



## INDIAN RICH TRADITIONAL APPROACH TOWARDS WELL-BEING IN CONTEXT OF NEW NORMAL

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### ABSTRACT

Lockdowns have been imposed around the world to contain the spread of the corona virus pandemic. However, excessively stringent measures might be a threat to people's mental health. This study examines the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on psychological well-being and its relationship to habit and routine modifications. The emergence of COVID -19 pandemic has severely impacted individuals from all walks of life. The rapid spread of the disease to nearly all parts of the country has posed enormous health, economic, environmental and social challenges to the entire human population. In the absence of any effective drugs and vaccines for treatment, social distancing and other preventive measures are the only alternatives. Lockdown is among one of the options suggested by World Health Organisation (WHO) to reduce spread of the virus. India was quick to close its international borders and enforce the world's largest COVID lockdown on March 22, 2020. In this new normal situation when people are almost inside their room and spending time with great worry and stress, our rich traditional concept of yoga is the only weapon to fight against the unwanted virus as well as to built our health and well being in the positive direction.

**Keywords** : Tradition, Yoga, Well-being, New Normal and COVID-19.

### INTRODUCTION

The culture of India refers collectively to the thousands of distinct and unique cultures of all religions and communities present in India. India's languages, religions, dance, music, architecture, food and customs differ from place to place within the country. Indian culture, often labelled as an amalgamation of several cultures, spans across the Indian subcontinent and has been influenced by a history that is several millennia old ( John Keay , 2011) , (Michaels, Axel,2004). Many elements of India's diverse cultures, such as Indian religions, philosophy, cuisine, languages, dance, music and movies have a profound impact across the Indosphere, Greater India and the world. Indian religions, sometimes also termed Dharmic religions or Indic religions, are the religions that originated in the Indian subcontinent; namely Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism. These religions are also all classified as Eastern religions. Although Indian religions are connected through the history of India, they constitute a wide range of religious communities, and are not confined to the Indian subcontinent ([en.wikipedia.org/Indian-religion](http://en.wikipedia.org/Indian-religion)).

Evidence attesting to prehistoric religion in the Indian subcontinent derives from scattered Mesolithic rock paintings. The Harappan people of the Indus Valley Civilisation, which lasted from 3300 to 1300 BCE (mature period 2600–1900 BCE), had an



early urbanized culture which predates the Vedic religion.

The documented history of Indian religions begins with the historical Vedic religion, the religious practices of the early Indo-Iranians, which were collected and later redacted into the Vedas. The period of the composition, redaction and commentary of these texts is known as the Vedic period, which lasted from roughly 1750 to 500 BCE (Michaels, Axel 2004). The philosophical portions of the Vedas were summarized in Upanishads, which are commonly referred to as Vedānta, variously interpreted to mean either the "last chapters, parts of the Veda" or "the object, the highest purpose of the Veda" (Adams, 2010). The early Upanishads all predate the Common Era, five of the eleven principal Upanishads were composed in all likelihood before 6th century BCE, (Bauman ,2016), Patrick Olivelle (2014) and contain the earliest mentions of Yoga and Moksha( Nikki Stafford ,2006).

India is the birthplace of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, and other religions. They are collectively known as Indian religions.6] Indian religions are a major form of world religions along with Abrahamic ones. Today, Hinduism and Buddhism are the world's third and fourth-largest religions respectively, with over 2 billion followers altogether (Jump2007, Nrn.org.np. 2010 and Religioustolerance.org. 2010) and possibly as many as 2.5 or 2.6 billion followers (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maharishi\_Vedic\_Approach\_to\_Health ). Followers of Indian religions – Hindus, Sikhs, Jains and Buddhists make up around 80–82% population of India.

Vedic Philosophy :

One Vedic model of the mind is expressed by the famous metaphor of the chariot in the Katha Upanisad and the Bhagavad-Gita. A

person is compared to a chariot that is pulled in different directions by the horses yoked to it, with the horses representing the senses. The mind is the driver who holds the reins, but next to the mind sits the master of the chariot – the true observer, the self, who represents a universal unity. Without this self no coherent behaviour is possible.

In the Taittiriya Upanisad 2.7, an individual is represented in terms of five different sheaths or levels that enclose the individual's self (Figure 3). These levels, shown in an ascending order, are:

- The physical body (annamaya kosa)
- Energy sheath (pranamaya kosa)
- Mental sheath (manomaya kosa)
- Intellect sheath (vijñanamaya kosa)
- Bliss sheath (anandamaya kosa)

These sheaths are defined at increasingly finer levels. At the highest level is the Self. It is significant that ananda is placed higher than the intellect. This is a recognition of the fact that eventually meaning is communicated by associations which are extra-logical.

The energy that underlies physical and mental processes is prana. One may look at an individual at three different levels. At the lowest level is the physical body, at the next higher level is the energy system at work, and at the next higher level are the thoughts. Since the three levels are interrelated, the energy situation may be changed by inputs either at the physical level or at the mental level. When the energy state is agitated and restless, it is characterised by rajas; when it is dull and lethargic, it is characterised by tamas. The state of equilibrium and balance is termed sattva.

Prana, or energy, is described as the currency, or the medium of exchange, of the psychophysiological system. The higher three



levels are often lumped together and called the mind.

The key notion is that each higher level represents characteristics that are emergent on the ground of the previous level. In this theory, mind is an emergent entity, but this emergence requires the presence of the Self.

The mind may be viewed to be constituted by five basic components: manas, ahamkara, citta, buddhi and atman, which cannot be reduced to gross elements.

Manas is the lower mind which collects sense impressions. Its perceptions shift from moment to moment. This sensory-motor mind obtains its inputs from the senses of hearing, touch, sight, taste and smell. Each of these senses may be taken to be governed by a separate agent.

Ahamkara is the sense of I-ness that associates perceptions to a subjective centre and thus creates “personal” experiences.

Once sensory impressions have been related to I-ness by ahamkara, their evaluation and resulting decisions are arrived at by buddhi, the intellect. Manas, ahamkara and buddhi are collectively called the “internal instruments” (antahkarana) of the mind.

Next we come to citta, which is the memory bank of the mind. These memories constitute the foundation on which the rest of the mind operates. But citta is not merely a passive depository. The organisation of the new impressions throws up instinctual or primitive urges that create diverse emotional states. (<https://blog.mygov.in/mental-health-and-wellbeing-through-yoga/>).

This mental complex surrounds the innermost aspect of consciousness, which is called atman; it is of course the same as the self or the brahman. Atman is considered to be beyond a finite enumeration of categories.

### **Hierarchical Levels:**

As we have said before, the state of mind is mediated by the pranic energy. This energy, at its highest level, is concentrated at certain points in the body. In the Tantras seven, eight or nine primary points of focus, which are called chakras, are described. It has been argued by some that the beginnings of this system go right back to Vedic times, as the Atharvaveda 10.2.31-2 describes the body as being eight-wheeled and nine-doored (asta chakra navadvara devanam puriyodhya). Their positions appear to be areas in the brain which map to different points on the spinal cord. The lowest one is located at the bottom of the vertebral column (muladhara chakra). The next chakra is a few inches higher at the reproductive organs (svadhisthana chakra). The third chakra (manipura chakra) is at the solar plexus. The heart region is the Anahata chakra. The throat has the fifth locus called the visuddhi chakra. Between the eyebrows is the ajna chakra. At the crown of the head is the sahasrara chakra.

It may be assumed that the stimulation of these chakras in a proper way leads to the development of certain connections in the brain that make it easier for the I-ness to experience the Self. In other words, the chakras are points of basic focus inside the brain that lead to the explication of the cognitive process, (<https://blog.mygov.in/mental-health-and-wellbeing-through-yoga/>).

### **New Normal Situation and Wellbeing**

The emergence of COVID -19 pandemic has severely impacted individuals from all walks of life. The rapid spread of the disease to nearly all parts of the country has posed enormous health, economic, environmental and social challenges to the entire human population. In



the absence of any effective drugs and vaccines for treatment, social distancing and other preventive measures are the only alternatives. Lockdown is among one of the options suggested by World Health Organisation (WHO) to reduce spread of the virus. India was quick to close its international borders and enforce the world's largest COVID lockdown on March 22, 2020, (Basu et.al.2020).

COVID-19 is an emerging infectious disease with its first outbreak in December 2019 in Wuhan city of central Hubei province of China (Wang, Horby, Hayden, & Gao, 2020). The WHO on 30th January 2020 declared the outbreak of novel coronavirus as a global health emergency (WHO, 2020c). As of 31st May 2020, a total of 5,939,234 confirmed cases globally with 367,255 deaths have been reported by WHO (<https://www.Worldometers.Info/Coronavirus/>, 2020). India has reported 190,622 confirmed cases and more than 5,408 deaths from COVID-19 since its first case on January 30, 2020 (MoHFW | Home, 2020).

To control the spread of this highly contagious disease, majority of countries worldwide including India imposed quarantine and social isolation. Quarantine and social isolation can be major stressors contributing to widespread changes in population lifestyle (Hossain, Sultana, & Purohit, 2020). Consequently, increased anxiety, frustration, panic attacks, loss or sudden increase in appetite, insomnia and depression have been reported during the coronavirus lockdown. Recent study showed that people under aggressive self-isolation were more vulnerable to mental health issues experiencing trauma triggers and anger (Brooks et al., 2020; Reynolds et al., 2008). Other factors such as indefinite isolation,

social distancing, self-quarantine, capsized travel plans and panic over scarce resources and information overload are also likely to affect mental health adversely (Banerjee, 2020; Pfefferbaum & North, 2020). Since the pace of life slowed due to the pandemic, India's large and diverse population faces unique challenges in terms of safe access to nutritious food, money, basic supplies, social care and medicine to support their physical health. These unprecedented times are certainly tough and it is crucial to maintain a healthy lifestyle especially among people with predisposed health conditions and the elderly (Izquierdo et al., 2019).

#### **Some Yogic Tools for Mental Health and Wellbeing:**

Tools to induce psycho-physical harmony: Asana-s (static postures), kriya-s (systematic and rationale movements), mudra-s (seals of neuromuscular energy) and bandha-s (locks for neuromuscular energy) gently stretch and strengthen the musculoskeletal system in a healthy manner. They improve mobility and flexibility of the different joints and groups of muscles. There is also concomitant improvement in the systemic function such as respiration, circulation, metabolism, digestion and elimination. A general sense of health and well being is also promoted by these aspects of Yoga that help release feel good hormones like endorphins and encephalins (Bhavanani, 2008; 2013).

Tools to balance emotional volatility: Swadhyaya (introspectional self analysis), pranayama (breathing techniques for control of vital energy), pratyahara (sensory withdrawal), dharana (intense concentration), dhyana (meditation oneness)



and bhajana (devotional music) stabilize emotional turmoil and relieve stress and mental fatigue. They bring about an excellent sense of emotional balance that is vital for good health. Group work also enables achievement of emotional balance essential for good health.

Development of appropriate psychological attitudes: Yoga encourages us to step back and take a meta-cognitive, objective view of our habitual patterns of behaviour and thoughts. This enables us to cope better with situations that normally put our bodies and minds under strain. Patanjali emphasizes the need to develop following qualities in order to become mentally balanced humane beings (Bhavanani, 2011). He emphasises abhyasa (relentless positive self effort) and vairagya (dispassionate attitude) along with ishwara pranidhana (acceptance and humility of the universal plan). He provides an antidote to the stress pandemic by suggesting change in our inner perspective through pratipaksha bhavanam (adoption of the contrary attitudes in the face of negativities). He advises us to develop clarity of mind (chitta prasadanam) through adoption of four conscious attitudes: namely maitri (friendliness towards those who are at peace with themselves), karuna (compassion for the suffering), mudita (cheerfulness towards the virtuous) and upekshanam (indifference and avoidance of the evil) (Bhavanani, 2008; 2011).

Contemplation, relaxation and meditation: There are a great many Jnana Yoga and Raja Yoga techniques of relaxation and visualization that are useful (Giri, 1976; Bhavanani, 2008). Other practices such as trataka (concentrated gaze), pranayama, pratyahara, dharana as

well as dhyana may also be utilized. Relaxation is a central element in Yoga as it is the body's own way of recharging its cells and helps to ease physical, emotional and mental tensions. We can facilitate our own healing when we are relaxed. In fact, we often unintentionally retard our inherent healing mechanisms when we are tense and uptight. Choice is ours to make!

Enhancing spiritual awareness: Yoga is the best way for us to consciously evolve out of our lower, sub-human nature, into our elevated human and humane nature (Giri, 1995). Ultimately, this life giving, life enhancing and life sustaining science of humanity allows us to achieve in full measure the Divinity that resides within each of us. Swadhyaya, satsanga (spiritual gathering), bhajana sessions and Yogic counselling are important aspects of Yogic living. We need to realise that "Oneness" is health whereas "Duality" is disease. We cannot remain lonely, depressed and diseased if we realize that we are part of a wonderful, joyful and harmonious Universe. Spirituality is the personal connection we feel with our own inner being. This can be strengthened greatly through conscious introspection and self inquiry. When we begin to understand the oneness manifest through all forms of life, we manifest gratitude, respect and love. Our life becomes one of selfless service (nishkama seva) for humanity. At that point, we start to radiate joy, love and wellbeing (tejasvi).

Relieving suffering and pain: In the Bhagavad Gita (VI:23), Yoga is also defined as "dukkhasamyogaviyogam yoga samjnitham", the conscious disassociation from union with suffering (Chidbhavananda, 1984; Bhavanani, 2013). Yoga improves pain tolerance and provides an improved quality of life. It can be safely said that Yoga helps us





endure conditions that it may not be able to cure. This is vital in end life situations where it is important that the patient has a sense of improved quality of life during their final days and moments on earth. Yoga can also benefit caretakers of such terminal patients who are under great stress themselves as it enables them to realise that we fulfil ourselves best as human beings when we help others (<https://blog.mygov.in/mental-health-and-wellbeing-through-yoga/>).

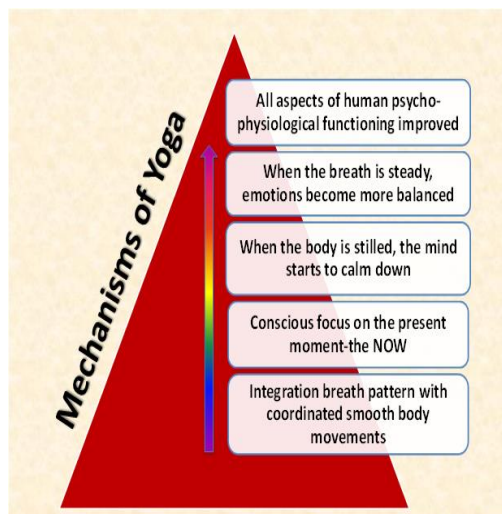


Fig 1. Mechanisms of Yoga (Giri, 1976; Bhavanani, 2013).

### The Mechanisms of Yoga and Mind Relationship

According to World Health Organization (WHO, 2014), mental health is not just the absence of mental illness. It is defined as a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. According to Indian Philosophy, Yogas is

'Chitta Vritti Nirodhah'-A technique to quiet the mind or the restraint of the modification of the mind-stuff is yoga.

The yoga and yogic practices are comprehensive in nature which involves psychological, biological and spiritual mechanisms and characterized by a new and promising approach with no negative side effects and proven scientific and practical implications covering all people. The researchers have argued that Yogic practices induce brain changes resulting in greater activation in left than right prefrontal cortex (Davidson et al., 2003). Some studies have demonstrated that yoga based exercises are responsible for formation of new neural pathways (Kreiman, Koch, & Fried, 2000). In their study, Lazar et al. (2005) and Lazar (2006) have found that yogic practices affect resonance circuitry which increases thickness in medial prefrontal cortex and insula, especially right side resulting in empathy, interoception and attunement to self and others, logical and intuitive processing (Kreiman, Koch & Fried, 2000). These practices also lead to decreased vulnerability to stress in healthy exercising adults (Baldwin, 1999). In their study on 113 psychiatric patients, Lavey et al. (2005) have found that yogic practices help regulate mood. In another study, these practices have been found to benefit emotionally distressed women (Michaelson et al., 2005).

There is a strong consensus that Yoga and yogic practices have positive impacts on the human functioning and performance. The mechanisms through which these practices exert their influence are many. It is postulated that yoga is effective because it positively alters brain neurochemistry (Streeter et al., 2007). It "counteract[s] stress and reduce[s]



autonomic arousal" (Khalsa, 2004) of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) including the sympathetic nervous system (Ross & Thomas, 2010). Researchers examining the breath work have reported that regular practicing of Yoga increases heart rate variability (Khatab, Khatab, Ortak, Richardt, & Bonnemeier, 2007), decreases blood pressure levels (Harinath et al., 2004) and decreases respiratory rates (Raghuraj & Telles, 2008). It also helps the sympathetic and the parasympathetic nervous systems to function effectively in response to stress instead of becoming hypo-reactive or hyper-reactive (Brown & Gerbarg, 2005).

There is another hypothesis which argues that yogic practices have regulatory effects on the release of various neurotransmitters. Melatonin is believed to regulate mood and sleep patterns (Douglass, 2009). In a study of Harinath et al. (2004), researchers found that participants showed increased melatonin levels after practicing yoga. Serotonin is also believed to improve mood states (Douglass, 2009). In another study of Davies et al. (2006), it was reported that serotonin regulates both psychological and cardiovascular responses to stress in people with anxiety. Lower GABA levels have been found in people with depression (Brambilla, Perez, Barale, Schettini, & Soares, 2003) and anxiety (Lydiard, 2003). Streeter et al. (2007) speculated that the physical postures of yoga increases GABA activity levels in the brain, thus decreasing anxiety and depressive symptoms.

## CONCLUSIONS

Lockdown situations additionally force a drastic change in habits and routines. These change might be crucial to explain alterations on well-being and health during the lockdown

and need to be examined. For instance, it has been suggested that excessive exposure to COVID-19 relate dinformation on media and social media might have a negative impact on psychological wellbeing or that excessive hand washing might cause handdermatitis. Yoga is a practice of recognizing and re-educating habitual patterns of thinking by cultivating wholesome thoughts. It may help regain balance, flexibility, strength, focus, relaxation, awareness of patterns, where stuck, start to become un-stuck and conviction with experience. These discussions make it evident that the yoga and yogic practices have sufficient capacity to help maintain, improve, cultivate and nurture health and happiness in the lives of individuals, societies and communities. It is also evident that Yoga as a psychotherapeutic technique has been applied to only a limited number of mental disorders such as Schizophrenia, anxiety and depression (Khalsa, 2013). The mechanisms through which yoga plays a role in the treatment of different mental disorders is yet to be known and established, although its effectiveness is doubtless. Yoga practices can have a place in the healthcare system as a treatment for a variety of psychiatric conditions, at least as an adjunctive if not as a primary therapy (Khalsa, 2013). It will be logical to conclude that the relationship of mental health and yoga has been underexplored and the future research must take these issues in more rigorous and scientific manner. These conclusions would be of great value for the academicians, policy makers, administrators, students and the public at large. It carries great significance for all aspects of human development, functioning and performance. Specially in the Covid 19 senario where people are inside rooms with tension and anxiety traditional yogic practice



shows our path to keep healthy and maintain wellbeing.

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