Research
Perspective

Don’t Put Yoga In a Small Box: The Challenges of Scientifically Studying Yoga

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It has been more than a hundred years since Swami Vivekananda gave a dynamic call to rid yoga and spirituality of the cobwebs of hidden mysteries. A lot has been done in the field of yoga research in the decades since, and still more is yet to be done. Yoga research is now a global phenomenon, with a growing number of randomized and controlled trials. More research studies are being published in indexed journals with peer review, and greater funding for research is available.

Today, however, we are at a crossroads, with important questions such as, “How do we really look into the deeper aspects of yoga?” cropping up more and more often. We are confronted with the stark reality that we really don’t have the equipment, techniques, or expertise to study yoga practices beyond the mere physical manifestation of their effects. To conclude that savasana has only the physical effect of lowering blood pressure and heart rate is to see only the iceberg’s tip, missing the other 90% of it. The real effects of savasana as both relaxation and renunciation may have more far-reaching effects than we are led to believe from a study measuring only these physiological outcomes.

It seems to me that most researchers are more interested in proving themselves right than in researching yoga as a whole. A lot of studies today seem geared more toward attracting people to specific techniques and institutions, and publicizing the techniques of those systems, than toward benefiting yoga as a whole. It gets truly absurd when well-dressed propaganda for specific organizations is being mass-produced in the name of “scientific research.” We must remember that yoga research should not be a sales pitch for any particular “brand” of yoga. True research is a quest driven by a specific question that needs an answer and that in turn leads to new questions.

It is clearly important to legitimize yoga practices in the eyes of the scientific community. However, we need to move away from the current model of yoga research that resembles pharmaceutical companies trying to find wonder drugs for newer diseases. Most modern yoga researchers seem to be trying to find a single yoga pill for each ill. We need to focus more attention on the core concepts of yoga. This requires extensive basic research that is lacking in modern times, as there isn’t much money available for such an approach.

We must not allow yoga to be made small as modern science tries to make yoga fit the demands of science. Putting yoga in a small box is as absurd as trying to put the ocean in a teacup. We must remember that the origin of research in yoga dates back to the prehistoric origin of yoga itself. Our ancient seers, the rishis, were truly searching and researching the all-important question, “Who am I?” One of the dangers in modern times is that many excellent scientists are researching yoga, but because their understanding of yoga is so limited, they end up missing the bus completely, in my opinion. Excellent papers are published from a scientific perspective, but they are truly very limited from a yogic perspective. There has to be a symbiotic relationship between yoga and modern science, and for this, human bridges combining the best of both worlds need to be cultivated. It is important that more scientists take up yoga and more yogis go into the study of science, so that we can build a bridge between these two great aspects of our civilization.

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