



Ashtang Yoga: For Attaining the State of Mindfulness

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Abstract

The moment of engagement in experiencing every minute detail around you is mindfulness. It is focusing and refocusing from moment to moment to expand awareness and discover inner peace. Developing this skill weaves a translucent thread of lucidity throughout the fabric of our existence. It allows the fullest and authentic expressions of self. In West, Kabat-Zinn is credited to popularize this age old Buddhist practice as a stress management intervention. An ancient Indian philosophy, older than the Buddhist concept of mindfulness, holds a niche in developing mindfulness—Yoga. Unlike the modern understanding of yoga, which is limited to asanas or physical activity, ashtang yoga comprises eight steps. Each step when practiced scrupulously helps the practitioner to attain mindfulness of surroundings, body, mind and feelings. The paper offers an analysis of yoga steps to attain mindfulness.

Keywords Mindfulness · Asana · Meditation · Buddhism · Therapy

Introduction

Since ages, almost all ancient scriptures emphasize the acquisition of mental peace, inner peace as life goals and suggest various paths for its attainment. Besides ancient religions and scriptures, contemporary religions, specifically Buddhism and its philosophies are celebrated as a religion of peace and non-violence (Yeh, 2006, p. 91). If one prepares a Venn diagram using the values preached in each religion, the common value shared by all religions will be ‘peace.’ To attain peace, meditation is commonly practiced and suggested. Of traditional and contemporary religions, Hinduism and Buddhism have Yoga and mindfulness, respectively, as the most common meditational practices.

Found about 2600 years ago in Buddhist philosophy, mindfulness is now a popular meditational practice in neurophysiology and psychology literature.

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Kabat-Zinn (1994) defined it as non-judgmental attention to the present moment; and the main techniques to practice the core of mindfulness are meditation, mental body scan, breath watching and mindfulness yoga (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Mindfulness leads to focused awareness and connecting with reality, the surroundings. It helps to be detailed about people around us, have a sharp observation of behavior and be more attentive as a person. Mindfulness is an awareness that stems from attending the present moment in a non-judgmental and accepting manner (Bishop et al. 2004). Regular practice weaves a thread of clarity throughout the fabric of our existence. It allows the fullest and authentic expressions of self. It is like connecting the outer self with the inner self. The steps for mindfulness are rather simple and involve absorption in the present moment by silencing the thoughts. Step by step one builds a mindfulness state of awareness. It is a skill that can be practiced every moment of the day, every day just like meditation. Mindfulness is focusing and refocusing from moment to moment to expand awareness and discover inner peace. According to Tang and Posner (2013), different mindfulness skills converge to a common goal, i.e., being in the state of awareness and placidity of the phenomenological field. This meditational practice requires acceptance of present conditions both behavioral and cognitive. Numerous researches in mindfulness provide pieces of evidence for:

- a) its effectiveness in emotion regulation (Chambers et al. 2009; Geschwind et al. 2011; Mathew et al. 2010; Nyklíček, & Kuijpers, 2008; Zhang, Wang, Wang, Liu, Zhang & Zhou, 2019),
- b) enhancing happiness and satisfaction (Davidson, et al. 2003; Ivanovski and Malhi, 2007; Shapiro et al. 1998),
- c) reduce anxiety, depression and experience equanimity (Baer et al. 2006),
- d) reduce addiction (Bowen, et al. 2006) and
- e) increase cognitive abilities (Brefczynski-Lewis et al. 2007; Jha et al. 2007; Low et al. 2008; McCracken and Yang, 2008; Ortner et al. 2007; Tang et al. 2007).

According to Schoenberg and Barendregt (2016), mindfulness involves a fine-tuning of attention to dismantle mental processes into basic constituents and observe this dismantling from a distant ego. They have used Vipassana as a synonym for mindfulness (Schoenberg and Barendregt 2016, p.307). Mindfulness meditation manifests discipline and concentration in lifestyle and actions. Insight emerges once the discipline and concentration are developed in behavioral, cognitive and emotional levels of individuals. Schoenberg and Barendregt (2016) structured the advancing of mindfulness meditation into three levels—discipline, concentration and insight. The study claims a heightened resolution of observation of internal or external stimulus as the emergence of equanimity and established an empirical baseline with neurophysiologic markers. It is a scientific representation of the Buddhist Philosophy. Holzel et al. (2011) proposed four effective compositions of mindfulness, namely attention regulation on the chosen object, body awareness, regulation of emotional reactions and changing perception about self. They found these four components similar to “*Satipatthana*

Sutta” in the Theravada Buddhist scriptures (Holzel et al. 2011). Davis and Hayes (2012) reviewed several articles on mindfulness and concluded its various benefits for both clients and psychologists.

So, ‘mindfulness’ can be referred to as a non-judgmental momentary awareness and a psychological state of awareness that one attains with the practice of promoting awareness about self and environment. In Buddhist literature, it is one of the eight noble paths that end the sufferings caused by desires and attachments.

Since it is a state of mind, certain practices can cultivate it. Walsh and Shapiro (2006) mentioned cultivating mindfulness by yoga, tai chi and qigong. A mindful state shall be a lifestyle and not only be limited to remedy as suggested by some above-mentioned studies. The current paper synchronizes the mindfulness with ashtang yoga.

Yoga is one of the *shatdarshans* also known as six schools of Indian philosophy, propounded by Maharshi Patanjali. In English language, the nearest possible word to ‘yoga’ is ‘union,’ indicating a connection between body and mind, outer and inner self, and soul and supreme power. It is an Ancient Vedic lifestyle. Today, the common idea of yoga is limited to *Asana* or physical pose, but it goes beyond and promotes physical, psychological and spiritual well-being. The spiritual enlightenment is the ultimate mindfulness state for any human being to attain. Yoga is a method to control the fluctuation of mind—*Chitta vritti nirodham* (Sanskrit translation). Issacs (2008) suggested being mindful of the body through *Asana* positions; and emphasis on similarity between Buddhist and yogic meditation. But the literature is ambiguous in explaining the relationship of various steps of former and latter practice. Similar work is found by other scholars (Gulathi, 2018; Martin, 2018). Yoga is a systematic way of living and comprehensive practice to bring self-discipline via social conduct, strengthening of the body, control breathing and withdrawing from giving in to desires.

The ashtang yoga comprises of eight steps. Each step when practiced scrupulously helps the *saadhak* attain mindfulness of surroundings, body, mind and feelings. Like mindfulness meditation, yogic practices develop a mental absorption in the present moment by regular practice of each step to offer a deep insight into the mind. Each step of yoga helps in evolving from awareness of surrounding to body, feelings and mind—a complete state of mindfulness.

The eight steps of Yoga outlined by Maharshi Patanjali comprised of *Yamas* (ethical disciplines), *niyamaas* (individual observances), *Asana* (posture), *Pranayama* (breath control), *Pratyahara* (withdrawal of senses), *Dharana* (concentration), *Dhyana* (meditation), and *Samadhi* (self-realization or enlightenment) (Bonura, 2011). These eight limbs are comprised of ethical principles for living a meaningful and purposeful life; serving as a prescription for moral and ethical conduct and self-discipline, they direct attention toward one’s health while acknowledging the spiritual aspects of one’s nature (Woodyard, 2011).

The fundamental goal of both yoga and mindfulness is awareness of experiences and emotions. How shall one practice the yogic steps in contemporary times to attain mindfulness? The following paragraphs include details about each step and its manifestation in contemporary times.

Yama and Mindfulness

The first step of Patanjali's yoga, also known as the first limb of ashtanga yoga, is *Yama*. It infers to the ability of self-control and restrains from basic instincts and desires. One can attain this ability by speaking truth always (*Satya*), not hurting any other living or non-living being (*ahimsa*), not stealing from others (*asteya*), not obtaining possessions of others (*aparigraha*) and following the path of true knowledge without being disturbed by desires or lust (*brahmacharya*). All these steps are beneficial for human brain. Studies have shown benefits of truth a healthy human brain (Polage, 2017; Spence and Kaylor-Hughes, 2008). The practice of *Yama* makes a person pious within his own self for self-realization. The person becomes observant, sensitive to self and others, restrains or controls various actions and desires, increases consciousness and awareness, and feels the inner peace. This is the beginning of mindfulness.

Niyama and Mindfulness

After acquiring self-control, *niyama* directs an individual toward disciplining own self within and environment around own self. *Niyama* includes five practices namely *saucha* (cleanliness is a clean body, mind and environment), *Santosh* (content), *tapas* (austerity), *swadhyaya* (self-study of scriptures) and *Ishwar pranidhan* (submitting to the almighty our joy, sorrow, anger, fear, success, failure, ego, etc.). The practice of *Yama* and *niyama* breaks the faulty behavioral pattern and thoughts and replaces them with healthy actions and beliefs, respectively. Mindfulness via *Yama* nurtures self-control and awareness followed by the consecration of actions and intentions via *niyama*.

Asana, Pranayama, and Mindfulness

Different meditative postures strengthen and bring flexibility in all the muscles of the body. *Asana* is about placing the body in specific positions, regulating breathing patterns and channelizing inner self. In *Asana*, the body is placed in a specific position, to align with breath (*prana*) and mind. Once the body and *prana* are regularized, the mind progresses toward the experience of focused consciousness. *Asana* and *Pranayam* are dedication and absorption of self in every moment and every segment of the environment.

Mindful meditation by Kabat-Zinn includes body scan method where the practitioner scans his physical self in the moment. Garland et al. 2015a, Garland et al. 2015b and Schaufeli and Salanova (2011) have reported positive changes and experiences of mindfulness. But adapting *Yama*, *niyama* and *Asana* make an individual scan his body and mind all the time. They stimulate an experience of

positive affect and cognition which later becomes behavioral patterns. This prepares an individual for the successful culmination of this stage gradually.

Pratyahara and Mindfulness

This stage can be closely associated with mindfulness state (insightfulness) because it helps to withhold mind from an ongoing perception of the external and internal environment. It brings one-mindedness, focus on self, patience, and mildness (just like mindfulness meditation). *Pratyahara* rejuvenates the self by letting go of old habits, beliefs, thoughts, etc. *Pratyahara* can be conceptually encircled with Buddhist noble paths (right speech, livelihood, thought, action and effort). It is parallel to the re-integration suggested in mindfulness meditation. The person attains this ability to cultivate inner peace, silence, and withdraw from the material world with intentions to self-discovery.

Dharana, Dhyana, Samadhi, and Mindfulness

All meditative practices begin with the fourth state of consciousness, i.e., *turiya* (Vyas and Vyas, 2017, p.28), and this process is facilitated by *Pratyahara*. *Dharana*, *Dhyana* and *Samadhi* are the last three limbs of yoga and together are referred to as *Sanyam* (Tapasyananda, 2015, p.101) or control. *Dharana* is binding attention beyond a single target. It leads the individual to *Dhyana* where total concentration is achieved after practicing it in *Dharana*. *Dhyana* eventually leads to *Samadhi* which is the deepest stage of concentration. This is an up going swirl of consciousness from *Pratyahara* to *Samadhi*.

Regular practice of *Dharana* enhances mental strength, increases the ability to remain focused and trains the mind to remain calm (Roy, 2020). The physical and mental consciousness increases to cease all restless thoughts and emotions (Roy, 2020). *Dharana* can be facilitated by fixing of the mind on a target in the environment. Simultaneously, imagination can also be sought to fixate minds such as an image of a flower, a deity or a flame in the center of one's being (Tapasyananda, 2015, 94). The yoga steps, from *Yama* to *Pratyahara*, help in mastering the art of *Dharana* because it requires to focus on breath, body and mental processes. When the mind is trained to remain fixed on an internal or external point, the individual experiences an unbroken flow of power and this state is *Dhyana* (Tapasyananda, 2015, 100–101). Beyond this state, the individual rejects the external environment completely and meditates only on the internal self that is *Samadhi*. According to Vyas and Vyas (2017), *Samadhi* is the elimination of mind. So the meditation begins with a large object and gradually moves to fine ones and ultimately to objectlessness. It is a shift of perception from external objects to intentions of self and then to self-sections. However, if one practices meditation for the long term as directed in yoga, it brings longevity; i.e., an increase in the melatonin level resulting in physical rejuvenation and regeneration (Vyas and Vyas, 2017, p.47).

Conclusion

Practicing mindfulness also requires the mind to focus on every single object and moment and actions. With the practice of yoga, individuals can attain focus and a one-pointed mind as required for being mindful. The author is trying to establish a comparative relation between yoga and mindfulness to suggest that what is acquired by the latter can be gained by steps mastered in the former. Practicing yoga makes an individual focus perfectly in his life. It works for physical, psychological and spiritual development with a disownership of the materialistic world. The goals of mindfulness are very similar to that of yoga. Hence, to achieve the mindfulness, one can practice and master the steps prescribed in yoga.

The stages of yoga as mentioned above are the progression of individuals from his outer world to the inner world. This way the chances of failure in yoga can be brought down. The inner self-de-integration and its re-integration would be less scary (Schoenberg and Barendregt, 2016).

Future Research

The scientists use experimental methods for understanding the progression of the human mind from different stages of consciousness through yoga and mindfulness as a comparative study. Mainstream psychology needs to align Indian psychology and its methods. Yoga practice as psychotherapy shall be taught and encouraged to be practiced. The eminent scholars and practitioners should not limit their understanding of yoga to asana and compare its effectiveness with mainstream psychotherapies for a simple reason that yoga has the potential for the development as a new psychotherapeutic model is still afresh. Interdisciplinary research in different areas of psychology with yoga is mentioned below.

In the field of education, research will provide a new perspective of using yogic techniques for handling and guiding students for behavioral issues.

In child psychology, parenting skills using yoga will help parents learn and teach the lesson of a good character, and healthy body and mind over materialistic achievements.

In mental health profession, both clinical and non-clinical practitioners can use yoga in controlling and regulating problem behavior in children and adults such as impulsivity and anxiety.

In sports psychology, yoga can be an inclusive routine in Indian schools and colleges. Currently, yoga is just an intervention program (Goodman et al. 2014).

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