

The Role of Astanga Yoga in Mental Health: A Review

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Abstract:

There is no health without mental health. Mental health refers to our psychological state, emotions, and social well-being. We are aware of only physical health, but not mental health. But physical health and mental health both are interconnected. For our daily life, we need both physical and mental health. Both physical and mental health are significantly improved and enhanced by regular practice of yoga. In this article, I want to highlight the role of Astanga yoga in mental health.

Keywords: Astanga yoga, Mental health, Quality of life, Well-being, Spiritual feeling, Who.

Introduction:

Mental health is an important and relevant topic to discuss in the age of modern globalization. The aim of mental health is to continuously develop good mental health from one's current mental state. Mental health affects many aspects of our life, like one's social connections, behaviour, and thinking power. Mental health plays an important role in monitoring and coping with stress.

Indian philosophy can be classified into two main categories. One is the Astika darshan, or orthodox school, that accepts the authority of the Vedas. These are Sankhya, Yoga, Nyaya, Vaisheshika, Mimamsa and Vedanta. The other is Nastika Darshan, also known as the heterodox school, which does not accept the authority of the Vedas. These are Buddhism, Jainism and Carvaka. **Yoga philosophy** is one of the most important and ancient practical philosophies of India. The founder of Yoga Darshan is generally recognized as **Maharishi Patanjali**. Patanjali wrote a book named Yoga Sutras, which is considered one of the most prominent books on yoga. The Ashtanga Yoga, which comprises eight limbs, is described in the Yoga Sutras. The eight limbs are Yama, Niyama, Asana, Pranayama, Pratyahara, Dharana and Samadhi. According to Patanjali's **Yoga Sutra**, "Yogah citta-vritti-nirodhah",¹ which means yoga is the control of the modifications of the mind. "Although yoga has its origins in Indian religion, it can be practised secularly and has been used clinically as a therapeutic intervention."²

"Once upon a time, people practiced yoga in every corner of India. Now, it is the pursuit of pleasure that prevails, and not the pursuit of yoga. People in the world experience yoga, pleasure, or disease, whichever it may be, in accordance with their karma"³. Mental health and physical health can be enhanced and developed by regular practice and conduct of Astanga Yoga. According to Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, Ashtanga Yoga is not just a physical practice but a comprehensive system that can transform one's entire being.⁶ It can also develop spiritual feelings like love, joy, inner peace, compassion, and awe. Spiritual feeling encompasses an introspective awareness, linking individuals to deeper consciousness and emotional states, which are pursued for spiritual growth. There are many ways to improve mental health. Examples include connecting with nature, building strong relationships, spend quality time with family and friends, walking, dancing, getting enough sleep, eating and balanced diet etc. Both physical and mental health are

significantly improved and enhanced by regular practice of yoga. In this article, I will try to highlight the role of Yoga Philosophy, especially Astanga Yoga, in developing mental health.

The Concept of Mental Health:

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health is defined as: “A state of mental well-being in which individual realizes their own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively, and is able to make a contribution to their community”.⁴ A large number of people worldwide suffer from mental health problems. We all have experiences of various mental health issues. We have to be aware of these issues through proper knowledge and guidance.

Mental health typically refers to human mental health, not that of animals. A human is an emotional, psychological, and social being. Man is a social and rational animal. He has a hidden potential to become a good human being, which is built up by positive mental health. That is why he is considered the greatest being in the world, but he can also be considered an inferior animal due to lack of good mental health. Mental health affects many aspects of people's lives, like behaviour, social connections, and emotional well-being. “Yoga is an integrated holistic system that provides a path to alleviate suffering physically, mentally, and emotionally, and as such may be a useful tool in the treatment of mental health conditions”.⁵

The Concept of Astanga Yoga:

Astanga Yoga is a science and a practice that has evolved over a period of thousands of years to deal with moral, physical, mental/emotional, and spiritual development.⁶ According to Maharshi Patanjali yoga is ‘Yogah citta-vritti-nirodhah’, it means the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind. Yoga is a holistic system and a path of self-realization. Patanjali outlines the eight-limbs (Astanga Yoga) in the ‘Yoga Sutra’. The eight-limbs are 1. Yama, 2. Niyama, 3. Asana, 4. Pranayama, 5. Pratyahara, 6. Dharana, 7. Dhyana, and 8. Samadhi.

1. Yama (Ethical Restraints): Yama refers to the actions which we should avoid doing. Ahimsa, Satya, Asteya, Brahmacharya and Aparigraha – these five principles are called yamas.

- Ahimsa (Non-violence): The principle of Ahimsa is to cause no harm to any living being through thoughts, words, and physical actions.
- Satya (Truthfulness): Satya means speaking and living truthfully.
- Asteya (Non-stealing): Asteya means not taking or desiring anything that is not ours.
- Brahmacharya (Self-control): Brahmacharya means practicing moderation and control over sensual desires and impulses.
- Aparigraha (Non-possessiveness): Aparigraha means letting go of attachment to material possessions, wealth, and even ideas.

2. Niyama (Observances): Five observances or personal disciplines that are essential for self-cultivation and spiritual growth within the framework of yoga. These five Niyama are Saucha, Santosa, Tapas, Svadhyaya and Ishvara Pranidhana.

- Saucha (Cleanliness): Saucha means maintaining external and internal cleanliness of the body, mind, and environment, as well as cultivating a pure and positive mental state.
- Santosha (Contentment): Santosha means finding satisfaction in little things.
- Tapas (Discipline): Tapas means self-discipline that builds inner strength and willpower.
- Svadhyaya (Self-study): Svadhyaya means studying spiritual texts like the Vedas, Upanishads, and the Bhagavad Gita, to gain a deeper understanding of oneself.
- Ishvara Pranidhana (Surrender) : It means surrender to a higher power and dedicating one's actions and efforts to a divine higher power.

3. Asana (Physical Postures): Sthirsukhamasanam. Physical poses to balance and harmonize the body's energy, preparing it for meditation.

4. Pranayama (Breath Control): Techniques to regulate the breath, calm the mind, and prepare for meditation.
5. Pratyahara (Withdrawal of the Senses): Withdrawal of the senses from external stimuli to focus inward.
6. Dharana (Concentration): Focusing the mind on a single point to quiet mental chatter.
7. Dhyana (Meditation): Maintaining a steady, focused awareness, often leading to deeper states of consciousness.
8. Samadhi (Absorption/Enlightenment): A state of unity with the divine or ultimate reality, where the individual ego dissolves.

Asatanga Yoga and Mental Health:

To remove all negative thoughts from the mind, one needs to practice the **Yama** first. By the practice of Yama, compassion and integrity are increased. It encourages ethical behaviour, which can lead to a more peaceful and balanced life, reduces stress, and promotes harmony. Practicing **Niyama** (Observances) cultivates inner peace, improves self-awareness, and fosters a sense of purpose. Physical and mental hygiene are enhanced through Niyama, and it also encourages a positive attitude. "If the limbs and sub-limbs of Yama and Niyama are to be practiced, then steps should be taken to ensure that one does not fall victim to disease, obligation, or poverty".⁷ Practitioners can create a strong foundation for spiritual progress by following it. **Asana** improves focus, reduces stress, and increases body awareness. Muscle tension is reduced and blood circulation is enhanced through Asana. Mind concentration and respiratory function are improved and promoted by the practice of **pranayama**. It also reduces anxiety. **Pratyahara** helps regulate the nervous system, and it enhances self-awareness and promotes inner peace. **Dharana** enhances the ability to focus and prepares the mind for meditation. **Dhyana** deepens self-awareness and promotes inner peace. It enhances overall well-being. A sense of oneness is fostered, a deep understanding of reality and a profound sense of connection to all beings are established in the state of Samadhi. Mental health is continuously enhanced by regular practice of Astanga Yoga. "Sahaj Yoga is a meditative technique that has been found to have beneficial effects in some psycho-somatic illnesses".⁸ Mental health needs to be taken care of constantly every day. Because it prevents the development of mental illness. Lack of mental health is at the root of mental illness. "A review study found that yoga is as effective or better than exercise at improving a variety of mental and physical health measures such as stress, quality of life, mood states, heart rate variability, pulmonary function and so on".⁹

Conclusion:

The main functions of Astanga Yoga on mental health are to enhance concentration and mental clarity, and to encourage positive thoughts and quality of life. Mental disorder or illness refers to a wide range of conditions that affect a person's mental health, thoughts, emotions, and behaviours, impacting their daily life and relationships. Examples include depression, anxiety disorders, schizophrenia, and bipolar disorder. The promotion of mental health and quality of life are enhanced through daily practice of **Astanga Yoga** with proper guidance.

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