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Yoga and Its Contribution to Health

The philosophical and practical foundations of yoga as an integral approach to health

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ABSTRACT

The author examines yoga as a practical system of philosophy oriented toward health, one that treats the physical, mental and social aspects together. He clears up misconceptions that associate it with religion, fakirism or gymnastics, presenting it as an ancient discipline systematized by Patanjali around 500 B.C., whose highest state is Samadhi. He describes the eight parts of this system, detailing the ethical norms of conduct (yamas and nyamas), such as non-violence, truthfulness, contentment and perseverance. He then explains the asanas, postures of passive stretching guided by comfort and stability, and the pranayamas, breath-control exercises that act upon the nervous system. He culminates in the concept of meditation as a hypometabolic state of control over the mind. The text maintains that, given the mental origin of many health problems, meditation is the great remedy that yoga proposes.

KEYWORDS: *yoga; meditation; asanas; pranayama; integral health; patanjali*

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All work on the human body carried out for preventive or therapeutic purposes must take into account the different factors that influence health. According to yoga, the physical, mental and social aspects must be treated together for this work to be complete.

There is a great deal of confusion in defining yoga. For some it is a kind of religion, for others it is "fakirism," and there are still those who imagine it as a kind of slow gymnastics. When one speaks of practicing yoga, what always comes to mind is the performance of strange positions, generally uncomfortable in appearance. When they are not understood and regarded as psychophysical exercises, it becomes difficult to grasp the scope of their effects and how they work together.

Yoga is an ancient discipline of unknown date. Indian epic texts already made reference to it, but it was around the year 500 B.C. that the first text devoted exclusively to the subject appeared, written by Patanjali, who established it as one of the systems of philosophy of India. Over time various lines and schools of yoga emerged, but all with the same purpose.

Yoga is by definition a state of mind, of control and balance, which, at its most advanced degree, bears the name Samadhi—that is, perfect health. To attain the calm or meditative state, perfect health is presupposed, from which comes the idea of a complex system for reaching such a state.

The system of yoga presented by Patanjali is made up of eight parts, in which the physical, mental and social aspects are addressed.

Without a doubt, it is of no use to live one's life in any old way, without any care for one's attitudes, without any control over one's emotional responses, and to think that with a series of physical exercises our health will be guaranteed.

For this reason, yoga begins its system by suggesting norms of conduct and ethical commitment to oneself, called yamas and nyamas.

Yamas:

1. Non-violence – in every sense: non-violence of thought, words and deeds; to do no harm to anyone;

2. Truthfulness – to speak the truth in any situation or place, without evasions or embellishments;

3. Non-stealing – or rather, not to desire what we have no right to, what we have not earned;

4. Control – over the basic impulses of survival, sex, appetite, and so on;

5. Non-accumulation – not to possess with attachment.

Nyamas:

6. Purity – to feel clean within and without;

7. Contentment – satisfaction with what one has;

8. Perseverance – discipline;

9. Self-study – the reading and practice of the essential scriptures;

10. Surrender – to acknowledge the existence of, and to be in unity with, the Creator.

These ten norms should not be regarded in such a summarized form; questioning and analysis are necessary in order to understand their full scope. Nor should one imagine that the entire ethical system is contained in these norms, but the one presented by yoga suggests a healthy and purposeful life, which calls for personal interpretation and a sincere decision on the part of the practitioner to do the best possible for their spiritual growth.

These norms must be practiced, which is why yoga is said to be a practical system of philosophy. It is known today that a large part of health problems are of a psychosomatic nature, and that the way one sees things and faces the world could do much to maintain the health of mind and body. A philosophy of life gentler with respect to competition and stronger with respect to the reason for our existence would reduce individual stress.

We should not confuse yoga with a religion or a sect; it is a system of philosophy that recognizes the interrelation of mind, body and soul. But there is no doubt that it is compatible with and can complement any religion, since good health and the capacity for concentration will foster greater devotional practices.

We should understand the practice of yamas and nyamas primarily as the prevention of health problems, through the acquisition of healthier habits. But what about the tensions that have already been somatized?

In the search for an ideal muscle tone, neither hypotonic nor hypertonic; for the development of a capacity for relaxation, for the proper functioning of the internal organs and for correct postural habits, yoga proposes the practice of the asanas, or postures, whose fundamental principle is passive stretching, without resistance.

Asanas – the best-known part of yoga, they are the postures, the exercises characterized by long-held positions, which to many seem a kind of self-flagellation. In truth, these practices must obey two principles: comfort and stability. By definition, an asana must be stable and comfortable; this means that if it is not comfortable, the practitioner should come out of the posture, while at the same time, if it is not steady, if there is no effort or control, it likewise does not deserve to be maintained.

These exercises differ from the conventional exercises we are used to in the West by their static condition, by the attitude of not exceeding one's limits, by the relaxation of effort, by the degree of constant self-observation, and by the low energy consumption during the practice.

To ask a human being to sit still for five minutes with the spine erect, without moving, is for most people no easy proposal—all the more so if the practice is meant to be pleasurable. The first obstacle will be that our back begins to hurt, whether from loss of flexibility or from the existence of some spinal problem; the second is that the thought soon comes to mind that "with so much to do, I can't just stay here doing nothing." It is easy to understand that if the body will not be still, neither will the mind grow calm. Yoga proposes a state of control starting from the easiest path—that is, using the body to influence the mind.

Another important aspect for understanding the work of the asanas is the language of the body, the physical expression of our emotional states. It is easy for us to perceive whether a person is happy, sad or tense, according to their posture. The bodily manifestation of our emotional states is evident. Which of us has not felt stiffness in the muscles of the shoulders and neck when very worried? What the yoga postures seek to do is the reverse path—that is, to reach the mind through the body. However, it is known that the influence of the mind on the body is much stronger than the reverse; the influence of the body on the mind is subtle, and for this reason the concept of regularity in yoga means daily practice.

The aim of these postures seems very simple at first sight: to prepare someone to sit upright and still so that they can perform the breathing exercises. But we know that to achieve this a great deal of training is required.

Over time, many of the human being's basic functions have suffered as a result of the development of intellectual, cognitive and social capacity. Today, in a gymnastics class it is necessary to teach how to walk correctly; many have to go to the doctor to learn how much and what to eat; pregnant women take childbirth preparation courses, and in some cases people even have to learn to breathe. And natural posture has not escaped this either—we have to reestablish a natural condition, and the asanas do this very well.

Pranayamas – another important channel of access to the nervous system is the breath. Just as the body can present changes in muscle tone and posture according to our emotional state, even more evident is the effect on breathing. Our breathing pattern changes according to metabolic and emotional conditions, and voluntarily. The

imposition of a particular breathing rhythm with specific characteristics is called, in yoga, pranayamas.

We can say that the yoga technique for meditation is pranayama. The basic aim of these exercises is to gradually slow the breathing rhythm, giving emphasis to the exhalation, without compromising comfort, without feeling short of breath, until reaching moments of respiratory pause. They are the most important exercises, and for that very reason they demand the greatest care; they are generally misunderstood as exercises of oxygenation or something similar, but their principal effect lies in their capacity to act upon the nervous system.

When we set out to voluntarily control our breathing, it is necessary for both the metabolic and the emotional influences to be under control, which is why the practice of asanas must precede the practice of pranayamas, remembering that relaxation belongs to the practice of asanas and that its practice reduces the two influences cited above. Thus, well seated, with the spine erect and calm, the pranayamas begin.

When we set out to act upon the breath, we can do so through the rhythm, through the movements and through the passages of the air. That is: I can breathe fast or slow, with abdominal or thoracic movements, and letting the air pass through the mouth or the right or left nostril. Combining all of this, I can, for example, breathe quickly with exclusively abdominal movements and through the left nostril; or breathe slowly with broad movements in the thoracic and abdominal region, letting the air enter through the right nostril and leave through the left. And so there are various pranayamas, but they undoubtedly follow certain principles.

But if the subject is health, let us not dwell on the techniques but on the concept. The main idea is the acquisition of a state of control that minimizes the harmful interferences of an overloaded nervous system or the problems arising from stress. This state of control may be called meditation.

Meditation – a few phrases can define, according to yoga, what meditation is: 1. Meditation is a hypometabolic state without sleep; 2. Meditation is a momentary silence that sometimes appears. It is a relaxation of thoughts and feelings; 3. Meditation is the stilling of the modifications of thought. Many definitions suggest a state of control, but one of them—though it does not come from yoga—makes the term "meditation" applicable to various everyday situations: meditation is to be where one is, to be present in what one is doing, to place the mind on a single objective. It seems a contradiction: when one is present in what one is doing, our thoughts are absent, and when we are absent from what we are doing, our thoughts are present. If we are performing a task while thinking of a thousand other things, our mind is full of thoughts and therefore absent from the task at hand. Even though this is not a yoga approach, we must recognize the importance of this kind of thinking for the control of the mind.

Meditation in yoga has nothing in common with intellectual concentration. We do not meditate on a subject. Yet one cannot stop thinking, or reduce the speed or quantity of thoughts, simply because one wishes to. The mind does not obey us in that regard. In India it is said that the mind is like an untamable little donkey: you want to lead it one way, and it wants to go another. If we begin to tell ourselves, "be quiet, be quiet...," we will end up agitating ourselves, or deluding ourselves with the thought that we are not thinking. For this reason, since the mind cannot be stilled by imposition, yoga proposes a complex system of techniques of influence over our attitudes, our body and our breathing, so that we can prepare the mind for meditation. Exactly like someone who, in order to plant a seed, prepares the soil, then waters the plant and waits for it to germinate—one cannot pull the tree out of the seed.

To meditate, one must adopt the attitude of a passive observer, which for us is not easy; we are always active and intervening, if only mentally, in every situation. To observe, to perceive, and not to question or analyze is a discipline."

"For a system such as yoga, which holds that the majority of health problems originate in the mind, meditation is the great remedy. Yoga is meditation, and the techniques for attaining it are also meditation. Therefore yoga is the end, and it is also the means for reaching this end.

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