

Chapter 3

Long-Term Changes in Experienced Yoga Practitioners: Growth of Higher States of Consciousness

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores subjective and objective correlates of the state of Yoga during Transcendental Meditation practice. Yoga fits the three criteria of a higher state of consciousness: (1) Yoga has a different subject/object relationship than other states. In Yoga there is no content—only self-awareness. (2) Yoga involves a more expanded sense-of-self. Content analysis of descriptions of Yoga yielded three themes: the absence of time, absence of space and absence of body sense. Yoga is the most universal aspect of the individual. (3) Yoga is defined by distinct physiological patterns. Slowing of breath, autonomic orienting and frontal alpha1 brain coherence are reported during the state of Yoga. The integration of Yoga with waking, sleeping and dreaming also fits the criteria for being a higher state of consciousness, called Cosmic Consciousness in the Vedic tradition. The chapter ends with the conclusion that growth of higher states of consciousness is the most important result of experiencing the state of Yoga. Then, life is lived in freedom.

INTRODUCTION

Yoga has become part of main stream Western thinking. Yet, Yoga has many definitions. For some, Yoga involves postures, *pranayama* and meditation practice (Vinutha, Raghavendra, & Manjunath, 2015). Others understand Yoga as a philosophy with eight limbs that are eight *prescriptions* for practice (Jois, 1999). While others understand the eight limbs of Yoga to be *descriptions* of the state of Yoga—once Yoga is attained then one naturally exhibits traits such as contentment, truthfulness, and non-violence (Sands, 2013; Maharishi, 1969).

Patanjali (circa 900 BC) wrote the Yoga Sutra. In the second verse of the first chapter of the Yoga Sutra, he defines Yoga. The verse in Sanskrit reads:

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Yoga chittavrittinirodhaha.1, 2

These Sanskrit words can be translated as: *Yoga* (union), *Chitta* (mind), *Vritti* (fluctuations), and *nirodhaha* (complete absence). When put together, this verse could be translated as: “Yoga is the complete settling of the activity of the mind” (Egenes, 2012). From this perspective, Yoga is not a set of postures or a philosophy. Rather, Yoga is an internal state in which the activity of the mind is completely still. The next verse clarifies that this settled state of mind is not inert, but is the self-referral state of the observer. The verse in Sanskrit reads;

Tadādraṣṭṛtūḥswarūpeavasthānam1,3

This verse can be translated as “the observer is established in himself” (Maharishi, 1994). From this perspective, Yoga is the simplest form of human awareness in which the experiencer is awake to his own existence (Travis, 2014). It is a self-referral experience, in which the boundaries that define our individuality, such as age, height, gender, and style of thinking are transcended. The mind is wide awake devoid of changing thoughts, feelings or perceptions; one is awake to one Self (Maharishi, 1994). It is like a wave settling down to the ocean, and becoming the ocean.

This chapter uses the term Yoga to indicate the *state* of Yoga—silent, self-awareness that comprises the “complete settling of the activity of the mind” and the “observer established in himself”. It explores long-term effects of the experience of Yoga. Most scientific research has reduced meditation practice to a tool to combat depression, lower high blood pressure, or improve emotion regulation. While these benefits do occur, the author suggests that the integration of Yoga—inner silence—with outer activity is the most salient benefit of regular experience of Yoga. This is living life in higher states of consciousness. Then Yoga becomes the ground for action as described in the Bhagavad-Gita: *Yogastah Kuru Karmani*: Established in Yoga perform action (Maharishi, 1969).

MEDITATION PRACTICE AND THE STATE OF YOGA

Meditation practice leads to the state of Yoga, but all meditations are not the same. Different meditation practices are associated with different cognitive processes and different patterns of brain activity. Three categories of meditation have been delineated: *Focused Attention*, *Open Monitoring* and *Automatic Self-Transcending* (Travis & Shear, 2010). Meditation practices in the *Focused Attention* and *Open Monitoring* categories develop cognitive tools during the meditation session that are then available to cope with challenges in daily life. For instance, Compassion meditation, which is in the *Focused Attention* category, is characterized by gamma EEG (20-50 Hz) and leads to activation of limbic brain circuits during the practice (Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, & Davidson, 2008). After the practice, research reports more compassionate behavior in daily life (Condon, Desbordes, Miller, & Desteno, 2013). Mindfulness meditation, which is in the *Open Monitoring* category, is characterized by bilateral frontal theta 2 EEG (6-8 Hz) and leads to activation of anterior cingulate cortices during the practice (Chiesa & Serretti, 2010). After the practice, research reports that one is more mindful during stressful experiences, decreasing the impact of stress on one’s mind and body (Zeidan, Martucci, Kraft, McHaffie, & Coghill, 2013). Transcendental Meditation®, which is in the *Automatic Self-Transcending* category, is characterized by frontal alpha1 EEG coherence (8-10 Hz) (Travis et al., 2010a). Transcendental Meditation is designed for transcend-

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