Episode Transcript

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Episode 17: “Interview with Tatiana Overduin on Exploring the Origins and Beliefs of Yoga: A Christian Perspective”

Tatiana lives in Adelaide, South Australia and works as a teacher at a Catholic school. She has a Bachelor of Arts in Theology from the Australian Lutheran College and is passionate about theology. This is Tatiana’s second visit to our podcast, and today discusses her experiences as a Yoga and meditation instructor, and its impact on her life and faith.

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Lexy: Welcome to another episode of Here She Stands. Today we are joined again by Tatiana Overduin from Adelaide. We first spoke to Tatiana back in Episode 8, where she talked about our identity in Christ. Today she has been kind enough to join us again to talk about the very important topic of Yoga: What exactly is Yoga and whether we as Christians should practice Yoga? So, Tatiana, thank you for joining me today.

Tatiana: It's a pleasure to be here. Thank you for asking me to join you again, Lexy. That's lovely.

Lexy: Thank you. Now, I'm not joined by Sonya today, she is unwell, so it's just me.

Tatiana: Hope she's feeling better soon.

Lexy: Yes, absolutely. So let's just jump straight in. So what is Yoga?

Tatiana: There's a lot one could say about that. I think as time has evolved, it has come to mean different things for different people. It's become a mainstream form of exercise in Western cultures. But originally its roots are as an ancient system, and a system which is meant to offer wisdom and support physical, mental and spiritual well-being. It definitely has its origins in that. And the physical postures themselves, which have a specific name. I'm going to choose not to use any of the Sanskrit names today, but they do have a specific name that groups them and I'm sure that people who do yoga would know what I'm talking about, but I'm just choosing not to use the Sanskrit today. There are also breathing techniques with a specific name in Sanskrit. It also then enters into guidance on living, and that becomes a big part of Yoga practice if one kind of gets into it more deeply. There's also the form of meditation, which enters into Yoga practice. Often Yoga sessions will begin or end with a brief meditation. So the aim of different Yoga processes is to supposedly help - the goal is to achieve harmony and a greater understanding of the person doing the Yoga, and also on life. So it could also be called a science, but it's most certainly a belief system in a philosophy, and it's not limited to any age group that can practice Yoga - or gender or religious background.

Lexy: Okay so within Yoga itself, there are different practices, and it's also like a lifestyle as well. Like you said, there are beliefs on life and practices on well-being and living that go with it.

Tatiana: I'll talk a little bit more about that with some of the other questions today and be a bit more specific on some of those points.

Lexy: Yes. So what is the origin of Yoga? Where did it come from?

Tatiana: I think for the person today, there's a lot of mystery and uncertainty surrounding Yoga. It's almost become just another kind of fitness routine, or even if you want to call it a sport or exercise program. But its history is based in the sacred text of the early writings of Yoga that can be traced back some 5000 years ago, apparently, or even further. So there's a long, rich history, initially developed in Northern India and the word Yoga is mentioned in the sacred texts and scriptures of the Vedic priests. There's a huge amount of work about Yoga contained in over 200 scriptures especially the main work of Indian or the Indus-Sarasvati civilization. And so again, there are different arms of Yoga as well. So it kind of can break up into different types of Yoga, but most certainly based in the meaning of the word. Yoga is based on the term which means to unite or to yoke. To yoke with: to yoke your body, mind and spirit into a personal universal awareness and consciousness.

Lexy: Okay, so you're not necessarily yoking with God as *we* know him, but with the universal awareness.

Tatiana: Well, that's what the tradition of Yoga is based on. I think we can explore some of these concepts of what it means for a Christian - perhaps later, as we discuss this.

Lexy: I have never done Yoga before. I've done a little bit of research into Yoga. From what I have read yoga is a Hindu practice. For those who are Hindu, it is a big part of their life and a big part of their belief system. Is that what you have found in your own study and your own research with Yoga?

Tatiana: Yes, that's its origins. So, as I said, though, many people today in our society would not be Hindu or not even think that there is any connection to that. But if you look at it, the origins of Yoga are from people who are Hindu, who would be practising Yoga as part of their spiritual belief system.

Lexy: Yes, I actually came across an article recently and it was talking about, I think it is the American Hindu Association, something like that, I'll have to fact-check that. It was talking about a campaign that they had started, which was basically the 'Take back Yoga' campaign, where these Hindus in America were just wanting people to understand that this is originally Hindu - *'we practice this, and we want people to be aware of its roots and where it's come from and what it means, so it's not just a fitness trend or a relaxation stretching session*'. Yes, I was reading that they would like it to be recognized for its roots.

Tatiana: Yes, I think that's the subtleness about it. And I'll use that word later again, that the way that a person becomes involved in the practice of Yoga, very innocently to begin with, but then the subtle influences that start to become a bigger part of the practice, because, of course, the more you practice Yoga, then the deeper you're going to enter into the various facets of it. I think people, perhaps without realising suddenly can find themselves deep in a practice that they originally never started off being involved in.

Lexy: Okay. Now, as I said before, I've never actually done Yoga. So what does a typical Yoga session look like?

Tatiana: Well, probably the most common thing about Yoga is what most say, Australians or people in the Western world would become involved in, and that is to improve flexibility and balance. For example, some of the movements can have great health benefits, and there are facts for that. So, for example, just one little example is where as people age, balance becomes an issue for them. And so putting your hand out, holding the back of a chair, standing on one leg, and holding one's balance, and particularly if you're older, and gently closing the eyes and then opening the eyes, swapping, turning around, doing the other leg: I don't see anything wrong with that. I think that that can be really beneficial for your body. Part of the issue is when we start to use the Sanskrit terminology with the poses themselves, and then like side stretching or forward stretching, that can, of course, again, be very beneficial to different parts of the body. So there's that part. It's also renowned for reducing stress and anxiety because of the practice of deep breathing. Breathing with the movement. The in and out breath becomes part of the whole movement. So, again, I think that I learned that from a medical or physiological point of view, a deep in-breath can actually really help people who suffer from anxiety. A really long, elongated out-breath exhale has actually been tested to show that, for people who suffer from

depression or are feeling very sad, if you exhale for a long time - it's very calming. So it depends. If we look at it from a physiological point of view, then I'm sure there are benefits. But when we start to yoke it with the spiritual elements, and particularly the use of the Sanskrit names, the correct Yoga names, I think that's where the danger lies.

Lexy: Yes. So the moves themselves, can be quite good for you: stretching, relaxation. Are there some Yoga instructors who hold sessions but leave out or don't really go into the Sanskrit or the spiritual side of things? Are there Yoga classes where it really is just the stretching and the different poses and all of that?

Tatiana: That would be a difficult question for me to answer because I could only go on experience, but I'm sure it would be that some teachers are simply using it as a form of exercise, full stop. I mean, there are other benefits, such as improving concentration and mental clarity, and improving sleep, boosting self-awareness. All of these are good things. So I couldn't judge whether there are teachers out there or not, or whether perhaps they start doing it with that and then build and increase the spiritual element. I did read an article that stated that if you're a good Yoga teacher, then you will start to integrate the ten most common movements or terms that you should incorporate into your practice. For example, there might be Yoga teachers who start just doing the movements and they're learning like I did. I gained my first step in Yoga teaching, and we can talk about that in a minute. But then in their own development of Yoga, they might read something and be encouraged, "*Well, there are ten deities, for example, a Yoga teacher should incorporate them into their classes"*, and then subsequently that is being put onto the student, because unless they stop or leave the session or perhaps pray through it, (which I definitely had done in the past when I first started) and you sort of protect with the light of Christ. You might start that way, and then eventually you start to become lapse in how you're practising your Yoga or start to take on more. I hope that answers your question.

Lexy: Yes. So in your experience, there has always been some type of spiritual element incorporated into the Yoga classes that you've done?

Tatiana: I think because I was a spiritual person to begin with, I was aware of the spirituality that surrounded it. For example, when I did my training, when I went to Byron Bay and did my training to get my 200 hours of training to become the first step of a Yoga instructor, we were asked to, and expected to, participate in the mantras; the chanting of mantras. So when I was doing my course, I was very aware that this was something that wasn't so crash hot and against my Christian practice. It was very tricky to sort of look like I was doing it but not be doing it. And it was just sort of a fine balance of *"how do I navigate this? Because if I want to get my instructor certificate, then I need to participate"* because it was an expectation.

Lexy: Yes. So how did you actually end up getting into Yoga and the study of Yoga?

Tatiana: When we went to Geraldton, when my husband was in his first placement in Geraldton, Western Australia, there was a Yoga class going there. So both of us actually started going to that, as a health benefit. We made it really clear to the instructor that we were very aware that we did not want to participate in anything associated with

Hindu spirituality. They were aware and they were really good about it, but there were still elements of it. It was more like, "*Well, if you don't want to do it, then don't participate"* and so there was a fine line, really, If I look back at it now. I don't think it had a big effect on us. Then we came back to South Australia and continued in a general sort of class, which was supposedly not really Yoga, but that was one of those body balance type classes that incorporated Yoga. Interestingly, the teacher there *did* start to use deities in the session, and we made a report of that or sort of mentioned it at the fitness centre, and that was kind of conflicting with where we were at, and then that person stopped. So it was interesting how (and that's what I was saying before) that as a Yoga teacher, they probably feel that they need to do that to improve the practice for everyone.
Then I started to come to classes that were close to home, and the studio that I used to go to didn't have a meditation teacher, and I had already started my meditation study as a meditation facilitator and they employed me as the meditation teacher at the Yoga studio. I was involved in running classes and it just made sense for me to go down the track of also incorporating Yoga into my sessions and so I did that. As I said, I went over to Byron Bay and did my training. Then after working at the studio for a couple of years, I had a home studio and ran a small business from home, so was able to regulate what sort of classes I wanted to hold. I did workshops, ran children's classes, prenatal sessions, and specialised in women's health and Yoga.

Lexy: So while all this was happening, what was your Christian faith like at the time?

Tatiana: At the time, I would definitely say my Christian faith was strong, but at the time, that's what I thought and that's what I would have told anyone if anyone questioned it, and I felt like I had a handle on things. But in hindsight, I can see that being involved in this, I probably spent a lot of time looking at Yoga-related reading and articles and practice, etc. So the time that I would have spent on doing all of that would have taken away time that I would have focused on Bible reading and what biblical practice is teaching me to do. So there would have been a fine line where there was a conflict that started, in a sense, of how much time I was devoting to learning more about Yoga and meditation, etc.

Lexy: Yes. I was going to ask you, did you ever feel like this conflict between what you were reading in Yoga and meditation and the biblical truth in the Scriptures? In many ways, they just don't fit with each other. Did you find that? Did you have to wrestle through that, or how did you process all of that?

Tatiana: I think there became an awareness within me. I remember one of the first things I started to do when I was running my home classes was I started to let my clients know about where I stood with my own personal faith because a couple of times I sort of ended my meditations with *"Amen"*. I had to clarify with, *"You know, I'm not trying to impose anything on you"*, but it just became a natural response. But it's almost as if the Holy Spirit began working in me to show me that this wasn't the way in that instance for me. Then another Christian woman, I shared with her what I was doing and then she warned me of the dangers of Yoga. She wasn't a Lutheran person, but another person I had met. She wasn't really a friend, she was more of an acquaintance. And then because she warned me about it, I just said, *"No, I don't think it's that bad or anything like that. It's very*

beneficial". I became quite fit through my practice. Then because of what she had said to me, I started to do my own research and found that there was quite a lot about the conflict that can occur for Christians if they become too deeply involved and the subtle way that Yoga begins to influence them and starts to draw people away. So it seems innocent at first, and then your spiritual practices become divided. So once I started to do my own research, then I really started to feel within my spirit that there was actually something: that I didn't want to do it anymore. Actually, I really feel that. Meanwhile, I was still running classes and people didn't want to stop coming and so I was almost fighting against myself. Then Covid happened and everything. It just became really clear I couldn't continue with my classes because of the expectations for running a home business and the COVID rules and regulations and so it folded. So in a way, that became a way to cease practice. I also was teaching it at school. Sometimes we have a special day and teachers hold a different type of activity, and I was, like, doing the whole set-up, and the classes would be full of all these students, and it went pretty well. But I don't do that anymore either. I ceased doing that.

Lexy: Yes. So when you were teaching, you were a Christian at the time? Because we've briefly touched on what a Yoga session looks like. What did yours look like? Because you didn't fully commit to a lot of the Hindu beliefs and things that are involved in Yoga. So what did you incorporate into Yoga, and what did you leave out when you were teaching?

Tatiana: I think that I learned the Sanskrit. I'm pretty good with languages. When I studied at the sem, I studied Hebrew and Greek, and I have the Ukrainian language that I can still speak. So I was kind of a bit chuffed about the fact that I could say the Sanskrit words and I had learnt them, but it was only over time that I started to realise the power of those words. So some of the things I've shared with you today, I wouldn't have known that at the beginning. For example, when I started at the studio and was employed there as a second job, a part-time job in the evenings, teaching these sessions, I didn't know what I know now about the power of the words. We talked before about the different types of exercises, and some of the exercises or the movements specifically mean more than just a movement. So the warrior poses, for example, are very much connected to a deity, and I didn't know that. The triangle pose, and I'm specifically not using the Sanskrit words here, but the triangle pose, again, is really like honouring a deity when you do that well, and so the body starts to position, you get better and better at the pose, and the body is positioning itself to give honour and praise to that deity.

I've got some Scripture texts today just about teaching Yoga. There was one, Matthew 18:6. As a teacher if I'm leading people astray, that text is the one that says in the Bible,

'if anyone causes one of these little ones, those who believe in me, to stumble, it would be better for them to have a large millstone hung around their neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea'.

So there's a responsibility of somebody who's leading others to get involved in a practice that eventually could lead them away from their Christian spirituality. So coming back to my teaching, I think just by using the Sanskrit words I unknowingly was 'invoking'. It's not that I saw things flying around the air

or anything, but just there's a certain empowerment that comes through Yoga, which actually is very attractive, particularly for women. But now that I'm on the other side of that, I can see that the suffering that we endure sometimes as Christians or as Christian women is also something that Jesus sees and supports us in. When we call on Jesus' name to help us through our difficulties and our struggles, when we humbly come before God with our requests, He, too can empower us in a different way, and not in this way. One of the things that I really thought about this question a lot, is how subtle the practice can grow of Yoga. It reminds me of 1 Peter 5:8 and Ephesians 4:27 how the devil getting a foothold into our lives and without us realising that, kind of just grows bigger. And I think the most important thing that I've come to recognise is that what's really different about our spiritual practice as a Christian is that we are people who daily come with repentance before God. It's not about getting bigger, better, stronger, more empowered. It's a different sort of power. It's not a worldly power. It's a humble repentance that leads us to have a true heart for what it means to be a Christian and believe in Christ as Lord and Saviour. So repentance is inseparable from our faith. And turning to Christ as our Lord and Saviour, as I just said, and in Acts 3:19, the text tells us, repent then, and turn to God so that your sins may be wiped out. And that time of refreshing may come from the Lord. And so I can't judge other people who do Yoga. I cannot, because everyone's experience is different, and I went through it. But if it takes you away from being able to acknowledge that we are sinful human beings and that we need to daily repent and turn to Christ, if there's a point where that starts to happen and you're being led away from your faith journey that God has called you to do, then that would be a time that a person would really need to stop and listen and reflect and even repent then, that the Lord, as he promises, will hear them and to continue to repent if that gets to that point for them.

Lexy: Yes. I have loved ones who are Christians who have either done Yoga in the past or do Yoga, and they love the Lord and they worship only God and I wouldn't point the finger at them and say, *"Oh, you're doing this Hindu worship practice, you are an idolater"*. I wouldn't do that.

Tatiana: No.

Lexy: But on the other hand, there does need to be this acknowledgment that Yoga is not just stretching. When you've got the Sanskrit words involved, which are, like you said, invoking these deities, and you're creating poses with your body that are showing reverence to these deities, there does need to be that acknowledgment that this is more than just stretching. There is a spiritual component involved in this. And I would love to hear if there's anything more you'd like to add to that. That'd be wonderful. But I would also love to hear about what consequences came. What consequences did you experience from doing Yoga?

Tatiana: Yes. Thank you. So, in response to your first comments just then, I think it is very much up to the individual Christian to stop and reflect on how their Yoga practice is influencing them and then ask the Lord and seek guidance through the Scripture of whether there is a conflict. So I'm sure that we can all individually do that, and that's responsible practice then. In regard to consequences, I mentioned before that there's a certain empowerment that comes through the strength of one's body and the

poses and the practice and all sorts of things associated with Yoga. I became quite strong in my personality, and probably the biggest impact is it affected my marriage.
And not that I'm the only person in my marriage, everyone is responsible, both people. But I think instead of seeking just completely God's guidance over some of the issues that were happening in my marriage, I looked to other things, including Yoga practice and definitely meditation as well. And again, I'll mention that it was subtle. I didn't know that because I was practising those things and not giving my concerns over to God in prayer, who promises to answer and hear and support us through that when we are dedicated to God's ways. I would say that that was the consequence. Subsequently, I mentioned the last time I was on the podcast that I was in a time of separation from my husband for six years, and what allowed us to come back together was God's Word: God's promises and God's ordinances for marriage. Not what Yoga says, definitely not what the world says. So I think that that would be something that I would say and perhaps other deceptions in my life at the time, too, listening to other louder teachings in the world rather than leaning on and trusting in God's promises over my life alone. As I said, I didn't abandon my Christian faith, but how much was I listening? How much was I integrating? And that, to me, is something I can reflect back on. So, for example, today I might have a problem that I'm dealing with right now, and it's very easy in our world to despair or lose hope or wonder: *"How am I going to solve this?"* When the answers are: entrust them to the Lord, He knows He's got his hand over my life. If I seek out his ways and trust Him and read God's word and pray about the situation, hand it over to God I have such a great sense of relief! That's just so precious and that shows a new way. It's God's way. Jesus' teachings are always new and refreshing because he's taken all my sins, upon himself, and all my problems, and he sees all. So it's immersing myself in those promises and trusting in God's word rather than looking to other ways to deal with the things that are challenging in my life at the moment.

Lexy: Yes. So before you stopped doing Yoga and meditation and all of that, did you find yourself running to meditation or things like Yoga when you were anxious or when there were just difficulties happening?

Tatiana: I did a lot of meditation; I'm a meditation facilitator as well. I did the training. I was running classes. My clients would say at the end of the session, I can't believe that was an hour and a half. It felt like 10 minutes. They were very in-depth. After studying a variety of different professional meditation facilitators, I developed my own style because I integrated all various different forms, and it didn't incorporate chanting or anything like that. It was more from a medical point of view, going into accessing the pineal gland, for example, and encouraging my clients to look within themselves, look within the body, and use the subconscious mind to alleviate anxieties, etc. And it's interesting because, at the Vatican, there's a huge pineal gland in the grounds.

Lexy: Really?

Tatiana: Yes.. It looks like a little pine cone.

Lexy: Yes, I've seen a statue of that! Not in real life, but, yes, funny enough, it was in one of my girls' maths books: there was a picture of it.

Tatiana: We were there in 2011. When I saw it, I thought, okay, so even the Christian church has in history seen the power of this little gland that's right in the centre of our brain. There's a lot I could say about that, too. But look, it is very interesting, all of these facets and I don't think it's wrong to study these things or know about them or read about them. The point where it becomes dangerous is if it becomes greater than the glory that we give to God for all things, Galatians 1,:5: *To God be the glory, forever and ever. Amen.*
And so otherwise, we would stop reading everything. We would stop learning everything. Meditation was something that I really enjoyed: I enjoyed teaching it; I enjoyed doing it. On occasion. I slip into it sometimes, but then I will come out of it very quickly because I've obviously trained my brain to do that. So I wouldn't say I practice it anymore. I just don't go to it. I would rather pray.

Lexy: Yes. And go straight to the Father.

Tatiana: That's right.

Lexy: It's really interesting what you said, that there is so much truth in some of the things that are taught and said in some of the New Age kind of groups, in that our physical and our spiritual and our mental bodies are like, we're just connected. Our mental affects the physical, and our physical affects the mental and the spiritual and that's the way that God created us. I do think, though, that sometimes the devil will sneak in some lies as well. He'll take some of the truth and then sneak in a bit of a lie. And, yes, I do like what you said about not letting it overtake the glory of God. So it is okay to look into the ways that our bodies are connected. There does need to be discernment because not everything out there is true.

Tatiana: No. And there is definitely a lot out there now. So, in 1 Peter 5:6-8 the text tells us to *'humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time. Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you. Be self-controlled and alert. Your enemy, the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour*." And so, very subtly, we can be influenced. And that's not just Yoga. That can be many other things in our modern world. but if we are reading God's Word and we are worshipping God as a community in our churches, and when we're dedicating ourselves to prayer, then we're building that barrier against allowing the devil to gain a foothold.

Lexy: Yes, and that is so important. As someone who has been under demonic oppression before, because I was participating in occultic practices, I do think it's very important for Christians to deeply consider whether they should attend a Yoga class or not, simply because I unwillingly was doing things. Sorry, not unwillingly. I was unknowingly doing things like numerology and different forms of divination and omen reading, thinking that this was how God was communicating with me. I had no idea that it was completely wrong and that's what brought me under demonic oppression. I guess my concern is when we have our brothers and sisters in Christ participating in some of this stuff, they may be a bit unaware of some of the consequences that could come from it.

Tatiana: That's right, that's a really good point, Lexy. If anyone's listening to today's podcast and feels that they're concerned, or perhaps even in disagreement with some of

the things I've said, a great thing to do is their own research and have a look and have a read about the history of Yoga and the Yoga practice. You mentioned that some Yoga studios now really want to integrate the Hindu religion or spirituality into practice, so we learn to be able to discern, don't we?

Lexy: Yes. And I've really enjoyed this chat, and I've really enjoyed how you've constantly just brought it back to Christ.

Tatiana: Thank you.

Lexy: You've just brought it back and just constantly reminded us of it. through this discussion: "*Let's talk about it, but let's also remember who we are in Christ, and we are humble before him and He is our God and He is our king and everything we do should be to glorify and honour him"*. I really appreciate that, Tatiana. Thank you so much for taking the time to talk to me today about this. It's given me a few more things to think about, as I'm sure it has some of our listeners, so thank you.

Tatiana: Oh, you're most welcome, Lexy. I'm going to put a little plug in, a little shout-out to some of my students who've decided to tap into some of the podcasts.

Lexy: Oh, lovely.

Tatiana: School students, that is.

Lexy: Yes, lovely. Well, *"Hello to your school students!"*.

Tatiana: Yes, thank you very much, Lexy!

Lexy: Thank you!