

Yoga in Mental Health

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Introduction

Yogic techniques, such as asana and pranayama of Hatha Yoga, and various meditations, have been trailed through clinical and other scientific procedures. The results have established the preventative and therapeutic applications of the yogic practices. The explanation of the underlying physiological and chemical basis of these practices has given them wide appeal and acceptability throughout the world. We have witnessed their success in curing some supposedly incurable common diseases like asthma, diabetes, hypertension, etc., without causing adverse side-effects. However, the world of science is yet to appreciate fully that Yoga is basically a science of the mind.

According to Patanjali, the primary aim of Yoga is to restrict modifications or tendencies of the chitta or mind - "Yogaschitta vritti nirodhah" [1]. Yoga analyses, removes and sublimates different types of samskaras or complexes with the view of restoring equilibrium in the personality and training the mind for higher psychic and spiritual attainments. As expressed by Swami Satyananda, "Yoga is a science of consciousness" [2]. Explaining further, he states that Yoga provides mastery over all the stages of consciousness or awareness and makes us spectators of experience. It is revealing to note that Freud's postulate regarding the three levels of mind (conscious, subconscious and unconscious) towards the end of the nineteenth century was conceived well over two thousand years before by Patanjali in his Yoga Sutras. He described the different levels or stages of consciousness and clearly stated that only a small fragment of the mind was conscious, while its larger part was unknown.

Yoga has developed methods of experiencing the different levels of consciousness and encompasses the concept of the super conscious mind. Consciousness may function without the help or medium of the sense organs, beyond sense consciousness which we experience every day. One can see without eyes, think without

brain hear without ears and feel without any sensorial mediumship. This is possible when through yogic practices one succeeds in breaking the barriers between different levels of consciousness. The small area of the conscious mind based on sensory experience is expanded, and the whole mind merges into what is called the super-conscious mind. This state of mind is also known as cosmic consciousness or transcendental awareness. The ultimate aim of Yoga is expansion of this consciousness.

Super consciousness is not a concept limited to the philosophical level. Neuroscientists now promote the inadequacy of the neurological basis of our experiences. Eccles [3] goes to the extent of saying, "since materialist solutions fail to account for our experienced uniqueness, I am constrained to attribute the uniqueness of psyche or soul to a supernatural spiritual creation". In an appealing analogy he regards the body and brain as a superb computer, and the soul or psyche as its programmer, without which the computer is not only incomplete but meaningless. This is very close to the Indian view that the mind is merely an instrument of the atman.

Integration

Yoga aims at developing an integrated personality of which the body, mind and spirit are integral components. It does not operate within the old mind/body dualism of Cartesian thought, which separates physical from mental health. Some say happiness depends on physical fitness, mental agility and spiritual verve. Spiritual joys and mental delights are subject to bodily conditions, free from every type of ailment. Yoga is a path to both physical and mental well being and higher spiritual awareness. Thus it presents a wider spectrum than modern viewpoint of psychosomatics which accounts for bodily ailments only on a functional basis. The real objective of Yoga is to attain peace and tranquillity within. Those who sincerely practise Yoga are not only free from stress

and anxiety; rather they remain undisturbed like the ocean. Yoga, therefore, is not only a science of mental diseases but a complete science of mental health. It is both preventative and curative of mental disorders and at the same time capable of producing mental peace and cosmic consciousness. As such, it is both a positive and normative science [4,5].

The body/mind interactional approach is strictly observed in the different practices of Yoga. Patanjali step of Raja Yoga bears testimony to this. Of the eight steps, the first four: yama, niyama, asana and pranayama, are exoteric and are considered to be the psycho-physiological preparations for the actual Yoga practices. The practice of Yoga proper begins with the fifth step, Pratyahara, which is withdrawal and control of the senses. Pratyahara, along with the next three steps of Raja Yoga, namely dharana (concentration on one object or idea), dhyana (meditation) and Samadhi (sublime equanimity) is esoteric and primarily psychological and psychic. Thus in the eight steps of Raja Yoga the practices at the physical and psychological levels are counterbalanced. They present a balanced combination of the physiological Yoga of vitality with the psychical Yoga of meditation. In fact, no asana, however elementary or difficult it may be, is purely a physical exercise. It is done with full awareness, generally with closed eyes and in rhythm with the breath, resulting in a cohesive integrated functioning between the body, mind and prana.

Psychotherapeutic use of Yoga

Certain scientific findings justify many of the yogic assumptions and demonstrate the psychotherapeutic value of Yoga practices. Vabia et al [6] elaborately dealt with the practice of various techniques of Patanjali and their therapeutic implication in the treatment of psychiatric patients. They found the yogic treatment to be more efficient than psychoanalysis or psychotherapy and behaviour therapy. They later [7] put forth a new approach termed psycho-physiologic therapy based on the concepts and techniques of Patanjali like asana, pranayama, Pratyahara, dharana and dhyana. According to the authors, Patanjali technique begins with control over the voluntary musculature, subsequently one works over the autonomous nervous system and, still later, over the thought process.

Udupa et al. [8] studied the psychological and biochemical responses to the practice of Hatha Yoga in a group of young subjects. On the basis of the findings they pointed out that the practice of Yoga makes an individual psychologically more stable and mentally more alert. Datey et al. [9] indicated the usefulness of shavasana in the therapeutic management of hypertension. Champa Rao & Murthy et al. [10] found shavasana efficacious in relieving anxiety. Patel [11] using Yoga and bio-feedback, found the yogic techniques useful in the treatment of hypertension.

A number of case studies and other findings indicate that neurotic and psychotic patients and cases of neural disorders can be successfully treated by the practice of different forms of meditation. Meditation develops the willpower and frees the mind from the arrest of wrong notions, whims and fears. Transcendental meditation (TM), a mechanical method of indigenous origin, has

come under much scientific scrutiny - Bloomfield et al. [12], and Wallace [13], Boudreau [14] reported a case of claustrophobia and another of profuse perspiration which were therapeutically successful under TM and Yoga while systematic desensitisation was only partially successful.

Thus the findings of clinical research confirm the psychotherapeutic usefulness of Yoga practices and suggest their superiority to other popular psychoanalytic and behavioural therapies. Psychoanalysis and Yoga differ not only in method but also in their aims. The aim of psychoanalysis is to resolve the conflicts and strengthen the ego so that the individual is better adjusted to the normal demands of situations, but the aim of Yoga is not only to remove mental strains but also to transcend the ego-consciousness so that spiritual consciousness may dawn.

Some Yogic Techniques for Mental Health

In our earlier discussion a number of yogic techniques and their efficiency in relation to mental health were mentioned. In fact, every yogic practice, even physical postures like asanas have psychological implications. Vajrasana, shashankasana, anandamadirasana, garbhasana, as well as pranayama, have been found useful in removing depression. Similarly, vipareeta karani mudra, shalabhasana, yoga mudra and shavasana are helpful in alleviating nervousness and improving memory. Kapalbhathi and bhramari pranayama relieve nervous tension. The practice of Karma Yoga, Kriya Yoga and meditation help reduce anger anxiety, stress and mental disturbances, and train the mind for higher psychic attainments. However, special mention must be made of a few such techniques or practices which are simple but have been found to be extremely beneficial from the viewpoint of mental health, and for the treatment of behavioural problems. These include Yoga Nidra, Antar Mouna and Ajapa Japa.

Yoga Nidra, or psychic sleep, is primarily a relaxation technique. Relaxation is useful, not only for mental and cardiac patients, but for all men and women engaged in various work. How to relax is a problem for which Yoga Nidra specifies a standard, systematic and scientific procedure. It is a more efficient and effective form of psychic and physiological rest and rejuvenation than conventional sleep. The practice of Yoga Nidra changes the nature of one's mind, cures diseases, restores creative genius and develops the capacity to penetrate into the depths of the human mind. On the other hand, the practice of Antar Mouna, inner silence, is a practice of mental relaxation and impartial observation of thoughts and ideas. We know at times conflicting thoughts and desires cause strain and psychosomatic problems. Similarly, when one concentrates and tries to unify the vagrant tendencies of one's mind, one finds it difficult and at times strenuous. The detachment practised in Antar Mouna is useful in bringing about mental peace and quiet. This practice removes any permanent thought that haunts the mind.

Ajapa Japa is the spontaneous mantra of the breath. It is said that the breath goes in with the sound of 'So' and comes out with the sound of 'Ham'. This is the sound of Ajapa Gayatri which the individual continuously repeats. The practice of Ajapa Japa offers significant benefits for mental disorders and its therapeutic effects

can hardly be over-emphasised. Lastly, Pratyahara is a useful technique of Patanjali Raja Yoga for bringing about transformation of mind, and the experience of peace and concentration. Through the techniques of Pratyahara, the wandering and restless mind, usually engaged in perceiving the external stimuli through the senses, is transformed, and one starts looking within. This leads to mental concentration and higher stages of meditation. These are some of the very simple meditational processes in Yoga which can be practised by both mental patients and normal individuals to improve their mental health.

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