

Global Mental Health, Peace and Sustainability: Does Yoga Show the Way?

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Abstract

Yoga can make an important contribution in achieving a healthy life and promoting well-being for all at a time when the world is striving to achieve sustainable development goals. Yoga underscores the unity of all things and of all people, a concept that is very close to the UN values of sustainability and peace. Yoga also promotes inner calm and it is highly necessary for us to better understand one another in the challenges we face. This year's theme of 'Yoga for Health' directly links yoga practice to sustainable goal number three that focuses on ensuring healthy life and promoting well-being at all ages. Yoga connects our body with nature and leaves us with a better balance with the world around us. In the plethora of activities and challenges of the 21st century, we need precious moments of self-reflection to allow us as individuals to play a positive role in improving the world around us.

Keywords: Yoga; Psyche; Psychiatric disorders; Peace

Introduction

The third International Day of Yoga was commemorated under the theme of "Yoga for Sustainable Development Goals (SDG)" on 21 June 2017 in which over 180 countries participated. The Secretary General Maria Luiza Ribeiro Viotti while delivering the message on the yoga day reiterated, yoga as a concept that is very close to the United Nations (UN) values of sustainability and peace. She opined that at a time when the international community is striving to achieve the Sustainable Developments Goals (SDG), yoga "has an important contribution to make in achieving a healthy life and promoting wellbeing for all." Echoing similar sentiment, the UN General Assembly President Peter Thomson appositely remarked "yoga has now assumed a global identity and the ancient art of physical, mental and spiritual balance that helps people achieve a sense of wellbeing. It guides us towards being in harmony with our fellow humans and with nature." On this event the Indian Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi stated in his popular national broadcast (Mann Ki Baat; generally means "Heart's talk"), Yoga is India's recommendation of wellness to the world and appealed to all citizens to embrace the practice of Yoga at whatever stage of life they are in [1]. Again at the Paramartha Niketan in Rishikesh, Uttarakhand on the bank of Ganges he stated "yoga is not just a form of exercise but a way to attain peace through physical, mental and spiritual well-being" [2].

The ancient scriptures suggests Sage Patanjali assembled the Yoga Sutras prior to 400 CE, and the very first line of his yoga sutra reads as Yoga citta vritti nirodhah, which means 'Yoga is the cessation of mind - movement which means yoga is a life style process of controlling chitta. Chitta composes of Man (Mind), Buddhi (Intellect), Ahamkar (Ego) relating to his technique of attaining final (Moksa) Emancipation. The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali prescribed eight limbs (Ashtanga) or stages of yoga, namely the first stage of spiritual path outlined as moral restraints (Yama) and its complements (Niyamas) that represent a series of "right living" or ethical rules. Both stages discipline the body and psyche, are considered to be necessary preliminaries. The third limb is mind-body posture as the accessory to mind control by governing and disciplining the body (Asana) which promotes good health and cultivate awareness, relaxation and concentration. The fourth one is the vital force (Pranayama), means extension of Prana - breath life force or breath control. The fifth limb is the conscious withdrawal of energy from the senses (Pratyahara) and the final three stages are the process by which unification of experiences occur. These are concentration (dharana), meditation (dhyana) and ecstasy (samadhi), described as

equilibrium and conjunction. These steps are known as 'samayama' - the term summarizes the "catch-all" process of psychological absorption with an aim of meditation. Specifically, the eighth state of meditative consciousness or absorption, a one-pointedness of mind, is the final phase of the unification process [3].

All these attributes of the revered practices are often accompanied by a distinctive philosophy and psychology. Besides, yoga was known as spiritual discipline for the advancement of ultimate state of psycho-physiological health with higher mind-body consciousness [4]. Yoga is well accepted by the Western world as a holistic approach to health which is also classified as a form of Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) by the National Institutes of Health [5]. It is also recognized as a form of integrated mind-body medicine that improves wellbeing, mostly the stress related illnesses [6]. In view of the documented benefits of yoga in promotion of mental and physical health, numerous psychiatrists now recognize its positive role in alleviating psychiatric disorders and adapt yoga in their own practice [7].

Yoga and Mental Health

In recent years there is a growing utilization of Yoga as one of the therapeutic measure in the field of mental health where the benefits of yoga practice and therapy are being widely recognized. Now the health professionals are aware of therapeutic values of yoga and many introduce the approach as a psycho-physiologic and spiritual technique in their treatment [8]. Research indicate Asanas increase patient's physical flexibility, strength and coordination while the Pranayama and Meditation practices calm and focus the mind to enhance higher self-awareness and lessen anxiety, that result in better quality of patients life. Some other beneficial and therapeutic effects reported by Yang such as reduction in level of distress, blood pressure, and improvement in mood, resilience and metabolic regulation [9,10]. Studies also indicate yoga is

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effective in the treatment of anxiety disorders (including in caregivers), pain, Alzheimer's disease, stroke prevention and rehabilitation, epilepsy, peripheral nervous system disorders and multiple sclerosis [11].

The practice of yoga has grown as a universal science which has innumerable therapeutic facets that helps to achieve holistic health. Though there are numerous types and schools of yoga, each characterizes their own specific styles of mind and body postures (asanas), breathing techniques (pranayama), meditation and deep relaxation practices that fosters awareness and eventually promote intense states of consciousness. According to yoga the nervous system of an individual affects one's health and yoga purifies and brings relaxation to the mind. It symbolizes unification of mind, body and soul to enable a person to gain higher consciousness.

In the past decades one can witness a considerable development in research addressing the impact of yoga on health and wellbeing. Many studies confirmed the physiological effects and advantages of yoga in the treatment of mental illnesses characterized by decrease in cortisol, plasma oxytocin, heart rate variability, increase in neurotropic factors (BDNF), copiousness of the cognitive experience related potential, and gray matter level are also reported [12-15].

In an exploratory study by Woodyard in reported several therapeutic effects of yoga practice, such as

1. Improvement in body flexibility and muscular strength.
2. Promotion and enhancement of cardiovascular and respiratory functions.
3. Improvement in depression, anxiety and stress.
4. Treatment of addiction and promotion of recovery.
5. Reduction in chronic pain, f) improvement in sleep patterns.
6. Boost in overall quality of life and wellbeing [16].

Therefore, it may be suggested that it is imperative for the health care professionals to be knowledgeable about the application of yoga and the evidence of its many therapeutic effects. However, the large scale transmission of yoga education and regular broadcasting yoga programs in the media has revolutionized yoga as a way of life with greater recognition of its rootedness in health and emotional wellbeing. Although there are emergent bodies of research literature and assorted scientific reviews that suggest numerous therapeutic effects of yoga, however few researchers had indicated that there is paucity of tangible evidence regarding its therapeutic relevance for many clinical conditions.

Peace through Yoga

Creating sustainable global peace on the Earth is an ultimate state of contentment and freedom amongst and within all nations and humanity. At the same time sporadic and acute societal unrest; including religious fanaticism, terrorism, territorial disputes, political and ethnic tensions posing greater challenge of the era around the globe. The interpersonal conflict may escalate to institutional aggression, hostility and war. World peace is desirable and peace brings both material and spiritual benefit to all societies. When it's most needed the yogic science has the power to inspire grassroots social change in the world. Yoga is not just for self-transformation, but is an instrument for global peace which provides internal, emotional and spiritual reconciliation and healing. It gives one the self-strength and capability to approach conflicts from a space of mindfulness, compassion and love, in such circumstances peace is inevitable [17].

Violence and war originates on economic, military, religious or ideological motives are caused by much the same factors as aggression between people. Though positive transformation within individuals may take enormous time but the practice of yoga can be critical to the transformation of those individuals who may create and are creating the institutions with replaced or transformed organizations that are based on the ethos of peaceful co-existence [18]. The ideal world of non-violence provides a foundation for people and nations to willingly cooperate, either voluntarily or by virtue of a system of governance that prevents warfare.

The Global Peace Initiative (GPI) has recognized the leading, scientifically established meditation-based "technologies of consciousness" that counterbalances individual and societal tension, restore balanced brain functioning and clearly diminish crime and social conflict. The GPI is now employing the "Brain-Based Approach to Peace" on a national scale in the United States of America, India and on a global scale [19]. In a study by Hatchard, Deans, Cavanug and Orme-Johnson in 1996 reported that due to Transcendental Meditation program in groups there were multiple effects in the intervention site such as reduced crime and a phase transition to increased orderliness. The distinctive efficacy of the Transcendental Meditation (TM) - Sidhi Program in groups has been well documented that reported success in preventing social violence, terrorism, and war which has been recognized by more than fifty demonstrations and twenty-three scientific research. The researchers have carefully scrutinized and published in reputed academic journals, in every paper the TM approach produced noticeable drop in crime rate, social violence, terrorism, war and on the other hand there was an increase in peace and positivity in society [20].

Sustainability and Yoga

On 20th June 2016 the Permanent Mission of India to UN organized a special event on Yoga for the Achievement of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The unique program sought to enrich the collective insight to the unique features of yoga and its central place for the achievement of SDGs as it links the ancient practice to modern sustainability goals. The SDGs are interconnected set of 17 explicit targets that include ending poverty and hunger, ensuring good health and wellbeing, achieving inclusive and quality education, access to safe water and sanitation, focusing on climate action, responsible consumption and the conservation of environment, promotion of peace, justice and strong institutions – all the socio-political and environmental goals may be ultimately linked to the olden practice of yoga for the mind and body which is a way to discover the sense of oneness with self, the world and the nature. Most importantly, Maharshi Patanjali described yoga as "sarvavhauma", which means Universal. In this context Hrudananda Ray contended "Yoga as a science of reunion can work and is working, fostering the well-being of a complete man. So simply it is a human science devoted to serve humanity beyond faith, belief and way of worship" [21].

The ancient yoga wisdom suggests the practice of virtues called Aparigraha which means non-possessiveness or non-greediness refers to keeping the desire for possessions to what is necessary or important based on the one's life stage and environment. The practice of Non-possessiveness (aparigraha) can lead to contentment (santosha) this implies a greater human value of sustainability, while meeting the needs of present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs [22]. "Yoga aims at transforming our life style and its awareness can help us in our struggle against climate change. The practice of yoga brings about balance, wellbeing,

happiness and freedom to live life fully. We may actually see the beginning of a global shift in consciousness leading to a more balanced and harmonious planet” [23]. In an official statement the former Director General of UN Ban Ki-moon stated that yoga practice can aid in increasing consciousness about our own role and responsibility as consumers of the planet earth’s resources and individuals’ obligation to respect and live in peace with our neighbors. In addition yoga can also help individual in emergency situations to find relief from stress [24].

In fact, sustainability may be found ingrained in Patanjali’s Ashtanga Yoga, code of conduct described in the eight fold path that are pertinent to human living and institutions in present-day context, observance of these universal code of conduct rooted in moral, ethical and behavioral imperatives ultimately lead to a sustainable society [25-28]. This has not only social dimensions but also has environmental and economic dimensions that eventually lead to spiritual progress of the individuals. These reliable principles and practices can be explicated how yamas (ethical restraints), and niyamas (ethical observances), have a bearing on individual behavior along with socio-economic and environmental implications. Similarly, the practice of the subsequent five limbs of yoga such as asana, pranayama, pratyahara, dharana and dhyana – lead to a sustainable society where individuals develop an affirmative attitude towards life, attaining a state of samadhi, (super-consciousness) the ultimate aim of yoga.

Conclusion

With the passage of time, it is becoming exceptionally evident that much of the revered ancient philosophy and science of yoga will be practiced in various forms around the world and will continue to grow in popularity. Since the time it was urged to the world community to adapt an international day of yoga by Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi in 2014, today it has got unprecedented response from the world community. It is recognized that the yoga as a holistic approach can make a significant contribution to human health and wellbeing, sustainability, peace of the world population that is striving to achieve sustainable development goals. Considering the growing body of scientific studies and numbers of systematic reviews on the therapeutic effects of yoga, it may be suggested that yoga can be considered as a complementary therapy or an alternative method in the treatment of many health conditions. However, still there is an urgent need for evidence building research in specific health conditions to further garner international and national support to benefit millions of people those are away from the practice of yoga.

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