

Yoga and Cancer

- Sudhanva Char

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People everywhere are fortunate that Swamiji has been taking significant interest in health and health care. Health does not mean mere lack of sickness and ailments. Health means robust physical and mental health. Without such robust health, we will fall below the benchmark that Srimannarayana loves to see human being rise to. We may have all the wealth, intelligence and other paraphernalia for a great human life, but without vigorous fitness and well-being, we will not be able to come up to His or Swamiji's expectations in terms of serving humanity as well as in terms of enjoying the good things we are blessed with, whether in terms of spiritual, mental or physical life. Robust health is an imperative for everything, in particular for *servicing God (Bhagavad kainkarya)*.

Yoga thinks of a human being as a very intelligently crafted and an indivisible fusion of body, mind and spirit. Human personality will be less than what it is supposed to be if the three do not go together. There is synergy here, 2 + 2 being greater than four, or the whole being greater than the sum of the parts. When this happens, we come to enjoy great energy that strengthens our immune system. It gives us the right positive mental outlook and makes us see Srimannarayana in everything and everybody, and love everybody. It gives us energy and initiatives to be proactive always, and not be couch potatoes. This is true health. If need be, for instance, we can be up and running even at 4:00 AM on a Sunday! This may however, necessitate a *savasana* later in the day!

The human body and the trillions of cells it is composed of, are more intelligent than we credit them with. Every human cell has a capability to think very smart and perform the allotted function most competently. The immune cells, for instance do a great job. They literally encapsulate intruding bacteria or even virus, and finish them. You should see this awesome chore of these cells on an electron microscope, magnified several thousand times. The neurons in our brain bring together electrical impulses and make thoughts. Just like the atom or the molecule is the tiniest part of a matter, the electrical impulse is the tiniest part of a thought. It takes the coordinated orchestra or networking of millions of human cells to just lift a finger. It is the bioelectrical activity or alpha waves that keep the heart beating nonstop from conception till the last breath, whatever life span Srimannarayana has bestowed upon us.

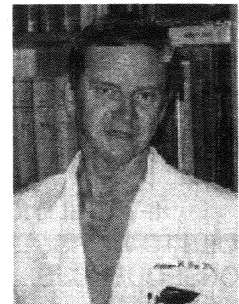
You can then imagine how much more of coordination and networking are needed to invent something new, solve a difficult mathematical problem, do software coding, compose the *pasurams* our *alwars* put together and so forth. However, when humans commit patent errors such as leading stressful lives, overeating, consuming wrong (non-saatvic) foods, overindulging in various pleasures, drinking alcohol beverage,

smoking, living in polluted cities and environment, over-medicating themselves, the body and the mind depreciate fast and lose their true capability. We become very vulnerable to cancers and numerous other diseases. Body parts get weak. The range of movement of the limbs of the body decreases. Aging occurs faster. The endocrine glands such as pituitary, thyroids, para-thyroids, adrenals and others, secreting biochemicals directly into the blood stream become sluggish. When pancreatic cells become sluggish, little insulin is produced and blood sugar goes up. We have diabetes.

In Lord Venkatesa's *ashto:ththara sathana:ma:vali*, He is addressed as *Nithya Yauvana mu:rthi*, someone that is eternally youthful. Balaji would like all his devotees too to enjoy such youthfulness by practicing good life. Yoga preaches that anyone that practices Yoga as regularly as you brush your teeth, will seldom fall sick. Even if sickness comes due to pollution of food, water or the air, the body's immune mechanism works most competently, homeostasis sets in and the body is restored to normal health rapidly. For instance, a person that practices yoga may recover from a cold or fever after six to twelve hours of rest, whereas other persons may take a few days to recover. When we travel, it is all the more important that we set aside time for yoga because it helps the body and mind to adjust itself better to the new environment.

One of the well-known cancer specialists that believed in alternative healing systems was Dr. William Fair. When this oncologist himself was diagnosed with colon cancer, he decided to go for yoga therapy rather than chemotherapy. Yoga, he practiced, might not have cured him of cancer, but it made cancer management less hurting. Dr. Fair wrote in the *New Yorker* magazine that vigorous practice of yoga helped him to gain more energy. That helped him to see more patients, write research papers for professional journals such as *Alternative Therapies in Health and Medicine*, and *Molecular Urology* and also edit some of them, spend more time with his family and even go scuba-diving! Dr. Fair was a member of the National Institutes of Health (NIH's) Cancer Advisory Panel on Complementary and Alternative Medicine. He served as a member of the White House Commission on Complementary and Alternative medicine. The Committee recommended to the President on the efficacy of Complementary medicine.

Chemotherapy is expensive and painful and the relapse rate is higher. It is possible that Yoga can help manage cancer better. There is good reason for research organizations to pay more attention to what Yoga can do to cancer victims. This is particularly more urgent for patients that are not likely to benefit from chemotherapy.



The late Dr. William Fair, Chair of Urologic Oncology, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, NY.
