

A study of Yogic Sciences and its bearing on Human Health

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Abstract

Yoga is a healthy way of life, originated in India. Now, it is believed to be a form of science accepted all over the world. The western culture is also accepting it as a healthy form of scientific exercise. Yoga for a common person contains the practices of yama, niyama, asana, pranayama, pratyahara, kriya and meditation which are helpful to keep one physically fit, mentally alert and emotionally balanced. This ultimately prepares ground for the spiritual development of an individual. Due to the complexities of modernization, man is not getting peace of mind, becoming violent, aggressive as well as physical and mental disorders are increasing. The reason behind these events is the man's disturbed awareness created due to the disintegration of physique, mind, intellect and spirit. Yoga is not just about exercise, it is a way to discover the sense of oneness with self, the world and the nature. Yoga exercises have a holistic effect which brings body, mind, consciousness and soul into balance. It improves the functioning of the various systems and calms the mind. If practicing yoga regularly, one can serve a peaceful life without any hindrance. There are plenty of benefits of yoga for not only physical, mental, social and spiritual health but also for self-realization. This paper aims to provide information about various health benefits of Yogic sciences in day-to-day life.

Keywords: Yoga, Asana, Health, Daily Life, Yogic sciences.

Introduction

Yoga is a mind - body practice that combines physical poses, controlled breathing and meditation or relaxation. Yoga is a traditional method of meditation developed by the saints of ancient India.

The word yoga is derived from Sanskrit word 'yuj' which means to connect, join or balance. Yoga is most commonly known to be a Hindu spiritual and ascetic discipline, a part of which includes breath controls, simple meditation and the adoption of specific bodily postures. The famous Patanjali defined Yoga as - "yogaschittavrittinirodhah" where chitta is mind, vrittis are thought impulses and nirodhah is removal. Overall it means 'Yoga is the removal of the fluctuations of the mind'. Yoga has its bearing on every aspect of human life. Yoga touches everything in life. Due to its vast impact and as it comprises a comprehensive and systematic body of knowledge we termed it as 'yogic sciences' in this discourse.

The structure of Yoga

The various branches of Yoga can be classified into five basis groups:

- Jnana Yoga-The Yoga committed to moksha(salvation).
- Karma Yoga-The Yoga committed to selfless service and Dharma.
- Bhakti Yoga- The Yoga devoted to love and devotion to God.
- Raj Yoga- The Yoga committed to introspection and contemplation.
- Hatha Yoga- The Yoga devoted to the discipline of the body which includes the practice of Asanas(yoga postures) and Pranayam(breathing exercises).

There are various Yoga postures or 'Asanas' that help to keep our body fit and healthy. 'Pranayama' or breathing exercise helps us to rejuvenate our mind and soul. It helps us to think better and stay calm and peaceful. A healthy body is essential to enjoy life to the fullest and regular practice of yoga can provide a great deal of healthy life. (Swami, 2010). Maharishi Patanjali systematised the yoga practices. After Patanjali, many sages/yogis contributed to its development and as a result Yoga has now spread all over the world. In this sequence, on 11 December 2014, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) with 193 members approved the proposal to celebrate 'June 21' as the 'International Yoga Day'.

Yoga in day to day life

Yoga is not a religion - it is the source of spirituality and wisdom, the root of all religions. Yoga transcends religious boundaries and reveals the way to unity. "Yoga in Daily Life" offers the spiritual aspirant guidance on life's path through the practices of yoga. There is

great importance of yoga in our daily life may be that's the only reason why the retention rate of yoga practitioner is so high.

A recent report published by an Indian health Organization sponsored by National Health tribunal said in their report that only 1% of every 10 people who start going to gym continue it for 2-3 years. In case of running, its 2% but in case of yoga, the retention rate is above 5% i.e. in every 10 people, 5 people continue practicing yoga for over 3 years. The reason behind this is very simple, yoga produces better result than any other exercise. Everyone desires to have better health without diseases. Of course it is the ultimate objective for utmost happiness in the human life. In the case of major health problems the precautionary measures are plenty. Some people control their diseases like Blood Pressure, Diabetes, Acidity, Asthma etc; by taking medicines regularly.

Hath yoga, a branch of yoga provides perfect health and control of mind and body. Hath yoga consists of three important aspects:

1. Control of breath
2. Control of mind
3. Yogic exercises

Hath yoga not only refers to physical exercise but also the action of body and mind, the various type of Asanas and Pranayama. Sage Patanjali, the great master of yoga Darshana in his thoughts and teachings prescribed the ways and means to attain yogic perfection. In his basic sutras, sage patanjali gives 'Eight - fold path' which helps in self-realization and to attain perfect state of mind. His 'eight-fold path' aspects of yoga are very relevant even today. They are:

1. Yama – Kindness, truth and non-stealing quality.
2. Niyama – Purity of body and mind.
3. Asana – Pose of the body to give special benefit to the body.
4. Pranayama – Breathing exercise.
5. Prathyahara – To withdraw the senses from the worldly ties.
6. Dharma – Concentration.
7. Dyana – Meditation.
8. Samadhi – A state of trance.

The main goals of 'Yoga in Daily Life' are –

- Physical Health
- Mental Health
- Social Health
- Spiritual Health
- Self Realisation

Physical Health

Man is a Physical, Mental and Spiritual being. The physical benefits of the ancient practices are too many to count; each body part gains something from every asana and every breath. Better posture, strength, balance, endurance, coordination, flexibility, steadiness and increased lung capacity are the basic gems one finds when beginning to engage with yoga. The ‘Suryanamaskar’ a series of 12 poses is said to be one of the best ways to lose weight. Yoga lowers levels of adrenalin, blood pressure, pulse rate and cholesterol. (Singh, 2009) Total body awareness attained from yoga is essential to prevent bodily injuries. As far as physical development is concerned, one has to be fit and healthy by practicing different types of kriyas, Asanas, Pranayamas, etc. Some of the important Asanas that are beneficial for physical development are Tadasana, Trikonasana, Setubandha asana, Dhanurasana, Bhujangasana, Padmasana, Vajrasana, Naukasana, Shalabhasana, Kapalbhathi and Pranayamas.

Yoga’s physical health benefits

- Physical activity helps us to live longer and prevent many chronic diseases such as heart disease, high blood pressure and breast cancers.
- Reduces pain in joints, back, arthritis, migraines and muscle soreness.
- Raises our metabolism and helps us to lose weight more easily (or eat more without gaining weight).
- Improves cardiorespiratory and muscular fitness.
- Reduces blood pressure and increases bone density.
- Reduces metabolism and improves digestion.
- Balances the hormonal system and clears our mind for better quality sleep.
- Improves our overall quality of life.

Mental Health

Mental health has been mentioned as the ability of person to balance one's desires and rations, to cope life stresses and to make psycho-social adjustment. Bhatia (1982) considers mental health as the ability to balance feelings, desires, ambitions and ideals in one's daily living. It means the ability to face and accept the realities of life. The positive dimension of mental health is stressed in WHO's definition of health as contained in its constitution: "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity". It is the psychological state of someone who is functioning at a satisfactory level of emotional and behavioral adjustment. Yoga has its bearing on daily life and it offers numerous methods to attain mental well-being. Mental development is a perennial process that continues throughout the life. The changes in cognitive process like attention, memory thinking, reasoning, and problem solving may be observed. Intelligence, development of language and concept formation are the finer aspects for mental development. Yogic practices like Surya Namaskar, Tratakand Pranayama enable the pineal gland for smooth functioning of learning, retaining for information and memory. Practicing of these poses helps to improve memory and other cognitive aspects significantly. Sukshma Vyayamas like BuddhiTathaDhristi-Shakti Vikasaka (Developing the Mind and Will Power), Smarana Shakti Vikasaka and Medha Shakti-Vikasaka (Developing the Intellect) are also beneficial for the mental development of the body.

Yoga's mental health benefits

- Reduces stress, depression and anxiety through increased endorphin secretion.
- Improves concentration, focus and mental clarity and mood stabilization.
- Allow us to make better decisions and improve critical thinking.
- Helps us to stay in the present moment. When we let go of the past and the future, we live 100 percent in the now, which affects all aspects of our life relationships.
- Four effective yoga asanas to improve mental health are: balasana, viparitarani, uttanasana and shavasana.

Mental Health Commission of Government of Western Australia describes, "Good mental health is a sense of wellbeing, confidence and self-esteem. It enables us to fully enjoy and appreciate other people, day-to-day life and our environment". Yoga is the unit of physical and mental discipline, with control of breath and all other functions, practiced in order to attain one pointed concentration of mind, spiritual union with the supreme. Chronic stress is the major cause of many physical and mental disorders and yoga has been effectively used in

the management of stress (Bussing, 2012). It has been observed that the practice of yoga decreases verbal aggressiveness compared to physical exercise. Yoga helps to improve the mental health of both the young and seniors by reducing stress (Yadav, 2015). Yoga can be wisely applied in welfare programs to improve the quality of life in all age groups.

Social health

Social health is the ability to be happy within oneself and to be able to make others happy. It is also the ability to relax and experience life in all its beauty. One of the growing problem of our time is drug addiction. It is clear sign of social illness. Sahaja yoga has a beneficial impact on every aspect of a person's life; that is mental, physical, emotional and spiritual life. Sahaja yoga meditation is very easy and any one can do it along with his profession and family life. Social development means the growth and development of attitudes and behaviors. Behavioral socialization is also the part of it. Yogic practises like Yama, Niyam, Dhyana etc. are important parts for social development.

Spiritual Health

The main principle of spiritual health is – “Ahinsa-Parmo Dharma”. This precept embraces the principle of non-violence, in thought, word, feeling and action. Prayer, meditation, mantra, positive thinking and tolerance, lead to spiritual health. Human should be protectors not destroyers. Yoga is a spiritual practice that is focused on bringing in harmony between the mind and body. Some spiritual benefits of yoga include –

- Deepening of meditation
- Awakening and purification of the chakras(energy centres)
- Expansion of consciousness
- Effortlessness comes into our life and life becomes less stressful.

Spiritual Development means self-awareness, contentment, self-acceptance, self regards, self-actualization, etc. It takes place in the form of habits, values and ethics. Dhyana is just like a panacea and powerful tool for spiritual growth and development. Practicing of yama,niyama, and meditation are beneficial for spiritual growth. Self enhancement can also be done through Ashtanga yoga.

General guidelines for yogic practices

Yogic activities can be done by all children including children with special needs. However, children with special needs should perform these activities in consultation with yoga expert/yoga teacher as per their capacity.

1. The yogic practices should start with a quiet mood which could be attained by reciting a short prayer.
2. It is essential that body should be prepared by activities such as ankle bending, knee bending, finger movements, hand clenching, wrist bending, wrist rotation, elbow bending, shoulder rotation, and eye movement. After this, Surya Namaskara can be practised.
3. Regularity of practice is essential both in the physical and mental aspects of Yoga.

Asana

The term ‘asana’ means sitting in a particular posture, which is comfortable and which could be maintained steadily for long time. Asana gives stability and comfort, both at physical and mental level (Mercola, 2014). In yoga, an asana is a posture in which a practitioner sits. In the yoga sutras, Patanjali defines ‘asana’ as “to be seated in a position that is a firm, but relaxed”. Asana are also performed as physical exercise where they are sometimes referred to as ‘yoga postures’ or ‘yoga position’. Generally, the asanas are practised in the sequence of standing, sitting, pronelying and supine-lying position. Though there is other version which follows different sequence.

Pranayama

Pranayama is ‘Control of Breath’. It consists of the breathing techniques which are related to the control of breath or respiratory process. Pranayama popularly known as yogic breathing, involves a conscious manipulation of our breathing pattern. The health of the respiratory system depends upon the quality as well as the quantity of air inhaled by the person. It also depends on the rhythm and completeness of the breathing. Through Pranayama, a practitioner advantageously works with her/his respiratory, cardiovascular and nervous system which bring about emotional stability and peace of mind. Five types of prana are responsible for various pranic activities in the body, they are Prana, Apana, Vyan, Udana&samana. Out of these Prana and Apana are the most important.

Meditations

Meditation is relaxation. It is not about concentration, it's actually about deconcentration. It's not about focusing one's thoughts on the thing, but instead on becoming thoughtless. It is often used to clear the mind, reduce stress, promote relaxation or train the mind. It may be done while sitting, repeating a mantra, and closing the eyes in a quiet environment. In meditation, concentration is focused for a long time on a single object like breath, tip of the nose, etc. Meditation is a relaxing practice; it develops a sense of well-being in the person. Practice of asanas and pranayama helps in developing ability to sit in one position for a considerable period of time in meditation.

Conclusion

The art of practicing yoga helps in controlling an individual's mind, body and soul. It brings together physical and mental disciplines to achieve a peaceful body and mind. It helps to manage stress and anxiety and keeps us relaxing. It also helps in increasing flexibility, muscle strength and body tone. Yoga asanas build strength, flexibility and confidence. Regular practice of yoga can help lose weight, relieve stress, improve immunity and maintain healthier lifestyle. The true essence of yoga revolves around elevating the life force or 'Kundalini' at the base of the spine. It aims to achieve this through a series of physical and mental exercises. The mental techniques include breathing exercises or 'Pranayama' and Meditation or 'Dhyana to discipline the mind. The ultimate goal of yoga is, however, to help the individual to transcend the self and attain enlightenment. As the Bhagvad-Gita says, "A person is said to have achieved yoga, the union with the self, when the perfectly disciplined mind gets freedom from all desires and becomes absorbed in the self alone".

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