



Qualities of yoga practitioners, obstructions & precautions according to classical yoga texts

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Abstract

Today yoga has become a very popular health science as well as fitness routine all over the world, drawing innumerable people into the practice. However if the yoga practitioners (sadhakas) are aware of the rules and regulations as well as the precautions then the benefits will be manifold. Awareness of the qualities or prerequisites of the yoga practitioner will help in the fast progress and mastery of the yoga techniques. Similarly, knowledge about the various challenges or obstacles one might face will forewarn the practitioners so that he/she is well prepared to overcome them. Yoga training and teaching institutions should take good note of them and impart rightly to the yoga students.

Keywords: yoga practitioners, qualities, obstructions, precautions yoga texts

1. Introduction

Yoga is an ancient system purely originated in India relevant even to the present day context. It is a scientific system that fosters healthy development of the physique and balanced development of the psyche. Yoga also sharpens one's mental faculties improving attention and concentration. The practice of yoga will help in the development of an integrated personality as well as extraordinary cognitive capabilities. 'It is the duty of every human being to acquire the knowledge of the eternal truth and live happily as a yogi by observing the universe merely as a witness' [1]. Yoga brings in perfection, peace, and lasting happiness. Yoga helps one to have calmness of mind - at all times. It also leads to restful sleep, increased energy, vigour, vitality, longevity and good health. Regular yoga practice also helps one to do efficient work within a short space of time and have success in every walk of life. Yoga will infuse new strength, confidence and self-reliance and ones' body & mind will be at beck and call [2]. Today yoga has become a very popular health science as well as fitness routine all over the world, drawing innumerable people into the practice. However if the yoga practitioners (sadhakas) are aware of the rules and regulations as well as the precautions then the benefits will be manifold.

2. Materials and methods

Classical texts on yoga were studied thoroughly. All references to qualities of yoga practitioners, the obstacles they might face and the precautions of practice were noted. They are: *Patanjali Yoga Sutras* (PYS) [3], *Bhagavad Gita* (BG) [4], *Yoga Sutra of Dattatreya* (YSD) [5], *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (HYP) [6], *Siva Samhita* [7] (SS), *Gheranda Samhita* [8] (GS), *Hatha Ratnavali* (HR) [9], *Maha Nirvana Tantra* (MNT) [10] and many *Yoga Upanishads* [11] such as *Sandilya Upanishad* (SU), *Yoga Tattva Upanishad*, *Amritanada Upanishad* and *Yoga Kundali Upanishad* (YKU). Systematic understanding and analysis of the data that was collected was done.

3. Results & Discussion

The classical texts on yoga revealed many aspects of the qualities of the yoga practitioner as well as they have cautioned about the possible obstacles while practicing yoga. The precautions one have to follow were also deliberated upon.

3.1 Qualities for Yoga Practice

The most important quality for success is continuous practice. *Gheranda Samhita* (GS) says that, as by learning the alphabets one can, through practice, master all the sciences, so by thoroughly practicing first the (physical) training, one acquires the knowledge of the truth (GS-I.5). The body sans practice of yoga is compared with an undone earthen pot that is thrown into water. Just like the half-baked pot, such body will soon be decayed. So the sadhaka has to bake it and make it hard and purify it in the fire of training (GS-I.8). *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (HYP) questions 'how can one get success without practice? And answers that success comes to the sadhaka who is engaged in the practice because by merely reading books on yoga, one can never get success (HYP-I.67). It further clarifies that whether young or old, sick or feeble, one can attain perfection in all the yogas by practicing. Perfections results from practical application. Without practicing, just by reading the sastras (sacred books) perfection in yoga will never be attained. Perfection is also not achieved by wearing the garb of a siddha (liberated soul), nor by talking about it, but only through practical application (HYP-I.64-66). *Patanjali Yoga Sutras* (PYS-I.12-14) too emphasize the importance of practice because it is only through practice and love for the goal, that the modifications of the mind can be controlled. There are certain qualities of the sadhaka that are prescribed that bring success while practicing. *Siva Samhita* (SS-V.13) gives a list of these qualities in order to achieve success in *Hatha* yoga. They are being steady-minded, knowing the laya-yoga, being independent, full of energy, magnanimous, full of

sympathy, forgiving, truthful, courageous, filled with faith, worshipping the lotus-feet of the Guru, and always engaged in sadhana. It is also said that such sadhakas shall achieve success within six years. The sadhaka who has control over himself attains success through faith and none others can succeed (GS-III.16). Those who are addicted to sensual pleasures or keep bad company, who are disbelievers, who are devoid of respect towards their Guru, who resort to promiscuous assemblies, who are addicted to falsehood and vain controversies, who are cruel in their speech, and who do not give satisfaction to their Guru can never attain success. This yoga treatise also lays seven qualities (conditions), they are having a firm belief about success, having faith, respect towards Guru, the spirit of universal equality, the restraint of the sense organs, moderate eating and the last is unconditional (for advanced sadhaka) (GS-III. 17 & 18).

Bhagavad Gita (BG) suggests that abandoning without reserve all desires born of the imagination, by the mind, curbing in the aggregate of the senses on every side, Little by little let sadhaka gain tranquility by means of reason, controlled by steadiness, having made the mind abide in the Self, let him not think of anything. As often as the wavering and unsteady mind wavers, so often reining it in, let the sadhaka bring the mind under the control of the Self (BG-VI.25). It further suggests that having made the mind one-pointed, with thought and the functions of the senses subdued, steady on his seat, he should practice yoga for the purification of the self, holding the body, head and neck erect, immovably steady, looking fixedly at the point of the nose with unseeing gaze (BG-VI.12). This can be achieved when the sadhaka is serene, fearless, firm in the vow of the Brahmachari, with the mind controlled and harmonized (BG-VI.13); when the subdued thought is fixed on the Self, free from longing after all desirable things, then it is said to be harmonized (BG-VI.17). The other qualities recommended are fearlessness, cleanness of life, steadfastness in the yoga of wisdom, alms giving, self-restraint, sacrifice and study of the Scriptures, austerity and straightforwardness, truth, absence of wrath, renunciation, peacefulness, absence of crookedness, compassion to living beings, uncovetousness, mildness, modesty, absence of fickleness, vigour, forgiveness, fortitude, purity, absence of envy and pride (BG-XVI.1-3).

According to Sandilya Upanishad (SU) the sadhaka should be a person possessed of yama and niyama, avoiding all company, having finished his course of study, delighting in truth and virtue, having conquered anger, being engaged in the service of the Guru and being obedient to parents, then should proceed to do sadhana (SU-I.5.1). The sadhaka of yoga or pranayama must be a person who has mastered all the indriyas (senses). He/she should be a person of peace and poise and must be an aspirant for getting liberation. He should be devoid of all blemishes and relieved of all the bondages. He must be possessed with the power of discrimination. It is suggested that only such people be taught yoga sadhana and all others are not worthy of leaning yoga and he should be well read (HYP-I.56 & 57). He should overcome anger and should be practicing truth following the duties in his regular life with detachment. He must be a sincere person performing his mundane and spiritual duties. He should adhere to all yamas and niyamas and should be dutiful in serving the Guru and the parents. In the four fold classification of Hindu society all the

classes both men and women are eligible to do sadhana.

The treatise Moksha Cintamani, suggests even women of all the four castes that aspire liberation are eligible for sadhana. It tells that sadhana is the only way for getting liberation. One who has aspiration of both the worlds namely, life on this earth and beyond, such people are eligible for practicing yoga. Others are not eligible. A person who has no mundane fascination and who is intent upon getting liberated is eligible for yoga sadhana. The yoga sadhana that the person chose to practice should not be very tiresome and rigorous and the sadhaka is debarred from conversing with evil persons. Hathā Ratnavali (HR I.78) prescribes briefly these qualifications for a yoga sadhaka. The sadhaka who is an awakened person from sleep and who has regulated control over his diet and who has won control over the breath and the sense organs and who daily practices hathā yoga are eligible for yoga sadhana.

It is interesting to note the Maha Nirvana Tantra (MNT-III.43) does not emphasize much on the place and procedure, but lays stress on the mental quality of the sadhaka while doing sadhana. It says that the sadhaka should perform anganyasa (a form of worship), with his mind well under control and the sadhaka has to do japa with a pure mind (III.64). “The worship of the Supreme Lord may be by body or mind or by word; but the one thing needful is purity of disposition. The sadhana may be done always and in all places. It is of no account whether the worshipper has or has not bathed, or whether he be fasting or have taken food. But the Supreme Spirit should ever be worshipped with a pure heart” (MNT-III.75-78).

3.2 Precautions for Practice

In the initial stages of sadhana, Hathā Yoga Pradipika negates the sadhaka from over eating or gluttony, excessive strain, over talking, adherence to a strict schedule, mingling with the society and fickle mindedness (HYP-I.16). A beginner should avoid much traveling, company of women/men, and warming oneself by fire (GS-26 & 27). The sadhaka should also avoid early (morning before sunrise) baths, fasting, and other such practices that result in giving pain to the body, so also is prohibited from eating only once a day, or not eating at all. But he may remain, without food for 3 hours (GS-31). Bhagavad Gita too implores to avoid extremities and says that yoga is not for a person who eats too much or who abstains to excess, and yoga is not suitable for a person who is too much addicted to sleep or too much addicted to wakefulness (BG-VI.15). Yoga Tattva Upanishad (30-31) says that during the early stages of practice, laziness, idle talk, association with bad characters, acquisition of mantras, playing with metals (alchemy) and woman are to be avoided. The sadhaka should also avoid fear, anger, sleep or walking too much (Amritanada Upanishad-27). Regarding precautions related to diet, the sadhaka should avoid hard, sinful and putrid food, food that is very hot or very cool and that which is stale (GS-V.30), reheated, which becomes dry, has too many vegetables (HYP-I.60) and should follow many other negations as discussed before.

The practice of Kunḍalini yoga has to be done in the manner as explained by the Guru and the sadhaka has to follow the rules and regulations of the practices s/he does. For example, like following the diet stipulations and brahmacharya (celibacy)

after performing certain kriyas (cleansing processes). Yoga Sutra of Dattatreya (166-170) cautions the sadhaka that while practicing yoga he should not sit on the seat that belongs to others. He should also avoid others and should not be touched by others (114 & 115).

3.3 Obstacles of Yoga Practice

Yoga Kundali Upanishad (YKU I.56-61) says that the sadhaka should avoid ten obstacles. They are firstly the diseases that are generated in the body by not following the precautions (such as sleeping in daytime, late vigils over night, excess of sexual activity, moving in crowd, and the evil of unwholesome food and laborious mental operation with prana). The second obstacle is doubt, the others being, carelessness, laziness, sleep, attachment, erroneous perception, sensual objects, want of faith and failure to attain the truth of yoga. Gorakhnath has said (HYP-I.61) that bad company, mixing with women (or men), bathing early in the morning, fasting and other tasks that produce pain in the body are to be avoided. Moreover overeating, exertion, talkativeness, adhering to rigid rules, being in the company of common people and unsteadiness (wavering mind) are the six obstacles (HYP-I.15). According to Patanjali Yoga Sutra (I.30-31) the obstacles for practice are disease, mental laziness, doubt, lack of enthusiasm, lethargy, clinging to sense-enjoyments, false perception, non-attaining concentration, and falling away from the state when obtained. Grief, fickle mindedness, overpowering of senses and irregular breathing, which are the result of lack of proper concentration are also obstacles in the path of the sadhaka. The Yoga Sutra of Dattatreya (100-106) lists hurdles that come during sadhana especially in the first stage of sadhana. They are sluggishness, gossip among deceivers, mantra japa (the belief that everything could be got through mantras), belief and practice of alchemy, food and music.

In the yoga and tantra treatises several siddhis or miraculous powers are mentioned, which are attained by doing various practices. In Shaṭ Cakra Nirupana the siddhis that the sadhaka shall achieve after Kundalini raises upto each of the cakras is clearly discussed. The Yoga Sutra of Dattatreya (194-198) says that by the practice of pratyahara the sadhaka gets miraculous powers. He can hear or see the things of distance, can reach anywhere within seconds, can achieve the distinct power of speech, can take any form or can go everywhere, wherever he likes. He can disappear at his will and the iron can be converted into the gold by rubbing or applying his odour and the sadhaka also gets the power to fly in the sky. However the sadhaka should remain judicious to attain the mahasiddhi (liberation) and should not enjoy these siddhis, because these siddhis are the obstacles in getting liberation (YSD-199 & 200). Similarly Patanjali Yoga Sutra also lists the powers the sadhaka shall achieve during the practice and how these are more like obstacles in the sadhana.

4. Conclusions

In all the yoga texts apart from detailed instructions about the various techniques of yoga, philosophical truths are also deliberated upon. The modern yoga sadhaka will also benefit the true results of yoga when he/she pays attention to them. Awareness of the qualities or prerequisites of the yoga

practitioner will help in the fast progress and mastery of the yoga techniques. Similarly, knowledge about the various challenges or obstacles one might face will forewarn the practitioners so that he/she is well prepared to overcome them. Yoga training and teaching institutions should take good note of them and impart rightly to the yoga students.

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