BASIC CONCEPT OF YOGA AND ITS HEALTH BENEFITS- A SHORT REVIEW

Atul Andelkar1*, Sonam P Kanzode2, Jayant Shamkuwar3

1Research Officer, Lata Medical Research Foundation, Nagpur, Maharashtra, India.
2Lecturer, Bhausaheb Mulak Ayurved Mahavidyalaya, Nandanvan, Nagpur, Maharashtra, India.
3Project Manager, Lata Medical Research Foundation, Maharashtra, India.

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ABSTRACT

Yoga is a group of physical, mental, and spiritual practices which has its root in ancient India. Yoga is a complete science by itself being a holistic and very scientific background. These days everyone is suffering from some sort of lifestyle disorders, anxiety, stress, depression etc. and almost all streams of medicines have their limitations for these diseases. Ancient Acharyas have given the world a gift called Yoga which is proving extremely beneficial from children to adults to get relief from lifestyle disorders. Yoga science is magnificently described in many ancient treatises like Vedas, Bhagavdgita, Yogavashishta, Patanjali Yogasutra, Gherand Samhita. Yoga is accomplished by Asthanga known as Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana and Samadhi. Now-a-days, millions and millions of people across the globe have benefitted by the practice of Yoga which has been preserved and promoted by the great eminent Yoga Masters from ancient time to this date.

INTRODUCTION

Yoga is an Art and Science of healthy living. It is a spiritual discipline based on an extremely subtle science, which focuses on bringing harmony between mind and body. The holistic approach of Yoga is well established and it brings harmony in all walks of life and thus, known for disease prevention, promotion of health and management of many lifestyle disorders.

The origins of Yoga have been speculated to pre Vedic culture. The term ‘Yoga’ is derived from the Sanskrit word ‘YUJ’, meaning ‘to join’ or ‘to yoke’ or ‘to unite’. As per Yogic scriptures the practice of Yoga leads to the union of individual consciousness with that of the Universal Consciousness, indicating a perfect harmony between the mind and body, Man & Nature.[1] The aim of Yoga is Self-Realization, to overcome all kinds of Sufferings leading to 'the state of liberation'.

Historical Background

This is one of the oldest sciences of the world, originated in India, which is very useful for preserving and maintaining one's physical and mental health and also for 'spiritual evolution'. The practice of Yoga is believed to have started with the very dawn of civilization. Mythologically, the Lord Shiva is considered to be the first teacher of Yoga.

The word Yoga is often described as union. It implies that the individual is united with the Universe, the personality with the Universality. All the four Vedic Samhitas refer directly or indirectly to the Yoga system and the Yoga traditions. In the first three Samhitas there are direct as well as indirect references to Yoga. But the Atharavaveda gives the clear conception of Yoga describing the eight mystical circles (Chakras) and the nine gates of the human body-the golden sheath and the mystical wheel containing the thousand spokes. Therefore, it may be held that the Vedic seers and sages were aware of the nature, importance and implication of the practical aspects of Yoga. Their supernatural knowledge also tells us they were practical Yogis. By following the path of Yoga, they had become successful in revealing divine knowledge within their minds. The Vedas, the Upanishads, Yoga Vashishta and the Bhagavad Gita all put much emphasis on a firm conviction of the unreality of the material world; non attachment to things of the world; control of the senses; equal
mindedness; transitory nature of phenomenal objects; concentration of mind; solitude as necessary for spiritual advancement; transcendence of dualities. [2] Maharshi Patanjali systematized and codified the then existing practices of Yoga, its meaning and its related knowledge through his Yoga Sutras. [3] After Patanjali, many Sages and Yoga Masters contributed greatly for the preservation and development of the field through their well documented practices and literature. Yogagurus (Yoga teacher) from India later introduced Yoga to the western countries and Swami Vivekananda was one of them. [4]

Yoga Definitions- Variety of definitions is found in different classics. Some are listed below –

Table 1: Yoga Definitions according to classical treatise [5]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No.</th>
<th>Source Textbook</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Kathopanishada</td>
<td>When all the five senses along with mind remain still and the intellect is not active, that is known as the highest state.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bhagavad Gita</td>
<td>• Yoga is said to be equanimity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Yoga is skill in action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Know that which is called yoga to be separation from contact with suffering.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Yoga Sutras of Patanjali</td>
<td>Yoga is the suppression of the activities of the mind.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Vaisheshika Sutra</td>
<td>Pleasure and suffering arise as a result of the drawing together of the sense organs, the mind and objects. When that does not happen because the mind is in the self, there is no pleasure or suffering for one who is embodied. That is Yoga.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Brahmasutrabhasya of Adishankar</td>
<td>Yoga is the means of perceiving reality.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Types of Yoga

The term Yoga has been applied to a variety of practices developed by Hindu Acharyas. Also, the brief description of Yoga techniques is found in Jainism and Buddhism. In Hinduism it includes Jnana Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Karma Yoga, Laya Yoga, and Hatha Yoga. Raja Yoga refers to Ashtanga Yoga that accompanies eight Yoga Sadhanas (Practices) which are Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana (Meditation), Samadhi/Samyama.

Yama’s are restraints and Niyama’s are observances. These are considered to be pre-requisites for the Yoga Sadhanas (Practices).

- **Asanas**-capable of bringing about stability of body and mind ‘kuryat-tad-asanamsthairyam...’, consists in adopting various body (psychophysical) patterns, giving ability to maintain a body position (a stable awareness of one’s structural existence) for a considerable length and period of time as well.

- **Pranayama** consists in developing awareness of one’s breathing followed by wilful regulation of respiration as the functional or vital basis of one’s existence. It helps in developing awareness of one’s mind and helps to establish control over the mind. In the initial stages, this is done by developing awareness of the ‘flow of in-breath and out-breath’ (Swasa-Prasvasa) through nostrils, mouth and other body openings, its internal and external pathways and destinations. Later, this phenomenon is modified, through regulated, controlled and monitored inhalation (Shwasa) leading to the awareness of the body space/s getting filled (Puraka), the space/s remaining in a filled state (Kumbhaka) and it’s getting emptied (Rechaka) during regulated, controlled and monitored exhalation (Prasvasa).

- Pratyahara indicates dissociation of one’s consciousness (withdrawal) from the sense organs which helps one to remain connected with the external objects.

- **Dharana** indicates broad based field of attention (inside the body and mind) which is usually understood as concentration. Dhyana (Meditation) is contemplation (focused attention inside the body and mind) and Samadhi is integration.

Discussion- Yoga concept in brief- The ultimate goal of Yoga is Moksha (liberation) although the core principles of Yoga were developed in various forms over the period of time. Yoga is a meditative means of discovering dysfunctional perception and cognition as well as overcoming it to get relief from suffering, inner peace and salvation; Yoga is the raising and expansion of consciousness from oneself to being coextensive with everyone and everything. Yoga is the path to omniscience and
enlightened consciousness enabling one to comprehend the impermanent and permanent reality.

Yoga in Indian traditions is more than a physical exercise; it has a meditative and spiritual aspect. Some key differences between Yoga and exercise are listed below in table no.2.

**Table 2: Yoga Compared to Conventional Exercise** [6,7]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yoga</th>
<th>Exercise</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parasympathetic nervous system dominates</td>
<td>Sympathetic nervous system dominates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subcortical regions of brain dominate</td>
<td>Cortical regions of brain dominate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slow dynamic and static movements</td>
<td>Rapid forceful movements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normalization of muscle tone</td>
<td>Increased muscle tension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low risk of injuring muscles and ligaments</td>
<td>High risk of injury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low caloric consumption</td>
<td>Moderate to high caloric consumption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effort is minimized, relaxed</td>
<td>Effort is maximized</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energizing (breathing is natural or controlled)</td>
<td>Fatiguing (breathing is taxed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Balanced activity of opposing muscle groups</td>
<td>Imbalanced activity of opposing groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noncompetitive, process-oriented</td>
<td>Competitive, goal-oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness is internal (focus is on breath and the infinite)</td>
<td>Awareness is external (focus is on reaching the toes, reaching the finish line, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitless possibilities for growth in self-awareness</td>
<td>Boredom factor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Health Benefits of Yoga**

Yoga is recommended to promote relaxation, reduce stress and improve some medical conditions like lifestyle disorders, premenstrual syndrome etc.[9] Yoga improves psychological health during cancer, schizophrenia treatment.[9] Some health benefits are listed below. [10,11]

**Table 3: Health benefits of Yoga in general**

- Builds muscle strength
- Prevents cartilage and joint breakdown
- Betters bone health
- Drains lymph and boosts immunity
- Drops blood pressure
- Makes happier
- Lowers blood sugar
- Improves balance
- Helps to improve sleep
- Gives lungs room to breathe
- Gives peace of mind
- Eases pain
- Helps to keep drug free
- Perfects posture
- Protects spine
- Increases blood flow
- Ups heart rate
- Regulates adrenal glands
- Founds a healthy lifestyle
- Helps to focus
- Maintains nervous system
- Boosts immune system functionality
- Prevents IBS and other digestive problems
- Increases self-esteem
- Gives inner strength
- Encourages self care

**Yoga in Pregnancy**

The well being and quality of life of the mother is critical for optimal pregnancy outcomes; self-soothing techniques, psycho education, and relaxation are particularly important in this...
transitional and meaningful time.[12] Maternal stress and anxiety during pregnancy is associated with a host of negative consequences for the fetus and subsequent development. For instance, fetal exposure to maternal stress and stress-related peptides is a risk factor for adverse outcomes on the programming of the nervous system and brain morphology of fetuses, infants, and children. [13] In addition, prenatal maternal stress and anxiety may be risk factors for potential negative consequences for children later in life, such as the development of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or lowered performance on aspects of executive function. [14] It is hypothesized that maternal stress may affect the intrauterine environment and alter fetal development during critical periods, through either activation of the placental stress system, causing the release and circulation of corticotrophin releasing hormone, or through diminished blood flow and oxygen to the uterus.[15] Therefore, it is important to regulate maternal stress and provide expecting mothers with coping strategies for the inevitable stresses and changes that occur during pregnancy to increase quality of life and to maximize infant health and development.

Physical exercise can be helpful in the management of stress and other associated conditions or symptoms accompanying pregnancy, such as edema, gestational hypertension or diabetes, mood instability, musculoskeletal discomfort, aches, and weight gain.[16] Yoga and meditation have been found to reduce anxiety and endocrine measures, such as cortisol, in women during labour.[17,18] Other psychological factors, such as pain catastrophizing, have been associated with greater lumbopelvic pain during pregnancy and with decreased postpartum physical ability and can also predict the request for pain relief during labour.[19,20]

**Yoga in Childhood** – Children nowadays have to deal with their own stress of competition and they need a way to manage this stress and anxiety. Yoga is one form of practice which includes breath control and specific body postures (Asanas) that provides a range of physical, mental and spiritual relaxation which teaches children to be calm, while gaining awareness of the bodies, self control and discipline.

**Yoga for Youth** - Youth face constant pressure to excel at studies, get a job, manage relationships and deal with numerous other problems. Also, today's population is overwhelmed by many lifestyle disorders. To get rid from all these problems and to have the peace of mind, yoga is best for youth. Few minutes of Yoga can help a youngster to relieve mental as well as physical stress.

**Yoga in Geriatrics** - Yoga is incredible for an older population to help them maintain their balance, keep their joints flexible, maintain bone health as well as learn to cope up with mental stress. Yoga is great for focus, concentration and emotional wellbeing.

**CONCLUSION**

Traditionally, Yoga Education was promoted by knowledgeable, experienced, and wise persons in the families and then by the Seers (Rishis/Munis/Acharyas) in Ashramas (compared with monasteries). Today, Yoga is taught by many eminent Yoga Institutions, Yoga Colleges, Yoga Universities, Yoga Departments in the Universities, Naturopathy colleges and Private trusts & societies. Many Yoga Clinics, Yoga Therapy and Training Centers, Preventive Health Care Units of Yoga, Yoga Research Centers etc. have been established in Hospitals, Dispensaries, Medical Institutions and Therapeutically setups. Yoga is a gifted therapy for lifestyle disorders as well as many diseases like cancer, schizophrenia etc. Yoga is found very useful for pregnant women to relieve stress and get easy labour. Yoga has crucial role in growth and development of child. Even Yoga is an energy booster for Youngsters and old age persons. Everybody has conviction about Yoga practices towards the preservation, maintenance and promotion of health. It is presumed that a good, balanced, integrated, truthful, clean, transparent person will be more useful to oneself, family, society, nation, nature and humanity at large. Yoga education is 'Being oriented'. Details of working with 'being oriented' aspect have been outlined in various living traditions and texts of 'Yoga'. So, it can be concluded that Yoga should be promoted from the initiation of life i.e. from prenatal period and for life time to live a healthy and stress free life.

**REFERENCES**


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**Address for correspondence**
Dr. Atul Andelkar
Senior Research Officer
Lata Medical Research Foundation
Nagpur 440022.
Email: dratulandelkar@gamail.com
Phone: 9975014366