ARE WE PRACTICING YOGA THERAPY OR YOGOPATHY?

Modern Yoga therapy seems to have lost touch with the real essence of Yoga. The art and science of Yoga aims to help us regain our psycho-physiological balance by removing the root cause of the disharmony (dukhha samyoga viyogam yoga samjnitam. Bhagavadgita VI: 23).

Yoga understands health and well being as a dynamic continuum of human nature and not a mere ‘state’ to be attained and maintained. The lowest point on the continuum with the lowest speed of vibration is that of death whereas the highest point with the highest vibration is that of immortality. In between these two extremes lie the states of normal health and disease. For many, their state of health is defined as that ‘state’ in which they are able to function without hindrance whereas in reality, health is part of our evolutionary process towards Divinity.

Yoga aims at enabling the individual to attain and maintain a dynamic sukha sthanam that may be defined as a dynamic sense of physical, mental and spiritual well being. The Bhagavadgita defines Yoga as samatvam meaning thereby that Yoga is equanimity at all levels. (yogasthah kuru karmani sangam tyaktva dhananjaya siddhisiddhyah samo bhutva samatvam yoga uchyate. Bhagavadgita ii: 48) this may be also be understood as a perfect state of health wherein physical homeostasis and mental equanimity occur in a balanced and healthy harmony.

Tiruvalluvar the great Dravidian mystic says in his 1330 versed Tirukkural, a treatise on right living, “Look for the disease, look for the primary cause of it and then treat it” (noinaadi noimudhal naadi athuthanikkum vaai naadi vaippach chezhal.Tirukkural 948). Most modern doctors and even Yoga therapists seem to have lost their way in the maze and are content managing the manifest symptoms without understanding the real cause.

Maharishi Patanjali has explained the primary causation of stress based disorders through the concept of pancha klesha (psychological afflictions). These are avidya (ignorance of the ultimate reality), asmita (a false sense of identification), raga-dwesha (addiction and aversion) and abhinivesha (clinging on to life for fear of death) (avidya asmita raga dwesha abhinivesha klesha. Yoga Darshan II: 3).
Avidya as the root cause enables other kleshas to manifest in different forms from time to time. They may be dormant, attenuated, manifest or overpowering in their causation of pain and suffering (avidya kshetram uttaresham prasupta tanu vicchinna udaranam. Yoga Darshan II: 4).

Dwaitam or the misplaced sense of duality due to avidya, the mother klesha is the main initial cause of the imbalance at the higher level that may then manifest into the lower through psycho-somatic stress mechanisms. This occurs through the various Koshas (aspects of the human existence) as various disorders depending upon the propensity due to sanchita karma of the individual.

Yoga Vasishtha, one of the great classical Yoga texts describes the causation and manifestation of disease (vyadhi) in an admirable manner. I often joke with my students that this text is the first recorded counseling session in human history- Bhagavadgita being the second! In the dialogue between the great sage Vasishtha and Prince Rama, it describes both psychosomatic (adhija vyadhi) as well as non-psychosomatic ailments (anadhija vyadhi). Samanya adhija vyadhi are described as those arising from day-to-day causes while sara adhija vyadhi is the essential disease of being caught in the birth – rebirth cycle that may be also understood in modern terms as congenital diseases (caused due to sanchita karma). The former can be corrected by day-to-day remedial measures such as medicines and surgery whereas the sara adhija vyadhi doesn’t cease until knowledge of the self (atma jnana) is attained.

Guru Stotra from the Vishvasaratantra also takes a similar line in saying that the ultimate ‘wisdom of the self’ gained through the Guru destroys karmic bondages from many births (Anekajanma samprapta karma bandha vidhahine atmajnana pradanena tasmai srigurave namah. Guru Stotra, verse 9). It is interesting to note that traditional Indian thought views the very occurrence of birth on this planet as a disease and a source of suffering! Tiruvalluvar reiterates this when he says, “It is knowledge of the ultimate truth that removes the folly of birth” (pirappu ennum pedaimai neenga chirappu ennum chem porul kaanbadhu arivu- Tirukkural 358)

From the Yogic viewpoint of disease it can be seen that psychosomatic, stress related disorders appear to progress through four distinct phases. These can be described as follows:

1. Psychic Phase: This phase is marked by mild but persistent psychological and behavioural symptoms of stress like irritability, disturbed sleep and other minor symptoms. This phase can be correlated with vijnanamaya and manomaya koshas. Yoga as a therapy is very effective in this phase.

2. Psychosomatic Phase: If the stress continues there is an increase in symptoms, along with the appearance of generalized physiological symptoms such as occasional hypertension and tremors. This phase can be correlated with manomaya and pranamaya koshas. Yoga as a therapy is very effective in this phase.

3. Somatic Phase: This phase is marked by disturbed function of organs, particularly the target, or involved organ. At this stage one begins to identify the diseased state. This phase can be correlated with pranamaya and annamaya koshas. Yoga as a therapy is less effective in this phase and may need to be used in conjunction with other methods of treatment.

4. Organic Phase: This phase is marked by full manifestation of the diseased state, with pathological changes such as an ulcerated stomach or chronic hypertension, becoming manifest in their totality with their resultant complications. This phase
can be correlated with the *anamaya kosha* as the disease has become fixed in the physical body. Yoga as a therapy has a palliative and quality of life improving effect in this phase. It does also produce positive emotional and psychological effects even in terminal and end of life situations.

As Yoga therapists, unless we aim to correct the manifest psycho-somatic disassociation as well as the underlying ignorant, jaundiced perception of reality in the individual, we are not practicing *Yoga Chikitsa* (Yoga as a therapy).

Managing and suppressing the manifest symptoms with Yoga techniques is just as good or bad as modern Allopathic medicine that focuses primarily on symptomatic management without ever getting close to the “real” cause of most disorders. How many doctors look at the emotional and psychological issues that are the primary cause of the problem in so many of their patients? Remember, the concept of psychosomatics is not older than a hundred years in modern medicine. A hundred years ago any doctor talking about ‘mind affecting bodily disease’ risked getting labeled a quack for sure!

When today we find our Yoga therapists making the same mistake in merely treating manifesting symptoms without remedying the ‘real’ cause, it can only be termed as YOGOPATHY!

An example of this Yogopathy trend is when we use *Shavasana* to manage patients of hypertension quoting research that has shown that *Shavasana* reduces blood pressure. We seem happy just to bring the blood pressure down for the time being! Real *Yoga Chikitsa* would try to look for the primary cause of the patient’s hypertension and try to tackle that along with *Shavasana* for symptomatic management. Without an attempt to do so, it is merely Yogopathy.

Another common example is of using the left nostril *Chandra Nadi Pranayama* to lower the blood sugar or using the right nostril *Surya Nadi Pranayama* to relieve bronchospasm without looking for the real cause of the patient’s diabetes or asthma. When we do this, how are we any different than the modern doctors who prescribe anti diabetic and sympathomimetic agents for these patients? Where is the real Yoga in this type of therapy? Where is the effort to find and deal with the primary cause?

When we remember to inculcate the principles of Yoga in our day to day life, and help our patients to understand them thus assimilating them in their own lives, we are practicing Yoga. If not, it is merely Yogopathy, the symptomatic management of conditions using techniques of Yoga!

The art and science of Yoga has infinite possibilities for providing answers to most health problems troubling modern humankind. However we often misunderstand this science and want it to be a miracle pill. A pill that we take only once, and want all the problems to vanish into thin air! Yoga is a wholistic science and must be learnt and practiced with a holistic view. The dedicated practice of Yoga as a way of life is no doubt a panacea for problems related to psychosomatic, stress related disorders helping us to regain our birthright of health and happiness.

* By Yogacharya Dr Ananda Balayogi Bhavanani, Programme Co-ordinator ACYTER, JIPMER. This article first appeared in the Integral Yoga Magazine, Yogaville, USA. Fall 2009.
CASE REPORTS FROM ACYTER YOGA THERAPY OPD

Yoga therapy OPD is functioning in Super Specialty Block of JIPMER. Yoga therapy and lifestyle consultation is given by Dr Ananda Balayogi Bhavanani, Programme co-ordinator and Dr Zeena Sanjay, SRF from 10 AM to 1 PM on Monday, Wednesday and Friday and 10 AM to 4 PM on Tuesday and Thursday. 283 patients (new 205 and old 78) of various disorders attended the OPD between July and September 2010. The yoga therapy sessions are being conducted at ACYTER yoga hall on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays from 10 – 11 AM for patients of diabetes, 11 AM – 12 noon for patients of cardiovascular diseases and 12 noon – 1 PM for patients of other disorders. The yoga instructors, Shri G Dayanidy and Selvi L Vithiyalakshmi are conducting the sessions both individually and in groups as per directions of the therapists given in the OPD. Patients have reported satisfaction with the therapy sessions and are attending regularly. 417 patients of diabetes, 293 of hypertension and 489 of other conditions attended these sessions in July - September 2010. A total of 4036 patients of various psychosomatic ailments including diabetes mellitus, hypertension, musculoskeletal disorders, respiratory disorders, stress and psychological disorders, endocrine disorders, coronary artery disease, urology, gynecological disorders and ENT disorders have attended consultations and therapy sessions between June 2009 and June 2010.

We give below a few case reports compiled from our patients over the past year.

1. **Effect of yoga on subclinical hypothyroidism:** Complementary and Alternative Medical (CAM) therapies such as yoga are being increasingly used as adjuncts to modern medicine. Though it has been suggested that yoga may have a role in revitalizing thyroid function, there are few studies on the effects of yoga on thyroid disorders. A 36 year old female with elevated TSH level (9.39 IU/ml) and low normal T4 levels (12.57 pmol/L) was diagnosed as having primary subclinical hypothyroidism and advised to start replacement therapy. She came for consultation to the ACYTER Yoga OPD and was given appropriate yogic counseling and taught a series of techniques potentially beneficial to patients of thyroid conditions. This included suryanamaskar, sarvangasana, viparita karani mudra, surya nadi pranayama, bhramari pranayama and relaxation practices. She continued the practices for a year and reported back at the end of the year with her biochemical investigations. After one year of therapy, there was a fall in TSH (2.66 mIU/L) and a normalization of free T4 values (8.98 pmol/L). A third biochemical analysis three months later showed that TSH further stabilized 2 mIU/L and FT4 at 9.78 pmol/L. As the anti TPO antibodies were positive both before and after the yoga intervention, the patient was advised to continue the yoga practices on a regular basis as long as possible with regular six-monthly follow up. It is suggested that yoga can be an effective adjunct therapy in thyroid conditions and further studies in larger samples are needed to confirm these findings and to better understand the mechanisms behind such beneficial effects in patients of thyroid disorders.

2. **Effect of yoga in newly diagnosed hypertension:** A 21 year old male working as an executive in Chennai presented to his clinician with complaints of headache and giddiness. There were no other major symptoms though he was anxious about his condition. As his blood pressure was 160/100 he was advised to start antihypertensive medication. He took the medicines for a week and on a visit to Pondicherry the following week, came for consultation at the ACYTER Yoga OPD where his blood pressure was recorded as 130/90 mm Hg. He was given appropriate yogic counselling and dietary advice and taught a series of techniques
that are potentially beneficial to patients of hypertension. This included jathis and asanas such as tala, hastakona, trikona, meru, vakra, bhujanga, uttanpada and pawanmukta. Pranayamas such as sukha, vyagraha, pranava, nasarga mukha bhastrika, chandra nadi and bhamari were also taught. Relaxation practices included shavasana with savitri pranayama and yoga nidra. He continued the practices for 10 days and his blood pressure were monitored daily. He continued doing these practices at ACYTER as well as at home. His BP averaged 128/86 for the first three days and reduced to 122/84 by the 4th day. It normalised at 124/80 during the last few days. The patient expressed a sense of relaxation and felt a decrease in his anxiety levels.

3. **Effect of yoga in a patient of long standing diabetes and hypertension:** A 55 year old male, with history of diabetes since 16 yr and hypertension since 7yr and on medication at JIPMER medicine OPD attended consultation in ACYTER Yoga OPD. His blood pressure was BP 130/90 mm Hg and blood sugar levels were 140 mg% (AC) and 173 mg% (PC). The patient was highly stressed out and quite fed up with life. He was given appropriate yogic counseling and dietary advice and taught a series of techniques that are potentially beneficial to patients of both diabetes and hypertension. This included surya namaskar, talasana, trikonasana, vakrasana, pawan muktasana, viparita karani, chandra nadi pranayama, pranava pranayama and relaxation techniques. He has continued the practices regularly for the past 14 months both at ACYTER as well as at home. He reports a feeling of rejuvenation and energy and his outlook towards life has changed dramatically. His blood pressure has stabilized around 110/70 with 50% decrease in antihypertensive medications. His blood sugar levels have also stabilized at 120 mg% (AC) and 167 mg% (PC) with no change in medications. This patient has felt the benefits of yoga in changing his life for the better and has brought more than two dozen patients to ACYTER to experience the benefits of yoga that he feels have come in his life.

4. **Case report on COAD in an adult:** A 33 year old female, suffering from chronic obstructive airway disease (COAD) for the past five years came to the yoga OPD. She was on regular medication and had complaints of uncontrolled wheezing despite using various inhalers. Her FEV₁ was 57%. She was given appropriate yogic counselling and dietary advice and taught a series of techniques potentially beneficial to patients of COAD. She was taught breath body co-ordination practices and suryanamaskar as well as asanas such as ushtra, gomukha, vakra, bhujanga and matsya and the jala neti cleaning technique. She was also taught sectional breathing and pranayamas such as vyaghrha, mukha bhastrika, suryanadi and nadi shuddhi. Relaxation techniques used were kaya kriya and yoga nidra. She continued the practices for 2 months at ACYTER and at home and reported that she was feeling a sense of ease and comfort that wasn’t there earlier. The frequency of her wheezing attacks had also reduced. Repeat PFT showed that her FEV₁ had increased to 68%.

5. **Case report on bronchial asthma in a 4 year old child:** A 4 year old female child, with complaints of respiratory difficulties since birth was on regular treatment for bronchial asthma with oral medication and inhaler. She came for consultation to the ACYTER Yoga OPD with complaints of wheezing, breathlessness and the mother expressed a desire to try out the yoga practices. The mother was given appropriate yogic counseling and dietary advice and then the child was taught in a playful manner a series of techniques that are potentially beneficial to patients of bronchial asthma. She was taught breath body co-
ordination practices and suryanamaskar as well as asanas such as ushtra, gomukha, vakra, bhujanga and matsya. She was also introduced to the jala neti nasal cleaning technique. She was then taught sectional breathing and pranayamas such as vyaghra, mukha bhastrika and suryanadi. She continued the practices for nearly one year and her complaints reduced slowly. She continued doing these practices at ACYTER as well as home and the frequency and severity of her wheezing attacks reduced.

After the practice of 4 months she was able to stop the oral medications and usage of inhaler was also lesser. The consulting pediatrician advised her to stop the inhaler too as she was able to be comfortable without it. There were no episodes of wheezing reported till the end of the year even though she was not taking any medicines.

REPORT ON RESEARCH ACTIVITIES AT ACYTER

1. **Effect of yoga therapy in patients of essential hypertension**: A study is being conducted on the effect of yoga therapy in patients of hypertension. The study has a proposed sample size of 72 (36 in yoga and 36 in control group). Autonomic function tests have been completed in 50 patients and 23 have been randomised to the yoga therapy sessions being conducted at ACYTER on Monday, Wednesday and Friday. 15 of the patients have been attending the sessions regularly and 8 have attended more than 10 sessions till date.

2. **Effect of yoga therapy in patients of type 2 diabetes mellitus**: A study is being conducted on the effect of yoga therapy in patients of diabetes with peripheral neuropathy. The study has a proposed sample size of 60 (30 in yoga group; 30 in control group). Patients are being recruited from diabetic clinic and staff clinic. Cardiac autonomic function testing, nerve conduction studies and biochemical assessment are being done for each patient recruited into the study. So far pre-values of 25 patients in control group and 15 patients in yoga group have been taken. Of the 15 patients recruited into yoga group, 10 are regularly attending classes.

REGULAR ACTIVITIES OF ACYTER

Regular yoga classes are being conducted on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays in both mornings and evenings. 341 participants attended the classes in the last quarter. Suryanamaskar, basic asanas, pranayamas and relaxation techniques are being taught in the general classes. Senior Citizen’s Clinic is being conducted every Thursday and 116 participants attended classes with Mrs. Meena Ramanathan, coordinator yoga courses, Pondicherry University Community College.

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