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YOGA: A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO MENTAL HEALTH

As a psychologist and a yogi I find in my practice as counsellor and therapist that I rely more and more on the techniques and practices of Yoga to maintain my own sense of well being, as well as, that of my clients. Yoga is the art and science of living so it is concerned with the evolution of the human mind and body as a synthesized whole. Since Yoga views man as a psycho-somatic unit all attempts to develop and maintain a healthy personality must include all aspects of one nature. Therefore, Yoga is a system of disciplines for furthering an intergrated development of all aspects of the individual's personality, promoting mental well-being.

The physical aspects of the personality that are brought into a healthy state through Yoga are :

1. **Support Systems.** The skeletal and muscular structures and the linkage between them are made flexible and elastic. In-correct posture, the cause of a large proportion of back ailments, is corrected and the spinal coloum maintains agility even into old age.
2. **Control Systems.** The nervous and endocrinal systems through Yoga practices of Asanas and Pratyahara are brought into a state of balance. Many psychological, as well as, physical problems are due to faulty secretions within the endocrinal system. Problems such as hypo-thyroid or hyper-thyroid respond positively to Yoga asanas alone. Balancing the activity between the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems decreases the events of depression or aggressional behaviours.
3. **Metobolic Systems.** The digestive system benefits through the practices of cleansing techniques of Yoga, as well as, Pranayama and Pratyahara. The respiratory system is strengthened through Pranayama techniques and this in turns impacts

upon the working of the cardio-vascular system. Healthy lungs and correct breathing practices ensure a healthier heart and digestive system.

When all these three systems are working well we have a positive self-image and a tendency toward more self confidence and positive thinking.

The emotinal-behavioural aspects are :

1. The phenomenon of relaxation is a very important element in health both mentally and physically. Most research carried out using relaxation with psychological approaches to well-being that have originated in the West have shown that all the techniques, whether psycho-analysis or behavioural therapy, work best when relaxation is a part of the procedure.
2. The cultivation of emotions through being able to control them can be brought about easily with Pranayama. Many emotional / behavioural problems stem from a physiological event within the body. When we are frightened or angered our body reacts in a way to prepare us with a way to deal with these emotionally charged situations. When nor-adrenalin is introduced into the blood stream it causes the heart rate to speed up and that in turn causes breath to become faster. This event signals the body to release more nor-adrenalin which again speeds up the heart and breath and the cycle has begun. Deep slow breathing, if introduced, brings the breath rate down which lowers the heart rate which stops the demand for more nor-adrenalin and gives one control of their emotional states.

The mental aspects are :

1. The ability to concentrate. Psycho-motor retardation, is a common symptome in many psychological disorders. Pranayama and Pratyahara techniques are very important tools of Yoga for re-establishing normal thought patterns and psycho-motor normality. Techniques such as Trataka, Nada Yoga, Antar Mouna aid in the restoration of the ability to concentrate.

2. The abilities to remember, reason and abstract can be strengthened through these simple Yoga techniques. Memory and attention span can be systematically developed.

The creative aspects are :

1. Imagination can be freed for creative purposes when the mind is more relaxed and positive. An imagining mind is a lot easier to educate and stimulate than one where there is no imaginative facility.
2. Visualization can make learning anything a lot easier. Yoga techniques like seeing the inner black board, or the practice of inner Trataka help to develop visualizing abilities.
3. Vocalization, like visualization is a very important part of our creativity that Yoga helps to develop in a well balanced way. Whether the voice is used for speaking or singing, learning how to breath correctly and project the voice is important in how effective one can be in any interaction with others.
4. Cultivation of the ideal personality is one of the most important advantages of Yoga as a form of therapy for mental health. Through the use of the resolve in Yoga Nidra one can completely resturcture the personality in a very easy but efficient way.

When one is able to express one-self adequately. Whether as an artist or professional, greater self-confidence and self-esteem develops.

The spiritual aspects are:

1. Humility is a necessary pre-requisite for getting rid of ego and its attachments. Most westerners find this a very difficult aspect to accept but it is an absolute necessity.
2. Service to Humanity is a very easy way to help direct the thoughts in a positive direction. When ones mind is concerned with others it has less time to be creating worries about itself.

3. The more one develops a healthy balanced approach to the manifest reality, that is day to day life, then Self-Realization (Atmagyan) becomes a possibility.

Until the mind is same and healthy the possibility of experiencing higher consciousness is impossible. So it is better to correct the personality flaws systematically so that once you can go deep into the subconscious and unconscious mind you can come out refreshed, renewed and revitalized.

Patanjali, who systematized Yoga in a book called *Astanga Yoga* suggests that there are eight limbs to Yoga and these eight limbs are divided into outer and inner practices. These are:

A. Outer Practices

1. Abstentions (Yama)

1. From Violence (Ahimsa). How can one find mental health if one is still reacting in a violent way to the environment.
2. From Falsehood (Satya). If one is constantly repeating false information how can one be mentally healthy. Mental health can be built on truth alone.
3. From Theft (Asteya). Taking from others, even their ideas in order to appear greater than one is certainly does nothing to restore or maintain a healthy personality.
4. From Incontinence (Brahmacharya). At certain periods in ones life it is important that the mind is freed from its pre-occupation with sexual activities, especially if one is interested in pursuing higher goals or higher creativity rather than just pro-creativity.
5. From Aquisitiveness (Aparigraha). The more possessions we acquire the more we must be concerned with keeping them. It is our constant longings and desires for that which we do not have or can not acquire that cause us pain and unhappiness.

2. Observances (Niyama)

1. Cleanliness (Saucha). Cleanliness of the body, the environment and the thoughts are considered the first important observance of Yoga.

2. Contentment (Santoshā). Being satisfied with what one has is very liberating. When the mind is content mental health is a simple fact.
3. Austerities (Tapahā). Austerities does not necessarily mean wearing a hair shirt nor flagellation of the body. However it may mean that one must follow a strict diet to bring about or maintain optimum health. This observance helps in the development of will power.
4. Self Study (Swādhyāya). Self-analysis is a very important tool for mental well being, as well as, for any attempt to discover the hidden truths within. Most find it impossible to be objective about one's own behaviours and reactions to the environment.
5. Devotion to the Divine (Ishwara Pranidhāna). Acceptance of the idea of an Inner Divine nature is necessary to bring about its realization.

These two limbs are important in Yoga since they promote mental health. From the standpoint of Yoga practising the Yamas and Niyamas are not done to ensure a place in heaven when one dies but are observed because if all followed them it would produce the best possible world here and now.

3. *Postures (Asanas)*

The word asana means steady pose and for the purpose of meditation and self-realization it is necessary to quieten the body and breath in order to quieten the mind. From the standpoint of health Yoga Asanas have proven to be important tools for re-establishing physical well being and bringing about relaxation within the whole body. Many problems such as sexual assault, rape, and sexually aggressive behaviours can be greatly improved with some Asanas alone.

4. *Control of Breath (Pranayama)*

Control of the emotions is one of the most important achievements from practising Pranayama. Other advantages include healthier skin, stronger lungs and total relaxation.

B. Inner Practices

5. *Abstraction / Relaxation (Pratyahara)*

Withdrawal of awareness from disturbances within the environment is the first step towards development of the mind and its abilities. This does not mean that one tries to suppress or repress any experience. Through Yoga one can learn to aware of the outer environment yet not be disturbed or distracted by it.

6. *Concentration (Dharana)*

Developing attention span and the ability to concentrate are very important tools for day to day living, as well as, being necessary for realization of higher experiences.

7. *Absorption/Meditation (Dhyana)*

Technically this limb of Yoga is described as extended concentration. When the ability to concentrate has reached the point where the mind is absorbed in the area of focus then the mind becomes more powerful and able to bring about changes not only within one's own personality but can positively effect those with whom one has daily interactions.

8. *Sublime Equanimity (Samadhi)*

Total balance between the pairs of opposites gives one great power, it is the goal of all Yoga practices which must include the physical and mental or outer and inner practices of Yoga. Being balanced between pleasure and pain gives one absolute freedom and perfect mental health.

So the first four limbs are for establishing an ethical and moral basis of thinking and behaviour, developing a strong healthy physical body and balancing the emotional nature of the individual.

The last four limbs are for bringing about the withdrawal of awareness from external distractions and focusing the attention. Meditation is a method for dissolving the desire complexes, inhibitions, erroneous, psychological attitudes which leads to neurosis, psychosis, high blood pressure, etc. After meditation the expansion of consciousness begins and the individual can discover the power within himself.

Psychological Disorders

Psychological disorders are those which affect the human mind or psyche. These are divided into two main groups, namely neurosis and psychosis.

Neurosis

Neurosis include disorders such as neuroticism, obsessional/compulsive behaviours, reactive depression and anxiety. Most of the present day treatments for these problems include, counselling or behavioural change through techniques like desensitization, hypnosis and flooding. However the majority of these techniques have only short term success and seldom cure the individual entirely.

In the neurotic person the sympathetic nervous system is over-active. Yoga techniques such as asanas, pranayama, pratyahara and meditation stimulates the parasympathetic system and reduces excitation by lowering blood pressure and heart rate. Depression and eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia, have been treated very successfully with both outer and inner yoga practices.

Psychosis

Psychotic disorders are characterized by impaired mental reasoning and loss of touch with reality and include schizophrenia, manic depression and paranoia. Most of the treatment for this form of psychological disorders consists of drug treatment and in more extreme cases, electric shock treatment (ECT) and psycho-surgery, e.g. leucotomy. These treatments have some short term but little long term success. Very little research using Yoga for treatment of this form of disorders has been reported, maybe because these patients are usually heavily drugged and unresponsive. However, where Yoga techniques of pratyahara and dharana, such as Yoga Nidra, was used with these patients there first reaction was to fall asleep. In most forms of depression sleep disturbance is one of the main symptoms of distress, so reintroducing healthy natural sleep is usually a prerequisite to healing and well being.

Psychosomatic Disorders Managable through Yoga

Psychosomatic disorders are characterized by psychophysical reactions to emotional difficulties, for example, insecurity, rejection, frust-

ration and family problems. The vast majority of illnesses, apart from functional illnesses, accidents and poisonings are caused directly by tension in the mind. The mind and body are so closely interconnected that it is almost impossible for something to happen in the mind that does not happen in the body simultaneously. Psychosomatic disorders can be in the somatic, autonomic, endocrinal and immune systems.

Hypertension

Hypertension is a condition where the patient suffers from great emotional tension, which results in very high blood pressure. This can lead to widespread damage of the heart, blood vessels, eyes, kidneys and brain. Many studies have shown that pranayama and pratyahara lowers the blood pressure level. More specifically, it has been shown that Yoga Nidra technique lowers the blood pressure (B.P.) level in people with both normal and high B.P. levels so it reduces the damaging effects of hypertension. Studies by Stone and DeLeo; Braner; Agras and Lekh Raj Bali showed that relaxation lowered blood pressure levels dramatically.

Dr. Dean Ornish in California recently reported on his research with heart patients. His control group received the usual treatments for their heart conditions whereas the experimental group were given what he called Lifestyle Change. This included taking up the practice of Yoga, vegetarian diet, counselling to stop smoking if necessary, etc. He found that not only did his experimental group do better but in many cases the illness was reversed.

Migrane

Migrane is experienced as severe headaches, often accompanied by feeling of nausea and visual disturbances. Research by Green etal has shown that the brain's electrical rhythms change during Pratyahara, and especially during Yoga Nidra from beta waves (13-20 c.p.s.) to alpha waves (8-12 c.p.s.). Since the sufferer of migrane has more electrical activity in the brain, Yoga Nidra helps lower the brain activity to alpha rhythms.

Asthma

Asthma is a respiratory disorder characterized by difficulty in breathing, usually due to bronchial spasms and excessive production

of mucus in the bronchial passage. With Yoga therapy the symptoms of the illness can be relieved by stopping the attack using Mulabandha or Kunjal Kriya. It can actually relieve the illness in an ongoing way by the regular practise of Surya Namaskara Asanas, and Yoga can totally cure the illness through experiencing the cause of the illness in meditation. Hock etal; Erskine-Milliss and Schonell and Gupta etal, have all reported research on the use of Yoga in treating Asthma.

Cancer

Cancer is another area where a lot of research using Yoga techniques have been applied successfully. Dr. Ian Pierce, in England, reported that when looking at two groups of smokers, one that developed cancer and one that did not develop cancer he found that when he controlled for all factors in the life and lifestyles of the participants in the two groups, it was those who had the most stress in their life that developed cancer as a result of their smoking habit. Like the Simontons who reported their work in the book *Getting Well Again* he found that pratyahara and visualization were very important tools in recovery.

Ulcers

Ulcers are generally characterized by disintegration either on the surface of the skin or of a mucus membrane inside the body. Peptic ulcer is due to an imbalance in the autonomic nervous system. It is an overactivity in the parasym-pathetic nervous system probably as a result of fatigue and exhaustion of the sympathetic nervous system. Treatment by cutting the Vagus nerve, which is the norm, would in this case be the wrong thing to do. The tensions need to be eliminated and balance attained in the autonomic nervous system through asanas, pranayama and pratyahara and meditation. This malady responds to yoga therapy when it does not respond to anything else.

Drug Dependency

Drug dependency, whether prescribed or taken illegally has both a physiological and psychological component. The body and the mind both become dependent on a regular intake of the drug. Yoga techniques such as shankhaprakshalana, a gastro-intestinal cleansing together with pratyahara and meditation have been used

very successfully with addicts in hospitals in Copenhagen and Fairburn et al, reported that patients have been able to reduce their dependence on tranquillizers and hypnotic drugs and increase self-reliance by using Yoga Nidra technique.

So a balanced yoga practice should have some mantra, some asanas, pranayama, cleansing techniques, mudras and bandhas and should finish off with Yoga Nidra or some meditation practice. That gives the person a well rounded opportunity to experience total health. Once the body and mind are completely healthy then one realizes the changes that have happened at a deeper level as well, that the spiritual nature which is natural to us all has been unfolding at the same time and they experience the bliss that is a fundamental part of their Self.

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