

Yoga Therapy

Mira Mehta

A Short Review of Yoga Practices

Yoga encompasses many practices and traditions. These serve different purposes; some are suitable for beginners and others for advanced students or specialists. Broadly, and progressively, they include postures, breath control techniques, sensory control, concentration and meditation¹. All are known to have health benefits for body and mind.

There is also a practice tradition of awakening spiritual energy and causing it to rise through the body into the head, which it ultimately pierces in order to unite with cosmic energy. There are various optional ancillary practices such as cleansing techniques, chanting, reciting sacred syllables, and so on, which are adopted by some schools.

Postures form the first stage of practice and are suitable for both beginners and for the general public.

The health benefits of Yoga practices are mentioned in Yoga texts from ancient times to the present day. Ancient works speak in general terms² but mediaeval manuals³ and even more so modern books on Yoga⁴ specify the different effects of different postures.

Breath control also has many health benefits⁵, but there are cautions against learning it too soon as it is dangerous. Postures should be mastered first.

Yoga as Therapy

A system of Yoga therapeutics is thus well established in traditional Yoga texts. It is explicitly stated that postures bring “body tone, health and agility”⁶ and, indeed, that even the infirm and aged can practise.⁷

Yoga practices have become a popular means of alleviating ills. Since 1995 yoga as a therapy has been regulated by the Government of India, Department of AYUSH (formerly ISM&H).

Much work has been done in modern times to systematise sequences and adapt postures for all kinds of health problems⁸. This involves supporting the patient/student in the postures using bolsters, chairs, blankets, etc., so that they can gain the benefit without strain. The success rate of this method of treating patients is very high. This is because it promotes the natural healing energy of the body: the supported poses de-stress the affected parts, restore inner

alignment and create space for blood circulation, Muscle and joint pains, physiological dysfunction and mental and emotional stress can all be alleviated.

This method uses objective criteria to assess the needs of the patient and matches a sequence of postures (which is developed over time) to the problem presented (for example, standing poses and twists for simple back ache and forward bends with the head supported for hypertension). Supports are given according to the build and ability of the person. There is tremendous scope for the teacher/therapist to develop their skill.

The safety and efficacy of posture work for health purposes has been demonstrated over many years and is well documented in books and magazine articles all over the world.

Ayurveda provides further tools for diagnosis and treatment as well as insights into the therapeutic action of the postures.⁹ It classifies people according to constitutional type and advises on appropriate diet and lifestyle for each type. It describes the disease process and how symptoms manifest differently in each type. It maps the vital sites of the body. All these give pointers for Yoga therapy. Ayurveda's holistic approach links perfectly with Yoga.

Yoga Posture (*asana*) Model for Yoga Therapy

In the treatment of health conditions teachers can apply their knowledge of the various categories of Yoga postures and their benefits to devise suitable sequences:

- (a) Standing Poses
- (b) Seated Poses and Forward Bends
- (c) Twisting Poses
- (d) Inverted Poses
- (e) Supine Poses
- (f) Back-Bending Poses
- (g) Relaxation

There is a large body of published work on the health effects of Yoga postures. This has its roots in the explanations of Hatha Yoga texts¹⁰ and all Yoga schools in modern times describe postures.¹¹ The accuracy of posture work has been developed, and there is extensive literature about the therapeutic uses of postures.¹²

This physical and physiological approach can be explained by both Ayurvedic¹³ and allopathic¹⁴ medical systems.

References

- ¹ *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali 2.46-55, 3.1-3
- ² *Svetashvatara Upanishad* 2.13
- ³ *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* 1.17 and Ch. 2
- ⁴ Swami Kuvalayanada, *Asanas* (1933); BKS Iyengar, *Light on Yoga* (1966), Nagendra, Nagarathna and Monro, *Yoga for Common Ailments* (1990); Mira Mehta, *Health through Yoga* (2002)
- ⁵ *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* Ch. 3; Swami Kuvalayanada, *Pranayama* (1966); BKS Iyengar *Light on Pranayama* (1981);
- ⁶ *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* 1.17
- ⁷ *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* 1.64
- ⁸ BKS Iyengar, *Light on Yoga* (1966), Geeta Iyengar, *Yoga: A Gem for Women* (1983); Dr Krishna Raman, *A Matter of Health* (1988), Mira Mehta, *How to Use Yoga* (1994) and *Health through Yoga* (2002) as well as works from other yoga schools. There are many additional Iyengar-method books
- ⁹ Dr David Frawley, *Ayurvedic Healing* (1989); Robert Svoboda, *Ayurveda: Life, Health and Longevity* (1992); Dr Vasant Lad, *Ayurveda, The Science of self-Healing* (1993)
- ¹⁰ Mira Mehta, *Health through Yoga* (2002)
- ¹¹ Dr Krishna Raman, *A Matter of Health* (1988)
- ¹² *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* Ch.1; *Gheranda Samhita* Ch.2
- ¹³ Bihar, Sivananda, Kaivalyadham, Iyengar and so on
- ¹⁴ See 8 above; there are many additional Iyengar-method books