

Chapter 23

Traditional Frameworks of Well-Being and Modern Science

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes how to connect traditional frameworks from yoga to modern science and systems theory in a way that is evidence-based, clinically testable, inclusive, and extensible. This way of systematization enables leveraging the evidence for yoga from across the spectrum of well-being modalities. The key in the presentation is the choice of an approach that is equally valid for both ancient and modern systems. The authors begin by examining the importance of a skill-based approach and layout how well-being systems can be built by mapping the skills and qualities of the organism. They take a selection of domains or categories under which skills from traditional and modern sources can be analyzed: attention, transcendence, movement, breathing, devotion, cognition, and emotion. They conclude the chapter by presenting a larger map of well-being that includes more domains arranged from a clinical perspective.

INTRODUCTION

The Indian subcontinent has several thousand years of history of well-being practices. Among these, yoga and ayurveda are two key systems. There is substantial insight embedded in their traditional frameworks. If that insight is to be maximally relevant in a modern well-being setting, we need to analyze those frameworks and connect them with modern science.

This chapter presents a way of examining and reworking ancient frameworks of well-being from yoga, without losing their essential nature and contributions, with a view to making them more applicable in contemporary life in the background of current science.

BACKGROUND: CONTENT AND SCOPE OF FRAMEWORKS

To analyze any framework, we need to begin with its purpose and scope. A well-known way of introducing a traditional India system thought, like *Vedānta* (Nikhilananda, 1931) or the *Yoga Sūtra* (Sastri & Sastri, 1952), or even *Haṭha yoga* (Svātmārāma & Aiyangar, 1972), is to define the subject, the purpose, the qualification of the practitioner, and the connections between these.

In other words, we need to define what a framework consists of (the content) and in whom and where it is to be used (context and applicability). A structured approach is not restricted to modern thinking. The process of logical analysis is a foundation of ancient systems as well, including of yoga and ayurveda for well-being and self-transformation. In fact, if we are to connect ancient and modern systems of well-being, we need a common structured approach that can apply to both modern and ancient frameworks. In the next section, we are going to examine what that common structure can be.

STATES, SKILLS, SYSTEMS THEORY

The foundation of yoga and ayurveda—arguably of all wellbeing frameworks—are properties (*guṇa*) and functions (*karma*). This derives from the *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣika* system that, along with *Sāṅkhya*, underpins ayurveda. Substrates (*dravya*) have properties (*guṇa*) and functions or actions (*karma*) (Sinha, 1923).

Analyzing the concept underlying this presentation, we can see that properties describe the state of a system (Sharma & Dash, 1976). Functions or actions are what allow the state of the system to change (Sharma & Dash, 1976). In well-being frameworks, *guṇa* describes the current and potential state of well-being the individual may have. *Karma* describes the capacities or skills of individuals to change their state of well-being. All well-being frameworks select properties and functions according to their context or scope and explain or postulate connections between these chosen properties and functions.

Depending on the scope of a framework, it may choose to include different qualities and functions. Some frameworks deliberately include a narrower subset of the mind-body continuum. Some are broader, including a large section of the mind and body.

Smaller frameworks of narrower scope are nested within larger or broader frameworks. Some frameworks deal mainly with the body, and within that, some may deal with body feeling, while others may deal with body movement. Similarly, some frameworks deal mainly with thoughts, and others with the breath, and so on.

We are not claiming the qualities and functions listed in the frameworks of yoga are entirely comprehensive. In fact, it is impossible for any system to list all the qualities and functions that would describe the body and mind. Consequently, it is not possible to build one framework that covers all of well-being and self-transformation. Any well-being system will cover only part of what the body and mind are capable of in function or the different states that the body and mind can exhibit as qualities.

The value of traditional yoga is not purely in the lists that it proposes, but in the way in which the frameworks are structured and the foundation of a holistic approach that these frameworks reflect. There is a lot that we can learn from analyzing the way yoga structures the connections between different levels of mind and body. Apart from that, the qualities and functions that yoga uses are also well-selected. They are often the ones most useful in cultivating the capacity for self-regulation as well as other positive shifts of body and mind.

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