



A Reflection on Yoga, Acupuncture and Medicine

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Abstract

The paper aims at showing some aspects of the application of yoga in improving physical and mental health and a difference between the original aims of yoga and the areas in which it is applied today. Further it hints at some ways, through which functional units of humans defined by yoga could be understood in the framework of Western thought and science. Acupuncture is mentioned as a bridge to help this process.

Key words: Yoga; Acupuncture; Nadis, Tattvas; Research; Health

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Introduction

In the 20th Century a great effort has been made both to prove that yoga and acupuncture (i.e., Chinese medicine) can be used for health-related purposes and to discover the functional mechanisms of both systems. From the Western point of view, when both yoga and Chinese medicine became popular as a Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) a resistance became perceptible that led to regulation of CAM (CAMDOC Alliance, 2010). The main issue is that Western and Eastern medicine have a different approach to both health and treatment of illness.

In case of yoga, it has to be stated that it was not conceived as a medical system, but as a system for the discovery of the ultimate goal of humans – Self-realization. Thus, its methods – though there are a great number of yoga traditions – are directed to this aim. Nevertheless, hatha yoga has a strong emphasis on health and has a wonderful spectrum of procedures for arriving at a health status that enables intensive pursuing of the said ultimate goal manifested as samadhi that follows from the cessation of the activities of chitta – the substance of mind/mindfield. The result stated in Patanjali Yoga sutra (PYS) is:

1.3. Tada Drishtu Swarunele Vasthanabh || 3 ||

Tada Drashtuh Svaroope Avasthanam that is: the seer then rests in his unmodified state Usharbudh [21].

Rishi Vyasa in his commentary to verse I.1 of PYS declares that yoga is samadhi Usharbudh, et.al, [16,21]. Whilst Patanjala yoga relies on the training related to chitta, Hatha yoga offers a

wide range of “doable” processes starting with shatkarmas, asanas and pranayama, but Hathayoga Pradipika Akers [1] and Gheranda Samhita Digambarji, et.al, [4] offer training also for pratyahara, dharana, dhyana and samadhi. As pointed out by Avalon [2,3] Tantrik yoga defines and works with nadis, chakras and their energies. The nadis (energy cum information pathways) are defined in a tentative way, usually –at least in case of the main 14 nadis – by their start and endpoints and also by giving their relative position to Sushumna – the main nadi. It is also defined that the number of petals in the yantras of chakras (graphic composition symbolically indicating the role of the chakra), refer to the number of nadis stemming from them Khanna [9] Kundalini, one of the main issues kundalini of Tantra Yoga experienced also a doubting approach Sanella [17]; Dongart [5]. Nevertheless, the PubMed at the time of writing this paper has 54 entries on this subject.

The concept of chakras is linked also to the sankhya model of the world that uses tattvas for modelling the “construction” of the perceptible world (cf Ashurbudh 1986, 23-39). Thus, each chakra is assigned a tattva – from earth to akasha. Usually, yoga mentions 7 chakras, but the ajna chakra (6th) and sahasrara (7th) do not relate to the five tattvas. Much research went to get a measurable proof of nadis and chakras (cf. Motoyama1981), but they were not truly accepted by Western science. Treatises like Gheranda samhita Digambarji et.al, [4] and Satkarma sangraha Harshe[10] devote attention also to purifying the nadis (Gheranda sanhita 5.34-37, p.30) and making them passable for pranas Yogeshwaranand[23].

The Sarva upanishad nicely defines the koshas – functional units of humans, thought the described functional units would not be easily understood by medicine: “The aggregate of the six sheaths, which are the products of food, is called the Annamaya-kosha, alimentary sheath. When the fourteen kinds of Vayus beginning with the Prana, are in the alimentary sheath, then it is spoken of as the Pranamaya-kosha, vesture of the vital airs. When the Atman united with these two sheaths performs, by means of the four organs beginning with the mind, the functions of desire, etc., which have for their objects sound and the rest, then it (this state) is called the Manomaya-kosha, mental sheath. When the soul shines being united with these three sheaths, and cognisant of the differences and non-differences thereof then it is called the Vijnanamaya-kosha, sheath of intelligence. When these four sheaths remain in their own cause which is Knowledge (Brahman), in the same way as the latent Banyan tree remains in the Banyan seed, then it is spoken of as the Anandamaya-kosha, causal frame of the Soul. When it dwells in the body, as the seat of the idea of pleasure and pain, then it is the Karta, agent”.

To make the studied yoga system even more complex, it works also with marmas Vasishtha Samhita [22] and bindus Gitananda [8], which – to the Western mind appear also as model based and “abstract”. Contemporary efforts to make yogic concepts mapped into modern physical or other scientific frames did not produced reliable results, but Newcombe [15] has shown the vast cultural areas in which yoga got acculturated in the West and thus paving the way for adapting some of its concepts and methods also in health care.

Yoga and health

As the spectrum of possible application of various yoga techniques in health management is vast, here only a couple of examples can be given. There are 2352 publications at PubMed regarding the health effect of meditation. The way, how meditation is defined, though differ. There are 3338 studies at the same search portal on yoga and health. Again, the methodologies differ. So, it is difficult to quantify the contribution of specific techniques or yogic “structural units” like marmas, nadis, chakras or koshas to health benefit.

Meridians of the Chinese medicine, as they were somewhat better “measurable”, due to the fact that they were intended for medical usage and thus precisely described/situated, became a “bridge” in making the “invisible” measurable. Romodanov et.al, [16] were amongst the first to use thermo-vision to make meridians visible by stimulating their master points. Gach and Marco already in 1981 tried to develop yoga practices that stimulate meridians. In trying to explain the work of nadis, Maxwell [12] wrote: „While it is difficult to imagine how subtle gap junction mechanisms could be studied in humans, a recent Chinese study has demonstrated an increase in the expression of a particular gap junction protein (connexin 43) at an acupuncture point in rats using acupuncture stimulation “.

At present there is an increasing number of works that try to quantify the impact of yoga practices on health by measuring the skin resistance at specific meridian points like Ghosh K [7,14], but it still falls short of demonstrating that working with elements of the „yogic anatomy/physiology“has a quantifiable and measurable impact on health and wellbeing. Further, the units used for the impact assessment do not make the results well comparable to result of classic medical processes. Nevertheless, in yogic training the trainee has very specific perceptions of the work of all the mentioned structural elements that traditional yoga defined Lu K’uan Yü [11] and it can be hoped that there will come a time, when science will have the tools for discovering the “secrets” of yogic model of humans and of the universe.

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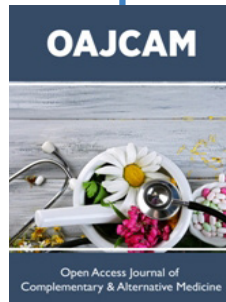
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