

by Imogen Dalmann

Though not exactly joined at the hip there is an increasing bond developing between medical science and yoga. After all they share a common purpose - the health and well-being of people. And increasingly, they share the same people – people seeking to maintain their health or recover from illnesses.

The medical establishment's perspective has a strong influence on how yoga is perceived by the public at large.

For over twenty years there has been an increasing effort from the medical sector to focus people's attention on prevention rather than cure. This tendency towards more prophylaxis is ever increasing. Today one can find information about health and disease all over the media. More and more people have access to information about the human body and the conditions and circumstances that lead to illness.

The use of the world-wide-web has added to this development: News-Groups for patients of particular diseases do not restrict themselves information on how to preserve health but have advanced deeply into the area of medical expertise as well as therapy. In Germany for example it is almost common knowledge that diabetes is connected to the level of blood sugar, that there are two types of diabetes which differ from each other in many ways and that the treatment diabetes is not always the same and so on. Information on heart diseases, different kinds of cancer, high blood pressure, allergic reactions, is also available leading to a very knowledgeable population.

The medical establishment's view on health and disease is no longer a privilege of those dealing with the topic professionally but has become part of common knowledge. Those who would discuss health and disease must master the basics and the terminology.

The importance of results in medical science and in yoga.

Medical professionals are increasingly prepared to accept the limits of modern therapy. Modern medical doctors are having less problems with "powerlessness" and "almightiness" than their predecessors had. There is an increasing willingness to accept complementary, not alternative medicine.

It is from this background that an increasing curiousness and openness towards time-tested methods of naturopatic medicine, such as traditional Chinese medicine, homeopathy and Ayurveda is growing. These methods have found acceptance in the treatment of many, mainly chronic, diseases. Yoga has also found its place amongst these accepted methods.

Simple implications – Simple explanations

What is the medical sciences' view on yoga? Firstly, medical science sees no reason to move away from its scientific approach to evaluation. Complimentary medicine or treatments must deliver proven results just as scientific medicine does. It should be possible to explain the concept in a rational and traceable way.

How difficult or how easy can these requirements be fulfilled by yoga?

Sometimes yoga's contribution to physical health and wellbeing can be easily explained in terms of cause and effect. For example when in Shalabhasana the muscles of the back get contracted and then, coming out of the position, are relaxed again, the result effect is easy to understand: The process of contraction and relaxation increases the amount of blood flowing through the

muscles, improving the muscles nourishment and helping the muscle to work smoothly. The risks of yoga exercises are also well documented. For example there is no doubt that the regular practice of headstand and shoulderstand or pascimottanasana can be harmful to an instable spine, can even cause problems with spinal disks and lead to unacceptable risks for the neck. Clear and logical knowledge such as this is easy to work with.

Experience

There are however, many situations which are not so clear and for which satisfactory explanations are not available for the scientific mind. Examples include: the relief of menopause symptoms through yoga or cases when depressive disturbances, a disturbed sleep or chronic sinusitis improves through yoga. But even in these situations there is openness in medical circles to accept that the results are there even when the scientific explanation is lacking. This attitude is not as strange as one may think – in the development of new medicines it sometimes happens that a medicine being tested to prove a certain effect shows another unexpected effect. The second healing effect, unforeseen and often arising in an area that should not show any effect can not be properly explained. Research on the effect often starts much later than the test of the medicine, designed to identify side-effects. Let us put it like this: it is not properly known how the remedy works, but the remedy will be used, because it has shown a healing effect after unwanted side effects on important organs have been excluded. Of course there will be a continuing effort to discover how the remedy works, but in the first line there is an openness towards everything that shows proven healing results.

With this background the results of yoga in healing or prevention are well accepted nowadays under one condition: the intellectual honesty of the argumentation must be given.

Honest arguments

Yoga teachers should seek to ensure that when using scientific arguments to explain the results of a certain practice they must not talk nonsense. Those who claim that shoulderstands would activate the thyroid gland or headstands would increase brain functioning by supplying more blood to the brain, or those who state that a forward bend in seated position would activate the blood supply to the stomach and so improve digestion, or who spreads “information” that backward bends like shalabhasana would activate the adrenal glands, or who ever claims that certain breathing techniques would have a definite influence on the left or right side of the body or would raise the level of oxygen in the blood or similar things, would only be scorned by more thoughtful scientific minds. Unfortunately, in the process they do harm to the public image of yoga and interfere with the dialogue with the medical establishment.

On the other hand, those who try to make clear that most of the results of yoga – asana, pranayama and meditation – are so complex that there is no simple explanation for them (which is the same case in psychotherapy), will have no problems with professional medical doctors. In any case medical doctors are well prepared to accept that as a first step it is sufficient to achieve good results with a traceable concept regardless of whether the results can be scientifically proved or not.

Ancient teachers of yoga , hundreds of years back developed their tools without any modern instruments like microscopes, chemical blood-analysis, x-ray or magnetic resonance imaging but their cognition is as amazing as their scientific attitude. In their relying on critical observation and experiential analysis they showed a scientific attitude, which does not differ from modern scientist. In their explanations they relied on ancient Vedic concepts just as western medicine relies on its medical predecessors. But if yoga now enters the arena of the modern scientific world, it is well advised to refer to the latest scientific cognition. This should be taken into account when connecting the concepts of the Indian ancestors to nowadays discussion. The old Yogis saw “agni” as a persons capability to assimilate and prana as the essence of life. Prana is

everything the process of life consists of, what maintains and supports it. Prana makes us breath and prana allows us to relate to whatever is there. During a disease prana is disturbed and the absence of prana means dead.

Yoga teachers should be extremely careful in connecting these complex phenomenas with western medical concepts. Very often for example “agni” is explained to be an equivalent of the solar plexus (which is a web of nerves and is on no account “hot” like agni is nor can it assimilate or influences digestion). Speaking like this gives the impression of a person with very poor knowledge and creates fatal results for the image of yoga in the medical world.

Changes in Medicine

There is a change in western medicine which will facilitate the communication between yoga and western medicine. While medical scientists of the “old kind” insisted on germs, bacteria and genetic factors as the only reasons to fall ill, the patients contribution to the healing process was limited to follow the doctors instructions. Lately and with increasing speed another view is spreading amongst medical science: Originating from the communication with psychology social influence and its personal management, too, is regarded as another possible cause for diseases(f. e. stomach ulcer), and there is no more doubt about the influence of a healthy lifestyle on health . Besides of this there have been discussions for quite a while now wether disease might be an integral part of human life, which should be accepted and handled accordingly. From this point of view the patient’s participation in the process of staying healthy or regaining health is a must. Here yoga is very much welcome and doctors will easily cooperate with yoga teachers.

Respect

Despite of all this, the responsibility for the healing process still lies within the hands of the medical doctor. When the patient reaches the limit of own contribution this responsibility is taken very serious and there should be a mutual respect between the yoga teacher and the doctor. As well as the doctor will not interfere with the tools of the yoga teacher, the yoga teacher should not confuse the student doubting the methods of the doctor. Most of the people seeking help with a yoga teacher are already under treatment and have undergone all necessary examination. Necessary medicine has been prescribed. One of the first responsibilities of the yoga teacher lies in not confusing the student giving unsolicited advice and challenge the competence of the doctor. Comments like “oh, you take cortison, didn’t your doctor speak about the side effects?” or “ Injections are not very helpful with back pain, we need a more profound cure”... will not contribute to a good relationship.

Communication between yoga and medical science is fairly easy as long as both sides remain in mind that they deal with a suffering person seeking help. To stress this common interest instead of getting lost in sham fights about which method will help with which disease should be the challenge of a good yoga teacher seeking cooperation with medical science.

Yoga teachers do not need a full medical education. Listening and examining carefully and knowing their tools thoroughly they can get very far with their student. As well as a surgeon studies anatomy with regard to his future duties, yoga teachers should study it in a special way with regard to their requirements connected with information about which âsanapractise or other tools would help with which case.

Yoga teachers kind of stand “on two fronts”. They have to deal with a false image of yoga in the western world. They have to spread information that sitting cross-legged or standing on the head is not the essence and is not the dominant intent of yoga, as well as to explain that yoga does not automatically follow Hinduism. They also have to free yoga from lots of esoteric ballast. And, on the other hand, yoga should not be treated as a secret knowledge, accessible only to

some chosen masters on top who are knowing everything already. But, from another angle, they should also not sell yoga cheaply. Yoga teachers should have a good, decent qualification and they well might be more offensive, more ambitious and clearer about what yoga is and what it can do. Yoga should be brought into the world to wherever it can be of use. This may be a child garden, a social project, a support group or wherever people gather to do something good. This requires some special preparation and a deep understanding of what is requested. And: there should be colleagues and teachers to exchange thoughts, ideas and friendly criticism. Like this yoga may become an integral part of everyday life.

Outlook into the future

When opening the Congress “Yoga for the 21st Century,” in France, T. K. V. Desikachar said: “Yoga is like a river which has been flowing for a very long time. Good or bad, it has reached the west and I do not think, this will stop it flowing. More likely it will receive many influences and grow. With or without scientific company, yoga will go on its way – without scientific assistants probably more chaotic and with some unnecessary doubts”. This means: Yoga should not fear the dialogue with scientific medicine, more: this dialogue is likely to be useful for both sides.