



Concept of holistic fitness since ancient Lore- A review

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Abstract

The origins of all fitness techniques are actually holistic and primeval. But nowadays the challenge is to reconnect the modern fitness techniques with their bygone scientific and holistic fundamentals. Therefore, Yoga which comprises of the Panchakosha theory is globally emerging as the Holistic Fitness Method. The five sheaths form the basic anatomy of human body as per Yoga philosophy and their vitiations can be corrected through yogic practices which are intended to promote overall health and fitness. The interconnectedness and balance of these Koshas, is the key to restoring wellness at physical, emotional, intellectual, social and spiritual levels. The wider objective is to maintain an overall balance between internal and external environments, being satisfied in ones natural state of inner harmony and keeping body, mind, and spirit in the state of equipoise, solace, and bliss.

Keywords: holistic fitness, yoga, panchakosha

Introduction

Manuscript

The Ancient Era of Holistic Health and Healing

Considering the universe as a whole, South African soldier Jan C. Smuts in the 1920s coined holism from the Greek word *Holos* meaning whole. In his book *Holism and Evolution (1926)* [28], Smuts describes holism as the propensity of nature to form whole that is the sum of the parts which are in close kinship such that they cannot subsist or be recognized independently of the whole (Freeman, 2005) [6]. Holism does not refer to any cult or religion; rather it is a perspective to view things in totality. The principles of holism date back to the times, long before penicillin or X-rays existed, when practitioners recognized the importance of holistic well being in achieving good health. The word Holistic was coined by Jan Smuts as a philosophical term describing his complex philosophy regarding the organization of nature.

Holistic Health is a state of balance which strengthens the interconnection of mind, body, spirit and environment and not simply an absence of illness. It is used many times in literature with a variety of different connotations. It is an approach to life that considers multidimensional aspects of wellness. It encourages individuals to recognize themselves in totality: physically, mentally, emotionally, socially, intellectually, and spiritually. Holistic health practices have been acquired from ancient healing systems that help to attain greater degree of wellness, prevent disorders and diseases and focus beyond mere eradication of symptoms. The two best known holistic health and healing systems are Indian Ayurveda and Traditional Chinese Medicine which originated almost 5,000 years ago and continue to evolve into complex practices till today (Patwardhan *et al*, 2005) [23]. Since the beginning, they considered human body as a compact universe of interlinked systems, comprising physical components along with subtle energies, spirit and

life force. Holistic Healing observes the whole person and considers their mind, body and spirit while treating. Another viewpoint is that holistic healing refers to the practices to boost holistic health. These include the use of traditional medical systems, mind-body-spirit interventions, manipulative and body-based practices, biological based treatments and energy oriented therapies.

The Modern Medicine and Western Fitness Epoch

With the realization that diseases are caused due to viruses and germs, the intervention based reductionist practices became prevalent due to the fear of dying. Conventional medical practices proliferated and cured particular symptoms leading to quick recoveries making us easily let go the awareness of holistic health and healing. Western medicine focused on bodily treatments, ignoring the mental, social, intellectual, spiritual and emotional aspects. Such practice lead to a change in the way people thought about health and wellness. A sudden shift from holistic to physical fitness was observed, when people developed an opinion that only physical health holds prime importance and shall be taken care of. In the 19th century, the fitness industry became flooded with several modern fitness techniques like aerobics, calisthenics, cardio workout, core training, fartlek, gymnastics, high intensity interval training, pilates, plyometrics, zumba, etc. which began acquiring public attention globally. Setting up of fitness studios and gymnasiums lead to equipment oriented mechanical workouts, consumption of food supplement for body building and toning and drug intake for power-packed performance. The Industrial Revolution and modernization detached us from original, scientific and natural practices of holistic health and fitness. As the sedentary lifestyle started portraying physical disorders, the physical fitness practices captivated the herd mentality due to the urge for instant relief disregarding its long term adversities.

Years later, by the mid of 20th century, worldwide population started getting trapped by cardiovascular diseases, cancer, chronic respiratory disorders, diabetes, obesity epidemics and much more. This was the time when people started realizing the limitations of interventionist practices. It was actually largely due to the discovery that modern medicine and fitness regimes belong to reductionist system which may be successful in providing immediate results but have negative effects on peoples' wellness and fitness in the long run. Gradually people started understanding that preventive health, wellness and fitness have huge values and began to search for more comprehensive practices for health and fitness.

Prominence of the Holistic Fitness Theory

In the 21st century, everyone has been talking about holistic health and fitness. The absolute focus is just on accomplishing a healthy, contented and fit state of self universally. The pillars of holistic wellness are- movement and exercise, healthy nutrition and wholesome diet, stress management and sleep, happy community and relationships, universal connect and purpose of life. This intense interest in health and wellness gave birth to a new movement called Holistic Fitness. Individuals are steadily exploring health trainings that include diet and nutrition, physical and emotional health, mindfulness and spiritual growth along with fitness. The fitness enthusiasts are switching towards holistic fitness practices which address the whole person and not just their physical training. The final goal is to attain health and fitness in totality through a combination of social, mental, physical, emotional, intellectual, environmental and spiritual methods. Gradually, this trend is progressing and the fitness industry is formally acknowledging the holistic aspect.

Holistic Fitness is not just a buzz word or a training fad but a philosophy with true meaning and methodology. Studies show that yo-yo dieting and crash-course fitness camps are not capable of giving long-lasting results because of their extreme nature. We strive for sustainable balance. The Holistic Fitness Theory has been framed to facilitate smooth transition from sedentary to healthy lifestyle. It usually focuses on the importance of external as well as internal self awareness for constructing a holistically healthy environment outside and within which helps to look, feel, and live better than ever thought possible. The holistic fitness approach never forgets that mind, body and soul are working together as a whole, and each of them is equally important for the overall fitness. Generally, people believe fitness as physical health relating to endurance, flexibility, strength and appearance. But recently, the purview of fitness has expanded and emerged as holistic fitness from the multidimensional holistic perspective on health and healing which assumes that the mind, body and soul are strongly bind in an inseparable manner. Holistic fitness practices not only pay attention to fat loss, development of muscles or increasing physical strength and endurance; but also seek to improve eating habits and sleeping pattern, reduction of stress and mood swings, strengthening personal, social and professional relationships, relaxing the mind and much more through complete lifestyle modification.

The age old famous *Darwin's Theory of Evolution* says *Survival of the Fittest*. Through this, it is clear that humans need more than exercise to create the greatest expression of genetics and of the Self. Humans are animals with a well

developed biological foundation. Darwin's theory of evolution has a deep meaning; according to which "Survival" does not simply refer to living as long as possible and "Fittest" does not merely relate to physical fitness. It actually refers to quality of life as well as healthy genes to pass on to future generations. It is meant to improve the connection of the whole self with the universe which means things that lead to a healthy psychological state play a crucial role in evolution and survival. An evolved approach to holistic fitness includes circadian rhythms, substance exposures, ecosystem, pace of life, alignment of environment with our biology and much more.

Yoga- The Approach for Achieving Holistic Fitness

We live in a time of great imbalance. Despite of endless opportunities to enhance fitness, the human throng with physical ailments is rapidly increasing. We face epidemic rates of chronic diseases. There are more toxins in our surroundings than ever before. Most of the individuals have poor dietary and exercising routines, struggle to manage daily stress, and many suffer from chronic depression and anxiety. Definitely, this is not limited to physical workout but is also related with the comprehensive health and fitness. It is not shocking to know that a dearth of holistic fitness approach lands us into serious medical malaise such as circulatory and pulmonary disorders, diabetes, obesity, heart problems, cancer, hormonal imbalances, etc. Hence, fitness has become the prime affair. There has never been a greater need for the holistic fitness approach as people are demanding medical alternatives and are constantly endeavoring for better personal fitness.

Thousands of years old tradition, Yoga, is now referred in the Western world as a holistic approach towards health and fitness. The term Yoga originates from Sanskrit word *Yuj* meaning to unite. Yoga integrates the essential metaphysical aspects of the mind and spirit with the body. It is both preventive and therapeutic and offers physical and mental benefits to the body and mind (Nagaraja, 2018) ^[19]. According to *Patanjali Yoga Sutra*, Yoga terminates the mental oscillations. And since stress is implicated in so many health problems, if you learn to quiet your mind, you are likely to live longer, fitter and healthier (Rani, 2017) ^[24]. Yoga is clearly unique as compared to other forms of exercises due to its exceptional nature of generating movement without producing bodily imbalances and tension (Nagaraja, 2018) ^[19]. It is a mind-body medicine which improves the physical, emotional, social, intellectual, environmental and spiritual aspects of health, wellness and fitness. Yoga tranquilizes the mind and creates feelings of relaxation, a sense of well being, improves self confidence and efficiency, lowers irritability and increases attentiveness providing an optimistic outlook towards life (Woodyard, 2011) ^[31]. Regular Yoga practice with an intention of self examination and betterment enables experiencing feelings of gratitude, empathy, and forgiveness. Yoga is a multifaceted spiritual tool with minimal side effects and is cost effective in comparison with pharmacological treatments. Though better health is not the final goal of Yoga, it is often a by-product (Rani, 2017) ^[24]. The renowned Yoga teacher B.K.S. Iyengar in his book *Yoga-The Path to Holistic Health* (2001) ^[11], states that exercising is effective only when done mindfully. He also emphasizes on the importance of being completely focused both physically and mentally during a practice.

According to Ayurveda, fitness does not mean just having a great physique or being disease free. Much more is needed for an individual to qualify as being in a fit state. Modern researchers now accept fitness as the ability to adapt and to self manage. In 2020-21, due to the pervasiveness of SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, holistic fitness gathered importance across the globe. In order to achieve the highest level of awareness for constructing a fit and healthy lifestyle; Yoga is what we need. Over the last decade, numerous scientific studies established therapeutic health and fitness benefits of Yoga thereby making it a potential integrative modality for the management of lifestyle and associated problems. According to Yoga, the prerequisite for being fit is having an optimum level of sensory and motor functions. In contrast to the contemporary modern fitness which believes in out-sourced fitness care, Yoga actually advances the in-sourcing of fitness care. Yogic practices are customized for every individual's holistic fitness on the basis of uplifting of his Panchakoshas in order to achieve the level of self actualization leading to oneness with universal consciousness. Correct and regular Yoga practice provides motivation to maintain holistic fitness, live healthy lifestyle and promote overall wellness to individuals of all the age groups. The unique scientific Panchakosha approach of Yoga makes it the foremost method of holistic fitness that is emerging and being adapted globally.

The Panchakosha Theory of Yoga

Panchakosha is a Sanskrit term meaning five sheaths or layers. They are the coverings which wrap the *Atma* or Self. The concept has been elucidated in many sacred ancient Hindu texts like *Taittiriya Upanishad*, *Vivekachudamani* and *Panchadashi*. According to the Kosha system in Yogic Philosophy, the five cardinal sheaths surround the human soul and function as one holistic system which portrays his individual growth along with the psychological and spiritual evolution. It is a subjective experience. Since eon, mankind is chasing happiness, health, and peace. Yoga is the practical way to attain *Moksha* (salvation) for which the knowledge of Panchakosha Theory is essential-

Annamaya Kosha (Physical/ Anatomical Sheath)

Everything in the universe is made of *Anna* (matter) which consists of *Panchamahabhutas* (five elements) namely the Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Space. Annamaya Kosha refers to the gross physical appearance of our body that we can see, touch and feel. This layer is build and nurtured by five perception organs (sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing) and five action organs (prehension, articulation, locomotion, excretion, and procreation). Yogic experience commences from physical body; therefore, an individual's overall personality including physique and traits build through his past, present and future births depends on Annamaya Kosha. The modern science has also been able to successfully unravel the subtleties of this Kosha which is easy to see and do experiments with. It consists of the entire world of matter (elements, molecules, atoms, protons, neutrons and electrons) which combine to make various chemicals thereby forming cells, tissues, organs, etc. that follow the well defined laws of nature and are controlled by nervous (electrical) and chemical (hormone) mechanisms to bring about movement and action in body (Nagarathna & Nagendra, 2008) [20].

Pranamaya Kosha (Vital Energy Sheath)

Prana is the vital life force which flows throughout our physical systems. The breath is the most physical expression of Prana, and Prana is closely related to the breath. Prana is the vital life strength that permeates our body. It is not the electromagnetic energy like electricity, sound, light, radio, x-ray, etc. known to the modern science. Prana is subtler than these and does not follow the laws of the usual energies. It is the subtle sheath of cosmic energy that penetrates and surrounds our physical body which is lifeless and useless without Prana. It comprises of the *Pancha Vayus* (five types of primary air namely *Prana*, *Apana*, *Udana*, *Samana* and *Vyana*) and *Pancha Upa-pranas* (five types of secondary air namely *Naga*, *Kurma*, *Krikala*, *Devdutt* and *Dhananjaya*) responsible for various functions which are indispensable for life. The Prana spreads and flows in circulatory, lymphatic, and nervous systems and the entire body in the form of vital, psychic, mental, and spiritual energies. The Pranic current, flows between the physical body and the various sheaths through subtle channels called the *Nadis* (astral tubes) (Nagarathna & Nagendra, 2008) [20].

Manomaya Kosha (Mental-Emotional Sheath)

Manas means mind, it is the source of everything. Manomaya Kosha is the layer of mind which comprises of thoughts, emotions, feelings and passions. These are the mental faculties with which we absorb, process and interpret inputs of our life. The various types of pleasures and pains affecting our lives positively or negatively are also experienced through mind. Mind is the fundamental cause of diversity, bondage and liberation. Manomaya Kosha is our mental and emotional library, the subtler layer of our existence which enables the mind to process and respond to the *Indriyas* (sensory instructions) in *Chitta* (memory) through *Ahankara* (ego). It is the key to human subsistence. *Bhavana* (emotion) is that unit of Manomaya Kosha in which rapid recycling of thoughts happens. It is known by feelings such as likes, dislikes, jealousy, love, hate, possessiveness, guilt, pride, etc. developed with the support of ego. When these emotions become intense, they govern our actions and deeds against the righteousness of cosmic laws leading to imbalances called *Adhi* (stress). Long lasting *Adhi* disturbs the functioning of Annamaya, Pranamaya and Manomaya Koshas causing *Vyadhi* (ailments) (Nagarathna & Nagendra, 2008) [20].

Vijnanamaya Kosha (Intellectual/ Wisdom Sheath)

Vijnana means subtle knowledge. Hence, this layer represents the higher faculty of wisdom lying underneath the processing and thinking of reactive mind leading to higher levels of truth and integration. It allows our consciousness to dive deep within ourselves and surroundings. Vijnanamaya Kosha consists of *Viveka*, the special ability to discriminate, decide, determine and judge everything rationally. The *Manas* (mind) is said to be *Chanchal* meaning restless, changeable, insentient, limited and evanescent. Vijnanamaya Kosha is the storehouse of all the information which with the help of *Viveka* orients the mind towards the soul, trying to find the truth in search for the eternal core of consciousness (Nagarathna & Nagendra, 2008) [20]. The conscience within mind has developed in human race greatly that differentiates man from animals. Vijnanamaya Kosha is the higher faculty providing

continuous guidance to the Manomaya Kosha for mastering the primary psychological instincts (Kavuri *et al.*, 2015) ^[12]. The freedom element inbuilt in all humans, guides them to discriminate between good and bad or right and wrong in order to move towards long term *Sukha* (happiness) (Nagarathna & Nagendra, 2008) ^[20].

Anandamaya Kosha (Bliss/ Spiritual Sheath)

Ananda is bliss, not relating to emotions like happiness or pleasure, but an infinite experience of reality. The ancients viewed the experience of the Bliss as the deepest level of our being, a state of eternal freedom, peace, joy, love, harmony and oneness with *Brahm* (Supreme Consciousness). *Taittiriya Upanishad's Ananda Mimamsa* (happiness analysis) explains about the most elementary issues of living organisms. It systematically directs towards the Anandamaya Kosha from which Prana and mind emerge. It is the most subtle aspect of our existence which is devoid of any form of emotions, a state of total silence, a state of complete harmony and perfect health (Nagarathna & Nagendra, 2008) ^[20]. Anandamaya Kosha is the innermost sheath that lies closest to the soul. It is the most subtle and sublime amongst all the five sheaths. It is the highest level of vibration in life, the state of *Mukti* or liberation. Very few people reach this Kosha which is the foremost stage of evolution where the Bliss is manifested. To bring the bliss of our causal body in all our actions is the key for a very happy and healthy life. This also brings our innate healing powers to effect providing a complete cure of our *Tapatraya* (all three types of miseries namely *Adibhautika*, *Adidaivika* and *Adhyatmika*).

Conclusion

Years of human practical experience establishes the fact that Yoga is the best way to prevent illness and maintain overall wellbeing. Therefore, Yoga is gaining admiration and is being adapted as the method for holistic fitness by everyone around the world to improve the quality of life and relieve stress. Yogic practices are altered and customized according to individual requirements in order to provide health and healing by calming the mental instability. Yoga is an easy to learn and cost effective practice and therefore is largely identified as a vital non conventional therapeutic system while treating ailments. Development of all the five cardinal sheaths is necessary for a person's complete spiritual evolution and ultimate union with the Divine. Numerous yogic techniques described in different yogic literatures help to overcome the imbalances of Panchakoshas thereby treating complex psychosomatic ailments.

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