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Yoga as an antidote to stressful life of the present era

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Abstract

Human life in the 21st century is marked by unprecedented advancement in science and technology, information and communication. No doubt, our physical comfort level has reached the zenith in the present era, in comparison to the by-gone days. But this is only the rosy side. On the other side, ever-unquenchable thirst for “getting and spending” (to quote William Wordsworth) has robbed us of our peace of mind. We are now an unhappy lot, each moment inviting mounting pressure and stress on ourselves. The result, in spite of sitting on the heap of our accumulated material wealth, we are badly in need of equanimity of mind and soul. Medical science cannot blot out this problem permanently. Yoga here may help us with its magic touch. Yoga has impressed the world so much so that on December 11, 2014, the General Assembly of The United Nations (UN) adopted a resolution, to observe 21st June of every year as the International Day of Yoga. In his speech delivered at The UN, the Prime Minister of India, Mr. Narendra Modi (2014) said: “Yoga embodies unity of mind and body; thought and action; restraint and fulfillment; harmony between man and nature; a holistic approach to health and wellbeing.....” Yoga helps in development of the whole mind in a balanced way by keeping stress at bay. This article seeks to understand yoga, the stressful life of the present era and the role of yoga in de-stressing us

Keywords: Yoga, stress, chittasuddhi, asanas, life style diseases, equanimity of mind

Introduction

Etymologically, the word ‘yoga’ originated from the Sanskrit root ‘Yuj’, meaning “to yoke”, “to join” or “to unite”. Essentially of Indian origin, yoga is a group of physical, mental and spiritual practices that aim at harmonizing system of development of the whole man. It is the art and science of healthy living. Yoga implies synchronizing all aspects of the individual – body, mind and soul – to achieve a balanced life. As per yogic scriptures, practice of yoga leads to the union of individual consciousness with that of the universal consciousness, indicating a perfect harmony between body, mind and soul. One who experiences this union, attains a state of freedom called ‘mukti’, ‘nirvana’ or ‘moksha’. Thus the aim of yoga is emancipation from mundane suffering through self-realisation. Besides exerting many good effects on human body, yoga may go a long way in relieving stress of the modern life.

How stress makes us ‘distressed’

The pioneering Hungarian-Canadian endocrinologist Hans Selye first introduced the concept of stress in 1936 in the domain of life sciences. He opined that stress is not necessarily something bad; it all depends on how we take it. The stress of creative successful work is beneficial, whereas that of failure, humiliation or infliction is detrimental. He defined stress as being in ‘distress’, which is marked by a man, specific to any demand made on it to adopt (1956). Constant exposure to stressful situations has a negative effect on our health. Stress manifests in a person when he is unable to adjust to his psychological and emotional conflicts. In today’s era of globalization, competition, innovation and change, we cannot avoid tension, stress and anxiety in our day-to-day life. Stress is our body’s way of responding to any kind of demand or threat. When one feels threatened, the nervous system responds by releasing a flood of stress hormones – adrenaline and cortisol, which prepares the body for an emergency action. Stress is common to all individual, irrespective of age and gender. In one way, stressful circumstances may be helpful in boosting up one’s level of performance because stress releases adrenalin that helps us to perform at the peak level at crisis situations.

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Stress, if lasts for a comparatively longer period of time, leads to the manifestation of various psychosomatic disorders one by one. At first, a person gets psychic changes such as restlessness, irritability, nervousness, insomnia etc. This is gradually followed by disturbing symptoms like palpitation, fear, chest pain, stomach pain etc. In course of time, these symptoms lead to more serious disorders like hypertension, diabetes, peptic ulcer, migraine etc. Combined with an unhealthy life-style with poor diet, junk food and lack of exercise, stress leads to significant rise in life-style diseases. People experiencing stress are at higher risk of coronary artery disease. Modern medical science helps one to some extent with such problems by prescribing drugs. But it is not sufficient for complete cure of such diseases.

Nature of stress in the present era

In this globalized world, we are living in an age of explorations, explosions and paradoxes. Due to ever-increasing ambitions, desires and competitions, maddening tension has increased. The modern world – a world of achievements, is also a world of stress. In this fast-paced world, perhaps nobody is out of the clutches of stress. No doubt, we have been witnessing tremendous progress in science and technology, socio-economic and cultural fields, but all these at the cost of losing our equanimity of mind. The modern lifestyle lures us with comfort and convenience, in the form of gadgets and gizmos that have become vital to our daily life. But it comes with a big price tag and we pay for it by bringing on us stress that gives birth to many psychological and physiological diseases like mental deformity, impulses, opposing ethical values, obesity, hypertension and cardiac problems, among others.

Stress has now become a way of our life. Adapting oneself with the whims of the boss at office, managing tasks on time, getting things done at home, attending to the needs of the siblings – we are always in the pressure-cooker, there is just no way escaping from anxiety and stress. Although stress has become a common part of the busy life, continuous stress may take tremendous toll on our health and happiness. It is a silent killer. Stressful thinking patterns wreak havoc on our body and mind. It may be consistent worry, creating drama in our lives, or hatred toward ourselves that continuously put us in a state of shock and distress. Once we have engrained that state of stress into us, we tend to react to all situations from that state of anxiety. We may overreact, harm ourselves or others, or keep attracting negativity into our life.

The main victims of today's stressful life are the adolescents. The period itself is a time of stress, storm and strife. Moreover, our education system has loaded them with variety of pressures, such as vast syllabus and curriculum, exam-phobia and break-neck competition. During teenage, children are stuck between schools, tests, examinations, sports, tuitions and many other activities which result in mental and health disorders. Their life revolves around academic activities, assignments, scoring good grades in the examination, performing better at schools and a lot of other hectic activities. They do not get much time for themselves to relax their mind and enjoy. To get first in the rat-race of life, they are inviting more and more stress for themselves. Parental expectations are largely incongruent with their children's ability. Social and family pressures, anxiety, abuse, political unrest, depressing job-market etc. make the situation worse. All these factors lead them to frustration and depression. When there is none to share their anxiety, stress gets out of bounds.

How yoga helps in relieving stress

A saying goes: "Prasannatma, Indriya, Manahaswatha, Ithyabideeyathe", meaning "Where the mind, soul and the senses tranquil, health is guaranteed". Yoga is predominantly concerned with restoring and maintaining a state of equanimity in our body, mind and soul. The most popular aspects of yogic lifestyle are asanas. Even those people unaware of the basic aspects of yoga, are familiar with asanas such as padmasana, vajrasana, shirshasana, chakrasana etc. The practice of moving the body into different postures has widespread physical benefits as well as an embalming effect on the mind. All these asanas enable the practitioner to explore and control all aspects of his emotion, concentration, intent, faith and unity between the physical and the ethereal body. The very essence of yoga lies in attaining mental peace, improved concentration power and a relaxed state of living. Therefore, it is not surprising that at present, lakhs of people round the globe are embracing yoga to reap its rich dividends. It is the most rapidly growing health movement now-a-days. Yoga has been considered as an effective tool for channelizing our sense organs. It causes 'chittasuddhi'. According to Swami Sivananda (1958, pp. 348-349) ^[9], 'chittasuddhi' is a process of mental purification that controls sexual thoughts, worldly desires, lust, anger, vanity, hypocrisy, egoism, greed, and jealousy. Improved level of yoga results in higher level will-power and tranquility of mind.

Yoga, if practiced regularly, is a great stress buster. Yoga brings us into a state of stillness and ease, allowing us to access our subconscious thinking patterns that may be bringing about stress in our life. Specific yoga poses can counteract stress by sending a relaxation response to the body. Calming and restorative poses along with controlled breathing activate the parasympathetic nervous system, bringing the mind and body to a calm and relaxed state.

One of the primary benefits of yoga is to eliminate stress from young students. In order to get a taste of emancipation from the modern stressful life, students may flock to yoga classes. Behavioural health services and research have found that students participating in yoga classes have shown improvement in mood, perceived stress and anxiety. Yoga helps in diverting focus away from the busy and hectic day and reflects its embalming effects on body and mind. Yoga provides tools through which one can counter-attack the feeling of helplessness and depression.

Research findings showing yoga as a stress reliever

It is evident from researches that yoga is an effective remedy for many stress related physical, psychological and psychometric disorders. Lark (1993, p. 201) ^[4] claimed that yoga practice provides effective relief from anxiety and stress. Vasudevan *et al.* (1994) ^[11] found the effectiveness of yogic meditation to reduce tension and headache. Prem Sahajpal and Rinpari Ralte, (2000) ^[7] have shown very beneficial effects on quality of sleep, reduction in stress level and improvement in self concept by Induced Yogic Relaxation Training. Several researchers in medical field have reported that pranayama, a popular yogic techniques is beneficial in treating a range of stress related disorders, improving autonomic functions, relieving symptoms of asthma, and reducing signs of oxidative stress. Meditation decreases experienced stress load (Kabat-Zinn *et al.*, 1992) ^[3]. Positive effects of some yogic practices on stress related problems and their reduction has also been shown by many other studies in India and abroad (Digamberji, 1975; Nagendra, 1983; Udupa

and Prasad, 1985; Vishal and Madhu, 1987) ^[11, 6, 10, 12].

Conclusion

Today yoga has taken the world by tempest and is gaining ground day by day. B. K. S. Iyenger (2005) ^[2] once said: "Yoga is a friend to those who embrace it sincerely and totally. It lifts its practitioners from the clutches of pain and sorrow, and enables them to live fully, taking a delight in life." Yoga is a multidimensional branch of knowledge and its scope has increased in the modern life of twenty first century. It is obvious that yoga is a boon for the modern man – a victim of everyday stress. If practiced regularly, yoga will bring us physical, mental and spiritual health. Overall, yoga offers everything we need for a happy life. More than a discipline to stay fit and healthy, yoga acts as a link between an individual and his true inner self. This ancient science has brought time-tested ways to relieve stress and other related ailments gifted by the modern lifestyle.

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