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Review Article

BASIC CONCEPT OF YOGA AND ITS HEALTH BENEFITS- A SHORT REVIEW

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ABSTRACT

Yoga is a group of physical, mental, and spiritual practices which has its root in ancient India. *Yoga* is a complete science by itself being a holistic and very scientific background. These days everyone is suffering from some sort of lifestyle disorders, anxiety, stress, depression etc. and almost all streams of medicines have their limitations for these diseases. Ancient Acharyas have given the world a gift called *Yoga* which is proving extremely beneficial from children to adults to get relief from life style disorders. *Yoga* science is magnificently described in many ancient treatises like Vedas, Bhagavdgita, Yogavashishta, Patanjali Yogasutra, Gherand Samhita. *Yoga* is accomplished by Asthanga known as *Yama*, *Niyama*, *Asana*, *Pranayama*, *Pratyahara*, *Dharana*, *Dhyana* and *Samadhi*. Now-a-days, millions and millions of people across the globe have benefitted by the practice of *Yoga* which has been preserved and promoted by the great eminent *Yoga* Masters from ancient time to this date.

INTRODUCTION

Yoga is an Art and Science of healthy living. It is a spiritual discipline based on an extremely subtle science, which focuses on bringing harmony between mind and body. The holistic approach of *Yoga* is well established and it brings harmony in all walks of life and thus, known for disease prevention, promotion of health and management of many lifestyle disorders.

The origins of *Yoga* have been speculated to pre Vedic culture. The term '*Yoga*' is derived from the Sanskrit word '*YUJ*', meaning 'to join' or 'to yoke' or 'to unite'. As per *Yogic* scriptures the practice of *Yoga* leads to the union of individual consciousness with that of the Universal Consciousness, indicating a perfect harmony between the mind and body, Man & Nature.^[1] The aim of *Yoga* is Self-Realization, to overcome all kinds of Sufferings leading to 'the state of liberation'.

Historical Background

This is one of the oldest sciences of the world, originated in India, which is very useful for preserving and maintaining one's physical and mental health and also for 'spiritual evolution'. The practice of *Yoga* is believed to have started with the

very dawn of civilization. Mythologically, the Lord Shiva is considered to be the first teacher of *Yoga*.

The word *Yoga* is often described as union. It implies that the individual is united with the Universe, the personality with the Universality. All the four Vedic Samhitas refer directly or indirectly to the *Yoga* system and the *Yoga* traditions. In the first three Samhitas there are direct as well as indirect references to *Yoga*. But the Atharavaveda gives the clear conception of *Yoga* describing the eight mystical circles (*Chakras*) and the nine gates of the human body-the golden sheath and the mystical wheel containing the thousand spokes. Therefore, it may be held that the *Vedic* seers and sages were aware of the nature, importance and implication of the practical aspects of *Yoga*. Their supernatural knowledge also tells us they were practical *Yogis*. By following the path of *Yoga*, they had become successful in revealing divine knowledge within their minds. The Vedas, the Upanishads, *Yoga Vashishta* and the *Bhagavad Gita* all put much emphasis on a firm conviction of the unreality of the material world; non attachment to things of the world; control of the senses; equal

mindedness; transitory nature of phenomenal objects; concentration of mind; solitude as necessary for spiritual advancement; transcendence of dualities. [2] Maharshi Patanjali systematized and codified the then existing practices of Yoga, its meaning and its related knowledge through his Yoga Sutras. [3] After Patanjali, many Sages and Yoga Masters contributed greatly for the preservation

and development of the field through their well documented practices and literature. *Yogagurus* (Yoga teacher) from India later introduced Yoga to the western countries and Swami Vivekananda was one of them. [4]

Yoga Definitions- Variety of definitions is found in different classics. Some are listed below –

Table 1: Yoga Definitions according to classical treatise [5]

S.No.	Source Textbook	Definition
1	Kathopanishada	When all the five senses along with mind remain still and the intellect is not active, that is known as the highest state.
2	Bhagavad Gita	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yoga is said to be equanimity. • Yoga is skill in action. • Know that which is called yoga to be separation from contact with suffering.
3	Yoga Sutras of Patanjali	Yoga is the suppression of the activities of the mind.
4	Vaisheshika Sutra	Pleasure and suffering arise as a result of the drawing together of the sense organs, the mind and objects. When that does not happen because the mind is in the self, there is no pleasure or suffering for one who is embodied. That is Yoga.
5	Brahmasutrabhasya of Adishankar	Yoga is the means of perceiving reality.

Types of Yoga

The term Yoga has been applied to a variety of practices developed by Hindu Acharyas. Also, the brief description of Yoga techniques is found in Jainism and Buddhism. In Hinduism it includes *Jnana Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Karma Yoga, Laya Yoga, and Hatha Yoga*. *Raja Yoga* refers to *Ashtanga Yoga* that accompanies eight Yoga Sadhanas (Practices) which are *Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana* (Meditation), *Samadhi/Samyama*.

Yama's are restraints and Niyama's are observances. These are considered to be pre-requisites for the Yoga Sadhanas (Practices).

- *Asanas*-capable of bringing about stability of body and mind 'kuryat-tad-asanamsthairyam...', consists in adopting various body (psycho-physical) patterns, giving ability to maintain a body position (a stable awareness of one's structural existence) for a considerable length and period of time as well.
- *Pranayama* consists in developing awareness of one's breathing followed by wilful regulation of respiration as the functional or vital basis of one's existence. It helps in developing awareness of one's mind and helps to establish control over the mind. In the initial stages, this is done by developing awareness of the 'flow of in-breath and out-breath' (*Svasa-Prasvasa*) through

nostrils, mouth and other body openings, its internal and external pathways and destinations. Later, this phenomenon is modified, through regulated, controlled and monitored inhalation (*Shwasa*) leading to the awareness of the body space/s getting filled (*Puraka*), the space/s remaining in a filled state (*Kumbhaka*) and it's getting emptied (*Rechaka*) during regulated, controlled and monitored exhalation (*Prasvasa*).

- *Pratyahara* indicates dissociation of one's consciousness (withdrawal) from the sense organs which helps one to remain connected with the external objects.
- *Dharana* indicates broad based field of attention (inside the body and mind) which is usually understood as concentration. *Dhyana* (Meditation) is contemplation (focused attention inside the body and mind) and *Samadhi* is integration.

Discussion- Yoga concept in brief- The ultimate goal of Yoga is *Moksha* (liberation) although the core principles of Yoga were developed in various forms over the period of time. Yoga is a meditative means of discovering dysfunctional perception and cognition as well as overcoming it to get relief from suffering, inner peace and salvation; *Yoga* is the raising and expansion of consciousness from oneself to being coextensive with everyone and everything. Yoga is the path to omniscience and

enlightened consciousness enabling one to comprehend the impermanent and permanent reality.

Yoga in Indian traditions is more than a physical exercise; it has a meditative and spiritual aspect. Some key differences between *Yoga* and exercise are listed below in table no.2.

Table 2: Yoga Compared to Conventional Exercise [6,7]

Yoga	Exercise
Parasympathetic nervous system dominates	Sympathetic nervous system dominates
Subcortical regions of brain dominate	Cortical regions of brain dominate
Slow dynamic and static movements	Rapid forceful movements
Normalization of muscle tone	Increased muscle tension
Low risk of injuring muscles and ligaments	High risk of injury
Low caloric consumption	Moderate to high caloric consumption
Effort is minimized, relaxed	Effort is maximized
Energizing (breathing is natural or controlled)	Fatiguing (breathing is taxed)
Balanced activity of opposing muscle groups	Imbalanced activity of opposing groups
Noncompetitive, process-oriented	Competitive, goal-oriented
Awareness is internal (focus is on breath and the infinite)	Awareness is external (focus is on reaching the toes, reaching the finish line, etc.)
Limitless possibilities for growth in self-awareness	Boredom factor

Health Benefits of Yoga

Yoga is recommended to promote relaxation, reduce stress and improve some medical conditions like life style disorders, premenstrual syndrome etc.[8] *Yoga* improves psychological health during cancer, schizophrenia treatment.[9] Some health benefits are listed below. [10,11]

Table 3: Health benefits of Yoga in general

• Builds muscle strength	• Perfects posture
• Prevents cartilage and joint breakdown	• Protects spine
• Better bone health	• Increases blood flow
• Drains lymph and boosts immunity	• Ups heart rate
• Drops blood pressure	• Regulates adrenal glands
• Makes happier	• Founds a healthy lifestyle
• Lowers blood sugar	• Helps to focus
• Improves balance	• Maintains nervous system
• Helps to improve sleep	• Boosts immune system functionality
• Gives lungs room to breathe	• Prevents IBS and other digestive problems
• Gives peace of mind	• Increases self-esteem
• Eases pain	• Gives inner strength
• Helps to keep drug free	• Encourages self care

Yoga in Pregnancy

The well being and quality of life of the mother is critical for optimal pregnancy outcomes;

self-soothing techniques, psycho education, and relaxation are particularly important in this

transitional and meaningful time.^[12] Maternal stress and anxiety during pregnancy is associated with a host of negative consequences for the fetus and subsequent development. For instance, fetal exposure to maternal stress and stress-related peptides is a risk factor for adverse outcomes on the programming of the nervous system and brain morphology of fetuses, infants, and children.^[13] In addition, prenatal maternal stress and anxiety may be risk factors for potential negative consequences for children later in life, such as the development of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or lowered performance on aspects of executive function.^[14] It is hypothesized that maternal stress may affect the intrauterine environment and alter fetal development during critical periods, through either activation of the placental stress system, causing the release and circulation of corticotrophin releasing hormone, or through diminished blood flow and oxygen to the uterus.^[15] Therefore, it is important to regulate maternal stress and provide expecting mothers with coping strategies for the inevitable stresses and changes that occur during pregnancy to increase quality of life and to maximize infant health and development.

Physical exercise can be helpful in the management of stress and other associated conditions or symptoms accompanying pregnancy, such as edema, gestational hypertension or diabetes, mood instability, musculoskeletal discomfort, aches, and weight gain.^[16] Yoga and meditation have been found to reduce anxiety and endocrine measures, such as cortisol, in women during labour.^[17,18] Other psychological factors, such as pain catastrophizing, have been associated with greater lumbopelvic pain during pregnancy and with decreased postpartum physical ability and can also predict the request for pain relief during labour.^[19,20]

Yoga in Childhood – Children nowadays have to deal with their own stress of competition and they need a way to manage this stress and anxiety. Yoga is one form of practice which includes breath control and specific body postures (Asanas) that provides a range of physical, mental and spiritual relaxation which teaches children to be calm, while gaining awareness of the bodies, self control and discipline.

Yoga for Youth- Youth face constant pressure to excel at studies, get a job, manage relationships and deal with numerous other problems. Also, today's population is overwhelmed by many lifestyle disorders. To get rid from all these problems and to have the peace of mind, yoga is best for youth. Few

minutes of Yoga can help a youngster to relieve mental as well as physical stress.

Yoga in Geriatrics- *Yoga* is incredible for an older population to help them maintain their balance, keep their joints flexible, maintain bone health as well as learn to cope up with mental stress. *Yoga* is great for focus, concentration and emotional wellbeing.

CONCLUSION

Traditionally, Yoga Education was promoted by knowledgeable, experienced, and wise persons in the families and then by the Seers (*Rishis/Munis/Acharyas*) in *Ashramas* (compared with monasteries). Today, Yoga is taught by many eminent Yoga Institutions, Yoga Colleges, Yoga Universities, *Yoga* Departments in the Universities, Naturopathy colleges and Private trusts & societies. Many Yoga Clinics, Yoga Therapy and Training Centers, Preventive Health Care Units of Yoga, Yoga Research Centers etc. have been established in Hospitals, Dispensaries, Medical Institutions and Therapeutically setups. Yoga is a gifted therapy for lifestyle disorders as well as many diseases like cancer, schizophrenia etc. Yoga is found very useful for pregnant women to relieve stress and get easy labour. Yoga has crucial role in growth and development of child. Even *Yoga* is an energy booster for Youngsters and old age persons. Everybody has conviction about Yoga practices towards the preservation, maintenance and promotion of health. It is presumed that a good, balanced, integrated, truthful, clean, transparent person will be more useful to oneself, family, society, nation, nature and humanity at large. Yoga education is 'Being oriented'. Details of working with 'being oriented' aspect have been outlined in various living traditions and texts of '*Yoga*'. So, it can be concluded that *Yoga* should be promoted from the initiation of life i.e. from prenatal period and for life time to live a healthy and stress free life.

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