In the fitness world today, yoga is big business. Classes are popping up all over, and some are even marketed as “Christian yoga.” But at the same time, there has been opposition to the way yoga is being sold. Some Hindus argue that yoga is intrinsically religious and that it is cheapening both yoga and Hinduism to treat it as simply a form of exercise. Some Christian writers agree and argue that yoga is spiritually dangerous. Others insist that yoga can be separated from its Hindu roots, and that it is no more than a form of stretching, while others say that it can be spiritually beneficial to Christians because you can pray while doing it rather than indulging in Hindu meditative practices.

The same kind of arguments can be found for any number of health practices from non-Western cultures, whether Chinese qigong rooted mostly in Daoism, or Indian Ayurvedic medicine, or acupuncture, or Reiki or other energy healing modalities. The list goes on and on. How are we to think about these things? Is it appropriate for Christians to engage in them? Is it helpful? If we do practice them are we skirting too close to the edge of what is acceptable in the sight of God, or have we fallen over the edge entirely?

There is no question some healing approaches and associated health practices are inappropriate for Christians. For example, shamanism and related forms that involve summoning spirits to heal are a clear violation of Scriptural teaching and are not compatible with Christianity, even if the spirits are described as “white spirits” or angels.

In most cases, however, things aren’t quite so clear cut. Moving your body into a position to stretch muscles and fascia as is done in yoga hardly seems to fall into the same category as shamanism. So where do you draw the line?

One place to start is to recognize that Christianity is not synonymous with Western civilization. Though there is no question that the Christian worldview was at the root of the development of much of Western culture and especially of the Western scientific tradition, this does not mean that the West has a monopoly on truth about the world or about the human body. Cultures all over the world have studied the natural world and developed health ideas and practices as a result. While some of them have been ineffective or overly tied to the world of spirits and demons, others have a much better track record and can be effective for promoting health.

Yet these health practices are often based on worldviews radically at odds with the Bible, generally at the level of their fundamental understanding of the nature of reality. Eastern worldviews tend toward monism, the idea that all is one and that distinctions between things are artificial or illusory. This is behind most forms of Hinduism and is the philosophical underpinning for the theory that governs yoga.

Chinese health practices are generally a bit removed from monism, but not too far. Acupuncture and qigong are built around the idea that underlying all of reality is the dao, the universal law that is the source and origin of all things. Everything that exists can be seen as an expression of the dao, and the dao governs the proper functioning of everything in the natural world. Health is maintained by balancing the two types of energy, yin and yang, that are manifested through qi (or chi), the energy that flows through the body in acupuncture meridians and that is the source of life.
These ideas are obviously far removed from the way Christians in the West view the world, and certainly the monistic elements are alien to a biblical worldview. But here we face a problem: the practices based on them work, not for everything, but for some things. And at times, they work better than Western medicine. How do we explain this?

At this point, we need to step back and take a closer look at the assumptions behind Western medicine. Modern medicine in the West has historically viewed the body as a biochemical machine, with health being produced when the chemistry is right and the mechanical parts are all in working order. Rather than working on health maintenance, which Eastern medicine tends to focus on, Western medicine has historically focused on repairing what is going wrong, whether through drugs or surgery.

The question we need to ask is whether the Western model of the body accurately reflects scriptural teaching. I would argue that it does not, at least not completely. Our souls interact with our bodies in ways that are not reducible to biochemistry, and physical health is affected by those interactions. Psalms and Proverbs both point to this reality. In other words, from a biblical perspective, the traditional Western model of health is inadequate as a complete explanation of how the body works.

Eastern models of health tend to recognize the importance of the interaction of mind and body, and they are built around energy systems in the body that Western medicine is just beginning to be able to identify.

This may be why Western medicine has not been able to explain why acupuncture works, or why some people have found in yoga a way to relieve pain that Western medicine and physical therapy hasn’t been able to help. Western medicine is unquestionably powerful and effective, but it isn’t the whole answer when it comes to health.

The best way of understanding this is to view the models that the different health systems use as metaphors: the Western metaphor of the body as a biochemical machine is very useful in many circumstances, particularly when things go wrong, but it isn’t complete. Similarly, the Eastern metaphor that sees the body in terms of energy systems also has its uses, particularly in helping maintain health, but it isn’t complete either.

Further, even when the healing practices work, the theory that underlies them may not accurately reflect reality. The history of science and technology is littered of examples of people who discovered something that worked in practice but who came up with entirely the wrong reasons to explain why it worked. Practices such as acupuncture may fall into the same category.

This suggests that many health practices, even if shaped by non-Western ideas, can be perfectly fine for the Christian as long as, first, we think of the models used to explain them as metaphors and thus avoid absorbing ideas that are incompatible with the biblical worldview, and second, that we avoid practices such as shamanic healing that violate express commands of Scripture.

Even still, this leaves gray areas. For these, the guideline is that whatever is not of faith is sin (Rom. 14:13). For me personally, I have no issues with acupuncture or qigong or doing yoga postures as means of stretching and myofascial release. I have real questions about things like the Sun Salutation, however: it originated as an act of worship to the Sun, so I am uncomfortable doing it as a Christian.

On the other hand, Paul tells us that it is acceptable to eat meat offered to idols—which is as overt an act of pagan worship as you can get—as long as doing so doesn’t bother your conscience. He also tells us that the one who eats and the one who abstains should not judge each other. This is the principle I think applies to yoga.
For some Christians, doing the Sun Salutation may not be an issue but it is for me. Following the principle that whatever is not of faith is sin, I should avoid it. But following Paul’s teaching on meat sacrificed to idols, I do not think I should try to push my reservations about yoga onto others. Other Christian teachers strongly disagree with me on this point, but I think the analogy to Paul’s teaching about eating meat offered to idols applies here.

Reiki is a still more difficult case. While there is no question that energy healing can work in some cases, Reiki’s attunements, mantras that invoke the Buddha-nature, and symbols are things that are harder to dismiss as spiritually irrelevant, unlike a succession of physical postures from yoga. Anecdotally, I have heard of some demonic activity connected with Reiki, so I would tread very carefully in dealing with it. Avoiding it altogether may be the best choice.

If you are interested in yoga or other holistic health practices that originate in non-Christian religion or spirituality, you will need to address these issues for yourself; if you have any hesitation about doing something, I strongly urge you not to begin until you can do so with a clear conscience before God.

There is a long tradition of Christian thought that argues that “all truth is God’s truth.” What that means is that Christians have the right to appropriate truth wherever it is found, whether in Christian sources or not. We do this every day in the context of Western civilization and culture; we should be free to do it with truth from non-Western cultures as well. And that means that we can use health practices from any culture as long as they do not lead us away from biblical truth.