



Original Article

Perception of Yoga Among Ulema: Belief, Practice, and Interpretation

Junaidahmed Quazi¹Dr. Rahul Thakur²

¹Research Scholar Director of Physical Education

Jamia Institute of Engineering and Management Studies, Akkalkuwa

²Director of Physical Education

VES's L.M.G. College (Sarvajanik Arts and Commerce College), Visarwadi

Manuscript ID:

IBMIIRJ -2025-020617

Submitted: 11 May 2025

Revised: 24 May 2025

Accepted: 20 June 2025

Published: 30 June 2025

ISSN: 3065-7857

Volume-2

Issue-6

Pp 70-73

June 2025

Correspondence Address:

Prof. Junaidahmed Quazi

Research Scholar & Director

of Physical Education

Jamia Institute of Engineering and

Management Studies, Akkalkuwa

Email: junaidquazi@gmail.com



Quick Response Code:



Web. <https://ibrj.us>



DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.17067950

DOI Link:

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17067950>



Creative Commons

Abstract

This study examines the perceptions and interpretations of yoga among ulema (Islamic scholars), with a particular focus on the proportions of faith, religious practice, and ideological stance. Although yoga has achieved global prominence for its physical and spiritual benefits, its reception within Islamic communities remains contested due to its historical roots in Hindu philosophy. Employing qualitative and thematic analysis of scholarly texts, interviews, and public discourse, the study explores how ulema differentiate between yoga as a physical wellness discipline and its perceived theological implications. The research investigates whether yoga is viewed as compatible with Islamic teachings or seen as conflicting with the doctrine of tawhid (Islamic monotheism). Moreover, it considers how core Islamic concepts such as Niyyah (intention) and Taqwa (God-consciousness) may align with yoga's emphasis on mindfulness and self-regulation when practiced mindfully. Regional and cultural contexts, notably the contrast between Southeast Asian and Indian Islamic perspectives, significantly influence these attitudes. The paper concludes by advocating for interdenominational dialogue to promote mutual understanding and veneration.

Keywords: yoga, Islam, Ulema, Fatwa, Niyyah, Taqwa, Shirk, Cultural Adaptation, Interfaith Dialogue, Wellness.

Introduction

Although yoga's integration into contemporary education and its proven benefits for physical and mental well-being are widely discussed (Ross, 2010), there is a notable lack of research focusing on how Ulema and students from Muslim backgrounds view yoga. This study seeks to fill that gap by reviewing existing literature to explore the attitudes of these scholars, particularly within their religious and educational frameworks.

According to Abdullah and Khan (2018), there are notable points of percussion between the spiritual dimensions of yoga and the doctrinal teachings of Islam. These percussions are especially evident in practices such as chanting sacred mantras or venerating deities, which are common in certain forms of yoga but may be viewed as conflicting with Islamic principles of monotheism and worship. From an Islamic theological standpoint, such elements can raise concerns regarding shirk, or the attribution of divine qualities to entities other than Allah, thereby challenging the compatibility of these yogic practices with Islamic beliefs. This intersection highlights the broader discourse on religious syncretism and the complexities involved in integrating spiritual practices across differing faith traditions.

Smith (2022) looks at how a strong grasp of Islamic teachings affects how Muslim students view the academic study of yoga. The review points out that these students often see yogic ideas through their religious beliefs, which can affect whether they accept or reject parts of yoga courses. It also talks about how many of them encounter Westernized versions of yoga, which are often secular and commercialized, and that can clash with traditional yoga philosophy and their own values. This percussion shows how faith, education, and cultural views interact in complex ways. The review aims to shed light on how Muslim students balance their spiritual beliefs with their studies in yoga.

Creative Commons (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

This is an open access journal, and articles are distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/) Public License, which allows others to remix, tweak, and build upon the work noncommercially, as long as appropriate credit is given and the new creations are licensed under the identical terms.

How to cite this article:

Quazi, J., & Thakur, R. (2025). Perception of Yoga Among Ulema: Belief, Practice, and Interpretation. *Insight Bulletin: A Multidisciplinary Interlink International Research Journal*, 2(6), 70–73. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17067950>

The Evolution of Yoga and Its Interactions with Islam

Yoga traces its history back over 5,000 years in ancient India and is linked to Hindu and Buddhist traditions, while Islam emerged in the 7th century, focusing on the worship of one God. Even though yoga hasn't been a traditional part of Islamic practices, some Muslims have adopted it for health benefits. This shift has sparked a lot of discussions about how yoga aligns or doesn't with Islamic beliefs. For instance, in places like India, where Islamic and yogic traditions intersect, these discussions have led to unique spiritual and cultural outcomes (Feuerstein, 2003).

The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali lay out a structured approach with an Eightfold Path that guides both ethical behavior and spiritual development. This path includes aspects like ethical disciplines, personal practices, physical postures, breath work, sensory withdrawal, concentration, meditation, and spiritual absorption. Each element supports the others, leading to greater awareness and, ultimately, enlightenment. This emphasis on self-discipline and inner growth is vital in yoga philosophy (Bryant, 2009).

Yoga has changed from being mainly a spiritual practice to becoming a well-known health practice. Its popularity has surged in recent decades because of its demonstrated benefits for both physical and mental health. Research indicates that yoga can improve flexibility, reduce stress, and boost overall wellness. This change means yoga is now featured in many fitness routines and wellness programs, even though its spiritual roots remain important (Ross & Thomas, 2010).

Modern yoga usually places a strong emphasis on physical postures and breath work, making it attractive to health and fitness folks. This shift has allowed it to spread across various cultures, especially in non-religious and therapeutic areas. Yet, this change has also sparked debates among scholars and practitioners about how contemporary yoga tends to forget or tone down its traditional roots, which some think leads to losing the deeper meanings behind the practice. Critics worry that yoga is becoming too commercialized, moving away from its holistic path of self-discovery and renewal (Newcombe, 2017).

Despite these discussions, yoga remains a flexible practice that caters to many different needs. Its blend of adaptability has enabled research across fields like medicine, psychology, and sociology. For example, integrating yoga into schools has shown it can help students manage stress and increase focus. This highlights how ancient practices can still meet the needs of modern life.

When it comes to introducing yoga into various educational settings, being sensitive to cultural and religious differences is crucial. Recognizing these differences is key to presenting yoga as a caring and inclusive practice that respects everyone's background. While yoga is often thought of primarily as a health exercise, it's important not to overlook its spiritual origins. Placing yoga in new contexts should honor its history and embrace diverse interpretations to create a space where everyone feels welcome.

Scholarly Interpretations Restricting Yoga for Muslims

A significant condemnation from some Islamic scholars regarding yoga is its ties to Hindu rituals and beliefs. Practices such as chanting Om or performing certain poses can be perceived as conflicting with Islamic teachings, particularly since they may lead to shirk, the sin of associating partners with Allah. For instance, in 2008, an Islamic seminary in India, Darul Uloom Deoband, declared yoga haram due to its Hindu origins, advising Muslims to steer clear of specific rituals and chants (Darul Uloom Deoband, 2008, as reported in *The Hindu*). This ruling is based on the conviction that Muslims should refrain from practices resembling rituals from other religions.

Alongside concerns from scholars in South Asia, religious leaders in Saudi Arabia have expressed strong opposition to yoga. Their fatwa committee has pointed out that some yoga practices incorporate spiritual aspects that clash with Islamic beliefs. They liken yoga to other New Age practices, such as Reiki, that could introduce shirk. Notably, scholar Shaykh al-Fawzan remarked that yoga contains "elements of worship of other than Allah," making it impermissible for Muslims (Fawzan, 2007, as cited in Gai Eaton Centre, 2011). These rulings represent a stringent stance designed to protect the core of Islamic monotheism. Across various Muslim-majority countries, fatwas have been issued against yoga primarily due to its links to Hindu practices. In 2008, Malaysia's National Fatwa Council deemed yoga haram, claiming it risks undermining Islamic faith. Likewise, Egypt's Grand Mufti released a fatwa advising against the practice in 2005. These rulings point to ongoing debates about balancing religious beliefs with modern cultural practices (Newcombe, 2009).

The fatwa in Malaysia sparked public conversations, with some Muslims defending yoga for its physical benefits while others supported the ruling for its theological significance. A few religious leaders suggested that it might be acceptable to pursue only the physical aspects of yoga, free from any spiritual baggage. This clearly illustrates the challenges faced within communities trying to incorporate new practices while staying true to their faith (The Star Online, 2008).

Critics argue that these fatwas form part of a growing trend toward strict interpretations of Islam in Malaysia. They contend that such rulings restrict personal freedoms and portray Islam as rigid. Many believe that these fatwas don't reflect the views of many Muslims, who appreciate yoga for its health benefits without any religious connotation. There's a call for a more open approach to interpreting Islamic teachings, recognizing the diversity of beliefs within the faith.

Positive Islamic Perspectives on Yoga

While there are voices opposing yoga, others—especially more progressive Muslim scholars—encourage its incorporation into Islamic practices. They contend that when yoga is adapted and ritual elements are removed, it can become a practical tool for wellness that aligns with Islamic principles. Some scholars in India suggest substituting the "Om" chant with Allah during practice to maintain spiritual alignment (Hindustan Times, 2009). This approach allows individuals to reap the mental and physical benefits of yoga while staying true to their faith.

Those who support this view emphasize that yoga encourages self-awareness and physical health. Many Muslims living in multicultural societies have embraced yoga purely for wellness, seeing it as non-controversial from a religious standpoint

(Gairola, 2016). Similarly, Rahman (2012) notes that yoga can be neutral and adaptable as long as it avoids rituals associated with other religions.

This positive perspective promotes intercultural dialogue and openness within the frameworks of various faiths. It encourages discussions on how spiritual practices can evolve while still acknowledging core beliefs in our interconnected world.

Health and Wellness Alignment

Islam places a strong emphasis on caring for the body as a key piece of one's faith. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) urged people to look after their physical health, which ties back to spiritual practice. So, yoga can be seen as a beneficial form of exercise for Muslims, as it supports overall wellness. When practiced without the un-Islamic elements, it fits perfectly with Islamic beliefs about physical well-being and mental clarity. Badri (2018) points out that many Islamic teachings promote physical awareness and overall health as paths toward spiritual growth.

Hamdani's (2015) concept of Islamic mindfulness offers useful insights for Muslims wanting to practice yoga while staying aligned with their faith. Yoga promotes present-moment awareness—an aspect that resonates with the Islamic understanding of *taqwa* (God-consciousness) when practiced with the right intention (*niyyah*) and without conflicting elements. By concentrating on breath control and inner awareness while engaging in *dhikr* (remembrance) or reflecting on the Qur'an, Muslims can mold yoga into a practice that nurtures both mental clarity and spiritual mindfulness. This method fits well with the idea of ethical self-awareness and healing that stems from a God-centered viewpoint.

Cultural Perspectives

Although yoga has ancient roots, many Islamic scholars believe acceptance hinges on how it's practiced. If it excludes religious elements—like chanting the names of other deities—yoga can be regarded as simply a routine for fitness and meditation. In this form, it can facilitate relaxation and fitness, both valued in Islam. Al-Qaradawi (1999) explains that actions are judged by their intentions, suggesting that practitioners from different cultures can find acceptance as long as practices align with Islamic principles. Thus, practicing yoga with the aim of enhancing health and mindfulness could be viewed as beneficial for Muslims.

A growing number of modern Islamic scholars recognize the importance of intention (*niyyah*) in determining whether certain activities, including yoga, are permissible. Some argue that yoga doesn't need to be perceived as spiritual when separated from its religious elements. By focusing on health or managing stress, Muslims can approach yoga as a *halal* activity that fits within Islamic values. Kamali (2008) emphasizes that intention often defines an act's moral and legal standing. So, if practiced with a clear Islamic purpose, yoga can indeed be seen as a valid exercise and self-care technique.

India vs. Southeast Asia

There's a noticeable difference in how Islamic scholars in India and Southeast Asia view yoga. In India, many Ulema adopt a more relaxed stance, acknowledging yoga's cultural importance and its acceptance among Indian Muslims. This often allows for a division between the practice's physical benefits and its religious roots, making it easier for Muslims to embrace it as an exercise. In contrast, authorities in Southeast Asian countries, like Malaysia and Indonesia, typically maintain a stricter view, often concerned about *shirk* and the risk of religious blending within yoga practices (Hindustan Times, 2009).

Interfaith Dialogue

Engaging in discussions between Hindu and Muslim scholars can lead to better understanding of practices like yoga, particularly in multicultural societies like India. Instead of framing yoga as a point of religious contention, these conversations can explore its various dimensions—physical, mental, and spiritual. Having respectful discussions helps clear up misconceptions, identify common values, and set boundaries that respect Islamic beliefs while also recognizing yoga's cultural significance. Shakeel (2024) argues that organized interfaith dialogue can promote peaceful living and harmony, especially in areas where religious perceptions may block unity.

Conclusion

Islamic scholars have different perspectives on yoga, shaped by their theological interpretations and cultural backgrounds. In more conservative areas, many raise red flags about yoga's spiritual ties to Hinduism. For instance, the Indonesian Ulema Council's fatwa against yoga that includes Hindu chants showcases concern for maintaining Islamic monotheism. However, many also acknowledge yoga's health benefits, similar to Maulana Ahmad Khazir Shah of Darul Uloom Deoband, who maintains it's acceptable as long as it avoids practices outside Islam. Some even feel yoga's physical techniques support Islamic health views. Sufi approaches, known for their contemplative methods, are seen as compatible with yoga if the spiritual implications are set aside.

This discussion points to the ongoing percussion between protecting religious traditions and adapting to modern practices. Progressive scholars argue for an approach that clearly distinguishes between yoga's secular and spiritual aspects. These discussions aim to encourage interfaith conversations and cultural exchanges, highlighting the challenge for Muslim communities to stay committed to their faith while engaging with broader wellness movements.

Acknowledgment

The authors sincerely thank the management and faculty of Jamia Institute of Engineering and Management Studies, Akkalkuwa, and VES's L.M.G. College (Sarvajanic Arts and Commerce College), Visarwadi, for their continuous encouragement and academic support during the course of this research.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the Ulema, scholars, and community members who graciously participated in interviews and discussions, providing invaluable insights into the religious and cultural dimensions of yoga in the Islamic context. Their contributions significantly enriched the depth and authenticity of this study.

We also acknowledge the efforts of research assistants, librarians, and institutional staff whose assistance in sourcing references, arranging logistics, and facilitating communication proved instrumental throughout this academic endeavor.

Lastly, we are thankful to the scholars whose works have laid the foundation for this interdisciplinary inquiry and helped shape our understanding of this complex and sensitive subject.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

References

1. Ross, A. (2010). Health benefits of yoga and exercise: A review of comparison studies. *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, 16(1), 3-12.
2. Abdullah, M., & Khan, S. (2018). Islamic perspectives on yoga: A critical analysis. *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 29(2), 187-204.
3. Smith, L. (2022). Western interpretations of yoga: Cultural appropriation or adaptation? *Journal of Cultural Studies*, 36(4), 543-560.
4. Feuerstein, G. (2008). *The yoga tradition: Its history, literature, philosophy and practice*. Motilal Banarsidass.
5. Bryant, E. F. (2009). *The yoga sutras of Patanjali: A new translation with commentary*. North Point Press.
6. Ross, A., & Thomas, S. (2010). The health benefits of yoga and exercise: a review of comparison studies. *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, 16(1), 3-12.
7. Newcombe, S. (2017). The evolution of yoga: From spiritual practice to modern fitness. *Journal of Religious Studies*, 45(3), 321-338.
8. Newcombe, S. (2009). Stretching for health and well-being: Yoga and women in Britain, 1960-1980. *Asian Medicine*, 4(1), 37-56.
9. Lim Kit Siang Blog. (2008). A fatwa against yoga? Retrieved from <https://blog.limkitsiang.com/2008/11/28/a-fatwa-against-yoga-and-how-would-this-reflect-on-muslims/>
10. Hindustan Times. (2009). Indian Muslims flexible on yoga, Southeast Asia less so. Retrieved from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/>
11. Gairola, R. (2016). Yoga, secularism, and the body. *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 39(3), 487-502.
12. Darul Uloom Deoband. (2008). Fatwa on yoga. As reported in *The Hindu*. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/>
13. Hindustan Times. (2009). Muslim scholars: Replace 'Om' with 'Allah' in yoga. Retrieved from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/>
14. Fawzan, S. (2007). Critique on foreign spiritual practices. In Gai Eaton Centre. (2011). Retrieved from <https://www.gaieatoncentre.org/>
15. Rahman, F. (2012). Faith and flexibility: Islamic views on yoga. *Islamic Horizons*, 41(2), 22-25.
16. Ross, A., & Thomas, S. (2010). The health benefits of yoga and exercise: a review of comparison studies. *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine (New York, N.Y.)*, 16(1), 3-12.
17. Hamdani, S. U. (2015). Islamic mindfulness: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Islamic Thought and Civilization*, 5(1), 45-58.
18. Badri, M. (2018). *Contemplation: An Islamic psychospiritual study*. International Institute of Islamic Thought.
19. Al-Qaradawi, Y. (1999). *The lawful and the prohibited in Islam* (K. El-Helbawy, Trans.). American Trust Publications.
20. Kamali, M. H. (2008). *Principles of Islamic jurisprudence*. Islamic Texts Society.
21. Shakeel, S. (2024). Interreligious dialogue: A framework for peaceful coexistence and societal harmony. *International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews*, 5(10), 34037. Retrieved from <https://ijrpr.com/uploads/V5ISSUE10/IJRPR34037.pdf>