

YOGA & MODERN MEDICINE: POSSIBLE MEETING POINTS

**By Yogacharya Dr. ANANDA BALAYOGI BHAVANANI,
M.B.B.S., A.D.Y., D.S.M., D.P.C., PGDFH**

Chairman: INTERNATIONAL CENTRE FOR YOGA EDUCATION AND RESEARCH, and YOGANJALI NATYALAYAM, Pondicherry

INTRODUCTION:

Modern medicine and Yoga are rational, scientific and universal in outlook and hence are natural allies bound to come together. Their combination has the potential to provide us with a holistic health science that will be a boon for the psychosomatic health of our masses. Improved health of the general population will result in reduction of pressure on our hospitals, which are under-staffed, over-crowded and fund-starved. Yoga and modern medicine are not exclusive, but complementary systems. Their enlightened collaboration will have a significant impact on our health care system. Yoga involves a wholistic approach to healing and well being and integrates healing with the culture, diet, environment, and tradition. Modern allopathic medicine that originated from Greco-Roman Medicine and Northern European traditions is built on the science of anatomy, physiology, and biochemistry and the structure-function relationship between cells, tissues, and organs. Allopathic medicine focuses on diagnosis, treatment, and cure for acute illnesses via potent pharmaceutical drugs, surgery, radiation, and other treatment modalities.

We are today faced with numerous debilitating chronic illnesses related to aging, environment, and hedonistic lifestyle, such as cancer, diabetes, osteoporosis, and cardiovascular diseases as well as many incurable diseases such as AIDS. Modern medical advancements provide the rationale for the integration of various traditional healing techniques including Yoga to promote healing, health, and longevity. It is imperative that advances in medicine include the wholistic approach of Yoga to face the current challenges in health care. The antiquity of Yoga must be united with the innovations of modern medicine to improve quality of life throughout the world.

At first glance, allopathic medicine and Yoga may seem to be totally incompatible and in some ways even antagonistic to each other. Practitioners of either system are often found at loggerheads with one another in typical modern one-upmanship. However it is my humble endeavor as a student of both these life giving, life changing and life saving sciences, to find the similarities that exist between them and build a bridge between these two great sciences of today's world.

It would of course be much easier to build a bridge between Yoga and Ayurveda as both share many similarities of concepts such as the Trigunas, Tridoshas, Chakras and Nadis. They also understand that a healthy balance between body, mind and soul leads to total health. Diet and behavior are given importance in both systems and the ultimate goal of both is the attainment of Moksha.

Though allopathy may not share all of these concepts with Yoga, it is to be seen that there are a great many 'meeting points' for the construction of a healthy bridge between them. Both allopathy and Yoga understand the need for total health and even the Word Health

Organization has recently added a new dimension to the modern understanding of health by including spiritual health in its definition of the “state of health”. Spiritual health is an important element of Yoga and now that even the WHO has come around to understanding this point of view, there is hope for a true unification of these two systems. Modern medicine has the ultimate aim and goal of producing a state of optimum physical and mental health thus ultimately leading to the optimum well being of the individual. Yoga also aims at the attainment of mental and physical well being though the methodology does differ. While modern medicine has a lot to offer humankind in its treatment and management of acute illness, accidents and communicable diseases, Yoga has a lot to offer in terms of preventive, promotive and rehabilitative methods in addition to many management methods to tackle modern illnesses. While modern science looks outward for the cause of all ills, the Yogi searches the depth of his own self. This two way search can lead us to many answers for the troubles that plague modern man. The Shiva-Samhita lists the characters of a fully qualified disciple (Shishya) as follows. “Endowed with great energy and enthusiasm, intelligent, heroic, learned in the scriptures, free from delusion...” Doesn’t a true modern medical scientist require these very same qualities?

ANATOMY AND PHYSIOLOGY:

The study of anatomy and physiology is a great meeting point for modern medicine and Yoga. Yoga therapists and practitioners can benefit from the intricate and detailed ‘break-down study’ of modern medicine where the body is broken down into many systems, then into many organs, many tissues and finally into billions of cells. On the other hand the Yogic “wholistic” view of the Pancha Kosha (the five sheathed existence) can help modern doctors realise that we are not just, ‘one-body’ organisms but have four more bodies that are equally if not more important. We are a manifestation of the Divine and have, not only the physical body but also an energy body, a mental body, a body of wisdom and a body of eternal bliss. An understanding of the psychic anatomy and physiology of Nadis, Chakras and Bindus when coupled with the practical understanding of the details of the physical body can inspire real knowledge of the self in all health care personnel. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi has tried to correlate 37 areas of human physiology with 37 areas of intelligence or consciousness as available in Vedic literature. Some of the examples are the correlation between Nyaya and the Thalamus as well as Samkya and the types of neuronal activity.

In his excellent book, *The Shambala Guide to Yoga*, Dr. Georg Feuerstein says, “Long before physicists discovered that matter is energy vibrating at a certain rate, the Yogis of India had treated this body-mind as a playful manifestation of the ultimate power (Shakti), the dynamic aspect of Reality. They realized that to discover the true Self, one had to harness attention because the energy of the body-mind follows attention. A crude example of this process is the measurable increase of blood flow to our fingers and toes that occurs when we concentrate on them. Yogis are very careful about where they place their attention, for the mind creates patterns of energy, causing habits of thought and behavior that can be detrimental to the pursuit of genuine happiness”. Professor Dr SV Rao, an eminent medical doctor and Yoga Scientist says, “Yoga is a science because it is verifiable. Yoga as a science of living is also an art. Yoga, therefore, may be defined as the science and art of optimum living. Yoga has the capacity to move, either side by side

with medical science or independently. This is because Yoga has a sound system of etiology, diagnosis and pathogenesis of disease. Thus we have a complete system by itself in Yoga.”

PREVENTION OF DISEASE:

Modern medicine has come to realise the importance of prevention only in recent times but the role of preventive medicine is still very limited. The Yogic lifestyle that includes the Yama and Niyama can help prevent a great many of the modern diseases like Hepatitis B and AIDS. Cleanliness that is taught through Soucha can help prevent and limit the spread of contagious and infectious diseases. Mental peace and right attitudes of Yoga such as Pratipaksha Bhavanam (taking the opposite view), Samatvam (equanimity of mind) and Vairagya (dispassionate detachment) can help prevent many of the psychosomatic ailments running wild in the modern world. If these Yogic values as well as practices such as Asanas, Pranayamas, Kriyas and Dhyana are inculcated in the modern human race, we can prevent virtually all diseases that abound today. Communicable diseases as well as degenerative disorders of the body can be well prevented in a true manifestations of the adage, “A stitch in time saves nine”. However the ‘will’ to do so is also of paramount importance as there is no money or fame in prevention and we don’t know what we have prevented because we have prevented it from happening!

To quote the eminent neurosurgeon Padma Bhushan Dr B Ramamurthi, “The revival of the Science of Yoga bodes good for mankind. All the technological advances in the third millennium will not lead to the happiness of mankind as man has a severe aggressive tendency and is likely to destroy himself because of this aggression. The only way out of this mess is through the Science of Yoga, which transcends all religions and cults. It is a science of the mind and the body and needs to be practised by all human beings to ensure their own future”.

PROMOTIVE HEALTH:

Yoga is an excellent tool of promotive health that can enrich modern medicine. The practice of Yoga leads to the efficient functioning of the body with homeostasis through improved functioning of the psycho-immuno-neuro-endocrine system. A balanced equilibrium between the sympathetic and parasympathetic wings of the autonomic nervous system leads to a dynamic state of health. According to Dr B Ramamurthy, Yoga re-orientes the functional hierarchy of the entire nervous system. He has noted that Yoga not only benefits the nervous system but also the cardiovascular, respiratory, digestive, endocrine and immune systems in addition to bringing about general biochemistry changes in the Yoga practitioners. He has also said that the Science of Yoga has been India’s greatest contribution to mankind.

MANAGEMENT OF DISEASES AND DISORDERS:

Yoga doesn’t negate the use of drugs and other methods of modern medicine. Patanjali in his Avatar as Charaka didn’t shy away from the need to use medicinal herbs as well as surgical methods when necessary for the benefit of the patient. The system of Ayurveda is more in tune with the Yogic views of healing in this regard but definitely the modern antibiotic treatment of infectious diseases as well as the emergency medical and trauma

management techniques of modern medicine must be understood to be life-savers in times of need. No Yoga therapist in his or her right mind should try to treat an acute myocardial infarction or an unconscious accident victim by Yoga alone. A symbiotic relationship between the techniques of modern medicine and Yoga can help the patient more than a dogmatic refusal to see the 'other side'. Yoga has a lot to offer in terms of psychosomatic disorders and in stress related disorders such as diabetes, asthma, irritable bowel syndrome, epilepsy, hypertension, back pain and other functional disorders. Yoga can help reduce and in some cases eliminate drug dosage and dependence in patients suffering from diabetes mellitus, hypertension, epilepsy, anxiety, bronchial asthma, constipation, dyspepsia, insomnia, arthritis, sinusitis and dermatological disorders.

To quote Dr Steven F Brena, "Yoga is probably the most effective way to deal with various psychosomatic disabilities along the same, time-honored, lines of treatment that contemporary medicine has just rediscovered and tested. Asanas are probably the best tool to disrupt any learned patterns of wrong muscular efforts. Pranayama and Pratyahara are extremely efficient techniques to divert the individual's attention from the objects of the outer environment, to increase every person's energy potentials and 'interiorize' them, to achieve control of one's inner functioning. Moreover, in restoring human unity, the Yoga discipline is always increasing awareness and understanding of ourselves, adjusting our emotions, expanding our intellect, and enabling us not only to function better in any given situation, but to perform as spiritual beings with universal values."

Yoga therapists must work in tandem with medical doctors when they are treating patients who have been on allopathic treatment. There are many instances where the patient stops medical treatment thinking that it no more necessary as they have started Yoga. This leads to many catastrophes that could be easily avoided by tandem consultations with a medical specialist. Similarly many allopaths tend to tell the patient to take up Yoga or relaxation and forget to mention to the therapist what they actually want the patients to do. Most allopathic medications need to be tapered off in a progressive manner rather than being stopped suddenly. We often find this mistake in regard to corticosteroids as well as cardiac medications where sudden stoppage can be harmful. We must remember Plato's words when he said, "The treatment of the part shouldn't be attempted without a treatment of the entirety," meaning that the treatment of the body without treating the mind and soul would be a useless waste of time.

REHABILITATION:

Yoga as a physical therapy has a lot to offer patients of physical and mental handicaps. Many of the practices of physiotherapy and other physical therapies have a lot in common with Yoga practices. Mentally challenged individuals can benefit by an improvement in their IQ as well as in learning to relate to themselves and others better. As their physiological functions improve with Yoga, the combination of Yoga and physical therapies can benefit such patients as well as those with learning disabilities. Musculoskeletal problems can be treated by the combination to improve function as well as range of movement, strength and endurance abilities. Balance and dexterity can also be improved by the combination therapy. The use of Yoga can help those recovering from accidents and physical traumas to get back on their feet faster and with better functional ability. An example of this was Dr Swami Gitananda Giri who managed to get back on his feet and function normally after a debilitating stay in a full body cast for more than

six months. Swamiji used to say, “Modern medicine kept me alive, but Yoga gave me back my life as otherwise I may have been a cripple for life”. Yoga also has a lot to offer those suffering from drug and substance abuse in assisting them to get back to a normal life. Yoga helps develop their self-control and will power and also gives them a new philosophy of living. This is vital as otherwise they will lapse into their old negative habits.

HEALTHY DIET:

This is a place that modern medicine and Yoga can help give a patient as well as normal person the proper wholistic values of a proper diet. Modern research shows us the benefits of the ‘break-down’ study of foods on the basis of their physical and chemical properties. This is important for the person to know how much of each constituent of food is to be taken in the proper quantity. Yoga can help a person to learn the right attitude towards food as well as understand concepts based on the Trigunas and Tridoshas for better health. Yoga teaches us that the cause of most disease is through under (Ajjeeranatvam), over (Atijeeranatvam) or wrong (Kujeeranatvam) digestion. Yoga also teaches us about the approach to food, the types of food as well as the importance of timings and moderation in diet. A combination of the modern aspects of diet with a dose of Yogic thought can help us eat not only the right things but also in the right way and at the right time thus ensuing our good health and longevity.

RELAXATION:

Most medical doctors understand that it is important to relax in order to get better. The problem is that, though the doctor tells the patient to relax, they don’t tell them how to do so and maybe in fact they don’t know the answer themselves in the first place. Hatha Yoga and Jnana Yoga Relaxation practices help relax the body, emotions and mind. Relaxation is a key element of any Yoga therapy regimen and must not be forgotten at any cost. Shavasana has been reported to help a lot in hypertensive patients and practices such as Savitri Pranayama, Chandra Pranayama, Kaya Kriya, Yoga Nidra, Anuloma Viloma Prakriyas and Marmanasthanam Kriya are also available to the person requiring this state of complete relaxation. It is important to remember that relaxation on its own is less effective than relaxation following activity.

COPING SKILLS:

Yoga has a lot to offer those who unable to cope with death and dying as well as those suffering from incurable diseases. The Yoga philosophy of living sees death as an inevitable aspect of life that cannot be wished away. Swami Gitananda Giri used to tell us that the whole of life is, but a preparation for the moment of death, so that we can leave the body in the right way. Those who are taking care of the dying as well as those taking care of patients of incurable diseases and major disabilities are under an extreme amount of stress and Yoga practice as well as its philosophy helps them gain the inner strength necessary to do their duty. Yoga can help break the vicious spiral of pain-drug dosage-pain and by doing so help reduce the drug dosage in patients suffering chronic pain. It has been reported that Yoga helps improve the quality of life in patients suffering from cancer and also helps them cope better with the effects of treatment. It relaxes them and helps them sleep better. As someone rightly said, “Yoga may not be able to always cure but it can surely help us to endure”.

EXPENDITURE:

Modern medicine is often criticized for the cost involved in its methods of treatment. Yoga offers an inexpensive method of health that can be added to the medical armory when required. Yoga only requires the patient's own effort and really doesn't need any paraphernalia. Of course the modern Yoga industry would rather have us believe that we need tons of Yoga equipment to start Yoga, but they are awfully of the mark in this case. Reduction in drug dosage and avoidance of unnecessary surgeries in many cases can also help reduce the spiraling cost of Medicare.

AGING:

Aging is inevitable and Yoga can help us to age gracefully. Modern medicine tries to help retard aging and help people look better by costly surgical methods that are only an external covering over the underlying aging process. Healthy diet, regular exercise, avoidance of negative habits and cultivation of the positive habits and a healthy lifestyle can help us to age with dignity. Yoga can also help our 'silver citizens' retain their mental ability and prevent degenerative disorders such as Parkinson's disease, Alzheimer's and various other dementias. Physical accidents such as falls can be minimised and many an artificial hip, knee or shoulder replacement surgery can be avoided. Swami Gitananda Giri, Yogashri Krishnamacharya, Kannaiah Yogi, Swami Suddananda Bharathi, Yogeshwarji, Yogendraji and my beloved Yoga uncle Padma Bhushan BKS Iyengar are but a few of the Yogis who have shown us that its is possible to grow old without losing any of the physical or mental faculties of youth.

PSYCHOTHERAPY:

In the field of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis we can find a lot of ancient Yogic concepts being reiterated time and again. Many modern psychotherapeutic concepts such as identification, projection, and transference are similar to concepts in Yoga psychology. Yoga psychology integrates diverse principles within a single body. CG Jung had a great interest in Yoga and the eastern thought and said, "Chakras represent a real effort to give a symbolic theory of the psyche". His 'Centre of Personality' concept based on dream analysis is very similar to the Yogic concept of a central psychic or spiritual personality. He also correlated Chakras to the archetypes that abound in the collective unconscious. Yoga helps the psychotherapist in training self awareness, and in the self regulation of body, diet, breath, emotions, habit patterns, values, will, unconscious pressures and drives. It also helps in relating to the archetypal processes and to a transient being. It offers an integrated method rather than one that is found in isolation in many different therapies. The theory of Kleshas is an excellent model for psychotherapy while emotional therapies of Yoga include Swadyaya, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana and Bhajans. Development of proper psychological attitudes is inculcated via the concepts of Vairagya, Chitta Prasadana as well as Patanjali's advise on adopting the attitudes of Maitri, Karuna, Mudita and Upekshanam towards the happy, the suffering, the good and the evil minded persons. Yoga also has a lot to offer in terms of spiritual therapies such as Swadyaya, Satsangha, Bhajans and Yogic counseling. It is also interesting to note that both Yoga and psychoanalysis share common ground in understanding that symptoms of

the disease are often willed by the patients. While all psychoanalysts must undergo psychoanalysis themselves, it is taught in Yoga that one must first undergo a deep Sadhana, before attempting to guide others on the path. However while psychoanalysis searches the unconscious, Yoga attempts to understand and explore the super conscious.

LIFE STYLE CHANGES:

Yoga helps patients take their health in their own hands. They learn to make an effort and change their life style for the better so that their health can improve. Life style modification is the buzzword in modern medical circles and Yoga can play a vital role in this regard. Yogic diet, Asanas, Pranayamas, Mudras, Kriyas and relaxation are an important aspect of lifestyle modification. Dr Dean Ornish, an eminent American medical doctor who has shown that Yogic lifestyle can reverse heart disease says, "Yoga is a system of perfect tools for achieving union as well as healing.

WOMEN'S HEALTH:

Women are the chosen ones blessed with the responsibility of the future of our human race. Healthy mothers give birth to healthy babies and a healthy start has a great future ahead. Yoga has a lot to contribute in combination with modern medicine to the health status of womankind. Puberty and menopause become easier transitions with the help of Yoga and many eminent Yoginis have said that they were not even aware of a single menopausal symptom as they went through this difficult period in a woman's life. Similarly our young girls can vouch for the fact that their pubertal changes and menarche has been relatively smoother than their counterparts who don't practice Yoga. The benefits of Yoga in terms of family planning are also an important aspect that needs further study, as they can be an effective part of the contraceptive armory. The risk of side effects is negated and the entire control restored to the individuals themselves. The Oli Mudras as practiced in the Gitananda Yoga tradition have great potential in this regard and also the Swara Yoga theories of conception have a lot of exciting possibilities. Once conception occurs, Yoga helps the young mother to be, to prepare herself physically and mentally for the upcoming childbirth. Yoga helps open the joints of the pelvis and hip as well as strengthen the abdominal muscles for childbirth. Later, simple Pranayamas and relaxation techniques help the new mother relax and enjoy the new experience of her life. Post partum introduction of simple practices along with breathing, relaxation and a lot of crawling helps her come back to normal earlier and this can be used in all maternity hospitals along with allopathic management. Yoga practices can also help reduce the drug dosage in medical problems that often complicate a normal pregnancy such as diabetes, asthma and hypertension.

RESEARCH:

The positive benefits of Yoga research are of vital significance and an understanding of how the various practices work in different conditions and in normal situations are of great value for both the science of Yoga as well as for the world of medicine. Yoga therapists can benefit a lot by a scientific understanding of Yoga postures and other techniques. This will bring about a rational approach to Yoga therapy rather than a haphazard application of individualistic knowledge. Institutions such as AIIMS, BHU, NIMHANS, DIPAS, JIPMER, VK Yogas, Kaivalyadhama, Bihar School of Yoga and

our own ICYER have done vast amounts of work in bringing forth the scientific methods of Yoga Vidya. Universities such as BHU, Sagar, Himachal, Venkateshwara, Annamalai and Andhra University have created Centers for Yoga education and research and are doing great service. Scientists such as Dr BK Anand, Dr KK Datey, Dr KN Udupa, Dr B Ramamurthy, Dr W Selvamurthy, Dr T Desiraju, Dr Nagendra, Dr Nagaratna, Dr Shirley Telles, Dr MV Bhole, Dr Rajapurkar, Dr Mittimohan, Dr Lajpat Rai and Dr Madanmohan have contributed extensively towards the scientific understanding of Yoga Vidya and Yoga Vidhi. The Central Government has created the Central Council for Research in Yoga and Naturopathy (CCRYN) that is the governing body for Yoga research and education in our country under the Ministry of Health. Various private institutions are running in our country and doing their best to propagate Yoga-Vidya. Yoga therapy is being used both in conjunction with modern medicine or alternative systems of medicine as well as on its own in various centers. Various conditions such as diabetes, hypertension, arthritis, mental depression, bronchial asthma etc have been found to be relieved by Yoga Therapy and centers such as sVYASA, Kaivalyadhama, National institute of Naturopathy (Pune), Manipal Institute and the Moraji Desai National institute are doing a great deal of work in this field.

Though there is a lot of research on Yoga being done by medical doctors these days but it is important to remember Swami Gitananda's words when he said, "We must research Yoga and not the lack of Yoga". Many studies are badly constructed and many-a-time we find that the Yoga practices performed by the patients have no real relation to Yoga at all. The higher aspects of Yoga are still not in the 'researchable' realm of modern science. Dr VSSM Rao writes that, "The tradition of Yoga is so perfect that we have to seek ways of expounding it in modern scientific terminology instead of simply evaluating it in terms of current concepts of science, which is expanding so rapidly that a time may come when man would like to live by his intuition rather than by scientific planning, bristling with conflicts and balancing a number of variables not completely understood."

IN CONCLUSION:

Many medical doctors have tried to bridge the gap between modern medicine and Yoga and in my humble opinion the best work till date has been the work of Dr Steven F Brena who in his path breathing work on YOGA AND MEDICINE puts into perspective the similarities between Yoga and medicine and also discusses in their relationship with different aspects of human phenomena. He says,

"Besides more or less close similarities, is there a realistic ground upon which both contemporary science and Yoga philosophy are going to meet and possibly to cooperate? The actual field of convergence between them lies in the recognition that physical laws of matter are binding only to a certain point; beyond them, man can find inner freedom, using his will power and proper techniques to select his habits and to gain control of his visceral and emotional functioning, according to the principles of learning. Psychology tells us that our biological functions are bound to the rhythmicity of earthly phenomena, but it also has demonstrated that our performances can be controlled by instrumental training, which is not influenced by circadian rhythms. It looks as though scientific investigations from one side are showing man bound to the earth, like any other living creature, while from another side they seem to prove that the human potentials are greater than the forces binding us – which is exactly what the Vedas have been teaching for

thousands of years. The concept of “dysponesis” is much more than a new theory in medicine. It is almost a new philosophy, bringing into perspective the value of energy-spending in problems of health and disease. Because of our habitual lack of control over our visceral systems, we are often too prodigal in spending our energy capital. In any given situation we are not only prone to “overshoot”, but also to learn the “overshooting” as a model of habitual interrelation with our environment. We are always tense and aggressive in whatever task we perform, always in competition with somebody or with ourselves, wasting our energies in confused actions and maladjusted reactions. We often do not cope with some given situation following a rational and intelligent evaluation, but with emotional outbursts, burning out a lot of fuel. The experiences gained from the various rehabilitation centers around the world, dealing with a variety of disabilities, confirms that our potentialities are greater than we assume, provided that we adequately train our energy-spending and effort-making.

Operant conditioning and dysponesis management have barely started to explore the ground of clinical applications. They are now at a stage of development that can be compared to surgery one century ago, a few years after anesthesia was discovered in 1846. On the other hand, Yoga has been teaching for centuries that the secret of fulfillment in life and spiritual evolution lies in the ability to concentrate vital energy instead of dissipating it. The “Royal Way of Yoga” takes man as he is, with all his handicaps, and brings him above boundaries of material forces to Cosmic Consciousness, teaching him how to expand his energy capital and how to use it wisely. Along the way, while he is seeking spiritual realization, man can also discover the key to health, joy and inner freedom. In this field of thinking and teaching, the age-old Yoga discipline and the more advanced investigations in health sciences have actually met and do agree”.

It is apt to conclude this presentation with a favorite statement of my Guru, Pujya Swamiji Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj, who said, “Health and happiness are your birthright. Do not forsake your golden culture for the plastic playthings of the western world. Learn and live Yoga for then you will know true health and happiness”.

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Yogacharya

Dr.Ananda Balayogi Bhavanani

Chairman : **Yoganjali Natyalayam and ICYER**

25,2nd Cross,Iyyanar Nagar, Pondicherry-605 013

Tel: 0413 - 2622902 / 0413 -2241561

Website: www.icyer.com

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