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 (Yoga is the disassociation from the union with painful suffering—*dukha samyoga viyogam yoga sam-nitham*). 102123

Yoga understands health and wellbeing as a dynamic continuum of human nature and not a mere “state” to be attained and maintained. If we try to understand this in terms of mortality and immortality, we can say that the lowest point on the continuum with the lowest speed of vibration is 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, health is defined as that state in which they are able to function without hindrance, whereas according to the yogic tradition, health is part of our evolutionary process toward Divinity. The lowest point on the dynamic health continuum with the lowest speed of vibration may be equated with the lowest forms of life and mineral matter, while the highest point with the highest speed of vibration may be equated with 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 wellbeing. The *Bhagavad Gita* defines Yoga as *samatvam*, meaning thereby that Yoga is equanimity at all levels. 124 This may be also 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 *Thirukkural*, a treatise on right living, “Look for the disease, look for the primary cause of it and then treat it.” 125-145 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 leading to bodily identification), *asmita* (a false sense of identification), *raga-dwesha* (addiction and aversion), and *abhinivesha* (clinging on to life for fear of death). 126-31 *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. 127-66 *Dwtaam*, or the misplaced sense 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 psychosomatic stress mechanisms. This occurs through the various *koshas* (aspects of the human existence) as various disorders, depending upon the propensity of the individual.

Yoga Vashista, 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—the *Bhagavad Gita* is of course the second!) In the dialogue between the great sage Vashistha and Prince Rama, it describes both psychosomatic (adhistya vyadhi) as well as nonpsychosomatic ailments (*anadhistya vyadhi*). *Samanya adhistya vyadhi* are described as those ailments arising from day-to-day causes, while *sara adhistya vyadhi* is the essential disease of being caught in the birth-rebirth cycle. The former can be corrected by day-to-day remedial measures such as medicines and surgery, whereas the *sara adhistya vyadhi* of birth and rebirth doesn’t cease until knowledge of the self (*atma jnana*) is attained.

The Guru Stotra from the *Vishvasaraatantra* also takes a similar line in saying that the ultimate “wisdom of the self” gained through the Guru destroys karmic bondages from many births. 14 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.” 128-129

When today we find our Yoga therapists making the same mistake in merely treating manifestations without remedying the cause, I prefer to call it *Yogopathy!*

**Four Phases of Disease**

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 understood as follows:

1. **Psychic Phase:** This phase is marked by mild but persistent psychological and behavioural symptoms of stress such as irritability, disturbed sleep, and other minor symptoms. This phase can be correlated with the *manomaya* (thinking mind) and the *vijnanamaya* (intellectual mind) *koshas* (bodies, or layers of being). Yoga as a therapy is very effective in this phase, as it can enable one to prevent and even eliminate the condition.

2. **Psychosomatic Phase:** If the stress continues there is an increase in symptoms, along with the appearance of generalized physiologic symptoms such as occasional hypertension and tremors. This phase can be correlated with the *manomaya* and *pranamaya* (energy) *koshas*. Yoga as a therapy is very effective in this phase, as the temporary malfunctioning can be remedied and health regained.

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 the *pranamaya* and *annamaya* (physical) *koshas*. Yoga as a therapy is less effective on its own in this phase and may need to be used in conjunction with other methods of treatment if we are looking for a permanent solution. Of course Yoga will still be effective in assisting the person to have a better response to his or her health challenge, but may not be able to provide a “cure.”

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 *annamaya kosha*, as the disease has become fixed.
From the Yogic viewpoint of disease, it can be seen that psychosomatic, stress-related disorders appear to progress through four distinct phases.

in the physical body. Yoga as a therapy has a palliative and quality-of-life improving effect in this phase. It also produces positive emotional and psychological effects, even in terminal and end-of-life situations.

As Yoga therapists, unless we aim to correct the manifest psychosomatic disassociation as well as the underlying mistaken 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 medicine that focuses primarily on symptomatic management without ever getting close to the real cause of most disorders. When today we find our Yoga therapists making the same mistake in merely treating manifesting symptoms without remedying the cause, I prefer to call it Yogopathy!

Yogopathy versus Yoga Chikitsa

An example of this Yogopathy trend is when we use shavasana to manage patients with 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. I wish to make it very clear here that I am aware that many can benefit from this too and that I am not against Yogopathy, as many need it. However, I am not in favor of it being called Yoga therapy or Yoga chikitsa.

I recently encountered a Yoga therapist who said that he advised his patients to do their prescribed pranayama while watching television to help them save their precious time! When queried on the principle that “prana flows where the mind goes,” he retorted that he was talking of therapeutic pranayama, whereas I was talking of spiritual pranayama! The rishis must be turning in their samadhis!

In the application of Yoga chikitsa it is vital that we take into consideration all the following aspects that are part of an integrated approach to the problem. These include a healthy life-nourishing diet, a healthy and natural environment, a holistic lifestyle, adequate bodywork through asanas, mudras, and kriyas, invigorating breathwork through the use of pranayama, and the production of a healthy thought process through the higher practices of Jnana and Raja Yoga.

As Yoga chikitsa starts to be introduced into mainstream healthcare, we must not fall into the dangerous trap of claiming that Yoga is a miracle that can cure everything under the sun, for that “puts off” the modern medical community more than anything. They then develop a stiff resistance to Yoga instead of becoming more open to this life-giving and health-restoring discipline. Because the use of Yoga chikitsa in medical centers is still in its infancy, we must be cautious about the after-effects we may produce by our conscious and unconscious thoughts, words, and actions. Better to err on the side of caution than be true to the adage, “Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.”

I am not downplaying the potentiality of Yoga, for it does have a role in virtually each and every condition. We must, however, realize that though Yoga can improve the condition of nearly every patient, it doesn’t necessarily translate into words such as “cure.” Modern medicine doesn’t have a cure for most conditions and so when Yoga therapists use such words, it creates a negative image that does more harm than good.

I would like to reiterate at this point the need of the modern age, which is to have an integrated approach toward all forms of therapy. We must try to integrate concepts of Yoga in coordination and collaboration with other systems of medicine such as allopathy, Ayurveda, Siddha, and naturopathy. Physical therapy, osteopathy, and chiropractic practices may be also used with the Yoga chikitsa as required. Don’t forget that advice on diet and adoption of a healthy lifestyle is very important, irrespective of the mode of therapy employed for the patient.

Yoga can surely help regain the ease lost earlier through dis-ease (as implied by sthira sukham asanam.3(II:46) It can also enable us to attain a dynamic state of mental equanimity: samatvam yoga uchyate,1(II:48) where the opposites of experience cease to affect us any more: tato dwandwa anabhigatha.3(II:48) This enables us to move from a state of illness and disease to one of health and wellbeing that ultimately allows us to move from a lower animal nature to a higher human nature and finally to reach the highest Divine nature that is our birthright. TTT

(continued on page 28)
Feature: Yoga Therapy or Yogopathy

Notes
1. Bhagavad Gita.
2. Tiruvalluvar. Thirukkural.

References

ASHTANGA YOGA: Prepare the ground of the spiritual life with Yama and Niyama; plant the seeds of Asana; water the plant of Sadhana with Pranayama; protect the plant from external predators with Pratyahara; let the plant root itself in Dharana; let the buds appear in Dhyana. Then the spiritual life will flower in Samadhi.

For Yoga Professionals

“A true work of art that explains the transformational power of classical Yoga Science in clear and practical terms. A manual for creatively meeting the challenges of everyday life.”
LILIAS FOLAN—Author and host of groundbreaking PBS yoga series, Lilias!

“A comprehensive and practical guide to the yogic practices as tools for transformation.”
DEAN ORNISH, MD—Author of Dr. Dean Ornish’s Program for Reversing Heart Disease

“Comprehensively outlines the holistic benefits of Yoga and brought joy to this heart surgeon’s heart.”
MEHMET OZ, MD—Noted surgeon, author and host of “Oprah and Friends”

Recipient of Major National Literary Awards:
Nautilus Award, Benjamin Franklin Award, Eric Hoffer Award, ForeWord Magazine Award, Independent Publisher Book Award.

AVAILABLE AT FINE BOOKSTORES NATIONWIDE.

CME FOR PHYSICIANS AND NURSES: Workshops by Leonard Perlmutter, based on “The Heart and Science of Yoga.” have been certified for continuing education credits for physicians and nurses by Albany Medical College, the Accreditation Council for Continuing Medical Education, the New York State Nurses Association and the American Nurses Credentialing Center’s Commission on Accreditation.

AMERICAN MEDITATION INSTITUTE
HEALTH • HAPPINESS • FREEDOM
60 Garner Road, Averill Park, NY • Tel 800.234.5115
www.americanmeditation.org

Call for a FREE subscription to
Transformation—The Journal of Practical Yoga Science