

Abstract

Spirituality and Contemplative States Through Yoga Practices: The Scientific Rationale and Preliminary Evidence

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Background And Aims: Yoga is an ancient contemplative behavioral mind-body practice that allows for the development and enhancement of mind body skills and behavioral factors including physical functioning, awareness/mindfulness, self-regulation of internal physiological and psychological states, and life meaning and purpose. This is achieved through yogic physical exercises/postures, breath regulation, relaxation, and meditative practices. The ultimate historical goal of traditional yoga has been the achievement of contemplative states and spirituality, specifically the unitive state of consciousness called Samadhi. The aim of this presentation is to describe the scientific rationale for how yoga practices can lead to such states and review some of the more important research studies providing supportive evidence for increases in spirituality with yoga practices.

Methods: Published hypothesis papers on yoga for spirituality and contemplative states and

published research studies on yoga practitioners and spirituality were acquired through searches on PubMed and PsychInfo databases.

Results: Basic research has supported the efficacy of yoga in developing and enhancing mind body skills and behavioral factors including physical functioning, awareness/mindfulness, self-regulation of internal physiological and psychological states especially of stress and emotion, and the enhancement of regulation of thought processes, and the development of metacognition that are consistent with the neurophysiology and mental state associated with spirituality and contemplative states. A number of survey studies of long-term yoga practitioners have shown improvements in spirituality with longer term practice.

Conclusions: Regular longer-term practice of yoga appears to be associated with increases in spirituality and contemplative states.

Keywords: yoga, spirituality, contemplative states