

Environment, Yoga and Health

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ABSTRACT In recent years environmental problems have become a global issue. A rise in stresses, in the process of urbanization, has led to the cardiorespiratory disorders. Yoga is an ancient science known for the maintenance of good health. This paper discusses the importance gained by yoga in the current crisis.

Although pollution and the destruction of the environment have occurred since the birth of civilisation, until relatively recently, this has mainly been a regional problem which has only slowly escalated in scope. Now, however, advances in technology, industrialisation and the global population explosion have brought damage to the environment on such a profound scale as to threaten the planet's very survival. It is obvious that this situation is a direct result of mankind's desire for materialistic satisfaction as well as its lack of respect for the life itself. The philosophy of Yoga and its practice which enabled the Indo-Aryan to survive the stresses of their time can also enable people of today's world to achieve contentment and security in the face of the cold war and other perils in a rapidly changing world. Many believe that for a healthy society with its members contributing their best for the development of physical, mental and moral values, it is important that Yoga is practised.

Yoga teaches that materialism must be brought under control if our fragile ecosystem is to be saved from irreparable damage. The revolution that Yoga seeks is none other than a positive transformation of the heart, body and mind of all human beings.

Derived from the Sanskrit Word "Yuj", Yoga literally means union-the union of body and mind. There are four main paths of Yoga - Karma Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Jnana Yoga and Raja Yoga;

each suited to a different temperament or approach to life. *Karma Yoga* is the Yoga of action. *Bhakti Yoga* is the path of devotion. *Jnana Yoga* - the Yoga of knowledge or wisdom. *Raja Yoga* is the science of physical and mental control. There are eight limbs of *Raja Yoga*. Patanjali provides with the methodological process for achieving the benefits of yoga by practising the eight steps, commonly called the *Astanga Yoga*. These are *Yama* (control and discipline), *Niyama* (Rule, methods and principles), *Asanas* (posture), *Pranayama* (Breath control) *Pratyahara* (withdrawal of mind from external world), *Dharna* (concentration), *Dhyana* (meditation) and *Samadhi* (contemplation). *Asanas* or posture and *Pranayama* form the sub division of *Raja Yoga*, which is as the *Hatha Yoga*.

Hatha Yoga, a sub division of Raja Yoja, is the science of bodily excellence. It brings fitness by improving vital functions. Physical fitness is measured in forms of strength, muscular endurance, cardiovascular endurance and flexibility. As more number of people are becoming conscious of physical fitness, Yogasanas have assumed new significance in modern times. The western system of exercises, aimed at developing the bulk and the power of muscle masses, is the most commonly used system all over the world. This system generates primarily, tension in the muscles which are left to be relaxaed. The exertion in performing these exercises is harmful to the

osteoarticular surfaces which leads to varying degree of organic injury prevailing in today world. *Yogasanas* on the other hand aim at a homogeneously integrated system of neuromuscular movements in which contraction of the muscles is always consciously followed by their relaxation (Lidell, 1986). This results in increased muscular strength and greater fitness of the individual. Earlier studies on cardio-vascular endurance showed improvement in the subjects undergoing *yogic* training (Ganguly, 1981, 1982; Ganguly and Gharote, 1974). Ganguly and Gharote (1989) observed that cardiovascular endurance, as judged by the Harvard step test, improved significantly in the experimental group. Although mean increase in the 'toc-touch' flexibility was observed in the experimental group, it did not reach the expected statistical significance.

Yogasanas act on the mind through the body whereas meditation acts on the body through the mind. Therefore, a practising *yogi* seldom falls ill and lives a long healthy life. *Yogasanas* bring about increased cardio-pulmonary efficiency, relaxation of muscles, decrease in the amount of oxygen consumed and fair distribution of the energy in the body and maintain the neuro-endocrine balance. This brings about equilibrium between the body and the mind. Some of these basic *Yogasanas* are *Surya Namaskar*, *Sarvangasana*, *Matasyasana*, *Bhuajangasana*, *Paschimothanasana*, *Trikonasana*, *Shavsana*. The importance and methods of performing these *asanas* have been given in previous investigations (Lidell, 1986; Subramanyam, 1989; Swami, 1973).

Yoga emphasises the promotion of vibrant health by tapping the organism's latent energy. It has soothing influence on mind. It is not merely the absence of sickness that is good health. A sound and dynamic body, a strength generating appearance and a power symbolizing firmness

when all these are present together, good health results.

Most of the bodily and mental disorders are caused by stress. Tension hovers around millions of people. In modern parlance such diseases are called Psycho-somatic disorders (Psycho-mind, soma-body). These are closely interlinked and a disorder in a system can cause disturbance in the other. Depending on the susceptibility of the individual and the environment, a number of stress induced diseases exist. High blood pressure, bronchial asthma, diabetes, thyrotoxicosis, gastric ulcers are some examples. Stress can also produce aggression, depression, neurosis, epilepsy, schizophrenia, etc. These can be caused by an imbalance in hormonal secretions as well as of the chemical substances produced in the brain. The re-establishment of the balance of these chemical substances can alternate these conditions.

All these effects justify the popularity of Yoga and stress its usefulness in the context of modern living as one of a variety of possible means that man can choose in order to make his way of life healthier and more balanced.

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