

[Clash: Who's Stealing Yoga?](#)

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Clash

Who's Stealing Yoga?

Dr. Aseem Shukla denounces the "Theft of Yoga," saying yoga is undeniably Hindu; self-help guru Deepak Chopra retorts, "No, it's not!" Welcome to the Great Yoga Debate.

Aseem Shukla, an Associate Professor in urologic surgery at the University of Minnesota medical school, co-founder and board member of Hindu American Foundation, is a regular panelist of Washinton Post's On Faith blog. So is Deepak Chopra. On April 18, 2010, Shukla wrote an essay entitled "The Theft of Yoga," and five days later Chopra responded. The impromptu exchange, soon dubbed the "Great Yoga Debate," has drawn hundreds of comments from readers and generated a firestorm of discussions in the wider Hindu community. Here are the highlights. Read it fully [here](#)

Aseem Shukla: "The Theft of Yoga"

Nearly 20 million people in the United States gather together routinely, fold their hands and utter the Hindu greeting namaste--the Divine in me bows to the same Divine in you. Then they close their eyes and focus their minds with chants of "Om," the Hindu representation of the first and eternal vibration of creation. Arrayed in linear patterns, they stretch, bend, contort and control their respirations as a mentor calls out names of Hindu Divinities linked to various postures.

Christians, Jews, Muslims, Pagans, agnostics and atheists they may be, but they partake in the spiritual heritage of a faith tradition with a vigor often unmatched by the two-and-a half-million Hindu Americans here. The Yoga Journal found that the industry generates more than \$6 billion each year and continues on an incredible trajectory of popularity.

It would seem that yoga's mother tradition, Hinduism, would be shining in the brilliant glow of dedicated disciples seeking more from the font of their passion. Yet

Hinduism in common parlance is identified more as a tradition of colorful and harrowing wandering ascetics than the spiritual inspiration of Patanjali, the second century bce commentator and composer of the Yoga Sutras that form the philosophical basis of Yoga practice today.

Yoga is severed in America's collective consciousness from Hinduism. Yoga, meditation, ayurvedic natural healing, self-realization--they are today's syntax for New Age, Eastern, mystical, even Buddhist, but nary an appreciation of their Hindu origins. The severance of yoga from Hinduism disenfranchises millions of Hindu Americans from their spiritual heritage and a legacy in which they can take pride.

Hinduism, as a faith tradition, stands at this pass a victim of overt intellectual property theft, absence of trademark protections and the facile complicity of generations of Hindu yogis, gurus, swamis and others that offered up a religion's spiritual wealth at the altar of crass commercialism. Once yoga was no longer intertwined with its Hindu roots, it became up for grabs and easy to sell. The American Yoga Association, states that "The common belief that Yoga derives from Hinduism is a misconception. The techniques of Yoga have been adopted by Hinduism as well as by other world religions."

Yoga is identified today only with Hatha Yoga, the aspect of yoga focused on postures and breathing techniques. But this is only one part of the practice of Raja Yoga that is actually an eightfold path designed to lead the practitioner to moksha, or salvation.

All of this is not to contend, of course, that yoga is only for Hindus. Yoga is Hinduism's gift to humanity to follow, practice and experience. But be forewarned. Yogis say that the dedicated practice of yoga will put one on the path of self-realization. Expect conflicts if you are sold on the exclusivist claims of Abrahamic faiths--that God awaits the arrival of His chosen few at heaven's gate.

Hindus must take back yoga and reclaim the intellectual property of their spiritual heritage.

Deepak Chopra: "Sorry, Your Patent on Yoga Has Run Out"

Aseem Shukla laments the disconnect between yoga and its origins in Hinduism. He's certainly right that the practice of yoga has become a "spiritual discipline" that is open to anyone of any faith. But it's strange to find him disapproving of this fact.

First, yoga is a spiritual discipline in India, and always has been. The aim of the practice is liberation. When liberation occurs, the yogi is freed from incidental religious trappings that enclose yoga. Secondly, yoga did not originate in Hinduism as Dr. Shukla claims. Perhaps he has a fundamentalist agenda in mind, but he must know very well that the rise of Hinduism as a religion came centuries after the foundation of yoga in consciousness and consciousness alone.

Beneath Shukla's complaints one detects the resentment of an inventor who discovered Coca-Cola or Teflon but neglected to patent it. Isn't that a rather petty basis for drawing such a negative picture? Most Indians, when they contemplate the immense popularity of yoga in the US, feel that something good is happening. Shukla regards the same scene with a withering frown.

Aseem Shukla: "Dr. Chopra, Honor Thy Heritage"

Deepak Chopra's rejoinder presents a veritable feast of delicious irony. Indeed, Chopra is a principal purveyor of the very usurpation I sought to expose. And we cannot discount his self-interest in this issue, considering the empire of wellness he has built on the foundations of essential knowledge passed on by generations of Hindu masters--yoga, ayurveda and Vedanta.

Chopra is perhaps the most prominent exponent of the art of "How to Deconstruct, Repackage and Sell Hindu Philosophy Without Calling it Hindu!" To Larry King, he has described himself as an "Advaita Vedantin"--one of the major philosophical schools of Hinduism. Yet none of the plethora of his book titles, that include several devoted to Jesus and one entire book devoted to the Buddha, even skirt the word "Hindu."

The rishis did not call themselves Hindu. The moniker "Hinduism" is of relatively recent origin, but it is accepted today as a handy substitute for the perhaps more accurate but difficult to pronounce name, Sanatana Dharma, the eternal religion.

I do not begrudge Chopra his runaway success, but an occasional nod to his spiritual heritage would be much appreciated.

Deepak Chopra: "Yoga Belongs to All of Us"

Although Prof. Aseem Shukla has got the bit between his teeth, I doubt that there's much enthusiasm for his ideas. Nobody is stopping Hindus from claiming yoga as their own... [but the claim is] false.

Shukla didn't refute my basic argument, which is that yoga is a practice rooted in consciousness, not proprietary religion. The great seers of India didn't simply precede the term Hindu, [but] dogmatic religion itself. The true success of Hinduism is measured by how many members transcend it, not by how many slavishly follow it.

Of course, being an organization of sorts, and a highly fallible one, Hinduism falls short of its ideal of Sanatana Dharma. It becomes tribal, self-enclosed and one-eyed about being the only way to God. Shukla is proud of promoting those parochial ends when he shouldn't be. The fact that yoga belongs to the whole world represents a great gift from Hinduism, not a loss.

I'm happy that Prof. Shukla isn't the most strident of fundamentalists. He seems rather bemused where most of his kind are zealous. I forgive the potshots taken at me. He seems unaware of my deep involvement in reawakening of Vedanta, ayurveda and many other aspects of India's spiritual tradition.

In the spirit of friendliness, I would like to find common ground with Prof. Shukla in the term Sanatana Dharma--the eternal wisdom of life. Whether he calls it Hinduism or I call it Vedic knowledge, I believe we are both referencing the same body of universal knowledge that has always stood for benefiting the whole human family.

Aseem Shukla: "Hinduism and Sanatana Dharma, One and the Same"

I will take Dr. Deepak Chopra at his word where he seeks to find common ground in our virtual debate as to the origins of yoga. Not willing to identify himself as a

Hindu, Chopra is content to accept the term Sanatana Dharma as the source of yoga and the Vedantic wisdom he propagates.

Chopra is hardly the first to find it hard to openly identify himself a Hindu, just as Eckhart Tolle eschews the term Hindu while he admittedly parlays the copious works of the towering contemporary Advaita Vedanta Hindu master, Sri Ramana Maharshi.

Today, Sanatana Dharma and Hinduism are synonymous. Chopra incomprehensibly condemns Hinduism as "tribal" and "one-eyed about being the only way to God," while I celebrate Hinduism as the original paragon of pluralism whose Vedas recognized that "Ekam Sat Viprah Bahudha Vadanti," or Truth is One, the wise call it by many names.

Chopra conflates Hinduism with "orthodox trappings" when I see a tradition of infinite possibilities, indeed yogas, suited to the inclinations of the seeker: bhakti yoga, or devotion, for those passionate in their love for God; jnana yoga, or the path of knowledge, for the contemplative; and karma yoga for the active and industrious.

Born and raised in the United States, I faced the innocently cruel queries of classmates that my children still answer today: "I saw on Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom that you Hindus eat monkey brains;" "My father told me you're going to hell because you believe in millions of gods." My work at the Hindu American Foundation is to answer such questions on a national stage.

There are no Sanatana Dharmists or Vedantins in today's world, but only a billion people around the globe and two million in the US who call themselves Hindu. So the movement to claim yoga's Hindu roots does not merely speak in a whisper--it is a silent majority finally beginning to find its voice. If Hinduism is better understood and appreciated along the way, children facing those questions I faced may just answer a bit more clearly and, yes, proudly, adding another important layer to America's pluralism.

The aftermath of this debate saw wide repercussions. Newsweek columnist Lisa Miller wrote about it, concluding that you can't stop people from using and transforming yoga, but you should "know where yoga came from and respect those origins." Spiritual counselor Philip Goldberg, writing for the Huffington Post, conjured an intriguing analysis that affirmed that the whitewashing of yoga allowed Hindu beliefs to be incorporated in mainstream America, much like a cultural trojan horse, and now people have no choice but to acknowledge the roots of karma, reincarnation and other Hindu beliefs.

As for the readers of the debate on Washington Post's website, the verdict is almost unanimous. Of the first 150 comments, only one is favorable to Chopra--the others either support Shukla, are neutral, or off-topic. Shukla scored the dialectic equivalent of a knock-out. P!pi

HAF's National Campaign to Reclaim Yoga

In 2009, the Hindu American Foundation called the Yoga Journal magazine to question why it rarely publishes the term "Hinduism" when drawing from the Bhagavad Gita or the Vedas. "Honestly, Hinduism just has too much baggage," offered the person who answered the phone, confirming the suspicion of bias.

Startled, the Foundation formulated its stance on this strategic issue shortly afterward, with the release of its paper "Yoga Beyond Asana: Hindu Thought in Practice." The paper quotes extensively from both the legendary yoga guru B.K.S. Iyengar as well as his son, Prashant Iyenagar, highlighting not only the delinking of yoga from its Hindu roots, but also the erroneous idea that yoga is primarily a physical practice based on asana, as it is almost solely known in the West.

In December 2009, HAF's Suhag Shukla spoke out at the Parliament of World Religions in Australia against the commercial appropriation and misappropriation of yoga. The Hindu American Foundation launched in May 2010 the "Take Back Yoga" campaign, describing it as an "effort to bring to light yoga's Hindu root--a relinking." Read more about it [at HAF's website](#)