

[Adventures in Yoga Philosophy](#)

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IN MY OPINION

Adventures in Yoga Philosophy

The popularity of yoga in the West comes with a trend of completely obscuring its Hindu roots

Lynda McClanahan

Like many of my generation, I took up hatha yoga in the 1970s. All I knew about it was that yoga was from India and that it must be a more spiritual form of exercise. Frankly, to my young self, it mostly meant deep breathing, "down dog " and the chance to enhance muscle tone in a noncompetitive atmosphere. One would not expect my attitude to cause in me anything other than a trim figure, but as they say, "Even a blind hog will find an acorn every once in a while." I found such an acorn when my quest for the philosophy of yoga began. Through study, I learned that hatha yoga steadies the body, regulates the life force and calms the mind. I also learned that its ultimate goal is union with God-consciousness. As time went on, I became convinced that hatha yoga is inseparable from the spiritual tradition in which it arose, Hinduism. Eventually, my studies led to teaching yoga philosophy to future hatha yoga instructors as part of their training and certification. Sharing with them my treasured discoveries about yoga was the fulfillment of a dream and a task filled with unexpected challenges and surprises.

Students come to hatha yoga with the intuition that it contains a subtle "something " which the local gym lacks. There is only a vague notion that this "something " is directly connected to Hinduism. My first difficulty was that the strength of this Hindu connection might be new or even shocking to students. Words like Brahman and God-consciousness are not normally used in yoga advertising. Even if students accepted these words, how would the studio owner react? After all, I had been hired to teach, not to diminish the market as upset clients walked out the door!

I had personal experience of negative reactions to Hinduism in the Methodist seminary I had attended. How well I remember the day when a lady fled the lecture hall of a Hinduism class exclaiming, "There is no truth in this religion!" On the one hand, separating yoga from Hinduism seemed culturally insensitive at best and plain wrong at worst. Yet how could I communicate this connection without deeply distressing and alienating people?

I gave up trying to solve this puzzle and gained a measure of inner peace when I realized that I was assigned to teach yoga philosophy, not to monitor reactions. Once I understood this, the mind became calm and everything fell into place. The idea that Western yoga students are innately antagonistic to Hindu ideas has not been my experience. Among my students are Indian and Indian-American Hindus, Jewish believers, secular humanists, Christians, artists and people with no spiritual affiliation at all. Many students show appreciation for the historical perspective I offer and speak of attaining a more mature understanding. One student shared that she was inspired to seek out a spiritual community for the first time. Far from rejecting yoga philosophy, most students behave like thirsty sponges.

We are at an important juncture in the history of Western yoga. Will hatha yoga in the West become identified with the culture that created it? Or will it make a clean break and call itself something else?

I teach that all yoga, including hatha, is an Indian spiritual technology saturated with Hindu ideas. What students do with this information is up to them. Only Brahman knows how it will all shake out. In the meantime, I hope yoga studios continue to insist on a philosophical component to their teacher trainings. Students should be exposed to the way yoga views itself from the inside out: as a spiritual discipline designed to assist in the evolution of both individual souls and the entire planet.

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