

## Yoga: Recreation or Religion?

The necessity for defining yoga as a spiritual practice is upon us. Here in the United States, Yoga has become an American phenomenon, a free-for-all, with the unfortunate consequence of becoming confused, if not aligned, with recreational activities.

Yoga with its practice of physical postures certainly has its fitness aspects. But Hatha Yoga is defined by its eight limbs, the first of which requires practitioners of yoga to refrain from harming others, lying, stealing, immoderate sex, and over-accumulating. These tenets are essential to all the major religions. Yet here in America, where the prevailing culture is deeply influenced by capitalism and financial gain, the Hath Yoga tenet of *aparigraha*, non-greediness, is a vastly foreign concept.

Therefore yoga with its current popularity in America is viewed by many as a means to make income. Even for those who embrace a more traditional Eastern philosophy, there is still some concern for financial gain involved with the offering of yoga classes, workshops, and teacher trainings.

In the state of Missouri a studio which offers yoga, Pilates, dance, massage, and chiropractic therapy was targeted for a recently-passed law regulating “recreational activities” and which requires sales tax be levied on consumers of fitness classes.

(A similar case occurred in the 1990’s, when massage therapists who worked for resorts in the Ozarks were charged with sales taxes due to the “recreational” nature of their work. Massage Therapy became a licensed profession in Missouri, thus protecting massage from being labeled as “recreation”).

Yoga, which is not a licensed profession is, according to the Supreme Court of the State of Missouri, a “fitness activity” and is now subject to the sales tax law. In the above case, the studio was billed for \$134,000, which included sales tax for the past five years and late fees. The studio began charging sales tax for all its classes and activities at the start of 2007, and was able to negotiate for a settlement and reduction of the fees. The studio owner wanted to take the case to court, and fight for a change in the law, thus protecting other yoga studios from similar costs, and saving her studio and clients from having to pay future sales tax. However, she settled. So her center joined a local Bikram studio and a nearby high-end gym and spa which offers yoga classes in paying the State of Missouri the sales tax they collect for their yoga classes.

In October of 2009 the state of Missouri mailed letters to more yoga studios demanding that they begin charging sales tax for classes. The State did not give the studios time to redress, threatening to charge them for back taxes and late fees unless they began levying sales tax by November 2009.

Thus we must now be adamant about identifying yoga for what it truly is: a path of Self-development and enlightenment that employs, as religion do, ritualistic and ceremonial practices (chanting Om, speaking the word “namaste”, using meaning-laden Sanskrit words to describe postures and activities). Yes, we could define and license yoga as a therapeutic practice, and yes there is an International Yoga Therapy Association, but this could take years and it begs the essential question: What is Yoga - recreation or religion?

Viewing yoga as recreation so it can be marketed to the masses as the latest fitness fad cheapens and demeans this philosophic path. Without recognizing its ancient shamanic roots, and admitting that it always was intended to raise human consciousness and awareness, yoga loses its ability to change lives in any meaningful way. Yoga as religion is intended to elevate humankind to its highest potential, by recognizing the inherent divine True Nature of all sentient beings, and giving them the power to create lasting happiness. Like all religions it defies simplification but clearly asks that, in order to call it Yoga, practitioners must offer it their highest dedication, consistency, and love, and call it by its True Name.