



IS
 YOGA
 A TOOL OF
 PSYCHO-SELF-DEVELOPMENT?



More and more over recent years we see articles popping up of how yoga, meditation or mindfulness practises are helping people to reduce anxiety and depression. Mental health is now finally recognised as an important part of our overall health and wellbeing and is as important as our physical health and impacts our physical health. The World Health Organisation defines mental health as "a state of wellbeing in which every individual realises 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 her or his community." So how does yoga fit into this and is yoga really a tool of psycho self-development? The answer to this question is in fact 'yes' and 'no', believe it or not! Let's explore the yes side of the coin first, although the no side is very interesting and is an inadvertent yes.

Anxiety disorders are a common disease of 21st century living and while most people may not suffer from anxiety on a day-to-day basis, many people will have experienced short periods of anxiety and some people are living with this condition every day. Anxiety is a complex condition that involves many factors within the neurological system including genetic disposition. One of the factors in stress is the response of the neurotransmitter gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA). GABA is an inhibitory neurotransmitter that helps to slow down neuron firing and regulate nerve activity. When the brain has low concentrations of GABA it can lead to anxiety and depression. The Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine published a study¹ undertaken by Harvard Medical School and Boston University School of Medicine that studied participants undergoing a 60-minute yoga session with a comparison group reading for 60 minutes. It found that there was a 27% increase in GABA levels in the yoga practitioner group after the yoga session but no change in the comparison subject group after the reading session so an activity such as reading which can undoubtedly be relaxing is not as effective as yoga. The autonomic nervous system (ANS) is mediated by two responses - the sympathetic nervous system and the parasympathetic nervous system.

The ANS is responsible for the regulation of our heart rate, digestion, pupillary response, urination and sexual arousal. When we are at rest these functions of the nervous system are at optimum state, and this is the parasympathetic state often referred to as 'rest and digest'. When we are stressed we move into the 'fight or flight' mechanism of the sympathetic nervous system which releases adrenaline and functions to save us from danger! However, we are often subject to lives that move us into the sympathetic nervous system response on a day-to-day basis. The problem with this is we are not responding with fight or flight to an acute stress response but are suffering from long-term low-level stresses and spending more and more time in the sympathetic state.

Yoga asana, meditation and related practices help us to move into the parasympathetic state, back to rest and digest. This is achieved through practices of concentration and focus (dharana) which diverts the mind's attention away from that never-ending to-do list, and also through the regulation of the breath. Respiratory Sinus Arrhythmia is a naturally occurring variation in the heart rate. When we inhale our heart rate speeds up and when we exhale our heart rate slows down. Many yoga practices will encourage us to take nice deep inhalations and slow extended exhalations which naturally slow the heart rate. Taking deeper breaths also impacts our optimum respiratory function and studies² of diaphragm movement and function claim that optimal respiration requires active control of the diaphragm - in other words breathing in deeply with awareness will increase our physiological function allowing better oxygen exchange leading to overall health benefits. When we feel healthier in our bodies we often feel more psychologically robust. This is also supported of course by the physical aspect of the exercise element of yoga.

Even those of us who would not particularly define ourselves as being anxious or stressed may have come to yoga to feel better about ourselves, perhaps with the faith that yoga will make us happier, more confident and relaxed. There may also be a social element that will psychologically boost us, being part of a group or tribe of similarly minded people and perhaps making new yoga buddies. What's not to like about that? If in doubt just search the Internet on the benefits of yoga and you will find 548000000 (at the time of this article) sites propounding the positive effects of this ancient and modern practice.

So, this leads nicely onto the no side of the coin. Although it's a no-ish! You may be surprised to learn that the tradition of yoga in the form of historical roots of yoga in scripture and practice, we could say yoga is a tool of psycho "un" development. Let's look to the sage Patanjali, author of the Yoga Sutra for clarity on this. Patanjali teaches us that yoga is experienced when we become free of our psychological conditioning. He is not giving us a self-help programme to improve our psychology into what we may see as positive, good conditioning; happy, sociable, intelligent and positive outlook as modern western psychology and therapy may look to do, but he is giving us a method to transcend all conditioning. The Yoga sutra gives us various options for moving our mind patterning into stillness (1.2 yogas citta vritti nirodhah) which includes practices such as meditation, chanting Om and breath control which will free us from the attachment to our stories (vikalpas) we have of ourselves which are often founded in past experiences (the cycle of karma) and the afflicted states (the kleshas) of being we experience in the form of ignorance, sense of ego, desire, aversion and fear of death. Patanjali's teaching is not concerned about having a 'positive' self-identity, but by becoming free of the mistaken identity of this bodily form and this current psychology (prakriti – manifest form) to being able to identify with the purusa (the unmanifest essence of being). He in fact teaches that we must experience a state of isolation (kaivalya) from this manifest form to the purusa.

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Another influence of modern postural yoga's philosophy comes from the system of Advaita Vedanta with roots within the Upanisad texts of India. This system meaning 'not two' is a system of philosophy to point us to the ultimate union of our self/atman (if we were to describe from the western psychological model we would say big 'S' Self) with Brahman, a metaphysical reality of all existence so there is no personal psychology to get bogged down by as we are ultimately all one; "Who sees all beings in his own Self, and his own Self in all beings loses all fear. When a sage sees this great Unity and his Self has become all beings, what delusion and what sorrow can ever be near him?"³. The tantric tradition which has also had an enormous influence on modern postural yoga (one could argue that this tradition has had the biggest influence both directly and indirectly through the Hatha yoga tradition in terms of the practices that are included in yoga today) has a similar view of Advaita Vedanta of the continuity between spirit and matter as consciousness and the recognition of this: "caitanyamatma" -"awareness which has absolute freedom of all knowledge and activity is the self or nature of reality"⁴. The realisation of this unity (yoga) is what leads us to a state of freedom/ moksha.

The teaching of yoga is therefore ultimately leading us towards an experience of freedom from the binds of conditioned existence. It doesn't give much weight to psychological analysis and self-improvement as this is not our ultimate self we are identifying with but by the process of vairagya (disentanglement) the freedom we start to experience lends itself to psychological wellbeing. We experience a state of contentment (samtosa) that doesn't rely on the external conditions of life to be perfect or even our mind to be still because we don't get consumed by the act of thought-based suffering as we identify with something that is more powerful than our own internal dialogue and that is the experience of wholeness and unity.

1 <https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/acm.2007.6338>
2 <http://breathe.ersjournals.com/content/13/4/298>
3 Isa Upanishad from The Upanishads, Penguin Books 1st published 1965
4 The Siva Sutras, Jai Deva Singh, Motilal Nanarsidass Publishers 1st published 1979

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