

Meditation as Medicine: The Mind-Centered Approach of Yoga

An Introduction

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Imagine that you are sleeping in a comfortable bed. The temperature is just right - not too hot, not too cold. You partner's caring arms, wrapped around your body, warm your heart even as you sleep. Or, maybe it is your cat that snuggles by your side. A gentle breeze flows through the slightly open window, keeping the air circulation fresh. To a fly on the wall watching you, you are a picture of bliss.

In this same sleep, you are having a dream. A mad elephant is chasing you. You run fast to get out of its path, but the giant animal will not give up. You cross rivers, lakes and mountains, yet still it follows you. You try to climb trees, but the elephant follows you and does the same. After all, this is a dream and anything is possible. Your panic makes you run faster and faster, but the Ferrari- powered elephant is close behind you.

You wake up from this nightmare. How do you feel? What do you observe?

You are gasping for breath. You feel hot, and your body is sweating profusely. You feel thirsty and reach out to get a glass of water. Your body feels tired and heavy. There is an emotional disturbance and stress that takes over. These are but a few of the symptoms you may experience upon waking from such a dream.

How could this happen, when you were sleeping in such comfort and peace? You have not been running, nor have you climbed any trees, nor has an elephant been chasing you. Yet the symptoms you are experiencing indicate that you ran a marathon-like distance with the speed of a sprinter. How can this be explained?

Modern science explains this experience as the "fight or flight response." Our body has different responses to different kinds of situations. When we feel we are in a dangerous situation, such as being chased by an elephant or a wild animal, the mind sends signals to the body that we are under attack, and we need to respond quickly. This is what makes us run for cover, for safety. It happens subconsciously within a flash of a second. Our body has been designed with these built-in defense mechanisms, which we use in life-threatening situations. This is the power of the mind. The mind sends signals, and the body responds instantaneously.

The same thing happened in the dream. The mind did not know whether we were dreaming or awake. When faced with a life-threatening situation in the dream-state, the mind responded in the same manner it would if we were awake - sending signals of panic to the body. When this happens, in response, we begin to run in the dream, and the body responds with symptoms like sweat, gasping for breath etc., which would be the normal symptoms produced if we were running in actuality. This demonstrates the power of the mind in relation to the body.

Another simple example – many times, we feel like running to the bathroom when we are nervous. The mind becomes panicky and sends a signal of panic, the body responds to this panic signal, in some cases by producing urine. For others, the symptom may be fidgety fingers or sweaty palms. Modern science has exhaustively studied this relationship and recorded such responses by the body.

The fundamental connection between mind and body is accepted by ancient disciplines like Yoga. Yoga not only acknowledges this relationship, it takes advantage of that powerful connection for healing purposes. Disciplines like Yoga tell us that if the body can respond to signals of distress or panic with certain kind of symptoms, it should also have the ability to react to signals of comfort with a different set of symptoms. Meaning, if we are fidgety and short of breath when the nervous mind is dominant, then by the same logic, we must have a stable body and smooth breath when the mind is very calm or comfortable. This idea is presented in an aphorism in the most important Yoga text, the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali.

vyutthana nirodha samskarayoh abhibhava pradurbhavau nirodha ksana cittanvayo
nirodha parinamah |

“This is the mind can be either in the agitated state or in the focused state. when the focused state rises, the agitated mind subsides, and the body and the senses express patterns connected with that [focused] state.” - Yoga Sutra III.9

This is only one among many aphorisms in the Yoga Sutra that speaks about this strong connection between mind and body. Yoga originated in India at a time when people were physically active in their daily lives and did not require more exercise to keep them fit. What they did require was a reliable, effective healing system that addressed the illnesses of the body and also of the mind and spirit. Yoga was developed as a discipline for healing, for creating health and wellbeing, with mind-centered practices like meditation holding an esteemed position in Yoga’s arsenal of healing tools.

The Mind-Body Connection as a Source of Illness.

As we discussed earlier, there is a strong link between the body and the mind. Whatever happens in the mind is expressed in the body, and the reverse is also true. This is true not only for healing, but also for creating disease. Here are a few examples to illustrate this point.

Suppose we are continuously in a state of stress. In such a case, it is likely that the muscles in the body tense and tighten frequently, thus causing neck pain or back pain to arise. In another case, it could be even more serious. For example, if the muscles that tighten are around a “slipped disk,” this could cause further pinching of the nerves that run through the vertebrae and lead to additional uncomfortable symptoms and/or problems. In an x-ray, we may see the dislocation in the vertebrae, and maybe the doctor will recommend physiotherapy to give it temporary relief. But as long as the stress continues, the muscles will have the tendency to remain tight and problems may reoccur.

In another situation, when the person is constantly stressed or pessimistic, the mind tells the body, “you are not okay, there is a stressful situation, watch out!” This may cause the body to produce hormones or enzymes that are needed when we are under attack, from, say, a mad elephant. So the body accumulates these chemicals when in reality, they are not necessary. This may alter the delicate balance of the human system, again producing unwanted symptoms.

Today, many doctors and researchers are noting a strong increase in the number of physiological as well as emotional and mental illnesses in people who are highly stressed. A quick look at the types of illnesses related to stress levels reveals an alarming number of physiological illnesses like headaches, peptic ulcers, sleeping problems, heart disease, chronic fatigue etc. Though in isolation they may have their own pathologies, modern research tells us that there may be a strong connection between the state of mind and the expression of these kinds of illnesses in a person.

Hence, it is not a good idea to ignore the mind-body connection as a source of illness.

The Mind-Body Connection as a Source of Healing.

Just as mind-body connection can be a source of illness, it can also be a source of healing. When we say that the body reacts to stress with certain types of responses, it also reacts to relaxation, care and nurture. Medical research has been looking at this latter relationship since the experiments of Dr. Herbert Benson in the 1960’s, which led him to propose the theory of “relaxation response” in the body. In essence, the theory of relaxation response states that the body responds to relaxation induced through breathing techniques, meditation etc., in ways that reduce stress levels. And if we extend it further, when the body feels comfortable, and not stressed, the mind reassures it that “you are okay,” and so the hormones and reactions that are triggered support a relaxation kind of a response.

This is precisely why traditions like yoga work so effectively. By practicing yoga techniques like breathing exercises, meditation and even asana practices, the mind is brought to a state of calm and relaxation, which reassures the body that everything is fine and there is no need to panic. In this way, the mind, through practices like yoga, becomes a source of healing and many wonderful possibilities open up. This is Meditation as Medicine.

Welcome to the Journey. Welcome to “The Healing Heart : Meditation as Medicine”.

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