



RELEVANCE OF YOGA IN THE MODERN AGE

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Modern age is the age of science and reason. Like any true knowledge, science has a great future. In recent years, there have been revolutionary developments in science and information technology. Our country is emerging as a leader in these areas and our lifestyle is being significantly influenced by these developments. Like any coin, the golden coin of science also has two sides. In proper hands, science is a blessing for the whole humanity. On the other hand, unscrupulous persons can use scientific knowledge for destructive purposes. The existing weapons of mass destruction are capable of destroying the whole world many times over. Inhuman terrorists are spilling human blood on a daily basis. In twentieth century alone, millions have perished due to wars and terrorist violence based on ethnic, religious and political hatred. Science has no answer to this grave problem staring us in the face. What does science tell us about how to behave, battle our emotions and passions and what to believe / not believe? Solution to the crisis of character has to be in moral-spiritual terms. It is clear that scientific 'know how' should be guided by spiritual 'do how' so that science is practiced at its noblest. Science cannot be ethically neutral and needs to be purified of its undesirable and arrogant obsessions. With the advancement of science, there should be a parallel development of art and spirituality. Otherwise we will have nuclear giants who are emotional pigmies and spiritual infants. Realizing this fact, Einstein has said that 'science without religion is lame and religion without science is blind'. However, many religious cults are based on mutually antagonistic doctrines and unscientific dogmas. They emphasize sectarian religiosity above humanity and spirituality. Religious beliefs that are in conflict with morality, humanity and reason cannot be accepted. Hence, there is a need to emphasize spirituality which not only transcends sectarian religious beliefs, but also is complementary to science. In the Vedic tradition, dharma is that which helps us in achieving all round progress in the external material world (abhyudaya) as well as development at the inner, spiritual level (nihshreyas).

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Yoga is a spiritual science for the integrated and holistic development of our physical, mental as well as moral-spiritual aspects. Yoga is based on philosophy that is practical and for our day-to-day living. Yoga produces desirable physiological changes and has sound scientific basis. True wealth of a nation consists of superior and noble persons it harbors. Popularisation of yoga will spawn a good number of such persons who will be an asset to the society and fit to be called as world men/women (vishva maanav), the ideal of Rig Ved. Yoga is the most precious gem of our cultural heritage and Vedic thought. Vedic culture has some distinguishing features. It considers all life to be interconnected and sacred. Ahimsaa which implies respect for life is naturally the first yam (the first limb in ashtaanga yoga). It also considers all humans as amritasya putrah, i.e., children of God who is one, all pervading and present in every being. Vedic thought also accepts the entire humanity as a single entity and considers the whole world as one family (vasudaiv kutumbakam). These lofty principles are effective antidote against cruelty to animals, mutual conflicts, greed and exploitation that are the bane of modern competitive age. It is a tribute to the wisdom of yoga rishis of yore that their timeless teachings are highly relevant for the modern age when information technology is transforming the whole world into a global village. Materialistic outlook and consumerism, pollution of mind and environment, dependence on junk food and drugs, deficiency of noble virtues and deeds and the stress of daily life are the bane of modern society. Being holistic, yoga is an ideal solution for all these problems.

The very first limb of ashtaang yoga is yam, which consists of five moral principles of i) ahimsaa or non-violence ii) satya or truthfulness iii) asteya or non covetousness iv) brahmacharya or living a Godly life and control of sensuality and v) aparigrah or non-hoarding. Aparigrah implies simplicity and moderation to counter greed, consumerism and wasteful expenditure that is being promoted by television advertisements. Progress is not explosion of consumerism and increased capacity for ingestion. Real progress means improvement of overall quality of life, including attitudes and behaviour. In Bhagvadgita (which is referred to as yoga shastra), Yogeshvar Krishna stresses the importance of moderation in all aspects of life including eating, recreation and desires. Market-driven capitalism and increase in the greed for consumption has resulted in depletion of natural resources and overall pollution of the environment. If the problem is not tackled effectively and quickly, it will have serious global implications. In this context it is interesting to note



that as early as 3000 BC, Yogeshvar Krishna has emphasized the sanctity of this whole creation by identifying Himself with it and declaring thus “Arjuna, I am the sapidity in water, light of the sun and moon, sacred AUM of the Ved, sound in ether, manliness of men, lion among quadrupeds, garud among the birds, ashwath among trees and Kapil among Siddhas” Lord Krishna further says that ‘Everything that is glorious, brilliant and powerful is a part manifestation of My glory’. Thus, yogic vision promotes unity of humanity with the whole creation and nature. It is clear that while materialism aggravates conflict between man and nature, yoga eases and solves it. From the yogic point of view, natural resources are to be harnessed for common good and not for satisfying human greed.

Good health, knowledge and creativity are more important than material wealth and power. We should realize the primacy of man over machine and humanity over materialism. Unfortunately, in the name of materialism, some people are slavishly aping decadent aspects of western, materialistic culture.

Their life is clustered with so much worthless things and three dimension culture of drink, dance and drugs. Junk food, junk entertainment, superfluous needs and wasteful consumerism are being promoted by callously commercial self-seekers. Materialistic and sensory pleasures do give us happiness. However, real and lasting joy (aanand) comes by strengthening and purifying our body-mind-soul complex and performing noble deeds and selfless actions (nishkaam karmayoga). That is why, yoga and ayurved have always given due importance to our physical body, subtle body as well as soul 12. All thoughts, including those of war and peace start in the minds of people. Hence, the mind should be calm, cultured and not dulled by drugs, drinks and taamasik / junk food. Yoga gives due emphasis to the purity of food.

Another serious problem of the modern society is mind pollution caused by mass media like television. Instead of emphasizing education and healthy entertainment, the media portray junk programmes, vulgarity and violence. This is highly detrimental to children and youth whose education, career and higher goal suffer. Violence on screen promotes antisocial behaviour and cultural degradation. Teenage suicides and shootouts by American school children are very disturbing consequences of mind pollution. Alcohol and drug abuse are also major problems of modern age. In some Russian schools, 80% pupils take drugs. Here, it is interesting to note that practice of meditation helps one to get rid of addiction and drug



dependence. Being blessed with intellect, discrimination and moral sense, human beings are different from animals. Consequently, a virtuous person is a blessing to the society, while a person without virtue can be deadliest predator. Man's inhumanity to man can be blood curdling as modern science and technology have given us powerful means of destruction. Therefore, modern man, especially scientists and ruling class must have strong moral commitment of their own. Internalised ethical sense based on awareness checks the perverse use of knowledge and power and determines the direction and quality of scientific research. It is the character that determines greatness and nothing is truly great unless it is good and noble. That is why yam (the five moral codes) is the very first step in ashtaanga yoga. According to Patanjali, these moral codes of conduct are beyond any class, place or time and hence universal great vows. They guide our thinking, behaviour and interpersonal dealings. Hence, they must be cultivated consciously and nurtured continuously. Bad thoughts and habits are like comfortable bed, easy to get into but hard to get out of. However, it needs to be emphasized that any undesirable thought can be extinguished by cultivating desirable and good thought. If we have smile on the face, we cannot have anger at the same time. That is what Patanjali means by saying that "By raising an opposing thought wave, one can overcome the negative one". To be effective and successful, character and altruism need the backing of physical and mental resilience. Yoga is an ideal method for purifying as well as strengthening our body and mind. Purified, strengthened and disease free body-mind complex of a yogi is the temple of the Divine (deho devaalayah) and an efficient instrument for doing all the noble deeds. It should be noted that evil is a strong force except against the evolved mind of a disciplined yogi. During the last few decades, three important things have happened. i) We have moved away from mother nature and our lifestyle is becoming more and more unnatural and stressful due to 'modern' lifestyle ii) modern medicine has conquered infectious diseases and decimated epidemics iii) there has been a significant prolongation of our life span. The result of all these is a phenomenal increase in lifestyle and psychosomatic disorders like headaches, sleep disturbances, depression, mental stress, eating disorders, obesity, diabetes mellitus, hypertension, angina, bronchial asthma, peptic ulcer, irritable bowel syndrome, arthritis, impotency, menstrual disorders and carcinomas. Medical diagnosis and treatment of these diseases are becoming more and more expensive and beyond our available resources. It



needs to be emphasized that yogic lifestyle and yogic techniques are very effective in prevention as well as treatment of these diseases. The efficacy of yoga in the management of hypertension has been well documented. Yogic treatment can be administered along with medical treatment as a complementary therapy. As yogic treatment is effective and inexpensive, we will save billions of rupees annually and there will be a tremendous reduction of pressures on our hospitals. It should be noted that while drugs have many undesirable side effects on our physical and mental health, yoga has beneficial 'side effects' in terms of improved psychosomatic health.

It is clear that yoga is a boon for the 'modern' society which has become a victim of everyday stress. Modern research has established the scientific basis of yogic techniques and yoga has now gained international acceptance and acclaim. It is desirable that yoga be made an integral part of our educational as well as health care systems. If our masses practice yoga, they will be physically healthy, mentally calm and spiritually evolved and hence more productive and happy. The rush and burden on our hospitals will be greatly reduced. Hence, there is an urgent need to popularize yoga among our masses. Yoga is consistent with our culture and complementary to science. It is our duty to promote it further and become yogis as Yogeshvar Krishna unequivocally declares the superiority of a yogi thus: 'yogi is superior to ascetics, jnanis as well as those who perform actions with motive. Therefore, Arjun, do thou become a yogi.

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