

Difference Between Yogic Practices and Physical Exercises

In the current western culture, Yoga and exercise are popular ways to stay in shape but the two have a number of differences in regards to the ultimate goal and the specific benefits that they can have on your mind and body.

The ultimate aim of Hatha yoga is to reach Samadhi, a higher state of consciousness. In order to purify the mind it is necessary for the body to undergo a process of absolute purification in order to remove impurities so the nadis function and the energy blocks are released. The main objective of Hatha yoga is to create an absolute balance of the interacting activities and processes of the physical body, mind and energy. When this balance is created, the impulses generated give a call of awakening to the central force (sushumna nadi) which is responsible for the evolution of human consciousness. If Hatha yoga is not used for this purpose, its true objective is lost.

The ultimate aim of exercise is to improve overall physical fitness level and health by practicing aerobic activity, which elevates the heart rate. Exercise can strengthen muscles and the cardiovascular system, improve athletic skills and aid weight loss. Regular exercise can boost the immune system and also improve mental health e.g. prevent depression and promote/maintain positive self-esteem. Furthermore, exercise in the form of different sports can be practiced competitively and the aim is to be the best within the sport, which can be an external driver to the individual's performance.

There are a number of similarities between exercise and the physical aspects of yoga and they therefore are not necessarily distinct practices as yoga can be

considered as form of exercise. As a form of fitness, yoga is excellent at building strength, flexibility, balance, and functional movement skills. And as a mind/body modality, yoga is unparalleled in its ability to relieve stress, help people cope with medical treatments, find meaning in daily life, and create more positive relationships with their bodies. Yoga works brilliantly to improve and normalize distressed breathing patterns, which is key to shifting an individual from the taxing "fight or flight" mode of the sympathetic nervous system and enhancing the "rest and digest" mode of the parasympathetic nervous system to achieve homeostasis.

The differences between yoga and exercise will depend on the type of yoga or exercise being practised and it should be noted that certain types of yoga e.g. Ashtanga are more vigorous than other forms and therefore share more similarities with exercise. However, general physical differences are outlined below:

- Yoga stimulates parasympathetic nervous system (hence relaxing) / Exercise stimulates sympathetic nervous system (hence tiring)

- In yoga, subcortical regions of brain dominate / In exercise cortical regions of brain dominate

- Yoga is anabolic which conserve energy / Exercise is catabolic which is capable of breaking down the energy

- Yoga practices slow dynamic movements / Exercise involves rapid forceful movements

- Yoga practices reduced muscle tension, progressive movements / Exercise involves increased muscle tension

- Low risk of injuring muscles and ligaments / Exercise has a higher risk of injury

- Yoga leads to relatively low caloric consumption / Exercise leads to moderate to high caloric consumption

- In yoga, energizing (breathing is natural or controlled) / Exercise fatiguing (breathing is taxed)

- Yoga is non-competitive, process-oriented / Exercise is commonly competitive, goal-oriented

- In yoga, awareness is internal (focus is on breath

and the infinite) / In exercise, awareness is external (focus is on reaching the toes, reaching the finish line, etc.)

• In yoga there are limitless possibilities for growth in self-awareness / In exercise there is generally no aspect of self awareness

Other differences are also apparent with regard to the practice of yoga and exercise. In general, yoga is self-sufficient in that it can be practised anywhere, anytime with the minimal requirement of sufficient space; a yoga mat is not even a pre-requisite. Exercise on the other hand generally requires equipment and therefore is constrained to being practised within a certain environment (e.g. gym/sports club) and may require other people to participate such as in group/partner sports.

Furthermore, Hatha yoga involves a number of steps:

- Shat karma (purifying practices)
- Asana (postures)
- Mudra (finger and hand positions)
- Pratyahara (sense withdrawal / non-attachment)
- Pranayama (breath exercises)
- Dhyana (meditation)
- Samadhi (realisation of the true self)

Of which the physical practice of asana's is just one step, whereas this is the main focus of exercise.

In conclusion, both yoga and exercise are comparable in some regards in terms of the physical and (to some extent mental) benefits, but exercise is limited to focussing on the maintenance and improvement of the physical body as the sole aim whereas yoga is based in ancient Hindu tradition and aims to use the balanced physical body as a preparatory pre-requisite to achieve a higher state of consciousness.

There is a great confusion these days between asana practice and sport exercise.

The most important difference between asanas and physical exercises is AWARENESS – when performing asana one must be aware of the breath, physical and mental state.

Other differences include:

1. Asana can be performed anywhere, with no need for additional equipment.

2. All people regardless of age, sex and health condition can perform Asana.

3. Asanas stretch the body muscles and lengthen them unlike exercise which generally shorten the muscles.

4. Asana are only one of 8 limbs given by Patanjali as the means for attaining self-realization and so health is only a by product and not the actual goal.

5. Asana are performed slowly.

6. Asanas require no companion and no competition is involved.

7. When performing asana blood goes to center of the body, while during exercise the blood goes to periphery.

8. Asana develop strength, stability, flexibility as well as the mind, while exercises develop muscles.

9. Asanas contribute to emotional stability.

10. Asana use less energy and one feels refreshed after performing them, yet exercise use more energy and one feels tired after practice.

11. When performing Asana a great importance is given to the breath, while during exercise very little attention given to the breath.