

How Yoga Fits In

“Yogaschittavrtti nirodhah” - Yoga is the settling of the mind into silence (Yoga Sutras chapter 1 verse 2)

“Yoga is the science of right living and as such is intended to be incorporated in daily life. It works on all aspects of the person: the physical, vital, mental, emotional, psychic and spiritual”.

Swami Satyananda Saraswati, in the Introduction to *Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha*

“Yoga is quite simply the most powerful system of overall health and well-being I have ever seen. This single comprehensive system can reduce stress, increase flexibility, improve balance, promote strength, heighten cardiovascular conditioning, lower blood pressure, reduce overweight, strengthen bones, prevent injuries, lift mood, improve immune function, increase the oxygen supply to the tissues, foster psychological equanimity and promote spiritual well-being...and that’s only a partial list” (Dr. Timothy McCall MD - in Yoga as Medicine

Some introductory concepts

What follows is my take on various route maps in yoga philosophy that make sense to me as I work my way along the path. It seems to me that they have in common the concept of *balance*.

There are many Yogic and Ayurvedic models that can be used to address various imbalances:

- Gunas
- Doshas
- Chakras
- Warming/cooling/energy model (Pingala and Ida)
- Excess/deficiency model (Brhmana/Langhana)

The concept of suffering/distress/dukkha being a result of imbalances is a feature in several of these systems. All can potentially be complementary to Western systems of psychotherapy and possible medication.

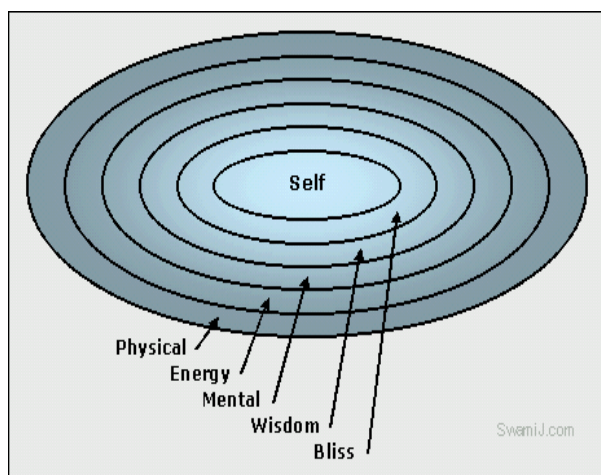
Hatha yoga is probably one of the most familiar definitions and also a map that can read across to Western anatomy and physiology. The very word conveys balance and evenness of energetic pathways: *ha* meaning sun, solar,



warm, positive, “masculine” energy and *tha* meaning moon, lunar, cool, “feminine” energy. Often used to convey the concept of balance in the autonomic nervous system, especially in modern stressed-out society working in overdrive in the sympathetic nervous system. To create balance or equanimity we often have to focus more on the parasympathetic nervous system, the “rest and digest” function.

The Koshas

Ancient teachings called the Upanishads have a beautiful and comprehensive philosophical model of five levels of existence in the human condition, called the 5 layers or levels of consciousness, the Koshas. These represent



- the physical body, the *annamaya kosha*;
- the energy level, *pranamaya kosha*
- two layers of the mind (the reactive mind *manomaya kosha* and the wisdom or observing mind *vijnanamaya*) and
- the bliss level, *anandamaya kosha*. Beyond (or within) the five layers, in this model, is the eternal Self.

In the Classical Yoga texts illness in general is conceived of as imbalance between the Koshas. As the energy level, the *Pranamaya Kosha*, is directly linked to both body and

mind, breath practices are integral to the Yogic way of helping with these imbalances.

The Ayurvedic model

Ayurveda continues to be one of India’s traditional health systems. The principles were incorporated into traditional Tibetan medicine too. Key concepts of Ayurvedic medicine include universal interconnectedness (among people, their health, and the universe), the body’s constitution (*prakriti*), and life forces (*dosha*), which are often compared to the biologic humours of the ancient Greek system. Each individual’s constitution or *prakriti* comprises a mixture of the doshas, with usually one being predominant. Imbalance (most often an excess of one of the doshas) is called *vikriti*; the object of treatment is to restore balance. Ayurvedic psychology has a comprehensive approach including attention to physical factors such as diet, herbs and exercise, including asanas.

Ayurveda regards mental disorders as due to imbalance of the doshas and of the gunas. Using these concepts, Ayurvedic physicians prescribe individualized treatments, including compounds of herbs or proprietary ingredients, and diet, exercise, and lifestyle recommendations; yoga practices are often

included, especially using mantra repetition. Studies have examined Ayurvedic medicine, including herbal products, for specific conditions, one of which was schizophrenia. However, there aren't enough well-controlled clinical trials and systematic research reviews—the gold standard for Western medical research—to prove that the approaches are beneficial.

Brief notes on evidence for effectiveness of yoga in mental health

With its paradigms of balancing the body, breath, mind, doshas, koshas, gunas etc., in many ways one might think yoga *is* stress management. The problem is that gathering robust scientific evidence in order to convince clinicians is very challenging; research is very expensive and time-consuming. The absence of evidence doesn't necessarily mean an intervention does not work; it is equally if not more likely that the research has not been done or has not been done to the gold standard of the randomized (double blind probably impossible) controlled trial.

Yoga practices are so varied that researching a “standard dose” and a “standard practice” of yoga is all but impossible; and a yoga practitioner may not be impressed by a trial of yoga practice of a few weeks' duration. Deciding on the type of control activity must be difficult too. “There is a high risk of bias in many reported studies and most do not report any information about safety, including possible adverse effects of the yoga intervention”. (*Sat Bir Singh Khalsa, Cohen, McCall and Telles (2016)*)

Fortunately, in the past decade, the evidence base has expanded rapidly and funding bodies such as the NHS are increasingly aware of the positive role that yoga practice can play in health care.

Stress & Anxiety

The yoga view of anxiety is that it is associated with diffuse or scattered energies (? excess of vata) and that the physical practices help to stabilise and harmonise so that the person becomes able to meditate.

Yoga can help with anxiety in numerous ways. It offers specific techniques that can reduce symptoms, both in the short and longer terms. The increase in vagal tone as part of the up-rating of the parasympathetic nervous system (the relaxation response) is a key part of yoga's effectiveness. Because of its focus on tuning in to inward states (svadhyaya) yoga can also help to get beneath the surface of anxiety to figure out what might be triggering it or maintaining it, such as habitual thought patterns, your behavioural responses etc. (*McCall, T*). One of the key yogic techniques used to counter anxiety is to focus on lengthening the exhale.

The afternoon session will focus on discussion and practices relevant to stress and anxiety, as well as some information about cautions and contra-indications.

Depression

Stress or chronic anxiety can be a big factor in the onset of depression, so the known benefits of yoga for anxiety disorders and stress can be relevant for depression too. The yogic model of low or depleted energy (such as an excess of *tamas*) suggests that practices that raise energy may be helpful.

There are innumerable studies on the benefits of mindfulness in helping to prevent relapses in depression. More recently there has been more of a focus on research into the full range of yoga practice rather than the mind alone.

The morning session will focus on discussion and practices relevant to helping with depression and a mention of some cautions/contra-indications

And finally.....

“Harmony and balance of mind are more important in life than spiritual realization. If your mind is harmonious and balanced, you will always find peace and contentment wherever you are. If the mind is disturbed, agitated, dissipated, and fickle, then even in the quietest corner of the globe or a remote cave in the Himalayas you will not find peace and solace. Therefore, deal with the mind.”

Quoted in “Mind, Mind Management and Raja Yoga” by Swami Niranjanananda

References and further sources of information

COURSE: Yoga and Mental Health - a module devised and taught by Sns. Amarajyoti and Shantipriya

BOOKS

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Wilson, Rob and Bransch, Rhena (2006) *Cognitive Behavioural Therapy for Dummies* John Wiley & Sons

WEBSITES

Mental Health First Aid courses are increasingly widely available in all parts of the UK

www.mhfaengland.org England

www.smhfa.com - Scotland

www.mhfa-wales.org - Wales

www.communityni.org Northern Ireland

www.nice.org.uk National Institute for Health and Care Excellence - evaluates the evidence base of treatments and makes recommendations, widely used for NHS. Useful section on Lifestyle and Wellbeing

www.mind.org.uk A well-known mental health charity and campaigning organisation that has lots of user-friendly information

www.breathingspacescotland.co.uk - details of a confidential phone line started in 2002 initially to reach out to depressed young men.

www.rcpsych.ac.uk Royal College of Psychiatrists. Useful and reliable information on all sorts of mental health conditions. Has a Spirituality Interest Group with several thousand members.

www.scottishrecovery.net An excellent organization and website dedicated to the concept of recovery from severe mental health problems with moving accounts by people of their own journey to recovery.

www.mindedinstitute.com ; founded by Heather Mason. Specializes in evaluating research on yoga therapy and running CPD courses. Solid reliable information. Useful blog posts.

www.lindagraham-mft.net - resources for recovering resilience