Yoga in Pain Management

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Summary

Yoga is a practice that has evolved and survived over thousands of years, its teachings adapting to many cultures and eras of history. Until recently, yoga was known in the West mostly for the extraordinary feats of its adepts: voluntarily stopping and then restarting of the heart, holding the breath for extended periods, or contortionist positions of the body. Now, with more cross-fertilization in all aspects of physical fitness, yoga has become mainstream. What may be lost in this process is the greater picture of where yoga came from, what it is, and its many uses, including medical pain relief. This chapter is meant to acquaint the reader more fully with the practice of yoga and its potential roles within an integrative pain medicine practice.

Key Words: health, mind–body, exercise, hatha yoga, yoga therapy, therapeutic yoga, pain medicine, neurophysiology in yoga, Iyengar yoga, anusara yoga

1. HISTORY OF YOGA

The word yoga means “to yoke” or “to join.” Classically this means that the individual consciousness links itself to a universal or supreme consciousness, and in doing so attains greater freedom and joy. Even though this definition identifies yoga as a spiritual practice, anyone can practice yoga along with his or her chosen religious affiliation, or with none. Yoga is theistic but non-sectarian. It has no clergy.

Yoga itself is not a religion. It is undenominational, relying not on faith but on a number of techniques that gradually lead the individual to the direct experience of those truths on which religion rests. “We can call it the inner spirit of religion (1).”
As will be discussed further in this chapter, some schools of yoga focus more on philosophy, while others focus more on physical and mental practices. But yoga has an imperishably spiritual character.

Yoga is often compared to a tree, with roots that are buried deep in history, a strong trunk composed of practices and philosophical teachings, and many branches. The branch that addresses bodily health is called “Hatha Yoga;” the word ‘hatha’ refers to a balancing of opposing forces.

The practice of the postures or asanas is common to yoga classes all over the world today. Yet this is just one of many yoga practices. Others include philosophical study, known as Jnana yoga; worship of deities, known as Bhakti yoga; and Karma yoga, which involves devoting one’s worldly activities to helping others. Asana is Sanskrit for “seat,” and in spite of their variety, these postures hearken back to the origins of yoga, which were inextricably bound to meditation.

The roots of the yoga tree originate before the Vedic Age, thousands of years before the Common Era. The Vedas, which date from the fourth and fifth centuries BCE, are among the oldest living scriptures, yet they include references to yoga practices that have been carried through to the present day. Originally, knowledge was passed on orally from teacher to student, making this history difficult to trace. However, scholars have found evidence of yoga practices in a sophisticated civilization that existed in India as far back as 2600 BCE.

In approximately the fifth or sixth century CE, the trunk of the tree split into three main branches that became known as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. The practice of Hatha yoga is intertwined with these spiritual traditions to this day. A radical idea appears here—that tending to the human body and keeping it strong and fit is part of a way of life that honors the inherent connectedness of body, mind, and spirit.

From pre-Socratic, Platonic, Manichaean, and Christian times, mind and spirit have often been opposed to the material, animal, bodily, or physical “world.” This has yielded the extremely difficult situation Descartes encountered: a ghost in a machine, with no possible connection between the mind and the body.

In contrast, contemporary integrative medicine has more affinity with the non-dualistic Advaita Vedanta tradition of Shankara (circa 800 CE), possibly reborn with Sigmund Freud. It seeks to understand the relationship between the mind and the body. For all its otherworldliness, Hatha yoga focuses less on worship and more on spirituality of the self; its orientation is far more to psychology than theology.

The next important development in yoga’s history came through the work of Patanjali, a physician and grammarian who compiled the prevalent teachings of yoga into a work called the Yoga Sutra circa the second century of the Common Era. This is a collection of nearly 200 aphorisms, which state much of the philosophy and practice of yoga in condensed form. What arose from this pivotal time in yoga’s history is called Classical yoga, which followed the teachings laid out in the Yoga Sutra. These are available in several excellent translations, such as those of Taimni, Feuerstein, and Shearer (1–3).

In 1893, yoga was first introduced in the West by the missionary work of Swami Vivekananda who represented Hinduism at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago. After that event, many seekers traveled to India and found teachers from various branches of the tree, leading to the spread of yoga throughout the Western world. Throughout the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, other teachers, such as Paramahansa Yogananda, Swami Satchidananda, Swami Sivananda Saraswati,