

Astanga Yoga: the Eight fold path of Holistic Health

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Abstract

Human birth is the golden gift of the God & healthy blissful life is its golden achievements, because this is the base on which one can fulfill *purusharth chatushthy -dharma, artha, kama and moksha* of life which is the ultimate goal of human life. This is the reason man has wished for his happy and healthy life from the beginning of the creation. Now a day in modern age humanity is suffering from various health disorders not only at physical level but also at mental, social and spiritual level. Due to materialistic life style each and every child, young, old, men-women all are under the influence health disorders. This is the reason in modern age modern medical science is trying to cure these health disorders but unable to do so because the health disorder is not only at physical level but also at other higher level of personality. That is why the therapeutic approach of modern medical science towards the health disorders is still only at surface level. The question which we aimed in this paper is that since the problem is not only at surface level but also at deeper level of human life so what kind of therapeutic approach towards the health disorders should be adopted to handle the various health disorder at various level of human personality. The answer lies in our ancient Yogic-Ayurvedic literature which gives us holistic vision towards the human life. Our sagacious seers have always applied a holistic approach towards the life. They have thought for holistic human health and in course formulated various scientific principles for acquiring holistic health. These principles are the principles of yoga which deals with the holistic approach towards the health disorders through which holistic health can be acquired.

Key words: Yoga, *Astanga yoga*, Holistic health

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Introduction:

Modern age is the age of physical development which has brought various materialistic comforts for human being but in course it has also raised so many health problems which have made human life miserable. Due to materialistic development and materialistic life style health problem is rising by lips and bound not only at physical level but also at mental, social and spiritual level which has unbalanced the integrated development of human life. In this way it has made life miserable by snatching the peace & pleasure from human life.

Obviously the root of the raising health crisis is the unbalanced materialistic developments. This health crisis is the biggest crisis for human life which has raised the stress level of entire humanity. This is the problem for which modern medical science has no solution. For instance we have many specialist in allopathic system which has lead to depth of knowledge but with missed understanding of widen context of life about how to achieve and generate greater happiness while living in consonance with the demand of surroundingsⁱ.

The reason behind it is that with the physical point of view only physical health problems can be handled but when the problem is not only at physical level but also at mental, social and spiritual level then solution can be found only with the holistic point of view. In Indian view of life this holistic vision is called a yogic vision which *Astanga yoga* gives us towards the life.

Yogic vision

It is the vision towards the life which gives integrated understanding & approach towards the life. It conceptualizes the human being not only merely as the composition of body and mind but also takes care of higher dimension of human personality. The yogic vision permits not merely for developing only physical aspect of life but suggest for integral development of all aspect of life. Yoga brings the equilibrium in thought

action and behaviorⁱⁱ and Excellency in karmaⁱⁱⁱ which results in removal of all the miseries of life. This fact in *Shrimadbhagvat Geeta* has been expressed very beautifully as follow-

Yuktaharviharasya, yukt cheshthasy karmashu.

Yukta swapn bhav bodhasya, yogo bhavati dukhaha.

Shrimadbhagvat geeta-4/16

That is why with the help of yogic vision of life all the health problems at different level of personality can be handled and holistic health can be acquired. To achieve this goal sage Patanjli has formulated the eight fold path of yoga popularly known as *Astanga yoga*.

Astanga yoga

Maharshi Patanjali in his well known Yogic literature 'Yoga sutra' has described the eight fold path of yogic system which is popularly known as *Astanga yoga*. *Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharna, Dhyan* and *Samadhi* are the eight steps of *Astanga yoga*^{iv}. The first five folds of *Astanga yoga* deals with external stage of yogic practice so called Bahirang yoga while last three folds of *Astanga yoga* deals with internal stage of yogic practice so called Antranga yoga^v. The combination of *Bahirang* and *Antranga yoga* constitute complete *Astanga yoga* which is helpful in handling the health problems related to not only the external level of personality but also the internal level of personality. In this way *Astanga yoga* act as the eight fold path of holistic health.

Holistic health

Our sagacious seers has always seen human life integrally and applied a holistic approach towards health, which can be seen in all the health definition given in Indian *Yogic- Ayurvedic* literature. In these literature merely physical health has not been considered as complete health but emphasis has been given for being healthy in all respect at all dimension of human personality.

Taitriyopanishad consider five dimension of human body which has been named as *panch*

kosa. *Panch* means-five and *kosa* means –sheat, layer etc. these five dimension constitute different body called- *Annamaya body*, *Pranamaya body*, *Manomaya body*, *Vigyanamaya body* & *Aanandamaya body*. These five bodies are made up of-*Anna (Earth)*, *Prana (Vital energy)*, *Mana (mind)*, *Vigyan (Intellect)* & *Ananda (Bliss)* respectively. In this way these five bodies collectively constitute the complete human life so the integral health and fitness of all the dimension of human life has only been considered as complete health or holistic health. This integrated vision of health can also be seen in the definition given *Ayurveda* as follow-

Ayurvedic definition of health

Famous Indian literature ‘Ayurveda’ defines the health as being in the state of-

*Samdosha samagnishcha samdhatu malakriya
Prasannatmendriy manah swasthy itayabhidhiyate.
Sushrut sthan-15/48*

That means a person can be said healthy only when whose *Dosha(Vata, Pita & Cuff)*, *Dhatu(Rasa, Rakt, Mans, Meda, Asthi, Majja & Shukra)*, *Agani (fire/body temperature)* is in equilibrium as well as *Mind, Soul & Senses* are in blissful state. From the above Ayurvedic definition of health it is obvious that the Ayurveda dose not only includes the physical health in the complete health but also include the mental and spiritual health in that which is the integrated holistic vision of health. In modern age world health organization also defines the health in same way which can be given as follow-

WHO Definition of health

According to WHO, “The health is not merely the absence of disease or weakness it is the state of physical, mental, social and spiritual well being”. In this way world health organization also support the integrated vision of health which need multi dimensional i.e holistic approach for its achievement.

Astanga yoga and holistic health

Healthy life is the base of blissful human life. It is the base of peace and pleasure. It is the base of

all *Bhoga* (all sensual pleasure) & *Apvarga* (libration). So we should take care of health without a good health we cannot achieve even a single goal of life. That is why the world famous ancient Ayurvedic literature *charak samhita* has said that

“dharmarthkammokshanam arogyam mulmutmam”.
Charak Samhita -1/15

Which means health is the base all four goal (*purusharth chatushthy- dharma, artha, kama and moksha*) of human life. Due to this importance of health in life our sages, seers, saints has given great emphasis on good health and has applied holistic approach towards it, because merely a physical health can’t be helpful in achievement of all goals of human life. Without being healthy mentally, socially and spiritually one can’t achieve the spiritual goal (libration) i.e resting in one’s own essential nature, which is the ultimate goal of *Astanga yoga*^{vi} as well as human life. This is the reason *Astanga yoga* adopts the holistic approach and gives eight folds model of holistic health.

Astanga yoga & physical health

Sage patanjali has described so many principles in his famous yogic literature *yoga sutra* such as *asanas, pranayamas, brahmcharya, sauch, taps etc* which can lead us towards the physical health. Accordind to maharshi patanjali a pose which gives steadiness and comfortability called *asana* which gives steadiness & helps the yogi to be not affected by the pair of opposites.^{vii} The regular practice of *yogasanas* helps in maintaining the proper body flexibility and muscles tone.

Having perfected in *asana*, the control of breath (*prana & apana*) is called *pranayama*^{viii}. The regular practice of *pranayama* helps us re-educating our breathing in pattern, manipulating our energy level & enhancing body immunity. Swami abhvedananda says, “the yogis of India claim that only through the right breathing pattern all the disease can be cured and there is a science behind it”.^{ix}

Brahmcharyas help us in control of sex energy and enhancing the body strength^x. *Saucha* helps in internal-external purification as well as developing dispassion towards one's own body & towards the body of others. *Tapas* are helpful in destroying impurities and developing perfection in body and senses. In this way these practices have very good impact on our physical health.

Astanga yoga & mental health

Yoga is the cessation of thought waves of the mind^{xi} because Mind is the root of mental health^{xii} which after the purification leads towards the spiritual health i.e. seer towards its essential nature which is the ultimate goal of yoga^{xiii}. That is why with the comparison to body and mind, mind is thousand times more valuable than body.^{xiv}

Even the constitution of mind is very subtle still the mind has in regulation and control of all the physical & psychological activities. This is reason the mental disorders are more harmful and dangerous than any physical disorders.^{xv} That is why the efforts have been made both in western and eastern world to understand the nature of mind, but first attempt has been made in Indian *vaidik* age.^{xvi} *Rigveda* is the most ancient world famous literature which enlightens the nature of mind.^{xvii}

Due to its significance of mental health in spiritual development maharshi patanjali in his *Astanga yoga* discuss the mental disorders not only at surface level but also at deeper level & classified it as nine major obstacles of yoga. Nine yoga obstacles are *vyadhi, styan, sansya, pramada, aalasya, avirati, bhranti, darshan, alabdhbhumikatva* and *anavasthitava* are called *yoga Antraya*.^{xviii} *Yoga sutra* has also enlisted the five root causes of mental disorder - *avidya, asmita, raga, dwesha & abhinivesh* in the form of *panch kalesha*.^{xix}

Apart from the discussion of mental disorders and its root causes sage patanjali has given various principles for mental health like -*Kriya yoga*, concentration & meditation etc. these principles act as the therapeutic techniques

through which all the unwanted mental waves (mental disorders) can be controlled and eliminated. Austerity, study of scriptures, and surrender to god constitute *Kriya yoga* which play significant role in attaining success in *Samadhi* and destroying the root cause of mental disorders i.e. *panch klesha*.^{xx} Concentration and meditation play significant role in channelization of mental waves in righteous direction which leads towards the mental.

Astanga yoga & social health

To bring the balance in personal & social life *Astanga yoga* also deals with various principles which lead towards the social health. Specially the first step of *Astanga yoga yama* (*ahinsa, satya, asteya, brahamcharya* and *aparigraha*) has significant role in social health and these principles are called *mahavratam* when they are followed universally without the any restriction of class, place, time, and circumstances.^{xxi} These principles purify our social behavior and help us to constitute a good society.

Ahimsa restrict us from any types of violence which results in non-violence (*vair tyaga*) toward entire surroundings^{xxii} (living as well as non living beings like-man, animal, plant, nature etc). *Satya* (truth) is an essential requirement of healthy personal & social life without which formation of a faithful society is impossible. *Asteya* is essential for constitution of corruption free society. *Brahamcharya* is essential for channelizing sexual energy in righteous direction and maintaining the personal- social sexual purity. Only for one's own pleasure not accumulating the physical resources more than ones need is called *Aparigraha*. In this way *Aparigraha* is essential for distribution of living resources to all the living beings and formation of a healthy & happy society.

Astanga yoga & spiritual health

The main goal of *Astanga yoga* is the acquiring the intuitive knowledge (*ritambhara pragya*) through *Samadhi*^{xxiii} means for the removal of ignorance, because without the removal of ignorance the seer cannot rest in his on nature

which is essential for liberation called state of kaivalya.^{xxiv} The state of *kaivalya*, is the ultimate state of spiritual health, which is the supreme goal of human life.

This is the reason the main aims and objective of *Astanga yoga* is to lead the seer towards its own nature i.e the spiritual health.^{xxv} For this *Astanga yoga* describes various principles like- *Kriya yoga, Ishwarpranidhan, Antranga yoga etc.* which lead us towards the spiritual health. *Kriya yoga* play significant role in removing the all afflictions of the body & attaining the stage of *Samadhi* through inhibition of *chittvrities*.^{xxvi} *Ishwarpranidhan*, complete surrender to the God or acting as an instrument in the hands of the God help us in the detachment of materialistic world & attainment of *Samadhi*.^{xxvii}

Dharna, dhyana & Samadhi collectively has been named as *Sanyama*.^{xxviii} These three practices with respect to previous five practices of *Astanga yoga* is known as *Antranga yoga*. The *Antranga yoga* play significant role in attainment of light of intuition (*ritambhara pragya*) which is essential for removal of ignorance and rest the seer in his real nature required for *kaivalya* i.e the state of ultimate spiritual health.

Conclusion

From the above discussion it is obvious that each and every steps of *Astanga yoga* has been scientifically arranged in an integrative manner with an integrated approach of holistic health. Each & every steps are essential for acquiring integrated holistic health. These eight steps of *Astanga yoga* are also holistic in terms of their significance for integrated health which plays a significant role not only in the attainment of physical health but also mental, social and spiritual health.

In this way *Astanga yoga* act as the eight fold path of holistic health. So there is the need to address the *Astanga yoga* in innovative and integrated manner so that its significance in the attainment of holistic health can be enlighten.

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