

YOGA, SELF AND TRANSCENDENTAL MEDITATION

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Abstract

This paper deals with the experiential aspect of Yoga. Recently, there has been a lot of attention paid to one aspect of yoga, which is asanas. The aim of this paper is to emphasise the value of meditation in experiencing Yoga(union). It also assesses the role of a technique called Transcendental Meditation in providing a direct experience of Pure Consciousness and cultivating a higher state of consciousness. It further discusses the practitioners' personal experiences of Self/Pure Consciousness during Transcendental Meditation along with the subjective effects of this technique on their lives.

Keywords: Yoga, Self, Pure Consciousness, Transcendental Meditation, Health, Well-being

Introduction

India is known for its ancient tradition of knowledge. This knowledge has been cognized by the seers in the form of Vedas. Veda means knowledge. Vedas are believed to be the blueprint of this universe(Harung, 1996).The profound knowledge stored in these texts encompasses everything from human life to cosmic creation. This eternal wisdom of life has been preserved and practiced for centuries. Quests of many a great mind all over the world has ended with the insights that the Vedas offer. Now, modern science has begun to validate the principles of the Vedas as well. It is a common notion that the spiritual development of any individual truly depends on the understanding of 'Self'. Often it is the connection with one's own true 'Being' which reflects in ways one lives life. The interest in delving deep into the mechanics of Vedic knowledge has given rise to greater acceptance of its scientific value. In the past few decades there has been a global recognition of the merits of 'Vedic' principles in promoting a more holistic and sustainable lifestyle.

Yoga, Meditation and Ayurveda, the tenets that provide impetus to understanding essence of Vedas today, are proving to be integral tools in preventing various lifestyle diseases. Research institutes all over the world have been conducting extensive research on Vedas and its principles in the field of medicine, education, behaviours etc. for greater development of human potential. The need to bring forth the scientific principles of Vedic knowledge for practical human use seems vital especially in a post covid world due to the deep mental and physical impact that the pandemic has had on individuals across countries.

YOGA

Atha Yoganusasanam

Now is the teaching on Yoga

(Yoga Sutra, 1.1) (Thomas Egenes, 2010)

Yoga is an integral part of the Indian philosophy system. It is known to be a “comprehensive philosophy and an array of techniques and procedures for unlocking the untapped potential that is said to be inside us all” (Sands, 2013). Yoga in the recent years is being studied and discussed as a form of physical asanas for better health and wellbeing. In its truest sense yoga encompasses every aspect of physical, mental, and spiritual wellbeing. Yoga is often defined as a practice “to join the body to the mind and together join to the self(soul), or the union between the individual self and the transcendental self” (Garfinkel & Schumacher, 2000). Modernized form of Yoga pays a lot of attention to Yoga asanas. This paper deals with the experience of yoga(union) of mind and body through meditation.

There are multiple forms of meditation, and their mechanics differ from each other. Therefore, to narrow it down we shall assess only one technique of meditation called Transcendental Meditation® (TM). This technique has its roots in the ancient Vedic tradition of knowledge and was introduced to the world by Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1950s. This paper assesses the scope of experiences through Transcendental Meditation with reference to Yoga.

SELF

Shivam shantam advaitam chaturtham manyante, sah atma, sah vigyeyah.
(Nṛisimhottaratāpanīya Upanishad, verse 1)

“The peaceful, the blissful, the undivided, is thought to be the fourth; that is the Self. That is to be known.”

The relevance of the value of ‘Self’ still stays intact in theoretical research but the aspect of its practical implication has yet to be explored in its entirety. Recently, due to the pandemic, the interest in the field of spirituality and Pure Consciousness has significantly increased all over the world (Bhattacharya & Gaur, 2023). There is a freshly kindled conscious attempt to identify ways to stay connected with one’s own ‘Self’.

The reverence of this experience of Pure consciousness or ‘Self’ has been a common theme across all Vedic literature. As per the modern understanding, “Perhaps the oldest written records containing the term ‘consciousness’ are the Upanishads, some of which were written as early as the 9th century BCE” (Laibelman, 2003). The experiences of Pure Consciousness are universal. For centuries, this has been a common experience in people engaged in meditation and other mystical practices. This experience has been associated with heightened awareness, enhanced performance etc (Harung et al., 1996). Modern day scientists have been exploring this unique realm of consciousness to validate the subjective experiences objectively. To concretize this, statements from physicists like Schrödinger and Planck on consciousness being primary, has further encouraged the interest in this field of consciousness. This heightened state of

consciousness has proven to nourish the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspect in individuals across.

Hundreds of studies on Transcendental Meditation (Chandler et al., 2005) have verified the wide-ranging benefits of this Transcendental Consciousness on human physiology. The eastern understanding of this perennial state heavily relies on texts of the ancient Vedic literature. The intricacy of this experience has been holistically described in ‘The Bhagavad Gita’, ‘Mandukya Upanishad’, ‘Taitriya Upanishad’, ‘Vivekchudamani’, ‘Yoga Sutras’ etc. In modern literature, the glimpses of this state of Pure Consciousness are clearly visible in works of poets like Rabindra Nath Tagore, W.B Yeats (Mirza, 1977) Wordsworth, Kabir, Sarojini Naidu etc. The celebration of this experience throughout literature has led to the pertinent question of its relevance in daily life.

EXPERIENCE OF SELF AND YOGA

Yogash Chitta-vritti-nirodhah

(Yoga Sutra, 1.2)(Thomas Egenes, 2010)

In Maharishi Mahesh Yogi’s translation of this verse, Yoga is described as “the complete settling of the activity of the mind”. A process which is promoted by the practice of transcendental meditation. Maharishi Mahesh Yogi introduced TM in 1950s and asserted that this technique would lead to total development of individuals across. Transcendental Meditation technique comes from ancient tradition of Advaita Vedanta. This technique of meditation has been rigorously researched scientifically to verify its efficacy. The teaching of TM has been standardized to keep it uniform and effective throughout the world. With over 600 research studies in around 250 universities and research centres in around 30 countries (Orme-Johnson, 2019). TM has been considered as an effective way of improving physical and mental wellbeing. The reason behind considering this meditation technique is because it is claimed to be an easy technique, not requiring concentration or contemplation(Travis & Shear, 2010)

It has been recorded that during the practice of Transcendental Meditation the mind starts to settle down and go beyond finest thought and perception to experience Pure Consciousness—Transcendental Consciousness—unbounded “Self”. Also, body experiences a state of unique state of deep rest. This experience can also be equated to the experience of yoga, where mind and body are completely unified with the Pure Consciousness. The technique of Transcendental Meditation allows its practitioners to experience a state of consciousness which is different from waking, dreaming, and sleeping (Travis, 2011).

In a recent survey done by the authors on 350 practitioners of Transcendental Meditation in India, profound subjective experiences of Pure Consciousness were reported. Some of those experiences are mentioned below:

- I have felt empty blissful moments during my meditation, where I lost track of time and space. – A.D

- Have experienced a state of silence when there is no thought & no mantra. – K.D
- There is a brief moment while I am meditating when I feel alone and isolated, as if I am in space where there is nothing around me. – P.D
- In my opinion, this Bliss that I have felt is what can be said as an experience of Transcendental/Pure consciousness. But yes even while practising TM or meditating- there comes a moment, where everything becomes absolute. – N.G
- A few times while meditating I have reached some indescribable place. Where everything makes sense. Why we are here and what is happening. But still it is not describable. I feel like I am in sync with the rhythm of a natural energy. – S.N
- Yes, i am beginning to experience fragments of pure consciousness. – J.N
- Yes. Sometimes I reach a state of no thoughts for few seconds. – V.C
- At time observed mind without thoughts. – G.P
- Understanding my being, who I am, what is the purpose of living life. – J.S

These expressions offer personal insights into individuals' subjective encounters during Transcendental meditation.

Participants shared instances of experiencing deep bliss during meditation, where they lost track of time and space. Some individuals recounted experiencing states of profound silence and devoid of thoughts or mantras during meditation, indicating heightened inner calmness. Participants interpreted their encounters during meditation as interactions with pure consciousness or transcendence, characterized by heightened awareness.

Some individuals noted short moments of experiencing a mind free from thoughts during meditation, suggesting periods of clarity. Participants reflected on gaining insights into their own being, signifying a deeper understanding of their own Self. These subjective experiences strengthen the idea of fostering personal and spiritual growth, as well as inner transformation through the experience of TM

EFFECTS OF YOGA

He whose mind is unshaken in the midst of sorrows, who amongst pleasures is free from longing, from whom attachment, fear and anger have departed, he is said to be a sage of steady intellect.

(Bhagavad-Gita, 2.56) (MAHARISHI MAHESH YOGI, 1967)

This verse from the Bhagavad-Gita emphasizes on union of mind with the Self leading to a life that can be free from attachments, fear and anger. The state of being free from attachment is often understood as being indifferent or passive in material life, but Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in his commentary on Bhagavad-Gita explains it as a state of “natural equanimity of the mind even when it is actively engaged”-which would indicate that one naturally lives the equanimity in

daily life without any kind of mood making of maintaining the experience of equanimity. This understanding supports the idea that deeper values of life are present in each individual and can easily be cultured and attained through transcending and experiencing the pure Self.

There are numerous studies indicating that by practicing techniques coming for yoga philosophy, one can develop a more evolved state of psychology and physiology. Multiple studies have recorded the positive effects of yoga practices on overall health and wellbeing. Research suggests that certain programs with the elements of yoga lead to reduction in aggression, fear and increase in emotional balance (Stueck & Gloeckner, 2005). In elderly people, regular practice of Yoga led to a better physical, mental, and emotional state (Mooventhan & Nivethitha, 2017).

With respect to meditation, research found significant improvements in total psychological distress, anxiety, depression, anger/hostility, and coping in the practitioners of Transcendental Meditation (Nidich et al., 2009). Also, hundreds of studies measuring the effects of regular practice of Transcendental Meditation shows a more holistic and profound pattern of physical, mental, behavioural wellbeing (Travis, 2016) (Barnes, 2018) (Yunesian et al., 2008). Transcendental Meditation, has proven to culture holistic development in its practitioners (So & Orme-Johnson, 2001).

In the same survey, when asked about the effects of Transcendental meditation, most of the practitioners reported increase calmness, happiness, clarity and reduced stress, anger etc in their daily lives. Some of the experiences are mentioned below:

- Increased calmness, more sattvic qualities, better discrimination of right and wrong, more peace, less misunderstanding, gradual reduction in addictive behaviours, ability to handle stress, ability to pinpoint thoughts that don't have a real basis, expanded thinking, inclusiveness of ideas and concepts outside own frame of reference, ability to see things at the fundamental level and field. – A.C
- I am more alert, more energetic, able to handle stress better, consciously getting rid of bad habits, able to pick up new skills easier. – T.R
- I've noticed that I am much more calmer and can easily shift my focus to work when I want to. I feel more rested and my thoughts have clarity. – P.D
- Yes, I've become more grounded, happier, calmer, content. There is more clarity in thought and life. I Feel that life has become easy after learning TM. Have got a lot more clear vision, thought process has become more positive, like I can do anything. – N.Y
- There's a change within myself that I can analyse myself where I feel some innermost happiness and peace which can't be explained in words. – P.K

The quotes offer firsthand individuals' subjective experiences following their practice in Transcendental Meditation (TM). Many participants remarked on experiencing heightened feelings of serenity, peace, and tranquillity in their daily lives. This suggests that TM may

facilitate the attainment of a more balanced and harmonious mental state. Participants noted enhancements in mental clarity, focus, and concentration. This implies that TM may bolster cognitive abilities and facilitate sharper decision-making and problem-solving skills.

Several individuals indicated improvements in stress management and coping strategies, implying that TM could assist individuals in navigating life's challenges with greater resilience and efficacy. Participants observed positive shifts in behaviour, such as purposeful abandonment of negative habits, and heightened enthusiasm for acquiring new skills. This suggests that TM might encourage beneficial lifestyle alterations and personal advancement.

Many participants expressed heightened feelings of happiness, contentment, and emotional stability following TM practice. This indicates that TM could exert positive effects on emotional health and overall satisfaction with life.

Participants reported experiencing inner growth, heightened self-awareness, and a deeper self-understanding. This suggests that TM may foster personal development and self-realization.

Some individuals described profound experiences of inner joy, peace, and spiritual fulfilment. This implies that TM might facilitate spiritual growth and inner transformation.

CONCLUSIONS

For centuries, the principles and techniques from the philosophy of yoga have provided opportunities for both physical and mental well-being as well as for the full development of ones' total inner potential—Enlightenment. In modern times, the utilisation of certain aspects of this ancient Vedic knowledge has grown significantly. Complete understanding of the Yoga needs a more comprehensive enquiry into the experiential aspects of the knowledge along with intellectual analysis. Qualitative and quantitative research on Transcendental Meditation offers an opportunity to explore the potential that can be unfolded through such techniques for holistic human development, through the experience of Pure Consciousness—Self. Additionally, the subjective accounts of individuals practicing TM underscore the potential for personal growth, spiritual discovery, and internal change. These accounts imply psychological, emotional, and spiritual advantages linked to TM practice. However, additional research is necessary to thoroughly investigate these effects and comprehend the underlying mechanisms by which TM influences subjective well-being and individual development.

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