INTRODUCTION:

Yoga is a spiritual science for the integrated and holistic development of our physical, mental and moral-spiritual aspects of being. The philosophy of Yoga is practical and applicable in our day-to-day living. Yoga has been documented to normalise physiological function and recent advances in the field of research have shown that it has sound scientific basis.

Yogi Swatmarama in the Hathayoga Pradipika, one of the classical Yoga texts gives us the assurance, “One who tirelessly practises Yoga attains success irrespective of whether they are young, old decrepit, diseased or weak”. He gives us the guarantee that Yoga improves health of all alike and wards off disease, provided we properly abide by the rules and regulations (yuva vṛddho ativriddho vaa vyāadhito durbalo pi vaa abhyaasaaat siddhiāapnoti sarvayogeshvatandritah-Hathayoga Pradipika I:64)

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. The lowest point on the dynamic health continuum with lowest speed of vibration may be equated with lowest forms of life and mineral matter while the highest point with highest speed of vibration may be equated with Divinity.

YOGIC VIEW OF W.H.O DEFINITION OF HEALTH:

World Health Organization (WHO) defines health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well being and not merely absence of disease or infirmity. WHO has also in recent times suggested a fourth dimension of spiritual health but has fallen short of defining it without confusing it with religion. From a Yogic perspective it is heartening that the WHO definition gives importance to ‘well being’ that is a vital aspect of ‘being’ healthy as well as ‘feeling’ healthy. There is no use in a doctor telling patients that all their investigations are ‘normal’ when the patients themselves are not feeling ‘well’.

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 sthira sukham implies this state of steady well being at all levels of existence (sthira sukham asanam- Yoga Darshan II:46). 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 (tato dvandva anabhigathata- Yoga Darshan II: 48).

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 Bhagavad Gita defines Yoga as samatvam meaning thereby that Yoga is equanimity at all levels. (yogasthah kurukkarmani sangam tyaktva dhananjaya siddiyasadhyoh samobutva samatvam yoga uchyate – Bhagavad Gita II: 48) This may be also understood as a perfect state of health wherein physical homeostasis and mental equanimity occur in a balanced and healthy harmony.

One of the main lacunae of the WHO definition lies in the use of the term ‘state’ that implies health is something to be achieved ‘once and for all’ with no need for care about it thereafter! It is definitely not so. We need to keep working on our health with great vigour and dynamic enthusiasm for the entire span of our life. If health is to be understood as a ‘state’, then it must be understood as a dynamic state that varies from day-to-day and often from minute-to-minute! It is often actually more challenging to maintain this dynamic state of health than to even attain it in the first place. Ask any World No.1 sports champion and they will testify to this inherent truth that applies to sports as well as to life itself.

**YOGIC CONCEPTS OF WELLBEING:**

Structural aspects of the human being: Yoga considers that we are not just the physical body but are of a multifold universal nature. Concepts of pancha kosha (fivefold aspects of our existence) and trisharira (threefold aspect of our bodily nature) help us understand our multi-dimensional real nature where health and result from a dynamic interaction at all levels of existence. At the level of the gross body, Yoga and Ayurveda consider that the human body is made up of seven substances. These sapat dhatus are rasa (chyle), rakta (blood), maamsa (flesh), medas (adipose), asthi (bone), majjaa (marrow) and sukraka (semen). Both these ancient health sciences understand importance of tridosha (three humors) whose balance is vital for good health. Health is further also understood as harmony of prana vayus (major energies of physiological function), upa prana vyas (minor energies of physiological function) and stability of nadi (subtle energy channels) with proper function of all chakras (major energy centres that may be correlated to the psycho-neuro-immuno-endocrine axis).

**Tridoshas and health:** The tridosha theory of health and disease that developed during the late Vedic period (circa 1500-800 BC) is common to virtually all Indian systems of medicine. Tridosha concept has correlation with pancha mahabhutas (elements of the manifest universe) as well as triguna (inherent qualities of nature). Health is understood to be the balanced harmony of the three humours in accordance with individual predisposition while disease results from an imbalanced disharmony.

Qualities of physical health according to Yoga: The Yogic view of health is exemplified
in *Shvetaasvatara Upanishad* where it is said that the first signs of entering Yoga are lightness of body, health, thirstlessness of mind, clearness of complexion, a beautiful voice, an agreeable odour and scantiness of excretions (*laghutvam arogyam alolupatvam varnaprasadam svara sausthavam ca ganghas subho mostra pureesam Yoga pravrittim prathamam vadanti-* Shvetaasvatara Upanishad: II-13).

The *Hathayoga Pradipika* echoes these qualities when Yogi Svatmarama says, “Slimness of body, lustre on face, clarity of voice, brightness of eyes, freedom from disease, control over seminal ejaculation, stimulation of gastric heat and purification of subtle energy channels are marks of success in Hathayoga”. (*vapuh krsatvam vadane prasannataa naadasputatvam nayane sunirmale arogataa bindujayogni diipanam naadiivishuddhir hatha siddhi lakshanam- Hathayoga Pradipika II-78,*).

In the *Patanjala Yoga Darshan* we find an excellent description of the attributes of bodily perfection (*kaya sampat*). It is said in *Vibhuti Pada* that perfection of body includes beauty, gracefulness, strength, and adamantine hardness (*rupa lavanya bala vajra samhanana kaya sampat*-Yoga Darshan III: 47). The effulgence that is characteristic of good health is also mentioned when it is said that deep concentration on *samana* (energy of digestion) leads to radiant effulgence (*samana jayat jvalanam*-Yoga Darshan III:41).

Qualities of mental health according to Yoga: Yoga not only considers physical health but also more importantly mental health. Qualities of a mentally healthy person (*stitha prajna*) are enumerated in the Bhagavad Gita as follows:

- Beyond passion, fear and anger (*veeta raga bhaya krodhah*-BG II.56)
- Devoid of possessiveness and egoism (*nirmamo nirahamkarah*- BG -II.7)
- Firm in understanding and unbewildered (*sthira buddhir asammudhah*- BG - V.20)
- Engaged in doing good to all creatures (*sarva bhutahiteratah*-BG V.25)
- Friendly and compassionate to all (*maitrah karuna eva ca*- BG XII.13)
- Pure hearted and skilful without expectation (*anapekshah sucir daksah*- BG XII.16)

The central theme of Yoga is the golden mean, finding the middle path, a constant search for moderation and a harmonious homoeostatic 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.

Maharishi Patanjali tells us that we can gain unexcelled happiness, mental comfort, joy and satisfaction by practicing contentment (*santoshat anuttamah sukha labhah*- Yoga Darshan II: 42). This link is quite apparent once we think about it, but not too many associate the need for contentment in their greed for anything and everything in this material world.

Qualities of spiritual health according to Yoga: The Bhagavad Gita also delineates qualities of a spiritually healthy person in verses 1, 2 and 3 of chapter XVI. These include: fearlessness (*abhayam*), purity of inner being (*sattva samshuddhih*),
steadfastness in the path of knowledge (jnanayoga vyavasthitih), charity (danam), self control (dama), spirit of sacrifice (yajna), self analysis (svadhyaya), disciplined life (tapa), uprightness (arjavanam), non violence (ahimsa), truthfulness (satyam), freedom from anger (akrodhah), spirit of renunciation (tyagah), tranquility (shanti), aversion to defamation (apaishunam), compassion to all living creatures (daya bhutesv), non covetedness (aloluptvam), gentleness (maardavam), modesty (hrir acaapalam), vigour (tejah), forgiveness (kshama), fortitude (dhritih), cleanliness of body and mind (saucam), freedom from malice (adroho), and absence of pride (naa timaanita).

Relationship between food and health: Yoga emphasizes the importance of not only eating the right type of food but also the right amount and with the right attitude. Importance of not eating alone, as well as preparation and serving of food with love are brought out in the Yogic scheme of right living. Guna (inherent nature) of food is taken into consideration to attain and maintain good health. Modern dietary science of diet can learn a lot from this ancient concept of classification of food according to inherent nature as it is a totally neglected aspect of modern diet. We are what we eat!

The great Tamil poet-saint Tiruvalluvar offers sane advice on right eating when he says, “He who eats after the previous meal has been digested, needs not any medicine.” (marunthuena vaendaavaam yaakkaikku arundiyathu atrathu poatri unnin-Tirukkural 942). He also says that life in the body becomes a pleasure if we eat food to digestive measure (attraal alavuarinthu unga aghduudambu pettraan nedithu uikkum aaru-Tirukkural 943). He also invokes the Yogic concept of Mitahara by advising that “eating medium quantity of agreeable foods produces health and wellbeing” (maarupaaduillaatha undi marutthuunnin oorupaadu illai uyirkku-Tirukkural 943).

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HEALTH AND DISEASE:

Yogamaharishi Dr Swami Gitananda Giri, founder of Ananda Ashram at Pondicherry and one of the most eminent Yogis of modern times 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 wholistic, unified concept of oneness, is advaitam 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’. It is interesting that
the 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!

ATTAINING AND MAINTAINING A STATE OF WELLBEING:

To live a healthy life it is important to do healthy things and follow a healthy lifestyle. The modern world is facing a pandemic of lifestyle disorders that require changes to be made consciously by individuals themselves. Yoga places great importance on a proper and healthy lifestyle whose main components are:

1. **Achar** – Yoga stresses the importance of healthy activities such as exercise and recommends asana, pranayama and kriyas on a regular basis. Cardio-respiratory health is one of the main by-products of such healthy activities.

2. **Vichar** – Right thoughts and right attitude towards life is vital for well being. A balanced state of mind is obtained by following the moral restraints and ethical observances (yama-niyama). As Mahatma Gandhi said, “there is enough in this world for everyone’s need but not enough for any one person’s greed”.

3. **Ahar** – Yoga emphasises need for a healthy, nourishing diet that has an adequate intake of fresh water along with a well balanced intake of fresh food, green salads, sprouts, unrefined cereals and fresh fruits. It is important to be aware of the need for a satvic diet, prepared and served with love and affection.

4. **Vihar** – Proper recreational activities to relax body and mind are essential for good health. This includes proper relaxation, maintaining quietude of action-speech-thoughts and group activities wherein one loses the sense of individuality. Karma Yoga is an excellent method for losing the sense of individuality and gaining a sense of universality.

According to Yogacharini Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani, Director ICYER at Ananda Ashram in Pondicherry, Yoga has a step-by-step method for producing and maintaining perfect health at all levels of existence. She explains that social behaviour is first optimized through an understanding and control of the lower animal nature (pancha yama) and development and enhancement of the higher humane nature (pancha niyama). The body is then strengthened, disciplined, purified, sensitized, lightened, energized and made obedient to the higher will through *asana*. Universal pranic energy that flows through body-mind-emotions-spirit continuum is intensified and controlled through *pranayama* using breath control as a method to attain controlled expansion of the vital cosmic energy. The externally oriented senses are explored, refined, sharpened and made acute, until finally the individual can detach themselves from sensory impressions at will through *pratyahara*. The restless mind is then purified, cleansed, focused and strengthened through concentration (*dharana*). If these six steps are thoroughly understood and practiced then the seventh, *dhyana* or meditation (a state of union of the mind with the object of contemplation) is possible. Intense meditation produces *samadhi*, or the enstatic feeling of Union, Oneness with the Universe. This is the perfect state of
integration or harmonious health.

HOW DOES YOGA HELP DEVELOP AND MAINTAIN WELLBEING?

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*. A detailed description of these techniques and their benefits on health is beyond the preview of this lesson and will be discussed in detail in other lessons. It will suffice to say here that 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 promotive 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.

Yoga is a wholistic science of life, which deals with physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health. Various aspects of Yoga help in the prevention and management of stress thus enabling us to live as healthy a life as possible in a dynamic state of wellbeing.

I. YOGIC CONCEPTS: Various yogic concepts have guided man towards shaping his life and the interpersonal relationships in his social life.

- **Vasudeva kudumbakam** - The whole world is one family. This is an excellent concept which helps one to understand that division on the basis of class, creed, religion and geographical distribution are all ‘man made’ obstructions towards oneness. One can then look upon all as his own and can bond with everyone irrespective of any barrier.

- **Pancha kosha** - The concept of our five sheaths or bodies helps us to understand how all our actions, emotions and even thoughts can influence our surroundings and that “No man is an island”. The concept of “nara” or psychic disassociation helps us to be aware of why things happen to us and others in our daily life.

- **Chaturvidha purusharthas** - The four legitimate goals of life tell us how we can set legitimate goals in this life and work towards attaining them in the right way, following our *dharma* to attain *artha* (material prosperity), *kama* (emotional prosperity) and finally the attainment to the real goal of our life, *moksha* (spiritual prosperity).

- **Chatur ashrama** - This concept of the four different stages in life, helps us to know how, what and when to perform the various activities in our life. *Brahmacharya* is the period from birth till 27 years and is the period for study, conserving the creative impulse and channeling it towards elevating spiritual
pursuits. **Grahasta** is the period of responsibility, spanning the period from 27 - 54 years in which we learn to care about others in the family and the social network, fulfilling our **Dharma** towards both the young and the old. **Vanaprasta** or retirement is the period after 54 years when one’s life can be played over again and again in the mind with a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction having not to worry about anything at all. **Sanyasa** is the period of life when after performing our duties to the best of our ability for 81 years and after having attained perfection in life we renounce everything for the divine.

- **Pancha klesha**: Avidya (ignorance), asmita (ego), raaga (attraction), dwesha (repulsion) and abhinivesha (urge to live at any cost) are the five **kleshas** or mental afflictions with which we are born into this human life. Through yoga we can understand how these control our life and see their effects on our behaviour. These ‘kleshas’ hinder our personal and social life and must be destroyed through **patanjali’s kriya yoga**, which consists of **tapas, swadhyaya and iswara pranidhana** (atman prasadanam).

- **Nishkama karma**: Selfless action and the performance of our duty without any motive, are qualities extolled by the **Bhagavad Gita**. Performing one’s duty for the sake of the duty itself and not with any other motive helps us to develop detachment (vairagya) which is a quality vital for a good life.

- **Karmasu Koushalam**: ‘Skill in action’ is Yoga says Yogeshwar Krishna in the **Bhagavad Gita**. ‘To do our best and leave the rest’ is how Pujya Swamiji Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj used to describe it. Even if we don’t practice the other aspects of yoga, we can be ‘living’ Yoga, by performing all our duties skillfully and to the best of our ability. A great artist, doctor, worker, singer or sportsman can be a Yogi by performing their duty to perfection, without care for the rewards of the action, even if they do not practice any **asanas or pranayamas**.

- **Samatvam**: ‘Yoga is equanimity’ says the Bhagavad Gita. Development of a wholistic personality neither affected by praise nor blame through development of vairagya (detachment) leads to the state of “**stitha prajna**” or “**sama bhava**”. This is a state of mind which is equally predisposed to all that happens, be it good or bad. Such a human is a boon to society and a pleasure to live and work with.

- **Vairagya**: The concept of vairagya (detachment) when understood and cultivated makes us dispassionate to the **dwandwas** (the pairs of opposites) such as praise-blame, hot-cold or pleasant-unpleasant.

- **Yoga as a “Way of Life”**: The regular practice of Yoga as a ‘Way of Life’ helps to reduce the levels of physical, mental and emotional stress. This lays emphasis on Right Thought, Right Action, Right Reaction and Right Attitude.

II. HATHA YOGA AND JNANA YOGA: Yogic **asanas, pranayamas** and **jnana yoga kriyas**, work on the various **koshas** of our body and clear up all the subconscious ‘quirks’ in our brain from the billions of years of evolution from animal to the human state. An understanding of these ‘quirks’ helps us to understand our reaction to various situations and helps to prevent our ‘stress response’ to them. ‘Stress Relievers’ from **Hatha Yoga**
and Jnana Yoga are of immense benefit in relieving the pent up emotions and the reaction to the stressful situation.

III. YAMA AND NIYAMA: The Pancha yama and pancha niyama provide a strong moral and ethical foundation for our personal and social life. They guide our attitudes with regard to the right and wrong in our life and in relation to our self, our family unit and the entire social system. These changes in our attitude and behaviour will go a long way in helping to prevent the very causes of stress in our life.

The pancha yama consisting of ahimsa (non – violence), satya (truthfulness), asteya (non-stealing), brahmacharya (proper channeling of creative impulse) and aparigraha (non – coveted-ness) are the “DO NOT’S” in a Yoga Sadhaka’s life. Do not kill, do not be untruthful, do not steal, do not waste your god given creativity and do not covet that which does not belong to you. These guide us to say a big “NO” to our lower self and the lower impulses of violence etc. When we apply these to our life we can definitely have better personal and social relationships as social beings.

The pancha niyama consisting of saucha (cleanliness), santhosha (contentment), tapas (leading a disciplined life of austerity), swadhyaya (introspective self analysis), and ishwar pranidhana (developing a sense of gratitude to the divine self) guide us with “DO’S” - do be clean, do be contented, do be disciplined, do self - study (introspection) and do be thankful to the divine for all of his blessings. They help us to say a big “YES” to our higher self and the higher impulses. Definitely a person with such qualities is a God-send to humanity. Even when we are unable to live the yama and niyama completely, even the attempt by us to do so will bear fruit and make each one of us a better person and help us to be of value to those around us and a valuable person to live with in our family and society. These are values which need to be introduced to the youth in order to make them aware and conscious of these wonderful concepts of daily living which are qualities to be imbibed with joy and not learnt with fear or compulsion.

IV. ATTITUDE: “To have the will to change that which can be changed, the strength to accept that which can not he changed, and the wisdom to know the difference” is the attitude which needs to the cultivated. An attitude of letting go of the worries or the problems and a greater understanding of our mental process helps to create a harmony in our body, mind whose disharmony is the main cause of ‘aadi – vyadi’ or the psychosomatic disorders.

V. PRANAYAMA: The practice of pranayama helps regulate our emotions and stabilize the mind, which is said to be as restless as a ‘drunken monkey bitten by a scorpion’. Animals that breathe slowly are seen to be of less excitable nature than those who breathe rapidly and a similar observation holds true for humans. Even when we get angry, we can experience that our breathing becomes rapid and it is slower when we are cool and relaxed. Thus the slow, rhythmic and controlled breathing in pranayamas leads to the emotional control seen in many yoga sadhakas.

VI. PRATYAHARA: Pratyahara kriyas help to distance our self from the sensory objects, attraction to whom is said to be the initial step in the causation of stress in man. Here, we withdraw our self from the senses and then are not affected by them. We realize how false the senses are in reality, and then do not get either attracted to them nor feel any revulsion towards them.
VII. DHARANA AND DHYANA: Dharana and dhyana, help to focus our mind on the right ideals and pursue our goals in a spirit of “nishkama karma” (selfless action) and “karmashu koushalam” (skillful actions). Development of clarity of thought appears when we are a ‘stitha prajna’ (person of mental balance) and have ‘sama bhava’ (equal reaction to the opposites). Proper sleep patterns and a subjective feeling of wellness are produced by Yoga and this in turn leads to better human relationships, proper attitudes, increased production at work and the greater good for the individual, family, nation and ultimately for the whole of humanity.

VIII. BHAKTI YOGA: Bhakti Yoga enables us to realise the greatness of the Divine and understand our puniness as compared to the power of the Divine or nature. We realize that we are but ‘puppets on a string’ following his commands on the stage of the world and then perform our activities with the intention of them being an offering to the divine and gratefully receive HIS/HER/ITS blessings.

IX. NADA YOGA AND MANTRA YOGA: Music and the chanting of Mantras with devotion helps to elevate the mind into a higher plane where the individual transcends their problems and can look at things in the right perspective. A detached view of our life can help us to see our self in the true reality. The Divine manifests in various ways and the loss of our individual ego can enable us to see the Divine Self that is there within us and also within all beings.

IN CONCLUSION:

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.

“Health and happiness are your birthright, claim them and develop them to your maximum potential”. This message of Swamiji Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj 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 birthrights and attain the goal of human life.

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