

# A Modern-Day Question Needing an Answer on the Gap Between Japanese Views of Religion and Yoga



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## Abstract

Conducting courses on Yoga both as a general education subject at a Japanese university and as part of the social innovation project workshops for citizens has numerously raised a common question: Is yoga religion or not? This is topic authors wish to comment upon from the perspective of the questioner and the answerer, the provider of knowledge in context of YOGA interlinking with an understanding of the question, its cause and explanation with a historical background of religion.

**Keywords:** Youth; Yoga; Philosophy; Culture; Experiences

## Background

Previously we had addressed the role of Yoga in higher education in Japan [1] and during the graduate school classes students had concerns on yoga and religion, even though the course devoted a lecture to explain this [2]. Why is this so?

## Question

Let us take the example of a question by a student to start this conversation. The question - anyone would like to know. But it is a question that is somehow difficult to ask. I have heard that yoga is not a religion, but it seems religious, doesn't it. What is religion? What is Yoga? I have always had a negative view of religion. I cannot believe in something like God, and I find prayers, etc., a bit dubious. However, after staying in Nepal and India for a while it was mentioned that 'my way of thinking' changed. Because their ordinary people were praying and worshipping, for example the sun, as a daily routine, a habit. It was realized that these acts were not special acts of human beings. It was no longer considered as something dubious like religion.

## Answer 1

*Why do we view religion negatively?* It is easier to understand when we understand the cause. When we usually speak of "religion," we are referring to a denominational organization:

- 1) There is a founder, a leader, and the leaders of the sect,
- 2) The doctrines and scriptures set forth by the founder, the leader, and the leaders of the 'order' are considered the only correct truths,
- 3) Those who belong to the sect can be broadly divided into clerics and believers,
- 4) The birthplace of the founder and the birthplace of the sect are revered as sacred sites,
- 5) There are places (meeting halls, temples, etc.) where prayers and other events are held, and there are rules for praying. There are strict rules on behaviors that believers must strictly observe,

6) Running (managing) a religion requires money. It involves worldly affairs that unite a large number of constituents. For this reason, there is a headquarters and a branch office, and there are branch chapters of chapters. Additionally, religious organizations have an ego as a group; i.e., this is the same with nations, companies, unions, etc. The ego of the association has the same desires as the ego of the individual, i.e., to gain power (wealth, power, and influence over others). Strong attachment to what they have gained. There is rivalry and jealousy, and so on. In this way, the 'order' often engages in struggles, wars, and persecution of those who do not adhere to the faith and outsiders, exposing a very ugly picture of humanity. Moreover, the 'order' forces its followers to do what is right that they think.

As you can see from the above, throughout human history, religious groups have a history of demonstrating ugly human behavior on a large scale, and even today, such incidents, conflicts, and wars continue unabated. We naturally believe that religion makes people happy, makes society peaceful, and creates a prosperous and peaceful society. However, when we come to know that the actual situation is the exact opposite, we think that "it would be better if there was no religion."

### Answer 2

*Religion that is not a religion:* Like the people of Nepal today, and like the common people of India, and a large number of Japanese today believe in, pray to, and worship gods and Buddha apart from their religious denomination. Even in Japan, if you go to the countryside, you will find Dosojin (road ancestor deity). There are people who silently clean up the area around Dosojin. Such prayer ('puja') and devotion ('bhakti') lead to the deep spirituality of Yoga. Acting with a reverent heart without wanting to be praised by someone or wanting benefits is similar to yoga, and the Japanese "DO" ('michi') is the same. If it is such a human activity, it may be said that it is a religion that is not a religion.

### Reflections

First, we would like to consider an incident in Japan that symbolizes the sect's ego as pointed out in Answer 1. In that incident, Japanese young people, especially university students, were victims [3]. This begins with an individual named Shoko Asahara. His father ran a privately owned shop by craftsmen who made tatami mats (Japanese flooring). However, the demand for tatami mats continued to decline and the family was poor. However, it was an ordinary family that could be found anywhere in Japan at that time. He was the seventh son of nine children, but he was blind in his left eye due to congenital glaucoma.

He was a very troubled child with a strong lust for power and a warped personality that took pleasure in dominating others, but this was not necessarily due to his family environment. Even after becoming an adult, there was no shortage of social troubles, but finally starting yoga class became the impetus for the later creation of Aum Shinrikyo. One of the authors of this paper, Takahashi Genboku, once saw a book on yoga written by Asahara

in the late 1980s. When I opened it, I found that it said, "When you do meditation, you can float in the air" and it showed a photo of a person levitating in the air. However, this is clearly a picture of jumping. Not only in yoga, but anyone can start to vibrate when meditating.

This vibration can become an up-and-down oscillation, which, when it becomes intense, causes the body to jump several tens of centimeters. In his book he showed pictures of this jump and wrote that he was 'floating'. After that, the yoga class came to be called Aum Shinrikyo, and it began to expose its political desires, and in 1990 Asahara and 24 of his followers ran for the 39th House of Representatives general election, but all were unsuccessful. And it was a state conspiracy, he thought, that led to this outcome. After that, he built a facility (Satian) where the believers lived together on the plateau of Kamikuishikimura in Yamanashi Prefecture. In 1995, he secretly produced sarin, a highly toxic substance, and used it in the Tokyo subway in 1995, causing a tragedy that resulted in the deaths of 14 people and many patients with severe aftereffects, shaking the whole of Japan.

This is the so-called subway sarin attack. Since sarin is a deadly poison, it cannot be created without considerable chemical knowledge and technology. It was possible because a group of young people who had graduated from science colleges were members of the cult leadership, i.e., the group actively recruited followers, especially targeting science students at relatively high-level universities. Asahara then took the position of the leader himself, established ministries and called senior officials ministers, and plotted for independence as a state. This is a classic example of the misery caused to society by the egos of religious cults, as pointed out in Answer 1.

Recently, Hoffman [4] reported in a news article: "On college campuses, clubs - known as "circles" in Japan - are stirring after long dormancy. The response is eager. It's like spring after a long winter. Be careful, warns Spa (May 2-9). The fresh air may be tainted. There are viruses and viruses - organic viruses and metaphorical viruses." The article further introduces government warnings and specifically calls for caution among universities and college students. "Watch out, it says, for circles with "a hidden religious agenda." It knows whereof it speaks. The article goes on to say, "Spa warns against Aum Shinrikyo successor group, namely Aleph, still active on campus and still attractive, apparently, to some young people who have no suspicion of the cult's sinister background."

Aum Shinrikyo has been called a cult for its extreme activities. However, as mentioned above, if religious groups are ruled by a strong ego, they will become the seeds that spread misfortune to humankind. Swami Vivekananda was the first person in the world to advocate that ordinary religious denominations cannot achieve true peace and tranquility for mankind unless they overcome their own ego. His call had a profound impact on the world religious community and the peoples of the West [5]. In Western thought, with its Christian worldview, "God, the Absolute, is an objectively

real being. And those who do not believe in this God are unworthy of being human”.

In other words, Western thought is an ideology that considers it good to repeat acts of aggression outwards from the solid ego-clad walls. On the other hand, Eastern thought, i.e., Indian Vedic philosophy, Yoga, Chinese Lao-Zhuang philosophy and Zen thought, does not have an ego structure that says ‘everyone must think the same way as me’, as the way of perception of the ‘absolute’ is different for each individual. Let us take the Bhagavad Gita [6], one of the classics of Indian thought that has been translated into numerous languages and read around the world, as an example. The Bhagavad Gita actively recommends fervent faith (bhakti). It repeatedly tells us to have ardent love (bhakti) for Lord Krishna.

However, it also says: “, without being attached to the fruits of activities, one should act as a matter of duty, for by working without attachment one attains the Supreme” (chap. 3 - v. 19). It also calls for the establishment of a free self, free from desires, fears, etc., and says that there are four techniques to achieve this. This is what yoga is like. This is different from the religions, which tend to be ego driven. The Bhagavad Gita recommends religious acts such as faith and worship, but even those who do not believe in God can be saved through yoga. This is what is meant by a religion that is not a religion [7,8].

### Conclusion

In summary, it can be stated: “in Eastern thought, such as yoga and Zen, the primary aim is to control the ego and cut off attachment by awakening to the inner self”. Therefore, even if

an individual holds religious belief, such as believing in God or worshipping a higher being, and performs such acts, they do not lead to acts that harm others. It may be a religion, but it is not a religion.

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