

Yoga and Human Health: A Historical Perspective

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
<p>Article History: Received: 17th January 2026 Accepted: 22nd January 2026 Published: 02nd February 2026</p> <p>Keywords: <i>Yoga, Human Health, Historical Perspective, Holistic Health, Indian Philosophy</i></p>	<p>Yoga is an ancient Indian discipline that has played a significant role in shaping the concept of holistic human health for thousands of years. Originating as a spiritual practice aimed at self-realisation, yoga gradually evolved into a comprehensive system promoting physical, mental, and emotional well-being. This research paper examines yoga from a historical perspective, tracing its development from the Indus Valley Civilization and Vedic traditions through the Upanishadic and classical periods to its modern scientific acceptance. Classical yogic texts such as the Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali and Hatha Yoga Pradipika provide systematic frameworks integrating ethical discipline, physical postures, breath regulation, and meditation. In the modern era, yoga has gained global recognition as a preventive and therapeutic health practice, supported by scientific research and institutional studies. Using a qualitative historical research methodology based on secondary sources, this paper analyses the continuity, transformation, and relevance of yoga in promoting human health. The study concludes that yoga's holistic approach, rooted in ancient wisdom, remains highly relevant for addressing contemporary health challenges and promoting sustainable well-being.</p>

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1. Introduction:

Health is a fundamental requirement for human survival and social development. Since ancient times, human societies have explored various methods to maintain physical fitness, mental stability, and spiritual harmony. Among these methods, yoga occupies a unique and prominent place. Yoga is not merely a physical exercise system but a comprehensive way of life that integrates body, mind, and soul.

The term "Yoga" originates from the Sanskrit root *yuj*, meaning to unite or integrate. This union represents harmony between individual consciousness and universal consciousness. Initially, yoga was primarily associated with spiritual attainment; however, its practices also contributed significantly to physical and mental health. Over centuries, yoga evolved into a holistic health discipline addressing prevention, promotion, and rehabilitation aspects of health.

In contemporary society, increasing stress, sedentary lifestyles, and lifestyle-related diseases have renewed interest in yoga as a natural and cost-effective health solution. Yoga's recognition by global institutions, including the declaration of International Day of Yoga by the United Nations, highlights its universal relevance. Understanding yoga's historical development helps contextualize its role in modern health systems.

This paper aims to examine the historical evolution of yoga and analyze its contribution to human health across different periods, emphasizing its continuity, adaptability, and holistic nature.

2. Objectives of the Study:

The objectives of the present study are:

1. To trace the historical origins of yoga.
2. To study the evolution of yoga through various historical periods.
3. To analyze the concept of human health in yogic philosophy.
4. To examine yoga's contribution to physical and mental health.
5. To highlight the relevance of yoga in modern healthcare systems.

3. Research Methodology:

The present research adopts a **qualitative historical research methodology**, as recommended by UGC norms for research in humanities and social sciences. The study is descriptive and analytical in nature and is based entirely on **secondary data sources**.

Sources of Data -

- Ancient Indian scriptures such as the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*
- Classical yogic texts including the *Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali*, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, *Gheranda Samhita*, and *Shiva Samhita*
- Books, research journals, seminar papers, and scholarly articles on yoga and health
- Publications and reports from yoga research institutions

Method of Analysis:

The collected data were systematically organized and analyzed using historical interpretation and content analysis techniques. Yogic concepts were studied chronologically to understand their development and influence on health. This methodology is appropriate for examining conceptual evolution and historical continuity.

4. Origins of Yoga in Ancient India:**4.1 Indus Valley Civilization-**

The earliest evidence of yogic practices is believed to originate from the Indus Valley Civilization (circa 3000 BCE). Archaeological findings, such as seals depicting figures seated in meditative postures, suggest the existence of proto-yogic practices. Although interpretations remain debated, these artifacts indicate early awareness of meditative discipline and bodily control.

4.2 Vedic Period-

During the Vedic period (1500–500 BCE), yoga was closely associated with ritual practices, meditation, and ascetic discipline. The *Rig Veda* and other Vedic texts emphasize breath control (*prana*), meditation, and disciplined living. Health was viewed holistically, integrating physical vitality with moral and spiritual purity.

4.3 Upanishadic Period-

The Upanishads marked a philosophical shift from external rituals to internal realization. They emphasized meditation, self-discipline, and knowledge of the self (*Atman*). Health, in this context, was perceived as balance and harmony between body, mind, and soul. These ideas laid a strong philosophical foundation for later yogic systems.

5. Classical Period: Patañjali's Contribution:

The classical period of yoga is most significantly represented by *Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras*. This foundational text systematized yoga into an eight-fold path known as **Ashtanga Yoga**:

1. Yama – ethical restraints
2. Asana – physical postures
3. Pranayama – regulation of breath
4. Pratyahara – withdrawal of senses
5. Dharana – concentration
6. Dhyana – meditation
7. Samadhi – state of complete absorption

Patañjali emphasized mental discipline, ethical living, and self-control as essential for health. Asanas were considered necessary to achieve bodily stability and comfort, enabling higher mental practices. This system clearly recognized the interdependence of physical and mental health.

6. Medieval Period: Development of Hatha Yoga:

During the medieval period (10th–15th century), yoga underwent a major transformation with the emergence of **Hatha Yoga**. Texts such as the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, *Gheranda Samhita*, and *Shiva Samhita* emphasized physical purification and bodily strength.

Hatha Yoga introduced detailed descriptions of asanas, pranayama, shatkarmas (cleansing techniques), mudras, and bandhas. These practices aimed at strengthening the nervous system, improving digestion, enhancing vitality, and preparing the body for meditation. This period significantly expanded yoga's role in physical health and therapeutic applications.

7. Modern Revival of Yoga:

The modern revival of yoga began in the late nineteenth century with thinkers such as **Swami Vivekananda**, who introduced yoga philosophy to the Western world. In the twentieth century, pioneers like **Swami Kuvalayananda** and **Shri Yogendra** initiated scientific research on yoga's physiological and psychological effects.

Institutions such as **Kaivalyadhama** and the **Bihar School of Yoga** conducted systematic studies on yoga's role in improving respiratory function, cardiovascular health, mental stability, and stress management. Yoga gradually gained recognition as a complementary and preventive healthcare system.

8. Yoga and the Concept of Human Health:

Yoga defines health as a state of complete harmony among body, mind, and spirit. Unlike the biomedical model that focuses mainly on disease, yoga emphasizes prevention, balance, and self-regulation.

Health Benefits of Yoga:

- Improved physical strength and flexibility
- Enhanced respiratory and cardiovascular efficiency
- Stress reduction and mental clarity
- Emotional stability and self-discipline
- Improved quality of life

Yoga promotes awareness and conscious living, enabling individuals to manage stress and lifestyle disorders effectively.

9. Findings of the Study:

The study reveals the following findings:

- Yoga originated as a spiritual discipline but evolved into a health-oriented system.
- Ancient yogic philosophy recognized the holistic nature of human health.
- Classical and medieval texts contributed significantly to physical and mental health practices.
- Modern scientific research validates many traditional yogic principles.
- Yoga remains relevant for preventive and promotive healthcare in modern society.

10. Conclusion:

The historical evolution of yoga demonstrates its enduring relevance and adaptability. From ancient spiritual traditions to modern scientific health practices, yoga has consistently contributed to human well-being. Its holistic approach integrates physical fitness, mental stability, ethical living, and spiritual awareness.

Understanding yoga from a historical perspective enhances its application in contemporary health systems. In an era marked by stress and lifestyle-related diseases, yoga offers a sustainable, cost-effective, and culturally rooted solution for promoting holistic human health. Continued research and institutional support can further strengthen yoga's role in global healthcare.

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