



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF TRENDS IN EMERGING RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF TRENDS IN EMERGING RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT

Volume 2; Issue 1; 2024; Page No. 127-132

Received: 01-10-2023

Accepted: 06-12-2023

The role of yoga and classical dance in enhancing spiritual well-being

¹Vijayta Jain and ²Dr. Samar Jeet Singh

¹Research Scholar, Sam Global University, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India

²Professor, Sam Global University, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.12620600>

Corresponding Author: Vijayta Jain

Abstract

In yoga, physical postures and alignments foster awareness and meditation. In dance, these elements are crafted to evoke aesthetic pleasure and emotional resonance in the audience. Rooted in Hindu mythology, both dance and yoga in India share a divine origin. The Natya Shastra and Abhinaya Darpana narrate how dance was divinely conceived by Lord Brahma, integrating elements from the four Vedas, thus elevating it to the status of the fifth Veda. Nataraja, Shiva's form as the Lord of Dance, symbolizes cosmic cycles of creation and destruction through his dances - Lasya and Tandava, reflecting parallels with the dual energies in hatha yoga. Dance & yoga is a spiritual journey that you will want to perform for the rest of your life. This form of communication is completely divine. Infusing dance and meditative practices also involve discipline in philosophy, literature, history and music. Dance in India encompasses a diverse array of styles, categorized primarily as traditional or folk. Like other facets of Indian culture, folk dances exhibit significant regional and stylistic diversity, reflecting local customs, ethnicities, and geographical influences. During the colonial British Raj period, classical dances such as Bharatanatyam faced ridicule and suppression. However, classical Indian dance has evolved into a rich dance-drama form that integrates elements of storytelling and theatricality. Productions often include narratives from Hindu mythology such as those depicting Shiva-Parvati, Lanka Dahan, Panchatantra, and Ramayana, among others.

Keywords: Physical and mental health, Bharatanatyam, Dance, traditional, yoga

Introduction

The term "yoga" holds multiple connotations, rooted in the Sanskrit "yuj," meaning "to join," which fundamentally implies unity or connection. However, ongoing discussions persist regarding what precisely becomes united: whether it's the soul with the divine, consciousness with its true essence, or other entities. Through time, "yoga" has broadened to encompass nearly any spiritual practice where practitioners employ specific methods to deepen their understanding of the spiritual realm. Historian Stuart Sarbacker provides a comprehensive examination of the diverse paths that yoga has historically and conceptually taken, both within India and beyond (Sarbacker 2021). One usage he explores translates "yoga" simply as "religious practice," encompassing practices across Indian religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism.

In contemporary discourse, especially in the West, "yoga" commonly refers to a system originating from Hatha Yoga, known as the "Yoga of Forceful Exertion," dating back to

the twelfth century and associated with Tantric perspectives on the body's relationship to the cosmos. Nevertheless, the origins of yoga trace back to the earliest Indian scriptures, the Vedas (1500–500 BCE), which suggest that practitioners can access the creative power of the universe through self-discipline (tapas) and celibacy (brahma Caryā). Tapas, meaning "heat" in Sanskrit, denotes the inner energy generated through rigorous ascetic practices. It is conceptualized as a spiritual fire that intensifies through challenging practices that deny bodily pleasures, often likened to the heat of a sacrificial fire (yajña), which represents the central form of religious expression in the Vedas.

Dance & yoga is a spiritual journey that you will want to perform for the rest of your life. This form of communication is completely divine. Infusing dance and meditative practices also involve discipline in philosophy, literature, history and music. The dance, the music, the meditation, the postures, all of them is a display of rhythmic

movements. Without the taal, kathak moves are incomplete and without the postures and meditation, yoga is incomplete.

In contemporary times, yoga and Indian classical dance, two profound spiritual disciplines, have often been trivialized - yoga reduced to mere physical exercise and classical dance to simple entertainment. Yet, amidst this simplification, a resurgence of their deeper spiritual significance is emerging among practitioners, revitalizing their authentic essence. Rooted in Hindu mythology, both dance and yoga in India share a divine origin. The Natya Shastra and Abhinaya Darpana narrate how dance was divinely conceived by Lord Brahma, integrating elements from the four Vedas, thus elevating it to the status of the fifth Veda. Nataraja, Shiva's form as the Lord of Dance, symbolizes cosmic cycles of creation and destruction through his dances - Lasya and Tandava, reflecting parallels with the dual energies in hatha yoga.

Yoga and Mental Health

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) has emerged as a significant psychological consequence among individuals affected by the anxiety-inducing circumstances precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The pervasive threat posed by an invisible adversary capable of striking individuals or their loved ones at any moment has provided fertile ground for the development of PTSD symptoms. The trauma associated with COVID-19 manifests through various channels, including the challenges of hospitalization-potentially involving invasive procedures like intubation-social stigmatization by acquaintances, and the enforced physical separation from loved ones during periods of infection. A comprehensive meta-analysis of COVID-19's psychological impacts underscores its detrimental effects on mental health, revealing elevated PTSD rates across diverse demographic groups, encompassing infected individuals, healthcare workers, and the general populace. The prevalence of PTSD in these studies consistently hovered around 17%, highlighting the widespread psychological toll exacted by the pandemic.

Even individuals who did not contract COVID-19 faced heightened PTSD risk due to the pervasive fear of infection and profound disruptions to social and occupational routines. PTSD significantly impairs daily functioning across mental and physical domains, affecting personal routines and overall well-being. The onset of the pandemic precipitated a surge in psychiatric consultations, accompanied by a notable rise in the prescription rates of antidepressant medications.

In response to the burgeoning mental health crisis, healthcare systems have adapted by intensifying psychiatric services and bolstering therapeutic interventions. Mental health professionals have been at the forefront of mitigating PTSD's impact through tailored therapies aimed at alleviating symptoms and fostering resilience. Psychosocial support initiatives have also played a pivotal role in assisting individuals and communities in coping with the protracted stressors of the pandemic era.

Moving forward, the integration of trauma-informed care models into public health frameworks represents a crucial strategy for addressing the enduring psychological repercussions of the pandemic. By promoting early

detection and intervention, healthcare providers can mitigate the long-term effects of PTSD and foster a path to recovery for affected individuals. Furthermore, enhancing public awareness and destigmatizing mental health issues are essential steps in building a supportive environment conducive to healing and resilience in the aftermath of unprecedented global challenges like COVID-19.

Dance in India encompasses a diverse array of styles, categorized into traditional and folk forms. Like other cultural elements, dances vary across different regions, shaped by local traditions and influenced by cultural exchanges within the country. The Sangeet Natak Akademi, India's national academy for performing arts, recognizes eight classical dances as Indian classical dances, with additional forms acknowledged by various scholars. These dances trace their roots back to the ancient Sanskrit text Natya Shastra and are deeply intertwined with the spiritual and ritualistic arts of Hinduism.

Classical Dance

Classical dance in India is a refined form of dance-drama, akin to a comprehensive theatrical experience where the dancer communicates narratives primarily through gestures. These dances predominantly depict stories from Hindu mythology, each style embodying the cultural essence of its region or community. The classification as classical hinges on adherence to Natyashastra, the ancient Indian treatise on performing arts. The Sangeet Natak Academy officially recognizes eight classical Indian dance styles: Bharatanatyam (Tamil Nadu), Kathak (North, West, and Central India), Kathakali (Kerala), Kuchipudi (Andhra Pradesh), Odissi (Odisha), Manipuri (Manipur), and Mohiniyattam (Kerala). These dances are deeply rooted in Hindu spiritual practices and artistic traditions outlined in Natyashastra. The essence of classical dance lies in its ability to evoke specific emotions (rasa) and sentiments (bhava) among the audience, as prescribed by Natyashastra. This distinguishes classical dance from folk dance, which typically evolves from community traditions and lacks the structured rules of Natyashastra. Classical dances are performed strictly in accordance with these ancient principles, ensuring their preservation as profound cultural expressions of India's artistic heritage.

Bharatanatyam

Dating back to 1000 BC, Bharatanatyam is a traditional dance form originating from the South Indian state of Tamil Nadu, predominantly practiced by women in contemporary times. Often accompanied by classical Carnatic music, Bharatanatyam evolved within the Hindu temples of Tamil Nadu and neighboring regions. Historically, it has been a solo dance form, traditionally performed by women, and primarily portrays Hindu religious themes and spiritual concepts, particularly those associated with Shaivism, Vaishnavism, and Shaktism. During the colonial British Raj era, Bharatanatyam and other classical dances of India faced ridicule and suppression. However, in the post-colonial period, Bharatanatyam has emerged as one of the most popular traditional dance styles in India and internationally. It is often regarded as synonymous with Indian dance by those unfamiliar with the diverse range of dances and performing arts within Indian culture.

Indian classical dance is particularly chosen to keep people healthy in all terms that are shared by many people and proven scientifically. All traditional Indian dances stuck to the Natya Shastra*, which is not only a composition of music, dance, and drama but also a collection of knowledge of anatomy and psychology. It describes various poses, hand and leg movements which are not only used in Indian classical dances but also the yoga postures commonly identified. Natya Shastra* regards Indian traditional dance as a peaceful mind therapy in motion, set to music designed to bring out specific emotions even all the stressful moods while performing it. The benefits of Indian dance include the reduction of stress, prevention of diseases, increasing flexibility, strengthening muscles, and promoting a feeling of well-being. Many individuals understand that dancing is good for their physical health. Although it is a pill to boost a person's mood and show a better appearance, it also provides an opportunity to overcome the stigma and the fear of being judged by others. Natya Shastra* explained numerous benefits of Indian classical dances, which are to prevent and manage mental illnesses, as well as improve body balance and coordination. All Indian classical dances may look similar to the unpracticed eyes, but there are many different techniques of movement among practitioners. This study was conducted to investigate Bharatanatyam, a form of Indian classical dance, as a dance therapy in the psychological matter and body balance with the coordination of the lighting system.

Literature review

Acharya, Chirmi & Jain, Madhu. (2016) ^[1]. The foundational aim of classical Indian dances and yoga has historically been the attainment of union with the divine through physical transcendence, offering pathways to self-discovery over centuries. Their efficacy as therapeutic practices stems from the integrated nature of mind and body, where changes in one realm manifest in the other. This paper explores the parallels between Indian classical dances and yoga, emphasizing their shared emphasis on enhancing physical health, rhythmic breathing techniques, activation of chakras, emotional release, and achieving a transcendent state or 'enlightenment experience'. The primary objective of this study is to underscore the intrinsic unity between yoga and Indian classical dance, both in promoting overall well-being and in facilitating spiritual exploration to attain a state of bliss akin to self-realization and divine connection.

Bhavanani, Ananda. (2023) ^[2]. This month's edition of Yoga Life extends a warm invitation to our global yoga community to join in celebrating the illustrious legacy of Param Pujya AMMAJI, who embodies the essence of the Divine Mother. As we come together on 13th September to mark her 80th birthday, it is a poignant moment to express our deepest gratitude to her. May we all strive to live up to her compassionate guidance and bring honor to her through our dedicated practice of yoga. The 6th Decennial Meet of Vishwa Yoga Samaj, scheduled from 8th to 17th September, promises to be a remarkable gathering for all those connected with the Rishi culture and Ashtanga Yoga Parampara. Organized under the leadership of Dhivya Priya Bhavanani, granddaughter of Param Pujya Swamiji and Amma ji, along with a dedicated team of coordinators and

volunteers, this event will coincide with AMMAJI's milestone birthday celebration. It also marks the 55th Anniversary of Ananda Ashram and the 30th Anniversary of YOGNAT, our cultural wing in Pondicherry. A special birthday homa and cultural performances by current students and alumni of Ananda Ashram and Yog Anjali Natyalayam are scheduled, alongside online panel discussions and presentations by senior members of the Gitananda Yoga family and YOGNAT Alumni. Highlighting the Decennial Meet is the International Conference and Workshop themed "Exploring the Indian Cultural Ethos through Yoga, Natyam, Sangeetam, and Samskrutam," featuring Naatyacharya and Padmabhushan Awardee Shri VP Dhananjayan as Chief Guest and Keynote Speaker. Additionally, the 21st Swami Gitananda Best Youth & Best Child Awards 2023, open to children and youth worldwide, will be presented. With a total of 15 events (11 offline and 4 online), we eagerly anticipate the enthusiastic participation of our global yoga community. Join us in this grand celebration to create enduring memories together.

Bhavanani, Ananda & Bhavanani, Devasena. (2010) ^[3]. An in-depth exploration of Bharatanatyam's historical evolution, artistic principles, and spiritual significance is undertaken in this article, emphasizing its profound alignment with Yoga. Both disciplines share a common goal of spiritual union with the Divine, yet Bharatanatyam uniquely emphasizes not only the dancer's communion with the Divine but also serves as a conduit for the audience to experience this connection. Mastery of Bharatanatyam demands extensive dedication and practice, encompassing physical, emotional, and mental dimensions. The article meticulously examines the multifaceted qualities essential for dancers to embody, emphasizing their role in guiding audiences towards spiritual insight. Yoganjali Natyalayam advocates for the revival of Natya Karanas integral to Bharatanatyam, highlighting the synergistic benefits of integrating Yoga into its practice. Beyond physical conditioning, the combined study of Yoga and Bharatanatyam fosters holistic development, enhancing qualities crucial for dancers such as strength, flexibility, endurance, awareness, concentration, and mind-body coordination. Detailed analysis compares each Asana's attributes, underscoring their role in refining movement subtleties essential for effective expression. Furthermore, the study delves into Mudras as intricate communicative tools, explored in comprehensive articles by Dr. Swami Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj and Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani. These contributions elucidate the neuro-mechanical basis and artistic nuances of Mudras, illustrating their pivotal role in Bharatanatyam's expressive repertoire. Ultimately, the article positions Bharatanatyam as a profound artistic discipline that encompasses and offers a transformative journey towards spiritual and aesthetic fulfillment.

Bajekal, Purna. (2020) ^[4]. This article endeavors to explore the intersection of dance and spirituality through the lens of dance/movement therapy (DMT). It integrates the foundational principles of Bharata Natyam, an ancient South Indian classical dance form, with DMT theory to propose the concept of embodied transcendence. Central to this theoretical framework is the application of Bharata

Natyam's insights into the interconnectedness of mind, body, emotions, and spirit within the therapeutic context of DMT. The article contends that under the guidance of a therapist, clients can achieve a heightened awareness of their experiences, potentially leading to states of transcendence and a deeper self-understanding. The theoretical model emphasizes the transformative potential of integrating Bharata Natyam's holistic worldview into DMT practices, suggesting avenues for future research and acknowledging current limitations. This approach aims to enrich therapeutic outcomes by leveraging the expressive and symbolic dimensions of dance to facilitate profound psychological and spiritual insights.

Ramaswamy, Aparna & Deslauriers, Daniel. (2014) [5]. This article delves into the convergence of dance forms and spiritual emergence, specifically within the practices of Bharatha Natyam, a classical Indian dance, and Contact Improvisation. It examines how these distinct forms of dance generate co-created experiences for dancers, emphasizing their unique techniques and artistic expressions. Through a phenomenological inquiry into the act of dancing, the study identifies shared elements in the unfolding of spiritual experiences, highlighting the mutual influence between the dancer, dance forms, and the emerging spiritual dimensions. The exploration posits that irrespective of dance form, the process of dancing catalyzes a symbiotic relationship where the dancer and the emerging spiritual experience reciprocally shape each other. This investigation not only delineates commonalities in spiritual emergence across different dance styles but also endeavors to articulate a descriptive framework for understanding spirituality within the realm of dance.

Pandit, Bhushan. (2023) [8]. This review article aims to explore the impact of Yoga philosophy on worldview by examining the available literature. Despite its ancient roots dating back over 5,000 years, Yoga has only recently gained recognition for its profound potential in healing both physical and mental ailments. Beyond its therapeutic applications, Yoga is revered for addressing a spectrum of philosophical and psychological inquiries, often likened to an ancient form of philosophy and psychology. At its core, Yoga strives for the unity of mind and body with nature, seeking to attain states of pure consciousness such as Moksha or Samadhi. Patanjali's Yog Sutra serves as a foundational text, outlining techniques, rituals, and practices aimed at achieving enlightenment and self-realization. This pursuit is depicted as a journey towards a deeper understanding of oneself, the universe, and connections beyond both realms. Central to Yoga is the belief that what is imperceptible can be apprehended through disciplined practice. This contrasts with perspectives like Kant's, which acknowledge the existence of imperceptible realities but do not prescribe methods for accessing them. According to Vedanta, Yoga signifies union—the spiritual merging of the individual soul with the universal soul, emphasizing a holistic approach to spiritual realization. In exploring the impact of Yoga philosophy on worldview, this article delves into the Yoga school's theory of knowledge, examining how its teachings on mastering the physical body, conscious mind, subconscious impulses, and superconscious ego contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the workings of the mind.

U S, Anitha. (2023) [11]. Indian Classical Dance and Indian knowledge system: Indian traditional dance styles, rooted in a legacy spanning over two thousand years, face the imperative of kindling awareness and interest among the younger generation. This initiative aims to cultivate a genuine appreciation for classical dance, fostering a deep engagement that upholds our timeless traditions and cultural heritage. The contemporary guru-shishya relationship reflects an amalgamation of the traditional Gurukul system and modern pedagogical dynamics. It evolves continuously through innovative teaching methodologies, creative choreographies, and reinterpretations of mythological narratives, while striving to preserve the reverence inherent in the traditional setup. Despite the influences of modernization, the essence of the guru-shishya tradition endures in India, embodying a delicate balance between adaptation and fidelity to tradition within the evolving landscape of Indian dance. Historically, the Gurukul system involved intense one-on-one training where disciples dedicated substantial periods—often spanning decades—to their art under the guru's guidance, akin to a form of profound meditation. This immersive learning extended beyond dance to encompass diverse arts, enriching creativity and understanding. However, since the 1930s, the establishment of formal dance institutes has transitioned teaching from individualized Gurukul-style mentorship to group instruction. This shift has seen traditional teachers migrate from smaller towns to urban centers, altering the dynamics of classical dance education. In navigating this transformation, the modern Guru-Shishya paradigm strives to strike a balance between preserving the traditional ethos and adapting to contemporary educational demands. It represents a pivotal evolution in the transmission of Indian classical dance, seeking to sustain its essence while embracing the opportunities and challenges of a modern era. This helped in making understanding the value of our knowledge system and traditional roots to the students more deeply in wide manner. Art education became popularized in 1940s when some of the veterans like dancer Rukmini devi in Tamil Nadu and poet Vallathol Narayana Menon in Kerala took the duty of uplifting the arts and giving training and preserving it in Institutes like Kalakshetra and Kerala Kalamandalam respectively.

Shubhangi, & Tiwary, Uma Shanker. (2017) [12]. The algorithm proposed in this study aims to facilitate pose recognition within the domain of Indian classical dance. Specifically, it focuses on three distinct dance forms: Bharatnatyam, Kathak, and Odissi, encompassing a total of 15 poses for the classification task. A preliminary dataset of 100 images was compiled and divided into training and testing subsets. Hu moments were selected as the method for feature extraction due to their ability to capture shape characteristics invariant to scale, translation, and rotation. To effectively apply Hu moments, the images were first segmented to isolate foreground and background components. Subsequently, the segmented images were binarized to facilitate feature extraction. Given the nature of the problem as a multiclass classification task, two methodologies were employed with Support Vector Machines (SVM): the one vs one and one vs all approaches. The performance of SVM was evaluated using both linear and Radial Basis Function (RBF) kernels, with results

compared across the different classification approaches. The study sought to determine the optimal SVM kernel and classification strategy for accurate pose recognition across the diverse repertoire of Indian classical dance forms studied.

The importance of yoga in incorporating spiritualism

Yoga first appeared as a comprehensive technique for maintaining one's physical, mental, and spiritual well-being in ancient Indian civilization. The Sanskrit root "yuj," which means to yoke or combine, is where the word "yoga" originated, reflecting the practitioner's intention to integrate different facets of the individual into a harmonious whole. Although it's hard to trace the exact beginnings of yoga, archaeological evidence points to a practice that predates the discipline by over 5,000 years. The Vedas, the oldest sacred books in Hinduism, were written between 1500 and 500 BCE, and they contain early mentions to yoga. Yoga is frequently linked in the Vedas to austere ceremonies and practices meant to achieve spiritual enlightenment and oneness with the almighty. The philosophical writings known as the Upanishads, which were written between 800 and 200 BCE, expanded on the idea of yoga by stressing the value of self-realization, self-discipline, and meditation. Yoga was first described in the Upanishads as a way to realize one's true nature as the eternal Self (Atman) and to transcend the confines of the ego. A highly regarded text written between 200 BCE and 200 CE, the Bhagavad Gita offers significant insights into the practice of yoga. Lord Krishna offers guidance on several yoga routes in the Bhagavad Gita, such as jnana yoga (the road of knowledge), bhakti yoga (the path of devotion), and karma yoga (the path of selfless action). These lessons stress the need of seeking spiritual insight, serving others without expecting anything in return, and being devoted to the divine.

The Bhagavad Gita elucidates the integration of yoga into daily life for spiritual evolution

The Bhagavad Gita provides ageless advice for spiritual development in the face of material struggles and acts as a useful manual for incorporating yoga into daily life. The Gita clarifies how people might incorporate spiritual consciousness into their daily activities in order to achieve self-realization and comprehensive development.

- First of all, the Gita places great emphasis on the idea of Karma Yoga—the road of altruism. It teaches that people should carry out their assigned responsibilities (dharma) with utmost sincerity and devotion, regardless of the results. Through surrendering the fruits of one's deeds to the divine and remaining calm in the face of success or failure, people can grow spiritually by overcoming egoism and developing a sense of detachment.
- Second, the Gita promotes the path of devotion known as Bhakti Yoga. It inspires people to develop steadfast love and devotion for the Almighty via a variety of devotional exercises like adoration, chanting, and prayer in order to achieve oneness with the divine via dedication and surrender to the will of God.
- The Gita also offers the knowledge-pursuing path of Jnana Yoga. In order to understand the true essence of the self and the universe, it highlights the significance

of introspection, discernment, and contemplation. Through self-realization and emancipation, people can develop discriminative wisdom and contemplate on philosophical truths. All things considered; the Bhagavad Gita offers a comprehensive strategy for incorporating yoga into daily life for spiritual development. It highlights how action, devotion, and knowledge can coexist peacefully, leading people to self-awareness, personal development, and finally, oneness with the divine.

The role of asanas, pranayama, meditation, and ethical conduct in fostering spiritual growth.

In the practice of yoga, asanas, pranayama, meditation, and moral behavior are all essential for promoting spiritual development.

- Asanas, or physical postures, encourage mental clarity and spiritual awareness by fostering physical health, vigor, and balance in the body. Asana practice lays the groundwork for more in-depth spiritual investigation by helping practitioners become more self-disciplined, focused, and able to inhabit their bodies with greater awareness.
- The practice of pranayama, or the control and regulation of breath, acts as a link between the material and subtle worlds, promoting the flow of prana, or life force, and reducing mental oscillations. Practitioners can promote inner calm, clarity, and spiritual insight by harmonizing their physical and energy bodies through the harnessing of breath. Mindfulness meditation, mantra repetition, visualization, and other forms of meditation help to develop inner peace, focus, and self-awareness. Regular meditation practice helps practitioners reach higher realms of consciousness, overcome ego constraints, and strengthen their fundamental connection with themselves—all of which contribute to significant spiritual progress.
- The Yamas and Niyamas, two yogic precepts that define ethical behavior, offer a moral and ethical foundation for spiritual practice. Through the development of qualities like sincerity, compassion, and non-attachment, practitioners cleanse their hearts and minds and harmonize with the universal concepts of harmony and interconnectivity, which promotes spiritual development and evolution.

Conclusion

Contemporary dance in India spans diverse performances, including choreography for Indian cinema, modern ballet, and innovative explorations of classical and folk dance. Artists frequently draw on themes from Indian mythology such as Shiva-Parvati, Lanka Dahan, Panchatantra, and Ramayana, integrating these narratives into their creative expressions.

Bharatanatyam makes a person get to know his body strength better and improves his thinking and behavior with the guidance of a proper lighting system. As a result, everyone can forget about any problems and stress for a while and enjoy life.

Yoga is a road to spiritual freedom, self-realization, and oneness with the divine. It provides transforming techniques that help people recognize their actual nature and transcend

the confines of the ego, including self-inquiry, physical postures, breathing exercises, ethical living, and meditation. Practitioners develop virtues like compassion, self-awareness, and equanimity by incorporating the ideas and methods explained in these ancient writings into their daily lives. This promotes spiritual development, inner peace, and a link with the universal source of consciousness.

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