

YOG FOR HEALTHY LIFESTYLE

Madanmohan *

Healthy lifestyle: a holistic view: Who does not want good health and long life ? However, there is no free lunch and one has to earn it by living a disciplined and healthy lifestyle. Health is the best wealth, so says the samskrit verse “Labhanam shreshtham arogyam”. If you possess good health, feel blessed, give thanks and preserve it at all costs. If not, do your best to achieve it, at any cost since our body is a temple of the Divine (Deho devalayah) and the means for performing all righteous deeds (Sharir madyam khalu dharm sadhanam). Vedic rishis have prayed for a full, enjoyable and independent life not just for 100 years, but even beyond (AUM tachchakshur devahitam bhooyashch sharadah shatat. Yajurved, 36: 14). Many warriors of Mahabharat war (3000 BC) were of venerable age and the great warrior Bhishma Pitamah was absolutely healthy and strong at 186 years. The secret of their long and healthy life was disciplined lifestyle in tune with the laws of Mother Nature. These universal Divine laws of nature are called as “Rit” in Vedic language. Yog and ayurved which belong to the Vedic tradition are rooted in nature. In spite of spectacular advances in medical science, “modern” man is a victim of a host of chronic health problems like hypertension, diabetes, chronic pains and insomnia. The primary cause of these problems is our artificial lifestyle that is away from and against the laws of nature.

What does being healthy mean? Health is difficult to define, easy to appreciate and a joy to enjoy. Positive health means perfect functioning of body and mind and ability to enjoy healthy life in its various dimensions. WHO definition of health is “A state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely an absence of disease or infirmity”. It is a condition or quality expressing adequate functioning of the organism in a given situation. To this definition, WHO has added “spiritual wellbeing” also. However, it is not clear what spirituality means. Spirituality should not be confused with religion and this point has been discussed in the section on Spiritual Health and Healing: a Yogic Perspective. Physiological approach to the question of health is in terms of measurable, objective values. A person is healthy if his blood pressure, heart rate, body temperature, blood glucose and other parameters are within normal physiological range. A healthy person is able to meet adequately the demands of his profession / work, i.e. as a teacher, a soldier or a farm hand. In a healthy person, dynamically interacting homeostatic (regulatory) mechanisms of unimaginable complexity maintain various body functions and parameters within normal physiological range. These mechanisms are less developed and easily taxed in newborn (especially premature) babies and the elderly. In ayurved, the term for health is “swasth”, i.e. one who is established and comfortable in his own being, a state of being whole and feeling whole. Acharya Sushrut (~ 600 BC) has given poetically beautiful and philosophically holistic definition of health thus: “Health is a state of balance of elements, optimum digestion and elimination and happy senses, mind and soul” (Samadoshah samagnishcha. Sushrut Samhita, Sutrasthanam, 15:41).

Lifestyle is the way people live and this has immense influence on the status of health or disease. Since one’s lifestyle is developed early in life, it is advisable to cultivate healthy lifestyle in early childhood. Many factors determine one’s lifestyle. Economic status determines incidence of under-nutrition in poor and obesity in the rich. Cultural values of the society dictate the incidence of vegetarianism in the population. Sedentary life is a major factor for coronary artery disease while personal habits like smoking and alcoholism determine the incidence of heart disease and cirrhosis of liver. Exercise, healthy diet and rest and relaxation are important components of lifestyle. From the yogic point of view, proper posture and brahmacharya are very important components of one’s lifestyle. Yog is the most perfect lifestyle module as it is comprehensive and holistic in its nature.

Yog for healthy lifestyle: Yog is a scientific–spiritual discipline and conscious evolution of our physical, mental and spiritual aspects. Its ultimate aim is to become divine by achieving unity with the all- pervading Divine Consciousness. According to Sri Aurobindo, “All life is yog” because yog is a philosophy that can be applied to everyday activities of our daily life. The ancient marvel of yog which is the most precious gem of our cultural heritage has been preserved despite centuries of stagnation and suppression due to brutal foreign invasions. And now it is our duty to promote and propagate

* Prof Madanmohan MBBS, MD (Physiology), PG Diploma in Yoga, MSc Yoga, DSc (Yoga), FIAY CYTER, MGMCRI, Puducherry

it for the benefit of entire humanity. Yog is holistic and its relevance is universal. It is the best means for improving our health as well as preventing and managing stress and stress disorders which are unmanageable by our health care delivery system.

According to materialistic view, we are essentially a body that has a mind. On the other hand, from the spiritual and yogic point of view, we are spiritual beings having human experience. In other words, we are an individual soul that has two beautiful instruments, body and mind. These three entities, i.e. soul, body and mind continuously and dynamically interact with, and influence each other. Yog has profound influence on our total health and personality because it has desirable effect on all the three aspects of our being. Yog is holistic in nature since it is science, philosophy as well as art. It has promotive, preventive as well as curative potential. Its effect is augmentative as it improves our physical, mental as well as spiritual health. Yog is a time-tested and safe tradition. Compared to other modes of health intervention, it has many advantages. It is economical in terms of time, energy and resources. Being holistic, it is ideal for our horizontal, in-depth as well as vertical development. For prevention as well as management of stress and stress disorders, there is no method as effective and as far-reaching as yog. That is why Yogeshwar Krishn describes the superiority of a yogi in unambiguous terms (Tapasvibhyo adhiko yogi. Bhagavadgita, 6:46).

Proper posture: From yogic point of view, proper posture and movement are important components of healthy lifestyle. Posture is a manifestation of physical and mental balance and has powerful influence on physical aging and mental mood. Good posture is very important for energetic and active life. When you are stooped, you look old and feel old. Do not think that slumped posture is natural to old age. So, lift yourself against the physical weight of gravity and mental weight of aging. Whether sitting or standing, maintain a good, firmly upright but comfortable and relaxed posture as asan should be firm but comfortable (Sthir sukham asanam. Yog Darshan). Stand and move with grace and vigor and do not tighten your muscles stiff in unwanted and awkward position. Of the 700 muscles that we have, good posture needs only 5 key muscles. Yogic posture is ergonomically appropriate and physiologically sound. Therefore, avoid poor posture and slouching in a chair as it:

- i) Distorts alignment of bones and creates more pressure on lower back.
- ii) Tenses muscles resulting in muscle pain and stiffness of joints.
- iii) Interferes with breathing and decreases vital capacity.
- iv) Interferes with circulation and oxygen delivery to brain resulting in poor concentration and drowsiness.
- v) Results in poor digestion and constipation.
- vi) Decreases productivity and accelerates aging.

Yog improves physiological functions: Human body is a beautifully robust mechanism capable of taking care of itself. Yog assists this process and improves our physiological functions and health. Scientific research has shown that yogic techniques produce consistent and beneficial physiological changes and have sound scientific basis (Wallace RK. Science, 167: 1751, 1970; Madanmohan et al. Indian J Physiol Pharmacol, 36: 229, 1992). Even a few weeks of yog training can improve physiological and psychological functions. Practice of asans and pranayams results in overall improvement in physical fitness and cardio-respiratory functions. We have reported that yog training for 3 months produces a significant increase in respiratory pressures, breath holding times and hand-grip strength (Madanmohan et al. Indian J Physiol Pharmacol, 36: 229, 1992). This indicates an improved physical strength and cardio-respiratory function. In the same study, we also found a significant decrease in visual and auditory reaction times after the yog training. This indicates a faster and more efficient information processing by the brain. We have also reported that after yog training, exercise-induced stress to cardio-vascular system is less severe (Madanmohan et al. Indian J Physiol Pharmacol, 48:461,2004). This means that yog training can enable one to tolerate more severe exercise load. Other workers have found that yog training produces a significant improvement in dexterity scores and motor speed (Manjunath & Telles, Indian J Physiol Pharmacol, 43: 225, 1999; Dash & Telles, Ibid, 43: 458, 1999). Yogis are capable of remarkable feats of endurance (Vakil RJ. The Lancet, 2: 871, 1950) and control of their autonomic functions (Chhina GS, Proc International Union Physiol Sci, 10: 103, 1974).

Yog for mental health: Just as our body requires physical exercise, balanced diet and bathing for good health, our mind requires inner discipline for mental health. Ordinary mind is a clutter of uncontrolled thoughts. Meditation (dhyan) is the ideal way to calm the mind. Meditation is the inner (antarang) yogic discipline in which there is a continuous flow of thought towards a higher spiritual ideal in a higher spiritual center of our consciousness. It makes the mind one-pointed and produces psychosomatic relaxation. Meditation is not an ordinary concentration. It is a special kind of concentration based on the first two steps of ashtang yog. Thess two steps are i) yam or five moral virtues and

ii) niyam or five spiritual discipline. Jap or repetition of holy name is very effective in achieving success in meditation. Jap should be done in a spirit of love and adoration as mystic worship and not in a mechanical way. Thus performed, jap and dyan are higher forms of worship to which our body, mind and soul, the whole being respond with better health and healing power. That is the secret of the power of yog. For success in dyan and to get attached to the universal Divine Consciousness, we have to create proper mood and loosen our worldly attachments. This attainment of unity and realization of identity is the goal of yog. In this state, our inner soul is freed from the thralldom of ego, mind and senses. Then problems of the world do not disturb our inner harmony. This is the basis of sound mental health, a distinguishing characteristic of a yog sadhak. Yog is equanimity (Samatvam yog uchyate. Bhagavadgita, 2: 48) and evenness of temper is the essential feature of mental health.

Spiritual health and healing: a yogic perspective: Human body is the highest and best creation of the Divine and an instrument for performing noble deeds (Sharir madyam khalu dharm sadhanam). That is why Vedic Rishis have called this body has Devapuri and Ayodhya (Asht chakra navadwara devanam poorvayodhya. Atharvaved, 10: 2: 31). Our body-mind-soul complex is the real temple of the Divine. By yog sadhana, we should keep it fit, clean and pure and seek the Divine within. Spiritual healing is curing a disease by non-physical means, i.e. through powers outside medical intervention. By prayer, meditation and therapeutic touch, the healer channels Divine healing energy that improves patient's life force (pran shakti). There are claims that spiritual healing hastens recovery and even hopelessly ill patients can recover miraculously.

Faith, i.e. belief in a higher universal Divine power is the basis of the spirituality. Faith is what your heart tells you is true when you intellect cannot prove it. One can have faith in a religion or in eternal universal Truth called as Rit in Vedic language. It may be noted that spirituality is distinct from religion. Religion is a particular belief system and mode of worship. Religions are many, but spirituality is one. Religion may nurture spirituality, but spirituality does not depend on it. Prayer is another important component of spiritual life. Prayer can lift the mind and soothe the soul. Prayer enhances health and promotes healing of self and others. It is a medical secret - prayer heals. Performing actions and one's duty with a spirit of selfless service (Nishkam karmyog of Bhagavadgita) is an important component of spiritual life. A person who believes in all-pervading universal Divine power feels connected not only to everyone, but to all forms of life and the whole creation. This promotes universal love which is distinct from selfish romantic love. A person who has these spiritual qualities is an asset to the whole society.

Health benefits of spirituality are significant. Faith in higher Spiritual power relieves one of cares, anxieties and stress and promotes calmness and tranquility. Consequently, his heart rate, blood pressure, muscle tone, oxygen consumption and carbon dioxide production decrease. Even his cholesterol decreases over a period of time. Spiritually-oriented people get sick less often. They recover faster in case they fall sick. It is claimed that patients recover better if family and friends pray for them. Spirituality also decreases the incidence of stroke and death from heart disease and increases survival after surgery. Spirituality helps to prevent / overcome bad habits because spirituality is considered to be bigger than these. As a result, there is increase in longevity and quality of life. Here it is interesting to note that Benson (New England Journal of Medicine, 281: 1133, 1969) has reported that transcendental meditation (TM) can help one to kick off drug addiction, which is a serious problem among the "modern" youth.

Power of pranayam: It needs to be emphasized that slow and deep pranayam breathing has a powerful influence on our wellbeing. A simple exercise to relieve stress and promote wellbeing is to straighten and mildly arch your spine as you inhale (purak) slowly and sequentially and then exhale (rechak) as you bend forward and round your back. It is claimed that pranayam reduces obesity and purifies the body. According to Patanjali, pranayam destroys the covering of inner light and the mind gains the power concentration (Yog Darshan, 2: 52-53). Manusmriti (6: 71) says that pranayam purifies the impurities of senses and the mind.

From the physiological point of view, slow and deep breathing (as in mahat yog pranayam) has the following advantages:

- i) It is economical as it reduces dead space ventilation.
- ii) All the muscles of respiration are strengthened.
- iii) Different parts of the chest and lungs are stretched, improving their flexibility.
- iv) Abdominal viscera are gently massaged by the descending diaphragm.
- v) Venous return (blood flow) to heart is improved.
- vi) Mind-body coordination (thereby health) is improved.

There is evidence that pranayam has therapeutic potential. In an interesting work from our laboratories, we have demonstrated that subjects trained in yog can achieve a state of deep psychosomatic relaxation and significant decrease in oxygen consumption within 5 minutes of practicing savitri pranayam (Madanmohan et al. *The Yoga Review*, 3: 25,1983). Savitri pranayam is a slow, deep and rhythmic breathing in which the ratio between purak, kumbhak, rechak and shunyak (bahya kumbhak) is 2:1:2:1. Telles and Desiraju (*Indian Journal of Medical Research*, 94: 357, 1991) also have demonstrated that pranayam can decrease oxygen consumption significantly. More recently, we have demonstrated the beneficial effect of pranayam in patients having premature ventricular complexes and palpitation (Prakash et al. *International Journal of Cardiology*, 111: 450, 2006; Ravindra et al. *Ibid*, 108: 124, 2006). It is clear that the power of pranayam is available to us freely. Let us use it for the benefit of the humanity.

Yog for prevention and management of stress: The all- pervasive stress and stress disorders are the bane of modern society. The main cause of stress among the affluent sections is material progress without a parallel development of inner, spiritual resources and this results in deep rooted conflicts and disharmony. Healthy balance between worldly enjoyment (bhog) and detachment (tyag) is good for mental health. This point is beautifully taught in a Vedic verse thus: "This whole universe is pervaded by Ishwar. Enjoy this world with a sense of detachment and do not covet the wealth of others" (Ishavasyam idam sarvam. *Yajurved*, 40: 1). Chronic stress results in disturbance of mental and physical equilibrium. The consequence is a host of chronic disorders like hypertension, angina, diabetes mellitus, peptic ulcer, irritable bowel, chronic pains, insomnia and cancers. It is alarming that the incidence of these lifestyle diseases is increasing in India. The problem is more marked in urban areas where people are living a routine of daily rat race. Over-ambitious, ever-struggling and restless persons (type "A" personality) are more prone to stress disorders. They can be screened in their early life by psychophysiological tests and taught yog relaxation techniques as a preventive measure.

Yog has a comprehensive and holistic approach to health and is the best treatment for stress and stress disorders. A judicious combination of simple stretching asans, slow rhythmic pranayams, yog nidra and dhyana is most effective and ideal for prevention and management of stress. Mantr (e.g. AUM) chanting, jap and bhajan singing, especially in a dedicated group (satsang) are very effective for managing stress and improving mental health. Yogeshwar Krishn gives a very high place to jap and bhajan singing when he says "Among the offerings, I am the offering of jap (Yajnanam jap yajnosmi, *Bhagavadgita*, 10: 25) and "He is the best yogi who worships Me by bhajan singing (*Shraddhavan bhajate yo maam*, *Bhagavadgita*, 6: 47).

Many workers have demonstrated the effectiveness of yogic techniques in the control of blood pressure and hypertension (Selvamurthy et al. *Ind J Physiol Pharmacol*, 42: 205, 1998; Datey et al. *Angiology*, 20: 325, 1969). Yog lays great stress on proper diet, a distinctive feature of which is emphasis on purity (satvik ahar) and moderation (mitahar). Overeating is a form of malnutrition that results in conditions like obesity, diabetes mellitus, and arthritis. Yogeshwar Krishn emphasizes the importance of regulation in diet, recreation, sleep-wakefulness and other activities for the yog sadhak (*Yuktahar viharasya*. *Bhagavadgita*, 6: 17). *Chhandogya Upanishd* emphasizes the importance of purity of diet for our inner purity (*Ahar shuddhou satva shuddhi*. 7: 26: 2). Purity of mind results in improved mental health and freedom from psycho-somatic disorders. It is clear that yogic lifestyle is very effective for prevention as well as management of stress and stress disorders.