

Yoga's Multifaceted Health Promoting Properties

Kulkarni Gowhath

Department of Physical Therapy, MGMH University, India

Yoga, as a mind-body practice, does not focus merely on physical activity. While in the West yoga is viewed primarily as a form of physical activity, in fact there are three other essential components, usually forgotten or considered only secondarily: (a) breathing exercises, (b) deep relaxation and (c) focusing of the mind. In fact, the true synonym for or meaning of yoga, samadhi (the state of integrated homeostasis), has shifted to asanas (yogic postures). Yoga as a system has always approached health concerns in an integrated way, viewing a person as a whole entity and claiming that, when one part is sick, then the whole body is also sick. The concept of samatvam, a homeostasis or state of balance in the individual, has been strongly emphasized in Indian scriptures. One of the meanings of the word yoga itself is samatvam: samatvam yoga ucyate (yoga is equilibrium) is an aphorism from the Bhagavad Gita, chapter 2, verse 48. A related, principal meaning of the word yoga is sangati or harmony. According to yoga, positive health depends upon the harmony of all bodily and mental functions. As mentioned previously, yoga considers man as a whole; it does not divide a person into categories such as organs, mind, spirit, etc. This process of integration means that yoga has developed methods to counteract the effects of those environmental and cultural influences that may contribute to disintegration. Whereas a diseased body or mind would certainly be liable to contribute to such disintegration, a healthy body and mind are necessary prerequisites to the performance of the more advanced yogic practices. It should be understood that the science of yoga does

not deal with issues of therapy in the normal sense of the word; rather, it has laid down certain hygienic, i.e. health-related, methods that are applicable to body and mind. These hygienic methods are known as kriya yoga. Kriya means a purificatory and reconditioning process. In fact, classical yoga generally deals with only mind and spirit, and the fundamental text on yoga – known as the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (PYS) – treats the body and mind as one whole. For that reason certain physical exercises like asanas and pranayamas (yogic breathing) are an essential precursor to more advanced psychological practices involving relaxation and focusing of the mind. All of these practices aim at integration of psychophysiological processes known as Samadhi. These practices stabilize psycho-physiological mechanisms so that there are fewer tendencies towards imbalance brought about by internal or external stimuli. Any disease (vyadhi) is considered a potential psycho-physiological disturbance. In the treatment of disease one may think of two defenses. One is to investigate and eradicate the offending factor so as to leave the body to regain its health on its own; the other is to put up a successful fight against the 'offenders'.

The philosophical approach of relaxation methods and techniques such as yoga is that one needs to strengthen oneself rather than waste time trying to eliminate a persistent and perhaps ineradicable offending factor. The role of yoga for man has been described thus: "For a man who wears shoes, the whole earth would indeed seem as if covered with soft leather" proclaims the Yoga Vashishtha.

Corresponding author: Kulkarni Gowhath, Department of Physical Therapy, MGMH University, India. E-mail: kulkarnig02@gmail.com

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