

“MODERN MEDICINE, MEET YOGA”

By

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Dr. Ananda has followed in the footsteps of his esteemed father, Dr. Swami Gitananda Giri, who in the 1970s forged a collaboration between his International Centre for Yoga Education and Research (ICYER) and the JIPMER Hospital in India. Dr. Ananda has also devoted a great deal of time to building a bridge between Yoga and medicine, both in terms of research and Yoga therapy. In this article, he examines Yoga as a traditional spiritual path of self-discovery and as a therapy applied in treating illnesses—and discusses the unique challenges facing the field.

Health is not just the World Health Organisation’s definition of a state of wellbeing at the physical, mental, emotional, social, spiritual levels, but it is actually a very dynamic state of being. If someone is looking at *Swasth*, one is considering real health and wellbeing as opposed to *Arogya*, the mere absence of disease. *Swasth*, in the ancient Indian definition, looks at health as balance and harmony, with a sense of wellbeing at all levels of existence. It’s not as though you attain to a state of health and stay there forever. It’s more an issue of one day up, one day down. How do we regain our balance? This question is what a *dynamic* state of health is all about.

Modern medicine has looked at the human being as just a complex of multiple systems perceived as if through a microscopic breakdown-study, breaking down the complete integration into pieces, pieces, and more pieces in trying to understand the whole. We must remember that the whole is always more than the sum of its parts. From the Yoga perspective, you are not just the body, the *annamaya kosha*, the anatomical level of existence. You have energy, life, which is *prana*. You have the *pranamaya kosha*, the physiological level of existence.

What then, makes the human being special? The concept of mind, the *manomaya kosha*, is the psychological level of existence where we think. Then, humans have a higher intellectual ability where one starts to question life, question one’s role, the universe, etc. This is the *vijnanamaya kosha*. Following that, as we understand our link with the cosmos, we dwell in the *anandamaya kosha*, where we are in tune with our cosmic, universal level of existence.

While modern medicine looks at the human being through a microscope, as a breakdown-study, the yogic perspective is one of a build-up telescopic view. They seem to be very different from each other, but they are actually two eyes that perceive the world, which allows us to experience a new dimension. If I look through just my right eye, I see one thing. When I look through the other, it has another dimension, and when I put them both together, I get the third dimension, depth-perception. When we build a bridge between Yoga and modern science—be it research, be it therapy, be it just knowledge—we gain depth-perception and we start to understand a new dimension to the human being.

The essence of all disorders, according to the yogic philosophy, is basically the mind and something that is slightly beyond the mind, the psyche, called *adhi*. When we talk about health and disease from a yogic perspective, we understand that all disease starts in the mind or something above the mind. In the psyche is where the initial ripples of disease are set into motion. The *anandamaya* and the *vijnanamaya koshas* cannot really be disturbed much, as they are more universal in nature.

However, the lower three *koshas* may get disassociated. This concept, called *nara*, or psychic disassociation, is where the mind, body, and emotions are not aligned as they should be. They don't fit in the right place in the right way anymore. This *adhi* starts and percolates down into the *manomaya kosha* level, the mind, where we experience agitations of the mind. We get depressed, anxious, feel off, there is paranoia, or fear as this tension starts to manifest. This further percolates down into the energy level, the *pranamaya kosha*, where the energy patterns get agitated. The *nadis*, or psychic channels, that are conduits for the energy, get weakened and become unstable. They are not able to tolerate the energy flows anymore. At this point, there is something definitely wrong happening. A sensitive person can usually feel it.

All Indian systems of medicine look at the digestive system as the root, where all diseases enter the body. The digestive system goes down, goes haywire, or some malfunction occurs, and then the body starts to develop disease. This can be said to occur in four phases: (1) Psychic phase: mere mental jitteriness (2) Psychosomatic phase: blood pressure starts to rise, heart rate goes faster, blood sugar and the biochemical parameters are off balance. These two phases are transient. You can deal with the psychic and psychosomatic phases. With a bit of relaxation people can bounce back; (3) Somatic phase: when the previous two conditions have gone on long enough, they settle into the organs. When this happens, permanent hypertension, diabetes, asthma start to manifest. Uncontrolled, it leads to the final stage. (4) Organic stage: the target organ is damaged. For someone with diabetes or hypertension, damage may occur in the eyes, the kidney, and the heart.

These yogic concepts enable us to understand that it is not just the bacteria, the germs, or the viruses that cause disease. Furthermore, Yoga understands that you can influence the mind through the body. When you adopt a posture, an *asana*, you are posturing a certain somato-psychic effect. Through the yogic *kriyas*, you work on channelling the process of purification at physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual levels. This is why the *shat karmas*, the cleansing actions of Yoga, and the concept of Kriya Yoga as in Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra* with *tapas*, *svadhyaya* and *Ishvara pranidhana*—discipline, introspective self-analysis and giving over to the Higher Power, respectively—are processes of purification that enable us to move from a state of disease and illness, to a state of ease and health.

Yoga is the original mind-body medicine, given that Yoga understands the principle that mind (the higher) affects the body (the lower). So how do we *prove* its efficacy? We must be vigilant in researching Yoga using a modern paradigm. Typically, we end up trying to make Yoga fit in a box. The only advantage, from experience and what I've seen, is that you get a glimpse of one effect of the technique, or one effect of Yoga. This enables the modern scientist to say: "This is also science in our eyes." It sort of validates it. But, we shouldn't stop there. The effects of Yoga are far greater than that.

For example, *Savasana* is a very good relaxer. It reduces blood pressure and the heart rate. When practiced, there's a decrease in oxygen consumption and the metabolism, and peripheral blood flow improves. There's a tendency to say, "*Savasana* is very good for relaxation, and it will be very good for hypertensive patients." This is how modern science looks at it. Make it a capsule, patent it, and then sell it! We must realize that, just as only 10 percent of an iceberg is above water, what we perceive and record through modern scientific methods is also only 10 percent—and I am being very kind. *Savasana* is about an attitude of renunciation, an attitude of relaxation, and the psychosomatic, psycho-spiritual benefits that occur. These benefits are so significant that what we see is like the little finger of the whole human being that we perceive through modern science.

It's easy to ask: "Then, why should we do research?" We should do research to know the little finger. Eventually, we become aware of the other fingers and slowly develop equipment, methods, and models that start to look at the big picture of Yoga. But if we say: "No, we aren't going to research it," we are shutting out an entire eye. Even if one eye is not able to see much, it is still giving us a new dimension. Hence, to me, research is absolutely essential.

The next question is: "Where is the funding?" For a pharmaceutical trial I can get thousands of dollars. For a Yoga trial, it is difficult to come by a hundred *rupees*. But, it's getting better, at least in India. We are getting funding, the Indian government is setting up Yoga research centers in various medical institutions. We also have Yoga universities like S-VYASA (the Yoga University located near Bangalore), which is doing a lot of work, as well as Swami Ramdev, who's started Patanjali Vidyapeeth and is beginning to do some research too. However, most of the movements are still in their infancies and there are a lot of teething problems. This is because, if we aren't careful in this craze for research validation, we end up saying. "*Savasana* is *only* good for hypertensive patients." What then happens is that we label it, put it in a corner, and forget that everybody can do *Savasana*! Its effects will be different on different people.

In fact, we studied that. We did a study showing that right nostril breathing (close your left nostril and breathe through the right one) increases heart rate and blood pressure. We tested it on people with hypertension and showed it doesn't. Therefore, a technique that causes a rise in a normal healthy volunteer doesn't necessarily have the same effect on a person who already has higher blood pressure. The technique has a built-in safety-mechanism. We're now starting to see that. Otherwise, it's very easy to say: "Okay, this technique has this effect in normal subjects." But then, does it have the same effect on other patients? Because we are not carrying out the research on patients, just on normal subjects, we say: "Yes, because this works on a normal subject, we can apply it." But nobody is doing the second part.

Naturally, Yoga helps everyone. So, they will find something positive to say: "This is the Yoga protocol for cancer." And it is not. Someone can do a whole group of other techniques and get the same effect because it is Yoga as a whole, which produces the effect. When trying to understand and research Yoga, it can't be put in a box. Of course, there are starting points when one must, but one ought to be aware of it: "I am putting it in the box." And this is what we have done. We have found that *Savasana* does this, *pranayama* does that, and *Surya Namaskar* does another thing. At that point, it's important to take Yoga back out of the box and ask, "What else is happening? Are some qualitative changes occurring?" Personally, I feel that we haven't even seen 0.1% of the effects of Yoga in all the research done until now.

The practice of *Brahma Mudra* in Yoga, with the head in the four different directions, is a beautiful example of this. The idea of *Brahma Mudra* is not just neck health, it's not just the sound vibration—"Aaa, Ooo, Eeee, Mmmm"—it's not just the sense of relaxation that helps you to bring health, but also how it aids in developing the ability to look at different perspectives and to come to a balanced view. Each time you go away (turning the head to one side), you come back (bringing the head back to the center), you go away, you come back (turning the heads to all four directions and back to the center). But ultimately, you are coming to one perspective that takes into view all these perspectives. This is what we need. When that starts to happen, we start understanding what Yoga does in medical terms, in scientific terms. And we begin to understand science through the yogic perspective, which is very beautiful because the yogic perspective on science expands the science.

Modern medical science has become so much of a science they have forgotten the art part and the heart part. When a doctor deals with a patient, is not just a diagnosis. It is not just a lab-report. The doctor is dealing with a human being. The manner in which he or she deals with a

human being is the art part that comes from the heart. The tests, the diagnosis, the treatment may come from the head, but, even in modern medical science, a bridge must exist between the heart and the head.

Some might say: “Yoga therapy may threaten the pharmaceutical industry and they won’t like that.” Pharmaceutical industries should never be afraid of Yoga or see it as a threat because Yoga takes discipline and, it’s not just the technique, it’s the lifestyle and the attitude. What attitude are you going to take toward that which stresses you? Life is filled with stresses. And stress originates in the mind and expresses as disease in the body. Even in caves, there are going to be stresses because of the lizards, the snakes, etc. The top of the mountain is going to be cold. The moment you perceive something as stressful, the stress-reaction kicks in.

The key lies in not perceiving something as stressful. This is easier said than done. It’s like if there are thorns everywhere, you put on a pair of slippers and you can walk around. This perspective toward life becomes the key attitude, the key element in Yoga as a therapy. How do you develop this attitude? How do you measure this attitude? How do you inculcate it in a person who is suffering from diabetes or asthma or cancer?

This is why the concept of yogic counselling is so vital in Yoga therapy, and most people don’t do it. If someone comes and says, “I have hypertension,” and if I say, “Do this *pranayama*.” Or, “I have cancer,” and I say, “Do that *asana*.” This is no longer Yoga Therapy, it isn’t Yoga Chikitsa. I call these instances Yogopathy. Just like allopathy and homeopathy, with all their boxes. We have limited Yoga into the confines of a box. The metaphysical aspect is not going to manifest unless there is an alteration in lifestyle (which includes diet, how you eat, how you relax, how you work, how you sleep, etc.). And how do you bring about the adoption of a yogic lifestyle? How do you inculcate it? How do you make sure they follow it? How do you motivate them to persevere? This is where it becomes challenging. It’s no easy fix.

Let’s recognize that we don’t have a cure for everything. We don’t know everything about human beings. We don’t know everything about diseases. So, why not take the tools that are there in other systems of medicine, use them in an integrated fashion with our Yoga system, to enhance the quality of healthcare and the beneficial effects to any patient who comes to us? I think that if modern doctors were to understand and utilize other systems it would create an integrated system of medicine that can enhance the benefits of our patients. Rather than saying, “I know the way and, if you die, you should die using my medical treatment.” We should say, “I want you to live, I want you to be the best you can and, if it is through modern medicine, well and good; if it is Yoga therapy, if it is Siddha medicine, Ayurveda, if it is a combination of them, well and good. That’s openness!

Dr. Bhavanani is the son of Yogamaharishi Dr. Swami Gitananda Giri and Yogacharini Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani. He grew up in the gurukula of Ananda Ashram in Pondicherry, India, where the knowledge of the art and science of Yoga was imbibed as a 24-hour-a-day sadhana. Following in his father’s footsteps, he became a doctor in order to combine eastern wisdom with the best of western science. He is Deputy Director (Yoga) in the Mahatma Gandhi Medical College and Research Institute of the Sri Balaji Vidyapeeth University. He directs the International Centre for Yoga Education and Research in Pondicherry, India, and a featured speaker at Yoga conferences around the globe. For more information: www.icyer.com