

## Is Yoga a System of Philosophy or a Healthcare Therapy?

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### Introduction

One of the greatest contributions of the ancient Indian masters to the world at large, is the philosophy of *yoga* and its scientific practice to enhance the quality of life. Many people think of *yoga* as a way of life, a practical philosophy which takes one forward in the spiritual path. On the other hand, all over the world, millions of people are attracted to *yoga*, as it is considered as a "Panacea" for many modern day diseases or afflictions. It is not only considered as a practical discipline that promotes health and prevents disease, it is also widely being recognized as a complementary therapeutic intervention. Today, several mainstream colleges and medical hospitals in are using yoga as "health-care technology."<sup>2</sup>

Now, we should understand whether *Yoga* has to be studied as philosophy, reflected upon and practiced or whether it is to be taken up as a therapeutical practice or life-style strategy, to be included in one's daily routine similar to brushing one's teeth or eating nutritiously.

### What is Philosophy?

The word, "Philosophy" is derived from "Philein" (like) and "Sophia" (knowledge). Thus, we see that philosophy is a love for knowledge and a quest to seek truth and clarity. All over the world, this love for truth and knowledge has resulted in many philosophies. In India there were great thinkers and sages whose thoughts culminated in many systems. *Yoga* is one such systematized body of knowledge called "*darśana*" – which originated in India.

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<sup>2</sup> Yoga as a Technology for Life Transformation, by Timothy McCall, MD  
Retrieved October 8, 2014 from <http://www.kripalu.org/article/179>

Thinkers, philosophers, people who had deep and inquisitive minds explored and inquired into many aspects of life and have put forward their ideas and practices to help the society at large.

Generally, philosophical queries focus on:

- a) The nature of this phenomenal world – what is this world, where it came from, what sustains it etc.
- b) The ultimate substratum, truth, reality or the principle that is behind everything. It can be “God,” Supreme being or “nothing at all.”
- c) The issues of hell, heaven, moral and ethical principles, purpose of life, what is body, spirit or soul, etc.
- d) The cause and effect sequences of occurrences in life, after life and its controller.
- e) Purpose of our existence, the good and bad actions, righteous living, rules of personal life, universal laws etc.

Thus, in short, many philosophical expositions try to help us understand our own self and this whole universe. The basic sciences be it physics, chemistry or bio-technology also endeavour to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge - using scientific methodology, scientific experimentation. Inquiry, arguments, debates and logical enquiry are the methods by which both science and philosophy establish various facts and try to provide insights into life processes.

All philosophical enquiry started with a common query to address the “human suffering.” i.e, why “duḥkham” (unhappiness) and if there is (abiding) happiness or peace, how to reach it?

*Yoga* is one such system of enquiry that expounds some of these aspects. This phenomenal world that we perceive and interact with is a part of us. This is called “*prakṛti*,” or “*drśya*.” *Yoga-sūtra* (2.18) clearly explains this phenomenon with adequate support from *sāṅkhya*. The concept of what it is which perceives all this, the knower, experiencer, the enjoyer, the

consciousness is that part called “*draṣṭā*” (2.20) or “*ātman*.” The interplay and interaction between these two principles is the source of enjoyment and also the means of emancipation or freedom from *duḥkham*.

*Yoga* philosophy puts forward both theoretical tenets as well as the practical steps involved in dealing with these two principles.

In this system-

- 1) We understand what human life or human nature is
- 2) What our potentials and capabilities are
- 3) What processes enhance our difficulties and cause cognitive traps
- 4) Most importantly, what means or methods can be applied as solutions

*Yoga*, as a philosophical system, has been a guiding light for many sages, kings and common men to live life to the optimum. Currently, there is a shift in the way *yoga* is looked upon. Millions of people across world are taking to *yoga* as a healthcare strategy and a therapeutic intervention. The enormous amount of research interest and publications on *yoga* and its effects on mind and body has given impetus to its usage as a therapeutic modality. In this rush to probe its beneficial aspects with regard to health and healing, the general understanding and application of the tools of *yoga* was skewed towards their physicality. Hence, in recent times, the philosophical import of *yoga* seems to have been relegated to the background.

### Is Yoga a Health Care Strategy?

*Patañjali* (*yoga-sūtra* 2.16) talks about *yoga* as a means to overcome “*duḥkham*” (suffering). He considered *vyādhi* (disease) (*yoga-sūtra* 1.30) as one of obstacles which causes us to suffer. Further, in the next *sutra*, *patañjali* highlights the inter-relatedness of bodily, respiratory and mental manifestations of *duḥkha*. So, *yoga* philosophy did touch upon the importance of having a harmonious relationship between body, breath and mind. But this was not the main focus of the philosophy. All the practices of *yoga* were designed to work on body breath and mind with the aim of refining and perfecting them for higher spiritual pursuits. There are many ancient *yoga* texts which

present the benefits of applying specific tools of yoga for specific clinical symptoms. (*haṭhayoga-pradīpikā yoga-yājñavalkya-saṁhitā gheraṇḍa-saṁhitā etc*)

In this context, it is evident that there is enormous research interest in *yoga*<sup>3</sup>. Evidence gathered shows that the practices put forward by the ancient teachers and modern *yogins* have tremendous impact in restoring body – mind balance. Interest of the scientific and medical community and also personal experiences of yogic practitioners have, to a large extent, given *yoga* a status of “Therapy” or “health care technology.” *Yoga* being inherently an *anubhava-sāstra* (a system of practice) has immensely contributed to a huge body of knowledge on health and healing.

#### Yoga’s Status as a System of Therapy and the Role of Śrī Krishnamacharya

To a large extent, in contemporary times, the credit for systematizing the therapeutic nature of yoga and its tools and formalizing the structure of its applications must go to yogacharya *Śrī T Krishnamacharya* (1888 – 1989). He was a modern philosopher who was well versed in all “*darśanas*” and “*vedas*” and at the same time, a “therapist” who could cure various clinical conditions, that were not offered sustainable treatment in other systems of Health Care<sup>4</sup> His son, *Śrī T K V Desikachar*, who followed this “*paramparā*” with an integrated understanding of philosophy and skills of application, could also establish to the world the role of *yoga* as “individualized therapy”. *Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram* (KYM), the institute founded by *TKV Desikachar* in 1976, has over the years emerged as a leading *yoga* therapy institute catering to the health-promotional, disease-preventional as well as disease-management needs of the care seekers.

Health of people is an asset which has to be built and maintained. Today, people seek yoga at different ages for different purposes and often they

<sup>3</sup> Yoga for health, Retrived October 8, 2014 from <http://nccam.nih.gov/health/yoga/introduction.htm>

have life styles that may be completely unhealthy and/or unhygienic. It is this pressing need to enhance health status of individuals that has placed yoga on par with other therapeutic modalities in the present time.

#### Yoga – Healthcare and Beyond

*Yoga* is not confined to just *asana*, *prāṇāyāma* or meditation. The philosophical ideas presented by sage *patanjali* provide the basic principles with which we can work on mental health and the transformation process which is fundamental in psychological health. *Patanjali* offers but one or two lines on *āsana*. But, he presents many practices to train the mind. And this has provided the basis for counselors and *yoga* therapists to work with individuals afflicted with stress and mental health issues.

For example, the first chapter of *yoga-sūtra* (1.33 - 39) provides a host of suggestions to stabilize an agitated mind and enable a movement towards pleasantness. This can be achieved by focusing on exhalation, taking help from an experienced person, focusing on an object which appeals to you etc. The concept of *pratipakṣa-bhāvana* (*yoga sūtra* 2.33) is similar to a self-initiated cognitive restructuring process. The possibilities are many as *yoga* mainly aims to bring about a transformation in the individual’s state of mind.

This science provides us both the deeper knowledge of the nature of human life and its existential angst and also lists practices like *āsana*, *prāṇāyāma*, *dhyāna*, *yama*– which can form daily discipline to achieve health. Thus, *yoga* is a practical philosophy, which can be applied to currentday health issues.

#### Yoga - A Holistic System

Conceptual understanding of body and mind, have originated in the philosophical tradition. The philosophy also presents certain attitudes to be developed and disciplines to be followed. The healing traditions have

been offshoots of practices based on this philosophy. The holistic approach to understand human existence in terms of its multiple interacting dimensions - body, breath, mind, discriminative knowledge, social and physical environment and the deeper consciousness as an interdependent dynamic principle is the most important contribution that has made *yoga* a philosophy and health care system.

Secondly, the body, breath and mind are to be used as instruments for higher spiritual purposes - *śarīram ādyam khalu dharmasādhanam (kumāra-sambhava 5.33)*. Thus, *yoga* emphasizes on health at a multidimensional level as an asset or resource to be built and preserved, with the deeper understanding that the body is merely an instrument, to be discarded when it becomes redundant.

Further, *yoga* provides many means or *upāyas* to deal with afflictions at each level. For afflictions at a physical level, *āsana* become a useful tool. Regulation of breath through practices of *prāṇāyāma* prepares the mind for meditation, which in turn trains and discipline the mind and the senses. Further, an understanding and application of the appropriate personal and social disciplines offers support at the personal, social and environmental dimensions of one's life. It is this vast array of solutions which has given the impetus for people to turn to *yoga* as an effective and efficient health care system.

Lastly, health is not confined to body and mind. Spiritual health and wellbeing forms the basis of global health and currently, this is considered an important dimension in the context of quality of life. Spirituality is not only an inner resource. It is found to be associated with better positive health outcomes. *Yoga* being a strong philosophical tradition with its focus on inner spirituality, addresses this need or dimension.

### Conclusion

*Yoga* as a system of philosophy and also as a health care strategy addresses the "need for knowledge" (*jñāna*) and also the "need to be well and happy"

happy" (*ārogya*). The path from one to another depends on the individual. Someone may take up *yoga* to improve health or to alleviate an illness and may develop an interest in *yoga* philosophy. Another individual may start with an interest in knowing philosophy and slowly discover many limitations in himself/herself and therefore commence a practice to enhance the physical wellbeing.

*Śhri T Krishnamacharya*, thus offered different approaches to *yoga*. For those who are inclined to knowledge, clarity and transformation, he suggested "*adhyātma-krama*" – spiritual approach to *yoga*. For those afflicted with physical and mental problems, the path he advocated was "*cikitsā*" – therapy, in which *yoga*, becomes an intervention to restore balance and functional well being.