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Yoga and Aging

How the yoga tradition links its practices to health and longevity

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ABSTRACT

The author discusses the relationship between yoga and health as presented in the traditional texts, stressing that in them the practice appears tied to the prevention and development of health rather than to therapy — the term "yoga therapy" being a modern one. He argues that yoga can serve as an adjunct in treatments, always with specialist supervision, and recalls that Indian Ayurvedic medicine already made use of some of its exercises. He explains that many practitioners lived in isolation, as ascetics and hermits, which compelled them to develop a system of health care and gave rise to their reputation for longevity and to the so-called miracles of yoga. He defines yoga as a calm state of the mind, or a hypometabolic state without sleep, and draws ancient concepts close to present-day notions. Finally, he laments the exploitation of the discipline by charlatans, which drives the medical profession away from research in the field.

KEYWORDS: *yoga; hatha yoga; health; longevity; ayurveda; prevention*

Everything found in the ancient yoga texts with reference to health is related to prevention and the development of health, never to therapy — indeed, the term "yoga therapy" is a modern one.

Yoga can be useful as an adjunct or complement to treatments and therapies, but always under the guidance of specialists in the field. Ancient Indian medicine, known as "Ayurvedic," makes use of yoga exercises in certain situations, making it quite clear that a good relationship between the disciplines that aim at health can only benefit the patient.

Speaking of the patient, the more patient the patient is, the better his recovery will be. Relaxation techniques and simple breathing exercises can be done by most people, even when bedridden.

Traditional texts describing a set of techniques known as Hatha Yoga speak of the development of health as a way of attaining control to the highest degree. We must consider that yoga was not a practice of religious devotees; it was not practiced in temples. Many of its practitioners lived in isolation, withdrew from the world, and lived as ascetics, as hermits — which forced them to develop a system of health care, since they lacked favorable conditions for survival. Several became famous for their longevity and degrees of control, giving rise to what are called the "miracles of yoga."

When they refer to control, they include all the possible relationships between mental and emotional states and the body, since, by definition, yoga is a calm state of the mind, also known as a "hypometabolic state without sleep."

Some of the concepts presented in these traditional books, when carefully analyzed, are similar to those we hear today. For example: the inverted postures — those in which the legs are raised — are described as rejuvenating, obviously not in an aesthetic sense, but in a sense akin to the saying that we are "as young as our vascular system"; they speak, therefore, of feeling young and not of looking young.

They also state that yoga is for everyone — young or old, healthy or sick — and that all will find benefits, provided the practice is appropriate.

What we must lament is that, precisely at the moment when this age-old discipline has so much to contribute to society, it is being discovered by charlatans who promise what they cannot deliver, hiding their ignorance behind arrogance, attracting a few naive followers, and driving away the more discerning groups, such as the medical

profession, which could contribute so much to research in this area.

Living as hermits, these practitioners had to develop healthy conditions in order to survive, especially in old age, recognizing that conditions were not always favorable — all the more so because they were hermits.

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