

THE ART OF RELAXATION IN GITANANDA YOGA

By

Yoga Vibhushan, Yogacharya

Dr. ANANDA BALAYOGI BHAVANANI

M.B.B.S, A.D.Y, D.S.M, D.P.C, P.G.D.F.H, P.G.D.Y., F.I.A.Y,

Chairman

INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR YOGA EDUCATION AND RESEARCH,

& YOGANJALI NATYALAYAM, Pondicherry, South India

www.geocities.com/yognat2001/ananda

SUMMARY:

This paper attempts to provide a bird's eye view of the causes and effects of stress from a Yogic perspective and offers an explanation of the Yogic approach to the alleviation of this modern epidemic. Various Hatha Yoga and Raja Yoga relaxation practices as well as relaxing Pranayamas culled from the GITANANDA YOGA system as espoused by Yogamaharishi Dr Swami Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj in the tradition of RISHICULTURE ASHTANGA YOGA are introduced in a wholistic manner. Swami Gitananda's FOUR-FOLD RELAXATION, an adoption of four attitudes for producing relaxation is explained for the benefit of the reader. This FOUR-FOLD RELAXATION method includes the LETTING DOWN of one's barriers, the GIVING UP of our stresses and strains, the GIVING IN to the dictates of the Inner Mind, the Higher Consciousness and, the GIVING OVER of the control of the Higher Mind to the Higher Self as the highest and last stage of Four - Fold Relaxation.

INTRODUCTION

We are all caught today in the tight and vicious claws of the all-consuming stress epidemic and haven't a clue of how to extricate ourselves from this psychic quicksand. Our bodies, emotions and minds are all jangled by the physiological and psychological responses of our 'selves' to the stress we face at every stage of our mortal existence. It is therefore not at all surprising that recent research has supported the importance of the role of stress in premature aging and the etiology of numerous diseases and disorders such as diabetes, hypertension, peptic ulcer, bronchial asthma, irritable bowel syndrome, depression and even cancer. It is postulated that frequent stressful experiences lead to the failure of the normal homeostatic, self-regulating mechanisms of the organism leading to disease, premature aging, debilitating mental and physical conditions and early or sudden death.

Yoga offers a way out of this 'whirlpool of stress' and is a wholistic solution to the stress epidemic that threatens the very future of our humankind. The **GITANANDA YOGA** system as espoused by **Yogamaharishi Dr Swami Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj** in the tradition of **RISHICULTURE ASHTANGA**

YOGA is a wholistic system that enables us to follow Yoga as a "Way of life". This system encompasses the cultivation of a wholistic and Yogic life style, adoption of a health promoting Yogic diet, development of correct and unbiased Yogic attitudes and various Hatha Yoga and Raja Yoga relaxation practices that help us to strengthen ourselves and develop positive health. This enables us to withstand stress better by normalizing our perception of stress, optimizing our reaction to it and by releasing our pent up stress effectively through various Yogic relaxation practices.

THE ROOTS OF STRESS:

Stress is an exaggerated response to change in the external or internal environment. The centre of the neuro endocrine system is the hypothalamus that prods the adrenal glands into activity. These glands are known as the "3 F" glands to the psychologist and the "3 S" glands to the physiologist. The "3 F's" are fright, flight and fight while the "3 S's" are salt, sugar and sex.

When faced with tension, anxiety builds up and the glandular system secretes its hormonal messages into the bloodstream. As adrenaline squirts into the blood stream, fear is the first emotion to be felt. Full fear is fright. Then we want to run, to escape or to flee from the danger, real or imagined. Psychological fugue is a natural outcome. The television, cinema, the local bar, card playing, and the races are all common examples of people escaping anxiety. If real fright occurs to the point that flight results, it may alter into a confrontation with the source of the fear. To fight is the result. Even a small mouse when cornered will take on a pursuing tomcat, and it is all a matter of adrenaline. It is said that heroes are made, not born, and it is true. The only difference between a hero and a coward is half a teaspoon of adrenaline—the one gets a medal, the other a firing squad. In Yoga, the relaxation techniques have a distinct effect upon the stress producing mechanisms of the brain and the adrenal glands, as well as the whole psycho-mental function from which the stress originates.

At the physiological level, the term "stress" covers all of the psychological factors expressed by the "3 F's" but added to these are two new factors which I have categorized under the term "3 S's". Sex and salt are also controlled by the adrenals and both of these are controlled or disturbed by mental anxiety, stress or tension. Notice how one sweats when frightened. The palms of the hands become wet, the toes sweat. When sexual passions are aroused, the adrenal glands are also thrown into action. One may be upset by "puppy love" as a teenager, moonstruck as a youth, sexually indulgent as an adult. All of these are a strain on the human mechanism, destroying tissue, burning up energy and shortening one's life. This is why a controlled sex drive (Brahmacharya) is advocated in Yoga.

The most common causes of stress are the Shat Ripus or the six enemies of the spirit. These are Kama (Uncontrolled passion), Krodha (Senseless Anger), Lobha (Greed), Moha (Blind infatuation), Mada (Massive Ego) and Maatsarya (Malice / envy). Corruption of character, conduct, thought and interpersonal dealing is another cause of stress. An environment where sadistic pleasure gives satisfaction, where ethics have little or scant regard, where self-interest is more important and where under cutting and backbiting are a common feature, will surely lead to the development of extreme stress. It is important to realise these facts and be aware of them in our life. Unless we develop awareness and

consciousness of what we think, feel and do, there cannot ever be a lasting solution to stress.

The attitude that one takes towards the events that make up the play of ones life is an important factor in deciding the levels as well as the effects of stress on the individual. The great thinker Epictetus said, "Men are not disturbed by things, but the views, they take of them". As our beloved Pujya Swamiji Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj used to jocularly say' "You don't have problems—you are the problem!" A positive frame of mind will help us to be cheerful and unstressed. Maharishi Patanjali's advise in this regard to cultivate Pratipaksha Bhavanam (The Opposite View) is vital to achieve balance of the emotions and mind. It is also worth trying to follow his advise of Maitri-Sukha (Friendliness towards the happy), Karuna-Dukha (Compassion towards the suffering), Mudhita-Punya (Cheerfulness towards the virtuous) and Upekshanam-Apunya (Indifference towards the wicked).

It is pertinent to understand the dictates of the Srimad Bhagavad Gita where many thousands of years ago, Yogeshwar Sri Krishna logically explained both the cause and effect of stress and how we cause our ultimate destruction by our attraction to the worldly sensory objects. The description of the 'Path to Destruction' as mentioned in the Srimad Bhagavad Gita holds true to this modern age also.

In chapter Two (Samkhya Yoga), in verse 62 and 63, the pattern of behaviour (stress response) is given that ultimately leads to the destruction of man.

Verse 62: "Brooding on the objects of the senses, man develops attachment to them; from attachment (Sangha or Chanuraaga) comes desire (Kama) and from unfulfilled desire, anger (Krodha) sprouts forth."

Verse 63: "From anger proceeds delusion (Moha); from delusion, confused memory (Smriti Vibramah); from confused memory the ruin of reason and due to the ruin of reason (Buddhi Naaso) he perishes."

In verse 64 of the second chapter, lord Krishna also gives us a clue to equanimity of mind (Samatvam) and how to become a person settled in that equanimity (Stitha Prajna) who is not affected by the opposites (Dwandwas). He says, "But the disciplined yogi, moving amongst the sensory objects with all senses under control and free from attraction (Raaga) and aversion (Dweshha), gains in tranquility."

According to Maharishi Patanjali, most of our problems stem from the five psycho-physiological afflictions (Pancha Kleshas) that are inborn in each and every human being. These Pancha Kleshas are ignorance (Avidya), egoism (Asmita) and our sense of needing to survive at any cost (Abhinivesha) as well as the attraction (Raaga) to external objects and the repulsion (Dweshha) to them. Ignorance (Avidya) is usually the start of most problems along with the ego (Asmita). Then, our sense of needing to survive at any cost (Abhinivesha) compounds it further. Both attraction (Raaga) to external objects and the repulsion (Dweshha) to them need to be destroyed in order to attain tranquility as well as equanimity of emotions and the mind. Maharishi Patanjali further states that the practice of Kriya Yoga (Yoga of mental purification) consisting of Tapas (disciplined effort), Swadhyaya (self analysis) and Ishwara Pranidhana (surrender to the divine will) is the means to destroy these five mental afflictions and attain to the state of Samadhi or oneness with the supreme self or the divine.

Both the Srimad Bhagavad Gita as well as the Patanjala Yoga Sutras emphasize that the key to success in Yoga (Chitta Vritti Nirodha) is Abhyasa (dedicated practice) and Vairagya (non attachment-dispassion). Vairagya has two stages. The lower stage (Apara Vairagya) is detachment towards worldly objects of the senses and a movement into Pratyahara whereas the higher or Para Vairagya is dispassion towards even higher achievements and Siddhis of the Yoga Sadhana itself. Attachment is usually towards the objects of the senses and that which attracts us. Until and unless we can go beyond the sense, there is no real Yoga possible at all. This is because our senses are great liars and mainly feed us information about the unreal world and not the inner reality.

We must strive to become persons of "Equal mindedness in all situations" that is described as Stitha Prajna or Samabhava in the Srimad Bhagavad Gita. Yogeshwar Krishna says that the man of Stitha Prajna has the following qualities: He is,

Beyond passion, fear and anger. (II.56)

Devoid of possessiveness and egoism. (II.71)

Firm in understanding and unbewildered. (V.20)

Engaged in doing good to all beings. (V.25)

Friendly and compassionate to all. (XII.13)

Has no expectation, is pure and skillful in action. (XII.16)

THE ART OF YOGA RELAXATION:

Many who seek the advice of a doctor are simply told that they are "tense" Already knowing this they pay a handsome fee for what they already know. If they ask what to do about the tension, the doctor will aver that they should "relax". In near panic, the doctor hopes the patient will not ask "how", for he doesn't know. He is himself "tense" in the first place!

Yoga relaxation differs from ordinary relaxation in that both those who are hyper tense as well as those who are normal can use it. It is not just a physical means of relaxation, but is an actual mental control of the psycho-neuro-endocrine system. The Hatha Yoga and Jnana Yoga Relaxation Kriyas help us to uproot the originating physiological or psychological causes of most modern stress disorders.

Deep relaxation and Yoga are synonymous when we reach the inner phases of Yoga. For at this stage relaxation is not only body relaxation, but also a state where the physical body, emotions and mind are all brought up into a high state of conscious relaxation. Please note the two words in the foregoing sentence- "up" and "conscious". The popular idea of relaxation is "down" and "non-conscious". This is where Yoga differs from any other system, and in particular, differs from drug medication and hypnosis where any outside control is employed. In Yoga, the control is turned, over to the higher mind. An elevation of consciousness takes place. After a relaxation session, one should feel that one has advanced a step up the ladder of evolution.

Physical activity such as the Asanas, Kriyas and Mudras are an excellent way to relieve physical tension. Strained muscles, tense sinews and stiff joints are all loosened up by regular practice of Hatha Yoga. Much tension exists because of lack of exercise leading to physical tiredness. One does not need sleep or a rest

to relieve this kind of tiredness, but a change over to the Yoga type of activity. An excellent example of this is a child who comes home from school very tired. The child does not wish to go to bed, but seeks permission to go and play and immediately, the tension is gone. Yoga practice offers a better diversion than any other form of physical activity.

When you find yourself tired during the day, try doing a little deep breathing or one or more of the Pranayamas mentioned in this introductory paper. See how quickly the tiredness flies. Indeed, it was not tiredness at all, but rather fatigue brought on by toxicity. If you are the type who awakens in the morning still tired, then try doing some Pranayama while still lying in bed. If you have slept tense and breathing has been poor during the night, you may be as tired or more tired when you awaken in the morning. Let a little Pranayama wake you up.

Much of the stress and tension that we face in modern life is not real tension. No Saber-tooth tiger is at our door. We are victims of modern anxiety. Most of the tension is "implied" tension as we let things prey on our minds and trade on our emotions. This kind of tension has to be dealt with in a unique way. You can spend a fortune on a psychiatrist who may or may not be able to help you, or you can approach your problem from the Yoga standpoint, which is to deal with the source of the problem. The source is "YOU". The problems are peripheral. Yoga has a unique way of dealing with these tensions and stresses that are stored away in the old part of our brain that we have inherited from our reptilian and mammalian ancestors. To be able to fully use the Yoga relaxation techniques, we should in the first place understand the four ways in which we need to relax.

The Gitananda Yoga system views the need for relaxation and its solution in four ways and offers us a method to achieve this **FOUR-FOLD RELAXATION**.

1. **LETTING DOWN:** This is to let down one's barriers to the needed advice and help, to let down one's prejudices and preconceived ideas and notions about people, things and ideas, to let down all of the false notions and materialistic idolatry that we have built up in modern living and in particular, to let down from the "God of Tension" which is virtually deified in "civilized" society. It is necessary that we find out the truth, stripped of all false belief, about our own nature and the nature of the Supreme. Leave off all fears and anxieties and gain a positive attitude towards yourself and others. Cultivate the desire for right action when action is called for.
2. **GIVING UP:** We must develop a firm desire to give up the stresses and strains that beset us. This does not mean surrender or a defeat, as popularly suggested by the English term "to give up". This giving up is to throw off any weakness that tends to build up tension, and to give off or let off those foolish tensions that at times turn us into a smoking volcano. Giving up here is a positive, relaxing and evolutionary process.
3. **GIVING IN:** To give in, in the Yoga concept of relaxation, is to "give in" to the dictates of the Inner Mind, the Higher Consciousness. Again, this is a positive process and is not the giving in of surrender. There is no negation or abdication of positive actions or ideas. One has to take up an Inner Life study to understand what it really means in words to give in to the Inner Self. In the beginning, it is an intellectual process, highly exciting and satisfying, but it must move beyond the intellectual, ecstatic state to an even more positive, transcendental state.

4. **GIVING OVER:** The giving over of the control of the Higher Mind to the Higher Self is the highest and last stage of Four – Fold Relaxation. This is where the highest attainments of the relaxation are achieved, where one can merge into beautiful super-conscious higher states of which you are aware, but no words can describe. Giving over represents the peak of fulfillment.

THE METHODOLOGY OF YOGA:

Yoga is a wholistic science of life, which deals with physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health. Various aspects of Yoga help in the prevention and management of stress.

1. DEVELOPING AN UNDERSTANDING OF YOGIC CONCEPTS

- ❖ Samatvam and Stitha Prajna: The Yogic concepts of Samatvam (equanimity), Stitha Prajna (the even minded human), Pancha Kleshas and their roles in creation of stress and the stress response, Pancha Koshas and their role in manifestation of stress, all help us to look at life with a different perspective.
- ❖ Vairagya: The concept of Vairagya (detachment) when understood and cultivated makes us dispassionate to the Dwandwas (the pairs of opposites) such as praise-blame, hot-cold or pleasant-unpleasant experiences.
- ❖ Yoga as a “way of life”: The regular practice of Yoga as a 'way of Life' helps to reduce the levels of physical, mental and emotional stress. This yogic 'way of life' lays emphasis on right thought, right action, right reaction and right attitude.

2. HATHA YOGA AND JNANA YOGA TECHNIQUES

Yogic Asanas, Pranayamas and Jnana Yoga Kriyas, work on the various Koshas of our body and clear up all the subconscious 'quirks' in our brain from the billions of years of our evolution from the animal upto the present human state. An understanding of these 'quirks' helps us to understand our reaction to various situations and helps to prevent our 'stress response' to them. 'Stress Relievers' from Hatha Yoga and Jnana Yoga are of immense benefit in relieving the pent up emotions and our reaction to the stressful situation.

3. APPLICATION OF YAMA AND NIYAMA

The practice of the Pancha Yama (Ahimsa, Satya, Astheya, Brahmacharya and Aparigraha) and Pancha Niyama (Soucha, Santhosha, Tapas, Swadhyaya and Iswara Pranidhana) in our life helps to guide us on the right path and clear up many problems in human relationships.

4. ADOPTION OF THE RIGHT ATTITUDE

"To have the will to change that which can be changed, the strength to accept that which can not be changed, and the wisdom to know the difference" is the attitude that needs to be cultivated. An attitude of letting go of the worries, the

problems and a greater understanding of our mental process helps create a harmony in our body, mind whose disharmony is the main cause of 'Adhija Vyadhi' or psychosomatic stress disorders.

5. PRANAYAMA, THE BREATH OF LIFE

The practice of Pranayama helps regulate our tumultuous emotions and stabilize the mind, which is said to be as restless as a 'drunken monkey bitten by a scorpion'. Animals that breathe slowly are seen to have a less excitable nature than the rapid breathers and a similar observation holds true for humans. Even when we get angry, we can experience that our breathing becomes rapid and it is slower when we are cool and relaxed. Thus the slow, rhythmic and controlled breathing in Pranayamas leads to the emotional control seen in many Yoga Sadhaks.

6. PRATYAHARA, SENSORY WITHDRAWAL

Pratyahara Kriyas help to distance our self from the sensory objects, attraction to whom is said to be the initial step in the causation of stress in man. Here, we withdraw our self from the senses and then are not affected by them and their varied inputs. We realize how false the senses are in reality, and then are neither attracted to them nor feel any revulsion towards them.

7. PRACTICE AND ATTAINMENT OF DHARANA AND DHYANA

Dharana and Dhyana, help focus our mind on the right ideals and enable us to pursue our rightful goals in a spirit of "Nishkama Karma" (selfless action) and "Karmashu Koushalam" (skillful actions). Development of clarity of thought appears when we are a 'Stitha Prajna' (person of mental balance) and have 'Sama Bhava' (equal minded reaction to the opposites). Proper sleep patterns and a subjective feeling of wellness are produced leading to better interpersonal relationships, proper attitudes, increased production at work and the greater good for the individual, family, nation and ultimately for the whole of humanity.

8. NADA YOGA (BHAJANA AND KEERTHANA):

Music especially when based on Bhakti can elevate the mind to a higher plane where the individual transcends their problems and can look at things in the right perspective. Music is known as the food for the Gods and is an excellent way to relax. It develops the Bhakti Rasa (devotional mood) and by involving us with spiritual thoughts helps render the restless mind calm and peaceful. When immersed in music we forget our worries and are at peace with our self irrespective of whether we are the performer or the listener. Various Ragas are known to induce deep physical and mental relaxation.

9. THE VIBRATORY EFFECTS OF CHANTING SESSIONS

Manta chanting helps focus our mind on the higher nature and through the vibrations of the chants rejuvenates our body, emotions and mind. Each body part has a specific vibration and it resonates when the appropriate chanting is performed properly. Activation of the Chakras (energy vortices of the energy

body) by dedicated chanting creates an excellent positive Pranic recharge for the energy reservoirs of the inner self.

A SHORT GUIDE TO SOME OF THE PRACTICES:

A. HATHA YOGA RELAXATION PRACTICES OF GITANANDA YOGA

- ❖ SPANDHA – NISHPANDA: Practices are performed using the concept of tension and relaxation where we first tense different parts of the body to the maximum and then relax them to the maximum.
- ❖ SHAVASANA WITH AWARENESS OF BREATH: In Shavasana the mind is focused on the breath and the process of deep and rhythmic respiration. The feeling of cool inspired air flowing into the nostrils and the warm expired air flowing out of them is experienced with awareness and consciousness.
- ❖ TALA KRIYA: In Shavasana, the arms are stretched over the head with the in breath and held as tense as possible. The tension is felt at the tips of the fingers and the toes stretching them in the opposite directions. Then on the outgoing breath the tension is released with a 'whoosh'
- ❖ DRIDHA KRIYA: Start in Shavasana. On an incoming breath, turn to the right side with the arms stretched over the head so that the entire left flank is facing upward and the right flank is completely touching the floor. Hold the body as tense as is possible and as long as the breath can be held. Then on the outgoing breath, collapse to the supine pose releasing the tension with a 'whoosh'. Perform on both sides three times each.
- ❖ MARMANASTHANAM KRIYA: This is a '22 point' relaxation practice performed from Shavasana. The body is relaxed consciously, part by part, starting from the toes and proceeding systematically to the top of the head.
- ❖ KAYA KRIYA: This is a three-part relaxation technique in which the lower, middle and upper regions of the body are relaxed with a movement-breath combination. On the in breath, the feet are moved inwards, the arms outwards and the head turned to the right. The reverse process is performed on the out breath.

B. PRANAYAMA PRACTICES OF GITANANDA YOGA

Modern life is full of stress and strain and this has taken a heavy toll on the health of humankind. Certain Pranayamas are useful to reduce the anxiety and stress levels as well as prevent the exacerbation of stress related disorders such as diabetes mellitus, irritable bowel syndrome, bronchial asthma and hypertension.

- ❖ VIBHAGA PRANAYAMA: Sectional breathing in low, mid, and upper regions of the chest. This effect is enhanced by use of specific Hasta Mudras.

- ❖ PRANAVA PRANAYAMA: Patanjali says that, Pranava is the name of the Supreme Self. The Pranava is also known as the "Maha Manta", the Manta of all Mantas. Using specific Hasta Mudras, the vibrations of the Pranava A-U-M is resonated throughout the lower, middle and upper parts of the whole body.
- ❖ SAVITRI PRANAYAMA: This Pranayama is a bi-nostril practice, which is regenerative and helps in rejuvenation. It is performed in the ratio 2:1:2:1 and in various Talas such as 2,3,4,5,6,etc. it can either be performed from the Vajrasana or the Shavasana.
- ❖ NASARGA MUKA BHASTRIKA: Nasarga Muka Bhastrika is a forceful expulsion of the breath through the mouth that can accompany different movements to relieve our pent up stress. Shake your hands to help shake up the accumulated tensions of your daily life. Take a deep breath in through the nose and clench your fist as if catching hold of all your tensions and stress. Now "whoosh" away all the tensions and stress with a forceful blast out through the mouth, as forcibly as possible.
- ❖ CHANDRA PRANAYAMA: Close your right nostril with the thumb. Inhale slowly through your left nostril for a count of four. Now exhale through the same left nostril for a count of eight. Keep the right nostril closed all the time during the practice. Repeat the same for a total of nine rounds. Patients of anxiety, hypertension and other stressful conditions can benefit by practising this Pranayama 27 rounds before breakfast, lunch, dinner and before going to bed.
- ❖ BHUJANGINI MUDRA: This is an excellent stress reducing technique performed from the Bhujanga Asana, the cobra posture that helps release our pent up stress and provides great emotional and mental relief. Take a deep inhalation in the face prone posture and then flare back into the Bhujanga Asana on the out breath with a mighty hissing sound that is made through clenched teeth. Relax back to the floor into the face prone posture on the next incoming breath.
- ❖ ALOMA VILOMA PRANAYAMA: This is an alternate nostril breathing technique that helps balance both hemispheres of the brain and bring about extreme calmness. Inhale slowly through the right nostril for a count of six. Hold the breath for a count of three while closing both nostrils. Exhale through the left nostril for a count of six. Hold the breath out for a count of three while closing both nostrils. Now inhale slowly through the left nostril for a count of six and hold the breath for a count of three. Exhale through the right nostril for a count of six and hold the breath out for a count of three. Repeat the same for a total of nine rounds. This Pranayama helps to control and cure conditions of extreme nervous fidgeting and undue irritability. It can also reduce temper tantrums and senseless outbursts of anger and rage. A similar practice done starting with left nostril is often termed Anuloma Viloma or Nadi Shuddhi in some traditions.

C. JNANA YOGA PRACTICES OF GITANANDA YOGA

- ❖ YOGA NIDRA: This can be either performed in Shavasana or any of the meditative sitting poses. It can be used for relaxation and to energize the

body and mind. The mind is used to produce this effect by powerful visualization. Various forms of this are taught but in the system taught by Swami Gitananda Giri ji the following approach is used. The energy is imagined to flow in clockwise concentric circles starting as a pin sized point at the solar plexus and slowly expanding to finally be 6 inches beyond the head and toes. Then the reverse process is performed. Savitri Pranayama is the breath sequence to be followed in this practice. (This explanation is only an outline of the practice and actual practice requires proper training to perform it properly.)

- ❖ ANULOMA VILOMA KRIYA: This Kriya affects the basic polarity of the body, regulating the electrical flow in the nervous system and the ionization of cellular energy. It also produces deep relaxation. In Shavasana, with Savitri Pranayama, the warm golden Prana is visualized to enter from the top of the head and flow out the feet on an incoming breath. On the outgoing breath, the cool silvery Apana flow is felt to enter the feet and flow through the body and out the top of the head. This is continued until a deep relaxation occurs. (This explanation is only an outline of the practice and actual practice requires proper training to perform it properly.)

RECOMMENDED READING:

1. Yoga: Step By Step, a correspondence course in Yoga by Yogamaharishi Dr. Swami Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj, Satya Press, Ananda Ashram, Pondicherry. 1974
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6. Ancient yoga and modern science by Prof TR Anantaraman. Gurgaon
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