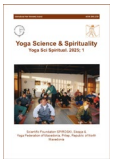
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Overview of Yoga Therapy

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Abstract

BACKGROUND: During the early 1990s, yoga was still widely misunderstood and burdened by cultural and scientific prejudices, particularly in the context of healthcare. Only a limited number of open-minded researchers explored its therapeutic potential. Since then, yoga—especially Hatha Yoga—has gradually gained scientific and clinical recognition as a complementary approach to health and disease management.

AIM: To present a reflective and conceptual overview of yoga therapy as a holistic health approach, contrasting its principles with conventional medical models and emphasizing its therapeutic, philosophical, and lifestyle dimensions.

METHODS: This work is based on a narrative, philosophical, and experiential analysis of yoga therapy, grounded in classical yoga texts, long-term practical experience, and historical perspectives on the development of therapeutic yoga. Comparative conceptual analysis between medical and yogic views of illness and healing is employed.

RESULTS: Yoga therapy views the human being as an integrated physical, energetic, and psycho-mental entity. Classical Hatha Yoga techniques—including asanas, pranayama, kriyas, relaxation, and meditation—demonstrate inherent therapeutic effects when applied through individualized, progressive, and carefully adapted programs. Unlike conventional medicine, yoga therapy emphasizes active patient participation, personal responsibility, lifestyle modification, and mental transformation alongside physical practice.

CONCLUSIONS: Yoga therapy represents an integrative and holistic approach to health that complements modern medicine without claiming to be a universal cure. Its value lies not only in symptom management but also in fostering awareness, acceptance, resilience, and conscious living. The growing volume of scientific publications on yoga, particularly in medical and psychological fields, supports its increasing relevance and integration into contemporary healthcare models.

Introduction

The text that follows was written and published in a brochure titled “YOGA – A Natural Path to a Healthy Heart” in 1993 [1]. I emphasize the year — a period of 32 years ago — because only with that context can we understand the spirit of the time: a period in which thoughts and attitudes toward yoga were heavily influenced by the prejudices that existed then, and which left a deep and negative mark on that era [2].

Only a small number of scientists, those with an open mind, were willing to listen and explore the benefits of yoga and felt motivated to direct their scientific and research curiosity toward studies in the field of yoga [3]. I remember that time very clearly, as well as earlier periods in which scientific attempts to approach yoga could be counted on the fingers of one hand [4]. It is of great importance that these rare events be mentioned and remembered, even if only from a historical perspective.

The text below is my view of that time.

Yoga is a philosophical and educational system that helps people reconnect with their true nature [5]. Through yoga, we explore our inner world and gain the opportunity to understand and fulfill the purpose of our existence, a process known in yoga as self-realization [6]. Even the oldest yoga texts mention that yoga can support people dealing with health issues [7]. They especially emphasize the power of Hatha Yoga techniques [8]:

- Viyāyama – Preparatory Techniques;
- Asanas – Psycho-somatic Static and Dynamic Postures;
- Pranayama – Breathing Technique;
- Kriyas (Shatkarmas) – Cleansing

Techniques;
• Relaxation Techniques;
• Meditation – Psycho-mental Techniques [8], [9].

All these techniques help in controlling and even overcoming illness [10].

Yoga isn't therapeutic just because we adapt it for that purpose, its very nature, especially the practices of Hatha Yoga, carries a healing effect [8], [11]. This therapeutic aspect is one of the most impactful parts of yoga. Because of this, yoga has gained respect and acceptance, especially in the Western world. Some of its effects have been so striking that they changed the minds of people who were once skeptical or critical of yoga [12].

For this reason, we have always focused on therapeutic yoga in our work. Over the years, we've gained extensive practical experience, both through individual cases, people who joined our courses on their own or through a doctor's recommendation, and through specialized research programs conducted within our school.

Illness in Medicine vs. Yoga Therapy

A human being is a complex structure, and yoga views people differently than conventional medicine [13]. Yoga sees the individual as a whole and this difference in perspective shapes how illness is understood and treated in yoga therapy, compared to medical practice [14]. This is also why holistic medicine today is seen as an essential reform in how we approach health and healing [15].

In yoga, a person is understood as an energetic being, something often overlooked in medical science [16]. This energetic aspect strongly influences the state of the body's physical functions. A person also has a unique psycho-mental constitution shaped by the four aspects of the mind (Antahkarana) [6]:

• Manas – the sensory–motor, lower mind;
• Buddhi – the intellect;
• Citta – memory;
• Ahamkara – the ego [6].

Depending on how well these functions operate (defined in yoga by the three Gunas: Sattva, Rajas, and Tamas), they determine the state of the mind, which together with the energetic component influences a person's overall health [7].

Illness (Vyadhi) is often the result of an unhealthy lifestyle, harmful habits, poor nutrition and stress [9]. It can also be influenced by inherited predispositions [15]. According to yoga philosophy, these factors are tied to karma, which plays a significant role in both the development of disease and the process of healing (6). At the same time, illness can also serve as a warning, a wake-up call to become aware of and change the direction of one's life [7].

Medicine tends to view the body in separate parts, as a collection of organs and functions. It often focuses on treating the symptoms rather than addressing the root cause, which may remain unknown. Another characteristic of medical treatment is that the patient is usually passive: they are expected to remain calm and follow instructions, while the doctor acts as the primary agent of healing [15].

In yoga therapy, the opposite approach is taken. The yoga instructor gives guidance and shows the person what they need to do for themselves [11]. In this way, the individual by consciously taking responsibility for himself takes an active role in their own healing process [14].

Characteristics of Yoga Therapy

Yoga therapy is defined by several important components. It's well known that the same techniques are used for both healthy and ill individuals, there is no strict separation between the two. However, the approach changes: the pace, intensity, and combination of techniques are adapted according to the nature and stage of the illness [10]. Based on this, the techniques are organized progressively, and a personalized program is created. The duration of the techniques differs between the regular program and the specialized program. Contraindications for the specific illness are taken very seriously, as well as any additional personal health issues the individual may have. Naturally, this can only be done by a skilled yoga instructor [11].

Beyond the physical techniques, it's important to become aware of the philosophical and spiritual dimensions of yoga, because yoga is not just a set of exercises [5]. Still, we need to realize that yoga is not a religion. Yoga is not a ritual but a method of awareness, a path of self-improvement [6].

To overcome illness, we must shift how we observe and understand things [14]. It's not enough to simply treat the symptoms; a person must also recognize the causes of the illness and the mistakes in their behavior. When people are healthy and feel well, they often become arrogant or indifferent. They start to believe they are untouchable, that what happens to others could never happen to them. This is why, when illness appears, it often comes as a shock [7].

In yoga therapy, changing one's mindset is essential, while the physical benefits come through regular practice [10].

Yoga therapy doesn't work only with the body; it works with the mind as well [6]. Beyond the physical

techniques and their effects through consistent practice, yoga should also be understood as a lifestyle aligned with the laws of nature and the state of one's inner world [5].

Yoga can help us manage certain illnesses by allowing us to face them more clearly [12]. But it should not be viewed as a cure for everything [11]. Some illnesses cannot be easily overcome. Yoga teaches us how to accept illness, how to live with it, and how to accept ourselves under new circumstances [14]. In doing so, we avoid becoming "twice sick": once from the physical condition itself, and a second time from the psychological distress caused by knowing that we are ill [12].

Currently (2025) the published papers about yoga in the Scopus Database with the subject area medicine are in first place (31.5%), in the second place are social sciences (10.5%), the third place belongs to psychology (8.5%) and other areas are less than 8.0% [17].

Conclusions

Yoga therapy represents a comprehensive and integrative approach to health that is rooted in ancient philosophical principles while remaining relevant to contemporary healthcare needs. By viewing the human being as an interconnected physical, energetic, and psycho-mental whole, yoga therapy offers a fundamentally different perspective from conventional symptom-oriented medical models. The therapeutic potential of yoga does not arise from modification alone but is inherent in its classical practices, particularly those of Hatha Yoga, which aim to restore balance, awareness, and self-regulation at multiple levels of human functioning.

Through individualized, progressive, and carefully adapted programs, yoga therapy emphasizes personal responsibility, active participation, and conscious lifestyle change as central elements of the healing process. Beyond physical benefits, it fosters mental clarity, emotional stability, and acceptance, helping individuals not only to manage or alleviate illness but also to transform their relationship with health, disease, and life itself. Importantly, yoga therapy does not claim to be a universal cure; rather, it supports coping, adaptation, and inner resilience, thereby preventing additional psychological suffering associated with illness.

The growing volume of scientific publications on yoga, particularly within the medical, social science, and psychological domains, reflects increasing academic and clinical recognition of its relevance and applicability. This expanding evidence base supports the integration of yoga therapy into holistic health models and underscores its value as both a complementary therapeutic approach and a pathway toward greater self-awareness, responsibility, and well-being.

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