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Yoga: a TREAT Rather Than TREATMENT

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Dr. Ramesh Bijlani, a product of All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS), joined as a faculty in 1977 at the Department of Physiology. He has been the Head of the Department in 1996. For more than 25 years, he was engaged in research on diet in relation to cardiovascular disease and diabetes. In the year 2000, he was instrumental in establishing at AIIMS a patient care facility for providing courses on yoga for prevention and management of chronic disease in tune with the latest advances in mind-body medicine. He has obtained Master's degree in nutrition from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, USA in 1979 and Doctorate in physiology from AIIMS, India. He has 12 books, more than 200 research papers and abstracts, more than 40 popular articles to his credit. He has been conducting annual workshops on mind-body medicine for doctors and other professionals at the Nainital Centre of Sri Aurobindo Ashram, New Delhi branch since April 2008. He has been honoured with many prestigious awards including Dr. ML Gupta prize for contributions to Medical Education by APPI in December 2010, Prof. RC Shukla Oration prize by Lucknow branch of APPI and Physiology Society, King George's Medical University, Lucknow. His area of interest includes Nutrition, Life Style & Health, mind-body Medicine, Religion & Spirituality, Medical education etc.

Yoga is a way of life based on a spiritual view of life. Taking good care of the body-mind complex so that it functions optimally is a part of the yogic way of life. This aspect of yoga has popular appeal, and obviously finds application in medicine. However, yoga is neither a system of medicine, nor is health its primary goal. Yoga has been primarily designed for spiritual growth, for which it is important to make in life the choices that are based on the voice of our divine essence, and using the healthy body-mind complex for translating those choices into action. Since making choices occupies all life, Sri Aurobindo has said that "All life is yoga", which means that all life gives us an opportunity for the practice of yoga. The result of making the right choices is a progressive reduction in disharmony between the voices of the emotional, intellectual and spiritual parts of the being. The culmination of this process is that the mind and the intellect become completely in tune with the Divine. This end-point, or union with the Divine, is the ultimate goal of yoga. The ultimate goal remains a remote theoretical goal for most of the practitioners of yoga. However, yoga also has valuable side effects, and these start appearing far before the ultimate goal is reached. The side effects are health and happiness, and it is these side effects that find application in medicine.

Yoga gives good health because taking good care of the body-mind complex is a part of yoga. This is done through regular physical activity, a good diet taken in just the right quantity, getting just the right duration of good quality sleep, and avoiding substances that may be harmful to the body. The physical practices of yoga have been shown by several studies to be far more efficient in improving cardiorespiratory efficiency than ordinary sports or exercises. Further, in yoga, a person adopts a healthy lifestyle, not out of fear of disease or death, but because it comes naturally to him in light of the philosophy of life he has adopted. Doing something because one wants to, not because one has to, has subtle but important implications in medicine. If a person does not like what he has to do, the resulting stress might do more harm than the good that comes from doing the right thing. How yoga gives happiness is a little more complex. It is commonly claimed that meditation, which is also a yogic practice, abolishes stress, and therefore brings happiness. This is a rather naïve and over-simplified explanation. If the attitude of a person to the people and events in his life remains unchanged, twenty minutes of meditation cannot compensate for the tension



and turmoil of twenty-four hours. Yoga changes the attitude by giving us a way of looking at life differently. The yogic worldview is based on a fundamental unity underlying the apparent plurality and diversity seen in the world. The unity leads to a sense of feeling connected with the rest of the creation. The connection leads to a reduction in the ego-sense, and growth of intimacy and love. Love can solve most of our inter-personal problems. However, that cannot take all stress away because life is difficult, erratic, and unpredictable. That is where the spiritual element of yoga gives us unshakable inner peace. The peace comes from positive thinking based on the realization that every situation in life, no matter how traumatic, can serve as a trigger for spiritual growth. The ability to look at all events and circumstances of life as conditions provided to us for moving further on our spiritual journey is the surest route to lasting mental peace. The two side effects of yoga – health and happiness – are both relevant to medicine, and closely related. The mind-body relationship now stands on a scientific footing, thanks to clinical, epidemiological and experimental studies that have been carried out with unprecedented vigour over the last fifty years.

Elements of yoga have been used by ayurveda for thousands of years. Now modern scientific medicine has started doing the same. But in spite of the immense potential that yoga has for applications in medicine, it is neither a therapeutic tool nor a tool for prevention of disease. Yoga ensures a peaceful and purposeful life, but does not offer any guarantee against disease. What it guarantees is inner peace independent of all circumstances, including poor health. A person on the path of yoga may be ill, but will not be miserable. Like everybody else, he is also sure to die, but he will not be afraid of death and will die in peace. There is nothing more one may dare to ask for. That is why, yoga is a treat, which can serve also as a treatment.

