Yoga: a Discipline of Grace  
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I was recently asked, “So what is yoga all about?” The question is somewhat akin to asking what running is all about. It depends on who is running and why, who they’re running from, to or with, how often, for what reasons, and with what frame of mind. In other words, yoga is an activity, but is not one essential thing, as several recent critics and adherents claim.

At one extreme, Albert Mohler and Mark Driscoll among others have denounced the practice of yoga among Christians. Driscoll states unequivocally that “yoga is demonic.” (Mark Driscoll. YouTube video. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BhcoBLdM8CQ](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BhcoBLdM8CQ). July 10, 2010.) Mohler claims that Christian commitments inherently conflict with practicing yoga and that the latter threatens Christian spirituality. (Albert Mohler, September 20, “The Subtle Body — Should Christians Practice Yoga?”) Both express concern about the spiritual roots of this embodied practice. At another extreme, Tara Stiles, a former model now infamous for her YouTube yoga videos and book Slim, Calm, Sexy Yoga, focuses entirely on the physical and health aspects of yoga. She says yoga is not about spirituality, but feeling (and looking) beautiful, healthy and strong. Many traditional yoga teachers and practitioners, represent yet another view, which finds Stiles’ ‘style’ an offensive departure from the tradition of yoga which is integrally spiritual, meditative, and physical.

Indeed, yoga (Sanskrit) refers to traditional physical and mental disciplines originating in India in association with religions we now call ‘Buddhism’ and ‘Hinduism’. Even in India there is no unified tradition. The practices have been preserved through various schools and lineages and thousands of gurus. The word ‘yoga’ (“joining” or “union”) signifies the sense in which these practices integrate and cultivate the body, mind and spirit holistically with the aim of self-enlightenment.

For our community, the question may be: why practice yoga? I consider yoga a holistic practice and discipline of awareness and cultivation of grace and strength in the midst of challenges. Every class initiates an opportunity to become aware of and grateful for the breath that animates our bodies each new day. Maintaining deep and even breathing throughout the postures cultivates calmness and focus in the midst of difficulty. The slow movements and poses allow each practitioner to nurture mindfulness of their own physical and mental strengths, weaknesses, injuries and limitations with the aim of restoration and health. The final resting pose ‘corpse pose,’ especially in this season of Lent, serves as a reminder that we shall ‘return to dust.’ But what of the spirituality of yoga? I find nothing about yoga itself—the postures, sequences, breathing, stretching, strengthening or discipline—to be inherently self-enlightening, spiritually harmful, or ‘Christian.’ Like any activity it can engender a spirit of competition or grace, in more and less healthy ways. Nonetheless, yoga can provide the space to nurture habits of gratitude for God’s love and grace, of self-care and self-love, and of love and grace for our neighbor as self—in the midst of the difficulties, stresses, and challenges that are sure to arise in the life of this community and beyond. That is, it can be an occasion for grateful meditation on the God in whom we “live and move and have our being.” (Paul at the Areopagus (Acts 17:28) specifically quoting the Cretan philosopher Epimenides.)