

# YOGIC PERSPECTIVES ON MENTAL HEALTH

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## INTRODUCTION:

Yoga is first and foremost a *moksha shastra* meant to facilitate the individual to attain the final freedom, liberation or emancipation. One of the important by-products of the yogic way of living is attainment of health and well being. This is brought about by right-use-ness of the body, emotions and mind with awareness and consciousness. This must be understood to be as healthy a dynamic state that may be attained in spite of the individual's *sabija karma* that manifests as their genetic predispositions and the environment into which they are born. Yoga also helps maintain and sustain this dynamic positive state of health after it has been attained through disciplined self effort.

The central theme of yoga is the golden mean, finding the middle path, a constant search for moderation and a harmonious homeostatic balance. Yoga is the "unitive impulse" of life, which always seeks to unite diverse streams into a single powerful force. Proper practice produces an inner balance of mind that remains stable and serene even in the midst of chaos. This ancient science shows its adherents a clear path to the "eye of the storm" and ensures a stability that endures within, even as the cyclone rages externally.

## CAUSATION OF PSYCHOSOMATIC DISORDERS:

Yogamaharishi Dr Swami Gitananda Giri, founder of Ananda Ashram at Pondicherry ([www.icyer.com](http://www.icyer.com)) has written extensively about the relationship between health and disease. He says, "Yoga views the vast proliferation of psychosomatic diseases as a natural outcome of stress and strain created by desire fostered by modern propaganda and abuse of the body condoned on all sides even by religion, science and philosophy. Add to this the synthetic "junk food" diet of modern society and you have the possibility of endless disorders developing... even the extinction of man by his own ignorance and misdeeds".

He explains the root cause of disease as follows. "Yoga, a holistic, unified concept of oneness, is *adwaitam* or non-dual in nature. It suggests happiness, harmony and ease. Dis-ease is created when duality or *dwaitam* arises

in the human mind. This false concept of duality has produced all conflicts of human mind and the vast list of human disorders. Duality (dis-ease) is the primary cause of man's downfall. Yoga helps return man to his pristine, whole nature.

All diseases, maladies, tensions, are manifestations of divisions of what should be man's complete nature, the *atman* or 'Self'. This 'Self' is "ease". A loss of "ease" creates "dis-ease". Duality is the first insanity, the first disease, the unreasonable thought that "I am different from the whole... I am unique. I am me." The ego is a manifestation of disease. Only a distorted ego could feel alone, suffer from "the lonely disease", in a Universe, a Cosmos totally filled with the 'Self'.

Interestingly, he points out that one of the oldest words for man is "insan". Man is "insane". A return to sanity, "going sane," is the subject of real Yoga *Sadhana* and Yoga *Abhyasa*. Yoga *Chikitsa* is one of the methods to help insane man back onto the path of sanity. A healthy man or woman may be known by the term "Yogi". A very strongly worded, yet very true statement indeed from the Lion of Pondicherry!

## YOGIC PERSPECTIVE OF DEPRESSION:

According to the Yoga Darshan codified by Maharishi Patanjali, depression or rather *daurmanasya* is one of the four *vikshepa sahabhuvah* that are the manifestations that accompany the obstacles to yoga *sadhana*, the *nava antaraya*. The other *sahabhuvah* are *duhkha* or suffering, *angamejayatva* or tremors and *shvasaprasvasa* or irregular respiration. (*duhkhadaurmanasya angamejayatva shvasaprasvasa vikshepasahabhuvah Yoga Darshan - 1:31*). When we analyse this *sutra* deeply we find that they are very true reflections of our inner state.

*Duhkha* or painful suffering at the physical, emotional and mental level can drive us to despair. Suffering is an excellent trick our mind plays as very few can overcome the 'moment' of suffering. Very few are capable of realizing what is really happening in the process of their evolutionary journey. The moment 'suffering' is felt, most people give up, and the lower mind survives to fight another day.

*Daurmanasya* refers to dejection and despair. We must remember that depression is not just in the mind but has many physical aspects too. A state of depression is another tool by which the lower mind tries to halt the spiritual progress of a *sadhaka*. However we must realise that the

greatest teachings are often given at moments of great despair. The art and science of yoga understands that this may be the best 'teachable' moment and hence we find the highest teachings of the Bhagavad Gita and Ramayana coming at this point.

Our Guru Swami Gitananda Giri Maharaj used to say, "A nervous breakdown is actually an opportunity for a spiritual breakthrough if we can realise the positive implications in our moment of despair and dejection". The teachings of the Yoga Vasishtha and the Bhagavad Gita which may be said to be the first and second recorded 'psychological counselling' sessions in human history were delivered when both Lord Rama and Arjuna respectively were at the depths of their depression. If we realise that this is indeed a window of opportunity for growth, success will come to us the soonest. But if we miss this golden chance, then even the Divine will struggle to help us out of our own deep pit of self pity.

*Angamejayatva* are the physical tremors of the body. The practice of asana helps us to attain to a state of physical control over our body. This enables us to go beyond the *dwandwa*, the pair of opposites that are the cause of these tremors. Tremors are an externalized manifestation of internal imbalances of our emotions and mind. Imbalance at the higher level causes the imbalance in the neuro-chemical transmitters and psycho-physiological pathways of the body, resulting in these physical tremors. When confronted with such a frightening manifestation, many aspirants get scared whether they are harming themselves and stop their *Sadhana* out of fear.

*Shvasaprasvasa* refers to the irregularity in breathing patterns. One of the main physical manifestations of mental and emotional upsets is the haphazardness of respiration. Ancient Yogis contemplated this deeply and found that mental disturbances cause irregularity and instability of respiration. Though their *jnana drishti* (perspective of wisdom) they realised that by stabilizing the breath, we can conversely produce a stability of emotions and mind. This knowledge is used even today in the practice of *pranayama*, when it is used as a means of altering the higher (mind) through the lower (body). This is one of the best examples of the numerous somatic-psyche applications found in the practices of *hatha yoga*, the physical science of balancing equal and opposite energies.

## YOGIC METHODS TO ATTAIN AND MAINTAIN HEALTH:

The science of yoga has numerous practical techniques as well as advice for proper life style in order to attain and maintain health and well being. *Bahiranga* practices such as *yama*, *niyama*, *asana* and *pranayama* help produce physical health while *antaranga* practices of *dharana* and *dhyana*

work on producing mental health along with *pratyahara*. Yoga works towards restoration of normalcy in all systems of the human body with special emphasis on the psycho-neuro-immuno-endocrine axis.

In addition to its preventive and restorative capabilities, yoga also aims at promoting positive health that will help us to tide over health challenges that occur during our lifetime. Just as we save money in a bank to tide over financial crises, so also we can build up our positive health balance to help us manage unforeseen health challenges with faster recovery and recuperation. This concept of positive health is one of yoga's unique contributions to modern healthcare, as yoga has both a preventive as well as promotional role in the healthcare of our masses. It is also inexpensive and can be used in tandem with other systems of medicine in an integrated manner to benefit patients.

## BECOMING ONE WITH THE BREATH:

In the science of yoga, body movement and breath must be synchronized. The breath pattern is important. Particularly in the use of *kriya* or structured movements like *Surya Namaskar*, the body is normally lifted on an incoming breath and lowered on an outgoing breath. Some of the breath patterns such as the *bhastrika* strengthen the whole solar plexus area as well as the diaphragm, building up stamina while producing internal cleansing of organs and the blood stream. *Kapalbhati* is another dynamic technique that enables us to break out of the deep hole of depression by creating a sense of activation. *Surya nadi* and *ujjayi pranayama* can also help in activating those who need the activation for healthy well being. The *bandha trayam* as well as the *aswini mudra* are both a God-send for those suffering from depression as they revitalise the entire psycho-neuro-endocrine system. The *pranava* and *bhramari pranayama* work towards creating an inner harmony that results in the attainment of a state of mental calmness.

According to Dr Swami Gitananda Giri, one of the foremost exponents of yoga in the 20th century, the inherent message of pranayama can be summarised as follows:

- There is an absolute and direct correlation between the way an organism breathes and its energy level.
- There is an absolute and direct correlation between the way a man breathes and the length of his life span.
- There is an absolute and direct correlation between the way a man breathes and the state of mind and clarity of thought, which he enjoys.
- There is an absolute correlation between the way a man breathes and the quality of emotions, which he experiences.
- There is an absolute and direct correlation between the way a man breathes and the subtlety of the thoughts, which pass through his mind.



## SHIFTING FROM INDIVIDUALITY TO UNIVERSALITY:

Yoga, which emphasizes the universal, is a perfect foil to those human activities, which glorify the personal. The ego which is fixated only on its own shallow self will soon run into the blank wall of depression and despair, overwhelmed by its own superficiality. That striving spirit which looks within at the universal aspect of its own nature and sees the oneness of the whole of creation will find an endless fountain of inspiration and joy. In short it may be safely said that the practice of yoga as a unified whole helps the individual shift from an "I"-centric approach to a "we"-centric approach.

The Srimad Bhagavad Gita says, "*yogaha karmasu koushalam*" meaning thereby that yoga is skill in action (BG 2:50). The real Yogi, immensely conscious and aware at the physical, mental and emotional levels gains great control through that consciousness over all aspects of life thus developing a real skill in living. Part of that skill springs from his cultivated detachment, his ability to work for "work's sake," and not for the sake of the reward. He realizes that his duty is to do his best but that the ultimate result is not in his hands. The Yogi performs the needed action not for the sake of the fruits of that action, but because it is good and necessary to do so.

Such an attitude of mind produces consummate skill in whatever action the Yogi undertakes. Consummate concentration, consummate controls are all offshoots of good *Yoga Sadhana*. This belies the age-old belief that the competitive spirit produces the highest skill. To this the yogic answer is: detachment from the fruits of the action produces the greatest efficiency, for one is then emotions connected with "goal-oriented", competitive thinking. The beauty of yoga is that these abstract principles become concrete in the daily practice of the techniques available in the yoga system. Once the "seed of yoga" finds fertile soil, these concepts grow naturally, slowly but surely taking root in all aspects of life.

## WHOLISTIC APPROACH OF YOGA:

The Yogic holistic approach to life that 'everything is important and everything has its effect' could do much to improve the mind, body and emotional states of well being. These practical approaches to health include:

- The use of early morning sunlight for healing and rejuvenative activities
- The use of water for internal and external cleansing
- Careful attention to diet of a sattvic nature
- Realising the necessity for balance between exertion and relaxation as all tension must be balanced using concept of *spanda nishpanda* or

"exertion-relaxation-exertion-relaxation" in an alternating rhythm of activity

- Learning how to "unwind" through the many relaxation techniques available in the Yoga science which can balance the immense amount of stress and strain that are part and parcel of day to day life
- Realising the need for clean air, water and food
- Becoming aware of the effect of modern modes of entertainment and addictive habits in general debilitation of the physical, emotional and mental nature
- Providing a "working philosophy" which will sustain one in triumph and defeat
- Learning to be sensitive to one's own bio-rhythms, one's own physical, mental and emotional cycles
- Being aware of the effects of the seasons and the various unnatural life styles to which the modern man is exposed

In short, all of these aspects of yoga as a way of natural living can provide relief for many of the psychosomatic ailments affecting humankind today.

## YOGIC TOOLS FOR POSITIVE MENTAL HEALTH:

In order to create an environment conducive to the development of positive mental health and also to prevent and manage the psychosomatic lifestyle disorders that are threatening humankind, yoga offers us many practical 'day-to-day' methods of action. Some of these tools for positive health are as follows.

1. Become aware of your body, emotions and mind: Without awareness there cannot be health or healing. Awareness of body implies conscious body work that needs to be synchronized with breath to qualify as a psychosomatic technique of health and healing. Psychosomatic disorders cannot be tackled without awareness.
2. Improve your dietary habits: Most disorders are directly or indirectly linked to improper dietary patterns that need to be addressed in order to find a permanent solution to health challenges. One of the most important lifestyle changes that needs to be implemented in management of any lifestyle disorder is diet.
3. Relax your whole body: Relaxation is most often all that most patients need in order to improve their physical condition. Stress is the major culprit and may be the causative, aggravating, or precipitating factor in so many psychosomatic disorders. Doctors are often found telling their patients to relax, but never tell them how to do it! The relaxation part of every yoga session is most important for it is during it that benefit of practices done in the session seep into each and every cell producing rest, rejuvenation, reinvigoration and reintegration.
4. Slow down your breath making it quiet and deep: Rapid, uncontrolled, irregular breathing is a sign of ill health whereas slow, deep and regular controlled breathing is a sign of health. Breath is the link between body and mind and is the agent of physical, physiological and mental unification. When breath is slowed down, metabolic processes are also slowed and anabolic activities begin the process of healing and rebuilding. If breath is calm, mind is calm and life is long!
5. Calm down your mind and focus it inwardly: The mind is as disturbed as a drunken monkey bitten by a scorpion say our scriptures. To bring that wayward agitated mind under control, and take it on a journey into our inner being is fundamental in finding a way out of the 'disease maze' in which we are entangled like a fly in the spider's web. Breath work and sensory control are the base on which mind training can occur; hence much importance is given to *pranayama* and *pratyahara*. It is only after this that concentration practices leading to meditation can have any use. Just sitting and thinking about something is not meditation!
6. Improve the flow of healing 'Pranic Life Energy': Improve the flow of healing 'Pranic Life Energy' to all parts of the body, especially to those diseased parts, thus relaxing, regenerating and reinvigorating ourselves. *Prana* is life and without it there cannot be healing. The different *prana* and *upa prana vayu* that are energies driving different physiological functions of the body need to be understood and applied as per needs of the patient.
7. Fortify yourself against omnipresent stressors: Decrease your stress level by fortifying yourself against the various omnipresent stressors in your life. When face to face with the innumerable thorns in a forest, one may either choose to spend all their time picking them up one by one while other thorns continue falling or choose to wear a pair of shoes and walk through the forest. The difference is in attitude. Choosing the right attitude can change everything and bring about a resolution of the problem by healing the core. Stress is more about how you react to the stressor than about the nature of the stressor itself!
8. Increase your self reliance and self confidence: Life is full of challenges that are there only to make us stronger and better. The challenges should be understood as opportunities for change and faced with confidence. We must understand we have the inner power to overcome each and every challenge that is thrown at us by life. The Divine is not a sadist to give us challenges that are beyond our capacity!
9. Facilitate natural emanation of wastes: Facilitate natural emanation of waste from the body by practicing *shuddhi kriyas* like *dhauti*, *basti* and *neti*.

Accumulation and stagnation of waste materials either in inner or outer environment always causes problems. Yogic cleaning practices help wash out impurities (*mala shodhana*) thus helping the process of regeneration and facilitating healing.

10. Take responsibility for your own health: Remember that ultimately it is "YOU" who are responsible for your own health and well being and must take the initiative to develop positive health to tide you over challenging times of ill health. Yoga fixes responsibility for our health squarely upon our own shoulders. If we do healthy things we are healthy and if we do unhealthy things we become sick. No use complaining that we are not well when we have been the cause of our problem. As Swamiji Gitananda Giri would say, "You don't have problems-you are the problem!"
11. Health and happiness are your birthright: Health and happiness are your birthright, claim them and develop them to your maximum potential. This message of Swamiji is a firm reminder that the goal of human existence is not health and happiness but is *moksha* (liberation). Most people today are so busy trying to find health and happiness that they forget why they are here in the first place. Yoga helps us regain our birthright and attain the goal of human life.

## CONCLUSION:

The dedicated practice of yoga as a way of life is no doubt a panacea for problems related to psychosomatic, stress related physical, emotional and mental disorders and helps us regain our birthright of health and happiness. It is only when we are healthy and happy that we can fulfil our destiny.

## RECOMMENDED READING:

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