



# Yogic Concepts of Holistic Health and Wellness

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## Abstract

Perfect health is the way of attainment of peace and happiness. The concept of holistic health is becoming popular in last few decades in modern medicine, but it existed in traditional healing methods from ages. The present paper discusses the yogic perspective of holistic health and wellness. It describes the concept of “five sheaths of existence (Panchkosha)” and yogic practices to take care of these sheaths. Yogic meaning of well-being is physical fitness, mental agility and spiritual verve. Yoga is curative, preventive and promotive science of health and wellness which encompasses all aspects of life. We must understand and practice yoga to achieve holistic health and wellness.

Achievement of complete health and disease-free life can help the attainment of the ultimate goal of human life: peace and happiness. Individuals subjectively experience the feeling of happiness and satisfaction. This affective reaction of satisfaction is not necessarily related to material gain or objective conditions of life.

The practice of the ancient science of yoga is a tremendous gift from our Indian culture. Only in the late nineteenth century, we have begun to understand the vast potential and health benefits of yoga.

Yoga is becoming popular among all: Restless, Sick or Healthy. It not only keeps one comfortable, fit and beautiful but also improves memory, intelligence and creativity. Specialists use it to unfold the deeper layers of consciousness in their move towards perfection.<sup>1</sup>

## Yogic Perspective of Holistic Health and Wellness

The preamble of World Health Organization, 1946, defines health positively, as complete physical, mental and social well-being, not merely negatively as the absence of disease or infirmity.<sup>2</sup> This statement has included the ability to lead “a socially and economically productive life” later. We are trying to reach “Health for All.” This definition structures health as a continuum. In other words, the wellness and illness are not two discrete entities as commonly understood but a continuous function indicating the state of wellbeing. There are many degrees of health between morbidity and optimal functioning in life. This is also reflected in the definition of health determined by recent international proceedings on physical activity, fitness and health: positive health is “associated with a capacity to enjoy life and withstand its challenges”, whereas negative health can be defined as “any departure, subjective or objective, from a state of physical or psychological wellbeing short of death.”<sup>3</sup>

In Vyasa-Bhashya (first commentaries on Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras) “Health” is described as “a state of harmony between support structure (Dhatus), fluids (Rasa) and senses (Karana). The classical texts of yoga talk of wellness as a balanced condition, it gives the concept of connecting to the whole while existing as a part. The word ‘Yoga’ means ‘unity’ or ‘oneness’ and is derived from the Sanskrit word ‘Yuj’ which means to join (yujyate anena iti Yoga).<sup>1</sup> This unity or joining is described in spiritual terms as the joining of the individual consciousness (Jivatman) with the universal consciousness (Paramatma). To achieve wellness, one must practice the holistic approach to health by balancing the body, mind and spirit through the self-disciplined life of Anasakti. The practices of asanas, pranayamas, mudras, bandhs, shat-karmas and meditation are ways to achieve holistic health. One has to achieve perfection in all the above elements before

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attaining union with the higher reality.

The Yogic view of health is exemplified in *Shvetaasvatara Upanishad* where it is said that the first signs of entering Yoga are lightness of body, health, thirstlessness of mind, clearness of complexion, a beautiful voice, an agreeable odor and scantiness of excretions (*laghutvam arogyam alolupatvam varnaprasadam svara sausthavam ca ganghas subho mootra pureesam Yoga pravrittim prathamam vadanti – Shvetaasvatara Upanishad: II–13*). Yogi Svatmarama in the *Hathayoga Pradipika* reflects similar qualities, “Slimness of body, the luster on the face, clarity of voice, the brightness of eyes, freedom from disease, control over seminal ejaculation, stimulation of gastric heat and purification of subtle energy channels are marks of success in Hatha yoga.” (*vapuh krsatvam vadane prasannataa naadasputatvam nayane sunirmale arogataa bindujayogni diipanam naadiivishuddhir hatha siddhi lakshanam – Hathayoga Pradipika II–78*).

In the *Patanjali Yoga Darshan*, an excellent description of the attributes of bodily perfection (*kaya sampat*) is available. It says that perfection of a body includes beauty, gracefulness, strength, and adamant hardness (*rupa lavanya bala vajra samhanana kaya sampat – Yoga Darshan III: 47*). The characteristic of good health is also mentioned as deep concentration on *samana* (energy of digestion) leads to radiant effulgence (*samana jayat jvalanam – Yoga Darshan III: 41*).

Yoga claims to endow perfect physical, mental, and social well-being even under stressful conditions. Thus the yogic meaning of well-being is physical fitness, mental agility, and spiritual verve. Yoga is curative as well as preventive and promotive science of health and wellbeing.<sup>4</sup>

### Concept of Existence and Development of Diseases

There are five sheaths of existence in the tradition of Yoga and in Upanishads there are five aspects of the existence of man (the concept of Panchkosha).<sup>5</sup> The five sheaths are: The first the grossest sheath – *Annamaya Kosh (anatomical)*, the second subtler sheath – *Pranamaya Kosh (physiological)*, the sheath in which creative power predominates – *Manomaya Kosh (psychological)*, the sheath of the power to discern and discriminate – *Vigyanmaya Kosh (cognition)* and the sheath of highest state of evolution in which bliss is embodied – *Anandmaya Kosh (conscious)*.

To remain healthy, we have to maintain harmony in all the sheaths of existence. It describes how one is the part of the whole and one's actions and thoughts influence the surroundings. For *Annamaya Kosh* one has to perform diets, *Kriyas*, loosening practices, and *Yogasanas* to take care of the parts of the body (7 Dhatus & rasa). *Kriyas* and *Pranayama* are practices for *Pranamaya Kosh* which are concerned with five *pranas* and five *karmendriyas*. *Manomaya Kosh*

can be kept in balance with *Dharana*, *Dhyana*, Prayers, Chants, *Bhajans* to satisfy five *gyanendriyas* and *chitta*. For *Vigyanamaya Kosh*, practices like self-learning, bliss knowledge and Yogic counselling have been described to calm five *gyanendriyaani* and *buddhi*. The highest state of evolution *Anandamaya Kosh* (represents supreme energy) can be maintained by working in blissful awareness and *Samadhi*.

In *Anandmaya Kosh*, a man is the healthiest with perfect harmony and balance of all his faculties. At *Vigyanmaya Kosh*, there are movements but channelized in the right direction. According to Yoga text, it is the *Manomaya Kosh* level where imbalance starts. This imbalance results in *Adhis* (mental illness) which breeds physical diseases called *Vyadhis*.

According to yogic perspective, diseases or physical ailments (*Vyadi*) are of two types:<sup>5</sup> one is *Adhija* – generated by *Adhis* which is further subdivided in *Sara* (essential type) and *Samanya* (ordinary type) and other is *Anadhija* – not caused by *Adhis*. *Sara Adhija* are responsible for the cycle of birth and death of physical body. These can be benefited with spiritual remedies like *Atma Gyan* and self-realization. *Samanya Adhija* are psychosomatic ailments caused during interaction with the world. The remedies for these are mental as friendly and pleasant environment and suitable techniques. *Anadhija* includes infections, contagious diseases, and physical trauma. Physical remedies like medicines, mantras and right actions can provide help in such conditions.

### Yoga as Way of Achieving Health and Wellness

Yogic procedures maintain normal body functions. Central nervous system ultimately controls the body through its relationship with autonomic nervous system and neuroendocrine processes. Yoga helps an individual to gain control over autonomic nervous system resulting in the homeostatic functioning of the body.

The experts of yoga have claimed that the perfect positive health, control on each part of body and mind and superhuman status can be achieved with regular practice. Here presenting the words of two renowned saints of all times.

Swami Vivekananda wrote:<sup>6</sup>

“There is not one muscle in the body over which a man cannot establish a perfect control. The heart can be made to stop or go on at his bidding, and each part of the organism can be similarly controlled.”

According to Shri Aurobindo:<sup>7</sup>

“Yoga is a methodological effort towards self-perfection by

the development of potentialities latent in the individuals. It is the process by which the limitations and imperfections can be washed away resulting in a superhuman race.”

Yoga is a holistic science of life, which deals with physical, mental, emotional and spiritual health. Various yogic concepts like *Vasudeva kudumbakam*, *Chaturvidha purusharthas*, *Chatur ashrama*, *Pancha klesha*, *Nishkama karma*, *Samatvam*, *Vairagya* and others enable us to live as healthy a life as possible in a dynamic state of wellbeing. The regular practice of Yoga helps to reduce the levels of physical, mental and emotional stress and emphasize right thought, right action, right reaction and right attitude.

Eight limbs of yoga of Patanjali's Ashtanga yoga have encompassed all the dimensions of health. The Yama and Niyam: five dos and five don'ts help us better personal and social relationships as social beings. The five don'ts (*Pancha Yama*) are non-violence (*ahimsa*), truthfulness (*satya*), non-stealing (*asteya*), proper channeling of creative impulse (*brahmacharya*) and non-covetedness (*aparigraha*) and five dos (*Pancha niyama*) are cleanliness (*saucha*), contentment (*santhosha*), leading a disciplined life of austerity (*tapas*), introspectional self-analysis (*swadhyaya*), and developing a sense of gratitude to the divine self (*ishwar pranidhana*). Every attempt to follow these dos and don'ts will transform one into a better person, and family and society would accept him as a valuable person. These values have a high potential to improve one's social health and bring happiness to life.

The practice of asana and *pranayama* can take care of physical health. Hathyoga Pradipika (classical text on the practice of yoga) describes eighty-four asanas, and one or the other asana can be used to stimulate each part of the body. Asanas may be performed as physical exercise; they are different in terms of “placing the physical body in positions that cultivate awareness, relaxation and concentration”. Though hath yoga has given eight pranayamas but more than 20 pranayamas are in trend. Regular practice of pranayama helps regulate our emotions and stabilize the mind.

*Pratyahara kriyas* help to distance our self from the sensory objects and can avoid the causation of stress. *Dharana* helps to focus our mind on the right ideals and pursue our goals in a spirit of selfless and skilful actions (“*nishkama karma* and *karmashu koushalam*”). Practising *dharana* can help in the development of clarity of thought by achieving mental balance and better reaction to the opposites. Yoga produces proper sleep patterns, a subjective feeling of wellness, proper attitudes and increased production at work. Thus, it will inculcate the mental health and in turn, lead to *Dhyana* and *Samadhi* are remedies for attaining spiritual health. *Dhyana* commonly referred as meditation is studied most in the scientific literature as the solution of

psychological ailments and unbearable stress and agony which are beyond the scope of modern medicine. *Samadhi* or enlightenment is the final destination of the journey of the yogic path where one can feel the one-ness with supreme energy. The person will reach the level of spiritual realm where one can tackle all emotions and worldly affairs with ease and comfort without losing calm.

The scientific studies also have shown that yogic practices are useful in attaining health and wellness. Yoga, accompanied by breath control increases cardiac output, decreases hepatic and renal blood flow, increases cerebral blood flow, decreases heart rate, and decreases diastolic blood pressure.<sup>8-11</sup> Various scientists have documented that respiratory parameters improve after Yoga, increase in FVC, FEV1, and PEF, increase in tidal volume, an increase in expiratory and inspiratory pressures, increase in holding time and decrease in respiratory rate.<sup>12-14</sup> Deep and slow breathing strengthen the respiratory muscles, increase their compliance, increase the oxygen intake and its diffusion in the lung, and ultimately lead to increase in the ventilatory perfusion.<sup>15</sup> Yoga practices affect higher functions of the central nervous system like perception and planning, execution, and learning and memory.<sup>16-21</sup> It shifts the autonomic balance towards parasympathetic limb.<sup>22</sup> Yoga influences cognition by increasing perceptual sensitivity, stunting of undesired stimulus, and changing disoriented perception.<sup>23</sup>

Yoga is a lifestyle as well as a philosophy which gives the process to achieve harmonious personality. The aim of Yoga is the blending of mind with the body so that they function coherently. The yogic postures appear to have been devised primarily to influence and rehabilitate the vital organs without giving fatigue to the muscles. So they consume little energy and produce physiological benefits to the body. Thus, Yoga is a systematic process of gaining momentum to achieve a man in his entirety.

## Conclusion

The yogic concept of holistic health and wellness has infinite possibilities for providing answers to most health problems and achieving the goal of “Health for All”. We must understand the science of Yoga: learn and practice with a holistic view.

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