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Like It Or Not, Western Yoga Is A Textbook Example Of Cultural Appropriation

Yoga furnishes a textbook example of lifting something from another tradition, branding it as “exotic,” diluting and twisting it, and then calling it our own.

[s.e. smith](#)

<http://www.xojane.com/issues/yoga-religious-cultural-appropriation>

Jul 8, 2013 at 11:30am

A California judge just [dipped his toes into the yoga wars](#) with a ruling on the Encinitas Unified School District’s yoga program, encouraging kids to get active by taking them through a series of asanas. In his somewhat strange ruling, he determined that yoga did indeed have religious roots (about which more in a moment), but that the school could continue the program because the religion had been, well, sufficiently diluted.

[The decision puzzled Candy Gunther Brown](#), an expert witness in the case who had testified extensively about the origins of yoga and its connections to religious practice and the Hindu faith. Ultimately, she questioned why the judge was even involved in this kind of case to begin with:

...his ruling—which found that EUSD was not excessively entangled with religion—actually entangles government with religion by placing Meyer in the position of evaluating whether EUSD stripped “enough” religion from a religious practice.

Who needs separation of church and state when you have downward dog, am I right?

The case pinged for me because I have a lot of interest in the ongoing yoga culture wars in the west, and this was simply another piece of the puzzle.

For a lot of people in the US, “yoga” is a series of pretzel-like physical exertions done to get fit, usually with some token Sanskrit thrown in here and there to keep things exotic and spicy. It’s an industry worth billions of dollars every year, between swanky supplies like [see-through yoga pants \(oops!\)](#), workout gear, and, of course, exclusive yoga retreats. It seems like everybody and their mother is either practicing yoga or training to become a [certified yoga instructor](#) these days.

As a fitness movement, yoga has swept across the US, and it’s been widely adopted in a variety of communities. It’s promoted for everything from supplementing physical therapy to help people recover from severe injuries to staying toned and fit for beauty pageants. Yoga is the New It Thing.

The problem is, that's not yoga. What people in the US are referring to as "yoga" is actually one aspect of a larger spiritual practice. Practitioners in the US are using *asana*, or "postures," a series of poses used to prepare the body for meditation.

Yoga actually includes a combination of exercises, which are intended to connect people with the divine. It's an aspect of Hindu faith with origins that are thousands of years past, and a very lengthy history of practice across Hindu communities in regions like modern-day India.

[The *asana* are just one aspect of that practice.](#) Along with the postures come breathwork, meditation, concentration, observances, withdrawal, restraints, and higher levels of meditation. These things are practiced as part of an interconnected system, and for some people, they are very integral to personal expressions of faith. That sure sounds a lot like a religious practice.

While yoga may confer a sense of wellbeing, deeper connection with the earth, and fitness, that's not the sole goal. Some practitioners of yoga don't actually do that many *asanas*. Kirti Kamboj, a lifelong practitioner of yoga, [wrote really elegantly about the divide between western perceptions of yoga and its tradition](#):

I found these points both illuminating and disturbing. Before, I was under the assumption that I'd been doing yoga all my life. Yet things I believed to be the core of yoga -- yama niyama ideals, body awareness, breath control, etcetera -- have no place in it at all...The realization that I've been doing fake yoga all my life is worrisome enough, but it's been eclipsed by a much more troubling one. The position that experts on both sides seem determined to hold, is that I, along with some of my family and friends and hundreds of millions of desis worldwide (even those among us who regularly twist ourselves into the sweaty *asanas* of real yoga!), don't exist.

Kamboj highlights a troubling aspect of the western relationship with the *asanas*; many westerners seem to view yoga as an ancient tradition they're honoring and preserving, as though people aren't practicing it all over the world. And they've adopted it as their own pseudo-spiritual practice without acknowledging that it's actually rooted in a specific religious tradition.

That's what translates into turning yoga into a multi-billion dollar industry complete with [attempts to patent specific postures and styles](#), as though yoga is a business rather than an aspect of religious tradition.

While many people appear uncomfortable when it comes to talking about cultural appropriation, yoga furnishes a textbook example; westerners lift something from another tradition, brand it as "exotic," proceed to dilute and twist it to satisfy their own desires, and then call it their own. While claiming to honor the centuries of tradition involved, what they practice is so far from the actual yoga practiced by actual Hindus that it's really just another form of trendy fitness, covered in New Age trappings. For Indians, particularly Hindus, [there's a definite divide](#) when it comes to the "yoga" practiced by westerners and that practiced in their own communities.

Only this time, that trendy fitness is ripped from the cultural traditions of actual living people, rather than being invented whole hog. The romanticization of both "yoga" -- by which people generally mean *asanas* sprinkled with a bit of breathwork and meditation -- and India has created

a heady mixture of appropriation and imperialism. Hence we have the west trying to pretend it's possible to patent a practice that is thousands of years old in order to allow a wealthy man to profit even more from his style of "yoga," and forcing India to defend its cultural traditions.

In 2010, the Hindu American Foundation launched a "[Take Yoga Back](#)" campaign to address some of these issues, reaching out to educate people about the origins of yoga. Their campaign is designed not to tell people to stop practicing yoga, but to get people thinking about its roots. Andrea MacDonald, a white Canadian yoga practitioner, [notes that it should be possible to practice yoga without turning it into a diluted, culturally void version of itself](#).

I struggle with the use of aspects of religious practice in secular life; until very recently, though, [I did asanas and pranayama myself](#) as a way of focusing, centering, and strengthening myself. I liked how these practices made my body and mind feel, but I also felt deeply troubled by my use of some of the eight limbs of yoga in a way that didn't feel in accordance with the practice's roots, and by my practice of yoga as an atheist.

If I wouldn't dream of taking Communion at a Catholic Church if I was attending as a guest, why would I practice yoga? Aren't there lots of explicitly fitness-oriented options for me to choose from that don't require me to appropriate religious practices from former colonies?

And couldn't Encinitas Unified have come up with another physical fitness program for its kids?



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