Role of Faith in Yoga

Introduction

In the biochemical model as practiced by allopathic medicine, the role of faith is seemingly unimportant. Let us first see what faith is. The dictionary definition of faith is “great trust or confidence in something or someone” (Cambridge English Dictionary). This trust plays a dominant role in coming to a conclusion regarding an event. The role of faith in medical therapeutics has been reported,[1,2] and attempts are afoot to incorporate faith in therapy. Faith could give rise to the well-known placebo effect. It is seen that a sugar pill is as effective as a prescribed medicine by a medical professional if the sugar pill is administered under right circumstances. The suffering patient has full trust in the medical procedure, and thus, even an “ineffective” pill could be as effective as real medicine. There are many instances cited in medical literature that placebo effect abounds and this factor is indeed very difficult to account for or to eliminate from medical research!

Faith as mentioned in the title is also of another kind: a religious faith that may surpass simple trust in medical manipulations that one might undergo. If healing is making a person whole – bringing a balance in all the five sheaths of human existence – then, in such a situation, faith is required. Body-mind-spirit balance requires faith in a higher power that could help in bringing this balance.

Role of Faith in Yoga

Is faith required while practicing yoga or, more specifically, could faith in higher power bring faster healing in a person practicing yoga? Sage Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras mention that samadhi could be attained by devotion to the Lord.[3] This faith is not necessarily in a person but “a superior spiritual consciousness.”[4] Yoga, though based on Sankhya philosophy, deviates from Sankhya through the introduction of the concept of Iswara. Samadhi could be obtained through devotion to Iswara. This is said to be a direct path to samadhi and hence recommended for practice for those who can internalize their vision and repeat a mantra. Thus, dhyana with mantra japa could lead one to the next stage of consciousness, namely samadhi.

In brief then, the role of faith in yoga is established in the sutras. It is also clear from the aphorisms that this is not the only way for attaining samadhi. The question still remains should we have faith while performing asanas and pranayama for reaching higher states of consciousness? In debating these issues, we usually forget the first two practices in the ashtanga yoga, namely yama and niyama: observances and practices that are required to be mastered on the path of yoga. If we observe closely, here also there is a commitment to surrender oneself to Iswara, the eternal principle. It is observed in one of the studies, that “yoga practice can make an individual better relate to oneself and to others”[4] thus providing a basis for healing to occur.

At this stage, it is important to review the concept of pancha koshas, five sheaths that constitute a human. The five sheaths are – as is well known – body composed of the food we partake followed by prana sheath, manas (roughly translated as mind), knowledge, and bliss sheaths. These are not independent sheaths; rather, they are interpenetrating and interacting sheaths. It is known that the body and mind are interlinked. Similarly, all koshas are connected to each other. Thus, any practice that influences one sheath will bring changes in others also, though the effect could be delayed or be only marginal. Asana practice, for example, could bring equilibrium to neuromuscular, hormonal, and other systems in the body. Practice of pranayama – which connects body and mind – could bring an agitated mind to calmness and clarity. Dhyana, dharana, and samadhi could open eyes of compassion along with a profound appreciation of nature and all creatures that we see and sense around us.

Conclusion

Although the role of faith is not presented in yoga centers, it is mentioned in the aphorisms that faith in Isvara or higher power is recommended for advancing in yoga practices. Most people seek yoga to “fix” problems arising in body or mind. Such an approach is justified since the role of yoga in bringing homeostasis to body-mind is well documented. Asanas, pranayama, and meditation are well accepted methods in the management of psychosomatic problems. However, the importance of practicing yama, niyama, and dhyana should be emphasized to practitioners. It is found that practicing yama and niyama provides psychological well-being in young adults, especially as they enter university away from the comfort of their known surroundings.[5] It not only provides a psychological protection, but also it could create a milieu for delving deeper into areas of altered states of consciousness. For, after all, the ultimate purpose of yoga practice is toward unfolding of human consciousness toward deeper levels and to bring peace and lasting happiness not only to oneself but also to others around and to the environment. The aphorisms say that in the presence of a true yogi, there will be no antagonism or unsettling of the mind in others. Practice of yoga could spread peace, contentment, and happiness all around leading to global harmony.

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