Introduction

From the very dawn of Hindu civilisation, our ancient sages and rishis have stressed the importance of man’s inner life and its development and adopted a holistic view, one in which mind and body, thought and emotions, beliefs and behaviour are not separate but function as inter-dependent systems. Down through the ages they have developed, special systems to exercise and increase the strength, purity and power of the inner life.

The physical body is the outer covering of the inner body - the subtle sheath which includes the mind. Just as the physical body needs food, rest and exercise for its growth, so does the subtle body which if nurtured and cared for, can produce wonders both in the material and spiritual field.

Physical Health

Modern medical science gives prominence to psychological factors as important causes affecting the physical health of a person. Contemporary society particularly the industrial one as opposed to the agricultural society of the early twentieth century and before, puts enormous stress on the people namely the constant pressure to meet deadlines and quality standards. Scientific and technological progress has made man highly sensitive; he has unravelled the subtle mysteries of nature and is travelling in outer space. Computers and automation have made this vast world a global village!

Associated with all these developments and growth, are stress and tensions - the key words in a variety of health problems. Human beings can adopt to what is available and are spoken of as “organisms of incredible adaptability.” But quite often one pays a high price for the adaptability.

Stress is the response of the body to any demand made on it - the high price one pays for it. It is a psycho-biological state manifested by a set of symptoms. Repeated stressful arousal breaks the defences of the body - a psychosomatic disorder is the result. The “Wonders of Medicines,” have created unrealistic expectations but it is no substitute for a healthful life style.

The World Health Organisation speaks of health as a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity. But to many people good health means simply that they have no real obvious illness or physical problems. But to those who are, ‘not feeling well’ most of the time, with no specific outward illness as such, stress, lack of vitality and depression set in stealthily.

Hindu Approach to Stress

Western medicine or rather western thinking speaks of such a condition as not something that should be avoided but how should one deal with it in the best way possible since there will always be demands to perform task or adapt to changing influences. But the Hindu approach is the avoiding of stress and tension which create mental...
ill-health. The cause of this is the ‘peaceless’ state of the mind and this could be remedied by regular Yoga and meditation.

Both the Yoga School of Hindu psychology and Freudian psycho-analysis are based on the concept of the “unconscious.” Textual commentators like Patanjali, have compared the mind to an ocean. The contents of the “unconscious” are like the undercurrents and cross-currents surging deep below the ocean, dominating and determining the uppermost wave on the surface. The deepest layers of the mind preserve the contents of innumerable previous births. And from the mind flow the thoughts determined by the past experiences and which give rise to feelings and emotions which in turn impact on the various systems of the body causing either stress or a sense of well-being depending on the thoughts.

Quality of Thoughts

Thoughts could be negative or positive. The former give rise to sorrowful and sad emotions and arise in the mind as a re-action to impulses received through the sense organs prompted by ego, attachment, greed etc. These become negative qualities which are injurious to health. The latter or the positive thoughts give rise to feelings of contentment and happiness and arise in the mind which is full of detachment, humility, tolerance etc. These become positive qualities which have a healthy and healing effect on the person.

Patanjali’s Yoga Sutra confirms this saying, “A man’s latent tendencies have been created by his past thoughts and actions. These tendencies will bear consequences both in his life and in the lives to come.” The subconscious mind is thus a storehouse of one’s past experiences which are the habits, behaviour and personality of the human being and it reflects on the mental health of the person.

Bondage to Mind and Matter

Hinduism is a way of life and the purpose of being born into this world is to realise the Divine. And this realisation cannot be had in one life. Man comes into the world with his past, his karmas that he had collected in his past lives through his own actions. It is to work out his karmas that he is born into the world. In this world, his real problem in life is his bondage to mind and matter. The Song Celestial, the Bhagavad Gita gives the message for the liberation in life as, “Be free from physical bondages and attachments and always remember Me as the path to reaching the goal.” Man's attachment is to his body and thereafter to those who are near and dear to him - his relationship in the physical world, weaving a huge web of relationship in various forms of attachments, making him a prisoner in his own web.

All these bondages coupled with a lifestyle associated with materialism, advancement of science and technology have created a great deal of stress in man because he is unable to cope, tied up in knots resulting in mental illnesses. Basic changes have to take place for a healthier and harmonious life and the Hindu realises that the Science of Yoga, the unique contribution of the ancient Hindus to the world, is the answer to this complex problem.
Control of Mind

It is indeed, to my mind the science of the future and as the learned doctors of the Vivekananda Kendra in Bangalore say ‘with a holistic vision relevant to a progressive society.’ This is explained clearly in the opening verse of Patanjali’s Yoga sutras itself as, “Yoga is the control of thought waves in the mind.” Once the mind is under control, man could lead a peaceful life sans stress and strain.

The aim of these Sciences are to free man from this bondage of mind to body, by giving him an awareness of his true nature, uniting the Atman, the individual Soul with the Paramatman, the Universal Soul. Besides the spiritual needs of man, Yoga also helps to develop the physical, mental, emotional and intellectual make up of an individual, without which an all-round development is not possible. The aim of Yoga thus is to create a healthy mind in a healthy body, harnessing the will and emotions by calming the mind, steadying the emotions and still not losing the growth of intellect - the key to human progress and ultimate goal of life.

The word Yoga is derived from the root Yuj - yojana to unite - that is to unite the physical and mental being in man ultimately becoming the union of the Atman with the Paramatman. Speaking in spiritual terms Yoga means a technique that man uses to purify his lower nature, to restrain his senses and direct his mind towards God. The techniques stimulate the sleeping mind and relax the hyper-active and hyper-sensitive mind bringing about a state of equilibrium. This balance gives him mental strength, makes him emotionally strong and helps him to face the complex problems of life with equanimity. Yoga techniques are directed towards the four major faculties in man, namely intellect, emotion, will-power and executive capacities guided by the senses and are respectively called Jnana Yoga, Bhakti Yoga, Raja Yoga and Karma Yoga.

Jnana is pure intellect while Bhakti or devotional Yoga teaches ‘the art of invoking the emotions, intensifying them and diffusing them at will.’ It is becoming increasingly relevant today mainly because Bakti helps to handle emotions, to gain control over them and lead a life of peace, love and harmony. It is an antidote to mental illness. Devotion, chanting of the name of the Lord or the Pranava Mantram OM should mingle into the great Silence within to be effective. These anesthetise a stressful mind gradually bringing it back to normal to prevent stress setting in.

Raja Yoga helps in harnessing the Will so that the techniques help to use the will at the level of the mind and body - not impairing one’s intellect and sensitivity but controlling them in order to prevent stress and strain.

Through Jnana, Bhati and Raja Yoga we learn to release the stress and strain that have accumulated but more important is to move towards a stress free life and at the same time retaining all the power and intellect that are necessary in today’s scientific and technical era. With all the stresses removed, one should act like a Karma Yogin. As Lord Sri Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita, “karmani eva adhikarashte; ma paleshu kadchana,” Your duty is to act; not the results thereof: Expectation is one of the more important causes of strain.
Thus we see that the whole process of Yoga is a slowing down process of the innate rush of the mind in order to avert stress and strain. The techniques are asanas and pranayama. Asanas are congenial postures which cure the restlessness in the body and quieten the mind. Through pranayama, the control of breath, the body is kept free of impurities. The exercise of breathing controls the mind and when breathing becomes slow and deep then the inner respiratory, circulatory and nervous systems of the body are calmed and brain functioning is relaxed. Mentally there is equipoise.

Another holistic view regarding mental health is meditation. While one sits in meditation a gentle voice from an unseen depth guides one into a noiseless land - the Shrine of Silence, where the cooling fragrant atmosphere soothes an anguished mind. The Shrine of Silence is the sacred seat of the Atman, the Kingdom of God where serene peace reigns supreme. As we sit in meditation regularly, at the same time at the same place, the mind gets nourished and relaxed, freeing one from mental stress.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion I would like to share with you all an example of how mental stress can bring about deadly illnesses like cancer given to us by the scientists and doctors of Vivekananda Kendra in Bangalore. While explaining the cells in the body which are constantly multiplying while others are dying being scavenged out, Dr. Nagaratna the director of the medical division of the Kendra said that when one is at peace with himself and is relaxed this function of multiplying goes on smoothly where the abnormal cells which carry the different diseases get scavenged out. According to my understanding of her explanation, we are all carrying these abnormal disease cells but that these get scavenged out if we are not under any stress. But if there is stress and strain, this does not function smoothly and the abnormal cells do not get scavenged out, instead remain and multiply setting in the cancerous process, manifesting as the terror disease.

The ancient Hindu sciences which help with the physical, mental and emotional development and which give a holistic understanding, offer a fantastic approach to the challenges of modern mental illnesses.

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