

Find alternative to yoga, urges Jakim

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KUALA LUMPUR: Just stop practising yoga. This is the message to Muslims by Department of Islamic Development Malaysia (Jakim) director-general Datuk Wan Mohamad Sheikh Abd Aziz.

"Perhaps those who practise yoga did not realise that it contains Hindu elements. So, we advise Muslims to stop doing so as it could affect their *aqidah* (belief).

"It is our responsibility to set things right," he said when contacted by phone yesterday.

Yoga practice among Muslims became an issue when Professor Zakaria Stapa of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia's Faculty of Islamic Studies said the practice could cause Muslims to deviate from Islam.

The National Fatwa Council on Saturday banned Muslims from practising yoga, causing an uproar among certain quarters, including Muslims.

Wan Mohamad said Muslim yoga centre operators would have to find other forms of exercise to teach.

"I'm sure they are smart enough to diversify their businesses or find alternatives," he said, adding that those who wished to seek clarification should refer to the relevant religious authorities like the state muftis.

Wan Mohamad said the fatwa was not made based on emotion, individual opinion or specific interest but thorough scientific research and collective effort.

"We also went through the yoga practitioners' holy books and other Islamic methodology and hadith," he said, adding that one should not regard the fatwa as though Islam was against physical exercises.

He said the fatwa was decided by the council, consisting of all the state muftis and five experts from various

fields, who were appointed by the Conference of Rulers.

Asked if similar fatwa would be issued on other forms of exercise like tai chi and qi gong, Wan Mohamad said, "Don't generalise. The issue here is yoga."

He said certain types of the Malay martial art silat were also banned due to elements of mysticism.

Asked if one could appeal against the fatwa, he asked: "Can we appeal to God to change the rules according to our whims and desires?"

Syariah lawyer Mohd Burok said the ruling had to be gazetted and enforced in the states before it could be brought to the syariah court.

"Muslims are allowed to appeal and argue their case should they be charged with going against the fatwa, deviating from their faith or if there are any allegations or claims made against them," he said.

Muslims who are unhappy with the ruling could not appeal against the ruling now as they have to wait for it to be gazetted and enforced.

He said only then could one appeal at the Syariah High Court with a team of experts and present arguments on why the fatwa is irrelevant.

"But, it (challenging a fatwa) has never happened before."

The Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Sikhism & Taoism was, however, more concerned about the word "*haram*" than the ruling itself.

Its president, Datuk A. Vaithilingam, said using the word *haram* in barring Muslims from practising yoga was uncalled for.

He said in a multiracial, multi-religious country, the fatwa council should be more sensitive in its choice of words.

"Instead, they should have used words like 'unsuitable' for Muslims. The word *haram* should have been avoided," said Vaithilingam, who is also president of the Hindu Sangam.

He said he had been getting calls

from Hindus in the country, criticising the word "*haram*".

"The council has the right to make decisions for the Muslims in the country but commenting and calling a practice of another religion as '*haram*' is insulting. It's hurtful to the Hindu community."

Social activist Datin Paduka Marina Mahathir, in her blog, suggested that a more measured fatwa ruling be issued for Muslims who practised yoga, like joining classes that did not require chanting.

She said it was also insulting to many Muslims who have been practising yoga for years and have not felt their faith weakened to be now told that yoga could affect their faith. "Must longtime yoga practitioners now go for rehabilitation?" she questioned.

National Fatwa Council chairman Datuk Dr Abdul Shukur Husin had said that the banning of yoga was not new as the Singaporean and Egyptian Islamic councils had also prohibited the exercise among Muslims.

In Egypt, a religious edict forbidding the practice of yoga was signed in 2004 by the then mufti Ali Gomaa and was published in Arab daily newspaper *Al-Hayat*.

The edict states that the 5,000-year-old practice violates Islamic law and could distort Islamic beliefs, while Egypt's highest theological authority called yoga an "ascetic Hindu practice that should not be used in any manner of exercise or worship".

Yoga, which dates back more than 5,000 years and is a form of spiritual practice in India, is one of the six classic systems of Hindu philosophy that stresses self-control, discipline, postures, breathing, restraint of the senses, steadying of the mind, meditation and contemplation.

It is a collection of spiritual techniques and practices, aimed at integrating mind, body and spirit. In recent years, classes have started at gymnasi-ums and in dedicated yoga centres.