Positive Health Through Yoga

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Introduction
Yoga is gradually being welcomed into modern health care systems as an understanding of its multifarious benefits is gaining ground worldwide. In our haste to have it accepted into the mainstream medicare, we must not however forget that Yoga is first and foremost a spiritual science for the integrated, holistic development of the physical, mental and spiritual aspects of our being. Though the recent advancements in the field of research have given evidence that Yoga helps normalize human physiological and psychological functioning. More importantly the practice of Yoga as a way of life is calming and provides a rare opportunity in our chaotic lives to leave the madness of the outside world behind and attain an inner peace by helping us to focus inwards.

The World health organisation defines health as, “The state of complete physical, mental social and spiritual wellbeing and not merely absence of disease or infirmity”. The Yogic way of living is a vital tool that helps attain that state of health. We must not forget that it is more important to have both a sense of being healthy as well as feeling healthy. Hence, the qualitative aspect of health, the spiritual nature of the human life is rightly considered more important in Yoga and other Indian systems of traditional medicine.

The Bhagavat Gita defines Yoga as equanimity at all levels which may also be taken as the perfect state of health where there is physical homeostasis and mental equanimity giving rise to a healthy harmony between the body and mind. The Hatha Yoga Pradipika, also states that, “Yoga improves the health of all alike and wards off diseases of one who tirelessly practices Yoga whether they are young, old, decrepit, diseased or weak, provided they abide to the rules and regulations properly”.

The Original Mind-Body Medicine
Yoga is the original mind body medicine and is one of the greatest treasures of the unique Indian cultural heritage. As both an art and science it has a lot to offer humankind in terms of an understanding of both the human mind as well as all aspects of our multilayered existence. Yoga treats man as a multi layered, conscious being, possessing three bodies (sthula, sukshma and kaarana sharira) and being enveloped in a five layered (pancha kosha) of existence.

This ancient science of mind control as codified by Maharishi Patanjali more than
2500 years ago helps us to understand our mental processes as well as the cause - effect relations of a multitude of problems faced by modern man. Modern man is the victim of stress and related disorders that threaten to disrupt his life totally. Yoga offers a way out of this 'whirlpool of stress' and is a holistic solution to stress.

Yogic lifestyle, Yogic diet, Yogic attitudes and Yogic practices help man to strengthen himself and develop positive health thus enabling him to withstand stress better. This Yogic “health insurance” is achieved by normalizing the perception of stress, optimizing the reaction to it and by releasing the pent up stress effectively through various Yogic practices. Yoga is a holistic and integral science of life dealing with physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health of the individual and society.

Health And Disease

Yoga understands that, physical ailments that are not of a psychosomatic nature can be easily managed with surgery, medication, prayers, douches and lifestyle modifications as required. Various Yoga techniques may also be used to help correct the physical ailments and restore health with regeneration, recuperation and rehabilitation as necessary. Accident prevention is an important benefit of a Yogic life. Better alertness, reflexes and physical condition enables one to prevent accidents as well as avoid getting traumatized both physically and mentally by such occurrences.

This qualitative aspect of health is something that Yoga and Indian systems of medicine have considered important for thousands of years. The definition of asana given in the Yoga Sutra as 'sthirasukham' implies this state of steady well being at all levels of existence. Patanjali also tells us that through the practice of asana we can attain a state that is beyond dualities leading to a calm and serene state of well being.

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:

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.

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.

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. Here, Yoga as a therapy may be needed to be used in conjunction with other methods of treatment.

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 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.

Often, however, the early stages of the disease process are overlooked and the final stage is seen as an entity unto itself, having little relationship to one’s living habits and patterns. This is because modern medicine only looks at the physical aspects and neglects effects of pancha kosha and trisharira on health and disease.

**Tools For Positive Health**

In order to create an environment conducive to the development of positive health and to prevent and manage the 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 that are the bane of the modern world 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 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 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 inward**

The mind is as disturbed as a drunken monkey bitten by a scorpion says 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, concentration practices leading to meditation can have any use.

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 yourself. 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. For patients of digestive disorders, focus must be on the samana vayu whereas, in pelvic conditions it needs to be on apana vayu. The fifth chapter of the Hathayoga Pradipika has a detailed analysis of various malfunctions of the vayu and their correction.

7. **Fortify yourself against omnipresent stressors**

Decrease your stress level by fortifying yourself against the various omnipresent stressors in your life. When one face with the innumerable thorns in
a forest, one may either choose to spend all their time picking them up one by one while others 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 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. 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 fall sick. No use of complaining that we are not well when we have been the cause of our problem.

11. Health and happiness are your birthright
Health and happiness are your birthright, claim them and develop them to your maximum potential. 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 birthrights and attain the goal of human life.

The art and science of Yoga has infinite possibilities for providing answers to most health problems troubling modern human kind. 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 holistic 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.

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