

Shatkarmas: Its origin and implications

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Abstract

Shatkarma is the first practice of sevenfold practice of Hatha Yoga. The cleansing effect on human body makes it an important practice for the aspirants. As Yoga has become increasingly popular in Western cultures as a means of exercise and fitness training. There is a need to have yoga better recognized by the health care community as a complement to conventional medical care. Over the last 10 years, a growing number of research studies have shown that the practice of Shatkarma can improve strength and flexibility, and may help control such physiological variables as blood pressure, respiration and heart rate, and metabolic rate to improve overall exercise capacity.

This review presents a summary of Hatha yogic texts and medically substantiated information about the health benefits of Shatkarma for healthy people and for people compromised by common disorders.

Introduction:

It is not difficult to trace the origin of the other branches of hatha yoga like asanas, pranayama, dhyana etc. to Smritis, Puranas, Tantras and Yoga Upanishads etc., but the same is not discernible with regard to its purificatory processes. No doubt, the word 'shatkarmas' occurs in the tantric texts like Yogini Tantra, but there it is purely indicative of tantric practices such as santi, vasikarna, stambhana etc. (1) having no link at all with yogic kriyas. Great wonder, the sole authority on raja yoga, Patanjali, and even his prominent commentators, nowhere refer to shatkarmas. Though considering vyadhi (2) as the first and foremost of psycho-physiological disturbances (chitta viksepa), instead of suggesting any purificatory practice for its removal, Patanjali Yoga Darshana (PYD) recommends a purely spiritual-cum-psychological aid - the isvara pranidhana (3), for this purpose. So much so, the scrupulous cleanliness (sauca) (4), the strict yogic observance, has the least connection with shatkarmas, albeit later commentators on PYD like Narayana Tirtha (5) have willfully and intentionally endeavoured to prove so, which effort is farfetched and imposed indeed.

One wonders, why even the works attributed to the father of hatha yoga Goraksha Natha,

miss these significant kriyas which, in fact, are part and parcel of hatha yoga. Similarly, an important treatise on Gita, which has greatly been influenced and coloured by hatha yogic thoughts, the Jnanesvari and for that matter even the main Yoga Upanishads, are silent about shatkriyas. Yet, it is true that these practices are quite old. For instance, the technique of ghrit neti, as exists these days, appears to be as old as the buddhistic era. A famous physician of that age, Jivika, employed some practice of the kind to cure the fatal nasal-cum-head disease of a renowned merchant's wife (6). At a place in Siva Samhita (SS), (7) there is a slight passing reference to dhauti prakshalana, though in a derogatory sense. In Siddha-Siddhanta-Paddhati (SSP), (8) we find mention of shankhaprakshalana but again in a reproaching style. In Yogiyaajnavalkya (YY), (9) as well, a practice somewhat similar to tratika has been enlisted. Hatharatnavali and Hathasamhita, as quoted in Vacaspatyam (10), refer to a few shatkarmic processes but these works are quite recent. For the first time in hatha yoga history, it is only in the Gheranda Samhita (GS) (11) and Hatha Yoga Samhita (HYS) (12) that shatkarmas find their rightful place, i.e. as the first aid to yoga. Hatha Pradipika (HP) (13) though, recognises the value of shatkarmas but refrains from assigning them any independent

position. Shatkarma-Sangraha (14), no doubt describes a good many purificatory exercises, but the work itself is not very old.

These practices appear in and not before HYP, GS and HYS. Maybe, these existed in the olden times too, but being directly transmittable only in the secret guru/ disciple tradition; or because they were not absolutely obligatory, remained unrecorded in the old texts. Nonetheless, in order to solve this historical riddle, we must not confine ourselves merely to the yogic studies, but should have a peep into the ayurvedic works as well. Impartially speaking, ayurveda (which is as old as Chakra and Susruta) has certainly influenced and consequently contributed a good deal to the hatha yoga school. For instance, in case of bodily imbalances and diseases, hatha yoga has fully accepted the ayurvedic theory of tridosha in principle and practice. To quote a single example, while enumerating the benefits of dhauti-karma (15), HYP guarantees that this practice cures twenty kapha diseases. But it does not name or elaborate on those diseases, therefore one has to look back to the ayurvedic texts (16). It is similar with other ailments described at random.

So far as the original source of shatkarmas is concerned, it would be genuine to admit that hatha yoga has picked them from the panchakarmas of ayurveda, since both the systems employ them for the cleansing and purification of internal organs, especially the alimentary canal. The ayurvedic panchakarmas namely vamana (vomiting), virecana (purgative), basti (enema) and nasyam (nasal therapy) (17) have good parallels in hatha yoga like vamana (dhauti), varisara (19), basti (20) and neti kriya (21). But this similarity cannot be carried further, for we should not forget that in the methods of their performance, both systems vary a great deal from each other. Further, while yogis use only pure water and air for such irrigations, the panchakarmas prescribe medicated solutions instead (22). Then the other difference, the yogis generally practise them

daily for hygienic and preventive purposes, whereas ayurvedic panchakarmas are resorted to only as therapeutic measures when necessary (23).

To record more contrast, shatkarmas help in the thorough and perfect washing of the internal organs, and impart massage and exercise to the organs, thereby increasing their tenacity and activity. Furthermore, once learned from an expert, they can be independently used without fear.

Nevertheless, shatkarmas, in line with other hatha yogic branches have the spiritual end in view (24). For example, neti destroys kapha-doshas, and is said to bestow clairvoyance (25) (divya drishti) and to facilitate khechari, which on perfection would lead to unmani- a higher end equated with raja yoga, advaita or sahajavastha. Karna-dhauti (26), a physical practice for cleansing the ears, enables the practitioner to hear the mystical internal sounds (nadas) which are produced in sushumna after nadi shuddhi and ultimately culminates in manolaya, leading to emancipation. Trataka (27), the eliminator of all eye diseases, induces divya drishti and helps towards sambhavi mudra, which on perfection makes the sadhaka one with Brahma. Varisara (28) is said to transform the body into the divine form, whereas basti (29) not only cleanses the rectum but invigorates the sense organs thereby bringing serenity of mind. The same is true of other yogic practices. Ayurvedic panchakarmas, on the other hand, do not help in spiritual elevation. Even then, we have to conclude that hatha yogic shatkarmas have their origins in the ayurvedic panchakarmas and not vice-versa, as some scholars think. This conclusion becomes more authentic when we observe the yogic purificatory practices from a historical angle.

In a research conducted in Connecticut, USA, a six-week program of yoga and meditation was undertaken to observe the brachial artery reactivity, significant reductions in blood

pressure, heart rate, and BMI was observed in the total cohort with yoga(30) It was found that yogic practices are useful in preventing and managing disorders related to the body systems(31) In the present study body weight significantly decreased after Hatha yogic practices. A controlled trial held in India supports that yogic practices contribute to reduced excessive body fat not only among school students but also in obese patients (32). Yoga might have played role as a safety measure. Other study also performed in Toronto, Canada, clearly states that physically active individuals are less likely to develop hypertension than sedentary individuals (33). Hatha Yogic practices significantly reduce the blood glucose and body weight of the practitioners (34, 35).

Conclusion:

Almost every text of Hatha yoga emphasizes the importance of Shatkarma, as the practice of Hatha Yoga can improve strength and flexibility, and may help control such physiological variables as blood pressure, respiration and heart rate, and metabolic rate to improve overall exercise capacity(36). The intensity of Hatha yoga may be too low to provide a training stimulus for improving cardiovascular fitness. Although previous research suggests that Hatha yoga is an acceptable form of physical activity for enhancing muscular fitness and flexibility, these data demonstrate that Hatha yoga may have little, if any, cardiovascular benefit(37). All such benefits prove this practice the asset of Hatha Yoga.

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