

Ashtanga Yoga for General Well Being

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I. INTRODUCTION

Yoga is an Indian philosophy systematized in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali approximately 2000 years ago as a global life style approach consisting of eight interrelated components. The first component consists of ethical behavior prescriptions toward others (e.g. non-harming) and the second consists of rules of conduct toward the self (e.g. discipline). The third is the practice of physical poses or asana. The fourth is a controlled breathing practice. The fifth consists of controlling sensory input. The following three components are increasingly more advanced levels of meditative practice. Specifically, the sixth component consists of practicing sustained concentration or focused attention on one object. The seventh is a state of absorption in which the entire perceptual flow is directed toward the object. The eighth and final component is a state of integration in which the object is seen as indivisible from the self. The goal of regularly practicing these eight components is to calm the restlessness of the mind so that mental activity can be directed into productive channels and mental pain can be alleviated (Iyengar 1966). Contemporary yoga practices primarily focus on asana, controlled breathing and meditation, with various degrees of emphasis on each of these components (National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health 2016). Yoga incorporating asana, or asana-based yoga, includes traditional practices such as Hatha, Iyengar, Sivananda and Ashtanga.

Ashtanga was developed at the beginning of the twentieth century by Pratabhi k. Jois (2010) following the principles of the yoga Sutras. Ashtanga yoga shares some characteristics with other current yoga practices, such as Iyengar, but also possesses unique features that may make it particularly potent to improve depression, anxiety, self-esteem and interpersonal functioning. Specifically, Ashtanga yoga comprises six series of increasing difficulty, all following the same core principles. Each series consists of a set number asanas of incremental difficulty, practiced in an invariant order. Practitioners progress to the next asana once they have mastered the previous. Asanas are chained by vinyasas, which are dynamic, fluid, movement sequences that make Ashtanga an aerobic form of exercise. Ashtanga is the only form of yoga practiced with the Tristana, which refers to focused attention on the coordination of asana, breath and gaze. The goal of the Tristana is to induce concentration, the first level of meditation, as follows. First, asanas are technically complex, and their correct execution requires careful mental focus on the body's alignment and the use of strength and flexibility. Second, each of the movements constituting the vinyasas is coordinated with either an inhale or an exhale and asanas are held for a specific number of breaths. This requires focus on the breath and constitutes an inherent controlled breathing practice. Finally, each asana and each movement constituting a vinyasa has a specific gazing point, for example the hands, meant to reduce external distractions and to further induce concentration (Jois 2010). By promoting uninterrupted concentration on these three elements, the Tristana also decenters practitioners from their fluctuating thoughts. Together, these characteristics make. Finally, Ashtanga is a progressive mastery practice. Each new pose involves a new set of frustration, doubts and discomfort. Overcoming these challenges requires accepting their experience and managing them with calm, patience and equanimity. Some of these qualities may extend beyond the mat into a less reactive and more poised approach to life with benefits in several domains. This integrated practice may be especially helpful for depression and anxiety for the following reasons. First, as mentioned above, exercise, controlled breathing and meditation all have helpful properties of their own. Ashtanga takes these three practices, each with their demonstrated benefits, and combines them into a single 60- to 75-min practice.

Finally, Ashtanga may improve interpersonal relations. The calm and equanimity necessary to the practice may generalise into a less reactive interpersonal stance allowing more thoughtful interactions. Relatedly, mindfulness, which also cultivates acceptance and non-reactivity, has been shown beneficial to relationships. Specifically, higher dispositional mindfulness is associated with a higher self-expression and empathy, and lower social anxiety. Further, interventions aimed at increasing mindfulness skills improve interpersonal relations, which participants attribute to increased awareness of their automatic reactions, creating conditions for more thoughtful interactions rather than reacting in habitual ways. In the present study, we hypothesised that participants would show significant improvements in self-

esteem, depression/affect, anxiety and interpersonal functioning. In addition, we gathered information on participants' reasons for enrolling and we tested whether these reasons, psychological or fitness oriented, would have an impact on attendance and outcome.

1.1 Benefits of Ashtanga Yoga

In Sanskrit, ashtanga means “having eight limbs or branches (components)”. According to the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, there is a practice called the Eightfold Path that leads to self-awakening and liberation. Ashtanga yoga, as the name says, outlines all eight limbs of yoga and develops both psychological and spiritual health. It focuses on a predefined sequence of poses that are connected through breath and movement, Few benefits this yoga style can bring are:

A. Physical Strength

Ashtanga yoga focuses on muscle training and develops physical strength. Practicing Ashtanga rejuvenates your body, making it stronger, toned, more flexible and controlled. The opening series includes lots of contortion- esque poses and many of them require core and arm strength. Your stamina and endurance will gradually improve and you'll have stronger core muscles. Another advantage of Ashtanga is that you can move through the practice at your own pace and level.

B. Effective Cardio Workout

Ashtanga is great if you need a cardio workout. It will help you to get in shape, manage your weight and stay fit, all that, while doing long slow deep breathing! When done swiftly, these movements can effectively raise your heart rate. Sequences of Ashtanga postures are done in a continuous, fast-paced way and the dynamic flow of the asanas (postures) may give you the sense of intensity. If you prefer more vigorous styles of yogic practice, Ashtanga is just the right style for you.

C. Good Coordination

Ashtanga yoga is a powerful tool to tune the body. It improves focus, balance and coordination. A swift and intense set of asanas instills a better sense of rhythm and increases your awareness of the movement and flow of your body.

D. Emotional Benefits

This style of yoga also emphasizes emotional and mental flexibility and strength. Asanas can affect not only your muscles and joints but also your emotions and enable purification.

By practicing Ashtanga, you will find a balance between feelings and emotions. It will help you deal with emotionally difficult situations, work through the pain and suppressed emotions, and overcome them. The equilibrium in your emotions will cause your organs and your whole body to work more efficiently and you will realize how strongly connected your body and mind are.

E. Mental Healing

Ashtanga yoga will keep your body moving in coordination with the breath. Breath awareness is particularly important in this practice. This sort of moving meditation and constant focus on the breath will purify and still your mind, relieve you of stress and allow you to alter patterns of unwanted behavior.

Ashtanga will bring you back to yourself and keep you centered on a daily basis. This practice teaches us to move beyond our mind, attain inner union and deep realization. Start practicing Ashtanga yoga in Poway and get in a state of being calm, energized, relaxed, and liberated.

Spiritual well-being

As we already mentioned, there is a set of specific sequences based on the practitioner's skill and experience that every Ashtangi has to follow. Repeating the same poses in the exact order has its purpose and the benefits are not only physical. It awakens your spiritual self.

The first four limbs cleanse your external and teach you how to interact with the world around you. The next four limbs focus on withdrawal, cleansing the internal and how you relate to your mind.

1.2 The Eight Limbs of Ashtanga Yoga

A. Yama

The first of the 8 limbs of yoga, yama, deals with one's ethical standards and sense of integrity, focusing on our behavior and how we conduct ourselves in life. Yamas are universal practices that relate best to what we know as the Golden Rule, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you."

The five yamas are:

1. **Ahimsa: nonviolence**
2. **Satya: truthfulness**
3. **Asteya: nonstealing**
4. **Brahmacharya: continence**
5. **Aparigraha: noncovetousness**

B. Niyama

Niyama, the second limb, has to do with self-discipline and spiritual observances. Regularly attending temple or church services, saying grace before meals, developing your own personal meditation practices, or making a habit of taking contemplative walks alone are all examples of niyamas in practice.

The five niyamas are:

1. **Saucha: Cleanliness**
2. **Samtosa: Contentment**
3. **Tapas: Heat; Spiritual Austerities**
4. **Svadhya: Study of the sacred scriptures and of one's self**
5. **Ishvara pranidhana: Surrender to God**

C. Asana

Asanas, the postures practiced in yoga, comprise the third of the 8 limbs of yoga. In the yogic view, the body is a temple of spirit, the care of which is an important stage of our spiritual growth. Through the practice of asanas, we develop the habit of discipline and the ability to concentrate, both of which are necessary for meditation.

D. Pranayama

Generally translated as "breath control," this fourth stage consists of techniques designed to gain mastery over the respiratory process while recognizing the connection between the breath, the mind, and the emotions. As implied by the literal translation of pranayama, "life force extension," yogis believe that it not only rejuvenates the body but actually extends life itself. You can practice pranayama as an isolated technique (i.e., simply sitting and performing a number of breathing exercises), or integrate it into your daily hatha yoga routine.

These first four stages of Patanjali's ashtanga yoga concentrate on refining our personalities, gaining mastery over the body, and developing an energetic awareness of ourselves, all of which prepares us for the second half of this journey, which deals with the senses, the mind, and attaining a higher state of consciousness.

E. Pratyahara

Pratyahara, the fifth of the 8 limbs of yoga, means withdrawal or sensory transcendence. It is during this stage that we make the conscious effort to draw our awareness away from the external world and outside stimuli. Keenly aware of, yet cultivating a detachment from, our senses, we direct our attention internally. The practice of pratyahara provides us with an opportunity to step back and take a look at ourselves. This withdrawal allows us to objectively observe our cravings: habits that are perhaps detrimental to our health and which likely interfere with our inner growth.

F. Dharana

As each stage prepares us for the next, the practice of pratyahara creates the setting for dharana, or concentration. Having relieved ourselves of outside distractions, we can now deal with the distractions of the mind itself. No easy task! In the practice of concentration, which precedes meditation, we learn how to slow down the thinking process by concentrating on a single mental object: a specific energetic center in the body, an image of a deity, or the silent repetition of a sound.

We, of course, have already begun to develop our powers of concentration in the previous three stages of posture, breath control, and withdrawal of the senses.

In asana and pranayama, although we pay attention to our actions, our attention travels. Our focus constantly shifts as we fine-tune the many nuances of any particular posture or breathing technique. In pratyahara we become self-observant; now, in dharana, we focus our attention on a single point. Extended periods of concentration naturally lead to meditation.

G. Dhyana

Meditation or contemplation, the seventh stage of ashtanga, is the uninterrupted flow of concentration. Although concentration (dharana) and meditation (dhyana) may appear to be one and the same, a fine line of distinction exists between these two stages. Where dharana practices one-pointed attention, dhyana is ultimately a state of being keenly aware without focus. At this stage, the mind has been quieted, and in the stillness, it produces few or no thoughts at all. The strength and stamina it takes to reach this state of stillness is quite impressive. But don't give up. While this may seem like a difficult, if not impossible task, remember that yoga is a process. Even though we may not attain the "picture perfect" pose, or the ideal state of consciousness, we benefit at every stage of our progress.

H. Samadhi

Patanjali describes this eighth and final stage of ashtanga, samadhi, as a state of ecstasy. At this stage, the meditator merges with his or her point of focus and transcends the Self altogether. The meditator comes to realize a profound connection to the Divine, an interconnectedness with all living things. With this realization comes the "peace that passeth all understanding"; the experience of bliss and being at one with the Universe. On the surface, this may seem to be a rather lofty, "holier than thou" kind of goal.

1.3 Results of Ashtanga Yoga

Mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, stress, and insomnia are among the most common reasons for individuals to seek treatment with complementary therapies such as yoga. Yoga encourages one to relax, slow the breath and focus on the present, shifting the balance from the sympathetic nervous system and the flight-or-flight response to the parasympathetic system and the relaxation response. The latter is calming and restorative; it lowers breathing and heart rate, decreases blood pressure, lowers cortisol levels, and increases blood flow to the intestines and vital organs.

One of the main goals of yoga is to achieve balance of the mind and create a sense of well-being, feelings of relaxation, improved self-confidence, improved efficiency, increased attentiveness, lowered irritability, and an optimistic outlook on life. The practice of yoga generates balanced energy which is vital to the function of the immune system. Yoga leads to an inhibition of the posterior or sympathetic area of the hypothalamus. This inhibition optimizes the body's sympathetic responses to stressful stimuli and restores autonomic regulatory reflex mechanisms associated with stress. Yogic practices inhibit the areas responsible for fear, aggressiveness and rage, and stimulate the rewarding pleasure centers in the median forebrain and other areas leading to a state of bliss and pleasure. This inhibition results in lower anxiety, heart rate, respiratory rate, blood pressure, and cardiac output in students practicing yoga and meditation.

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