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Daksh Sharma

Assistant Professor of Phy.Edu
SGGS Khalsa College Mahilpur,
Punjab, India

Misconceptions of Yoga

Daksh Sharma

Abstract

Breathing is life. The ancient yogis in India knew the intimate connection between breath and mind. For example, when your mind is angry, watch your breathing. It will be disturbed and similarly if you hold your breath for long, mind will be agitated. Even though the mental faculty undergoes a state of stillness at times, this cannot be called yoga. Such a physical state may resemble sleep. Fainting fits, cat lapse and hysteria also bring about a similar state of mental inactivity. People affected by such condition are not conscious of anything, and are not practicing yoga. The yogis in the past also kept the knowledge of Hatha Yoga a secret and therefore erroneous notion has prevailed that Hatha Yoga is something, which is done by forcing oneself. Thus the original word hatha was misunderstood meaning as obstinacy. In this study we have discussed about the misconceptions of yoga, so that every person should know about the criteria required for yogic practices and have all the benefits of Yoga in our life. Many points of practicing yoga had been taken into view such as: Place and Surroundings, Bath, Dress, yoga schedule, physical exercises and sequence of selection of yogic practices, duration and rounds of practices. A word of caution though - Please do not practice Yoga without the help of an experienced teacher.

Keywords: Breath, mind, misconceptions, fainting fits, obstinacy

Introduction

According to Patanjali, yoga is ability to control the modifications of the mind with the ones will power. Regulating the fluctuations of the mind is not a casual pursuit, and is only achieved through constant practice and with the spirit of renunciation.

Even though the mental faculty undergoes a state of stillness at times, this cannot be called yoga. Such a physical state may resemble sleep. Fainting fits, cat lapse and hysteria also bring about a similar state of mental inactivity. People affected by such condition are not conscious of anything, and are not practicing yoga.

Misconceptions

Even today yogic knowledge is considered a mystic discipline. People when read and hear about the yogis miracles and supernatural powers, they are amazed. Even though they have respect for yoga, they feel that yoga is not meant for ordinary people. And therefore they themselves keep away from it. The yogis in the past also kept the knowledge of Hatha Yoga a secret and therefore erroneous notion has prevailed that Hatha Yoga is something, which is done by forcing oneself. Thus the original word hatha was misunderstood meaning as obstinacy. In fact Hatha can be broken as Ha and The which are symbols. Ha means sun The means the moon. Sun and moon are indicators of the duality of the world. Since the science teaches us how to keep balance in a life full of dualities, it got the name Hatha Yoga. Many believe that for gaining success in yoga, one has necessarily to live in a forest, shun society, have an awe-inspiring face with unkept hair, wear a special costume, etc.

What is health?

Health is a state of well being physical, mental and social. It is not a mere absence of disease or complaints. Health and well being depends upon nourishment, activities (physical and mental) and rest. If anyone of these is excessive or meager, there is imbalance, which leads to ill health. There is no better or easier method than Yogabhyas for maintaining the health of the body and mind.

Correspondence

Daksh Sharma

Assistant Professor of Phy.Edu
SGGS Khalsa College Mahilpur,
Punjab, India

In patanjali's yoga Darshan (a compendium of aphorisms), some important interrelated principles are given. Of these the first is Sthira sukhamasana i.e. Asanas are steady postures affording pleasure both physical as well as mental. In order to attain this Patanjali has suggested a fine method. He says that while getting in to or maintaining an asana one should minimize efforts (Prayatnashaitilya). Asana should be performed with ease. For this, there should not be any conscious efforts. Also the mind should be fixed on the infinite One (ananta). Ananta is a concept. It means the entity, which has neither a beginning nor an end. If it is not possible to keep one's mind on Ananta, one can do Pranadharana or Maharadhnusadhana. Pranadharana means to be conscious of one's breathing i.e. fixing one's attention on breathing. Maharadhnusadhana means imagining that I am a droplet in a big lake.

Differential Relaxation

While attaining any particular upper parts of the posture in an asana being performed it creates positive or negative pressure only on a particular part of the body. While on the rest of the body parts, all the muscles must be completely relaxed. For example if the posture achieved actively involves the lower part of the body from toe to waist, then the muscles on the upper parts of the body above the waist, on the back, shoulders, arms, neck and face etc. must be completely relaxed.

Prandharna (Fixation of Mind on the Breath)

Prandharna is a compound word, a combination of two words i.e. Pranā and Dharna. Prana means breath and dharna means fixation of mind. While practicing Prandharna, the yoga aspirant has to fix his/her mind on the incoming and outgoing breath. The mind is thus trained and conditioned. Generally, the practice of Prandharna is done in three graded steps. If the mind of any person is under the spell of strong emotion or if it is wavering in emotional imbalance or if a person is suffering from an acute disease or pain, he or she should avoid Prandharna.

Yogabhayas and Physical Exercises Main Differences

The objective of physical exercises is to achieve health, speed, skill, agility, cardio-vascular efficiency, competence etc. However the objective of yogic practices is quite different. Daily performance of yogic practices results into an improvement in the tone of vital organs and important muscles. It increases one's Neuro-muscular coordination helps in achieving integration of body systems and personality. The daily routine becomes easy and pleasant. In physical exercises, the stress is on maximum use of energy. In yogabhayas, on the other hand, this is to be avoided consciously. Both are complementary to each other. If one is willing and has time and capacity, there is no harm regularly practicing both together. However a half an hour gap should be kept between the two to achieve the objectives of both and to ensure no harmful results.

Salient Points to Be Considered For Yogic Practices

Place and Surroundings

Choose a place, which is quite, airy, well lighted, insect-free, clean and not foul-smelling. There should be no draught of air or direct sunrays falling on the body. The place should be cheerful. Such a place is ideal. In its absence one can practice Yogabhayas by improving the available space to the extent possible. One can make use of fragrant flowers or perfumes to improve the conditions if possible.

Suitable time for conducting

It is best to perform Yogabhayas on an empty stomach. Early morning is the best time for Yogabhayas mainly because the stomach and bowels are then empty and light. However those who do not find morning's conveniently can do Yogabhayas on a light stomach in the evening or any other suitable time. It is more beneficial to have the stomach and bowels cleaned up prior to Yogabhayas because in many of the Yogic practices, these parts are contracted and stretched. However, in exceptional cases or where the bowel evacuation is not proper due to unhealthy habits. Yogabhayas may be undertaken under the guidance of Yoga teacher.

Bath

Take a complete or partial bath or cleaning the mouth, ears, tongue and nostrils or at least washing the hands, feet and face prior to Yogabhayas as it proves helpful. However, this is not considered must.

Dress

The dress should be minimum, light, soft, clean and loose. For ladies, a costume may be like pajama-shirt or salwar-kameez or any suitable dress for smooth and easy movements. In the cold weather the dress should be warm enough to protect one from the cold but should not at the same time, obstructs the movements.

Physical Exercises, Sports and Yogabhayas

It is advisable to leave a gap of 20 to 30 minutes between the practice of physical exercises/sports and Yogabhayas, so that the objectives of both can be achieved. Both are complimentary to each other.

Suggested Yoga Schedule

One should perform only those practices that have been selected and taught by a Yoga teacher or under an expert advice.

Sequence of Selection of Yogic practices

The recommended sequence for Yogic practices in Hathayoga is, first Asana, then various Pranayanas followed by Mudras and Bandhs. However it needs not to be followed rigidly. Keeping in consideration the modern day life, one make necessary changes in Yogabhayas as regards the number of practices to be done, their sequence, duration, number of rounds etc. taking in to account various factors such as body structure, age, capacity, ability. Women aspirants should perform only selected practices during the menstrual period and pregnancy. During these days they may restrict it to only those practices that give them rest and peace of mind, relieve tiredness and relax the systems of the body.

Duration and Rounds of Practices

In the initial stages for the first few days it is better to perform more rounds of an asana, maintaining its final stage for a brief period so as to acquire mastery over the posture. Once the mastery is achieved it is advisable to reduce the number of rounds gradually and maintain the final stage for an asana for longer duration. Similar is the case for Mudras and Bandhas. It is best to have body at rest and the mind at peace and cheerful when one starts Yogabhayas. In the absence of such a state, it is advisable to lie in Shavasana or sit in any of the meditative postures till the body and mind are refreshed and quieted and only then do one's recommended Yogabhayas.

As a beginner to learning yoga. One should take the required rest between two practices by completely relaxing the entire body for a few moments instead of performing the Yogic practices nonstop.

Yogic practices should be performed with ease and without strain. One should experience physical and mental pleasure out of them. For this, one should follow four cardinal principles which are as follows;

- a. Slackening of effort (Prayatna Shaithilya)
- b. Differential/Partial relaxation (Bhedatmak/Anshatmak Shithilata)
- c. Normal and Natural breathing (Naisargik Shwasana)
- d. Fixation of mind on the breath (Pranadharna)

All movements involved in Asanas should be slow, steady, continuous, controlled, rhythmic and graceful. In these movements, one should consciously avoid jerks and pulls, unnecessary strain, forcible stretching or extreme contraction of muscles, deep breathing or withholding of breath.

One should keep the eyes open till the final stage of asana is attained; one should gently close them for the period that the final stage of the Asana is maintained and again open the eyes while relaxing the posture. After adequate practice, one can keep the eyes semi closed in final stage of an asana while keeping the mind on the breath, i.e. doing Pranadharna. As a general rule, one should turn the gaze along with the face, turning the pupils in the same direction. However in certain Asanas especially the meditative one's it is necessary to fix the gaze between the eyebrows (Bhrumahhya Drishti) or on the tip of the nose (Nasagra Drishti).

While doing Yogabhyas avoid any type of competition as it is not conducive to the study of Yoga. One should not try to attain the ideal body pattern by applying force. The ultimate posture of the asana, which one can achieve, depends upon the various factors such as age, individual body structure and sex, Condition of body, mind, season, time of the day etc. Hence, one should attain the posture according to one's own capacity i.e. the stage that one's body structure and tone of muscles permit. Also, one should maintain the final stage of any posture only as long as one can do steadily and deriving pleasure

A word of caution though - please do not practice yoga without the help of an experienced teacher.

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