazing effects. Then the psychologists, medical doctors, criminologists, and philosophers started making investigations and they were surprised to find that **yoga is not a religion** but a science. ([link](#))

Shri Ram Sharanam Ashram: **Yoga is not a religion**. it is not necessary for you to believe in a certain god or to chant certain hymns. it is spiritual and ancient science, which leads to health in the body, peace in the mind, happiness in the heart and liberation of the soul. ([link](#))

Pandit Usharbudh Arya: **Yoga is not a religion** or a church. It requires no belief in a doctrine, no credo. All yoga philosophy is concerned with the experience of meditation and nothing else. It does not require anyone to adhere to a belief system. (from the book, *God*)

Swami Krishnanda: The foundation behind the practice of Yoga, or meditation proper, is the resolution of conflicts and fulfilment of all longings to the utmost extent until one reaches infinity itself. What a grand thing is Yoga! Now we realise! We will be surprised that our very life is there only for that goal. Now we will be able to appreciate that **Yoga is not a religion**. It is not Hinduism. It is not Buddhism. It is not Christian mysticism. It is not anything of that sort. ([link](#))

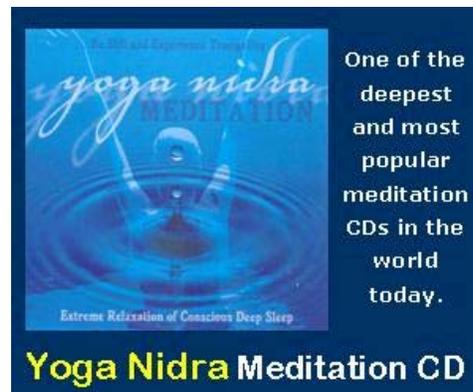
Osho: First, **yoga is not a religion**—remember that. Yoga is not Hindu, it is not Mohammedan. Yoga is a pure science just like mathematics, physics or chemistry. Physics is not Christian, physics is not Buddhist. If Christians have discovered the laws of physics,

then too physics is not Christian. It is just accidental that Christians have come to discover the laws of physics. But physics remains just a science. Yoga is a science—it is just an accident that Hindus discovered it. It is not Hindu. It is a pure mathematics of the inner being. So a Mohammedan can be a yogi, a Christian can be a yogi, a Jaina, a Buddhist can be a yogi. ([link](#))

Swami NadaBrahmananda: **Yoga is not a religion** and can usually be practiced by people of any religious persuasion. ([link](#))

Swami Veditatmananda Saraswati: *Yoga* need not be identified with a religion. It is based on the fundamental principles of life. It can be practiced by any individual anywhere, at anytime. It does not threaten anything. *Yoga* teaches us the fundamental principles and prescribes a way of life in keeping with those principles. When we live a life in keeping with fundamental principles, there is harmony. When we live a life in violation of the fundamental principles, there is a disharmony. Harmony is happiness, and disharmony is unhappiness. **Yoga is not a religion**. Yes, it is integrated in Hinduism, because it evolved in India. But it can be integrated by any individual without violating or sacrificing the tradition within which the individual has grown up. That is why it has been adopted worldwide. People have found that they can retain their faith and their beliefs, yet continue to take advantage of what *yoga* teaches. ([link](#))

Swami Maheshwarananda: Although we speak a lot of God and say that yoga is the way to God, **yoga is not a religion** nor a religious sect. God is a universal principle, cosmic light, eternally awake consciousness which pervades all existence. ([link](#))



This site is devoted to presenting the ancient Self-Realization path of the Tradition of the Himalayan masters in simple, understandable and beneficial ways, while not compromising quality or depth. The goal of our sadhana or practices is the highest Joy that comes from the Realization in direct experience of the center of consciousness, the Self, the Atman or Purusha, which is one and the same with the Absolute Reality. This Self-Realization comes through Yoga meditation of the Yoga Sutras, the contemplative insight of Advaita Vedanta, and the intense devotion of Samaya Sri Vidya Tantra, the three of which complement one another like fingers on a hand. We employ the classical approaches of Raja, Jnana, Karma, and Bhakti Yoga, as well as Hatha, Kriya, Kundalini, Laya, Mantra, Nada, Siddha, and Tantra Yoga. Meditation, contemplation, mantra and prayer finally converge into a unified force directed towards the final stage, piercing the pearl of wisdom called bindu, leading to the Absolute.

