



THE CONCEPT OF FITNESS, WELLNESS AND WELL-BEING IN ANCIENT INDIAN KNOWLEDGE SYSTEM IN REFERENCE TO BHAGAVAD GITA

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Abstract

The present study aims to analyze the importance of India's ancient knowledge system in providing us with the gifts of sports, fitness, wellness and well-being, and overall physical education. This study will analyze myths and challenges related to the origin of sports and other wellness exercises. In India, fitness, wellness and well-being as a concept has been considered vogue since ancient times. It traces its origin to traditional medicinal and health practices like ayurveda and yoga that have propounded the concept of mental and bodily wellness. Most of the ancient wellness concepts have largely focused on the basic needs of an individual mainly focusing on health, nutrition, and relaxation. In the context of sports, it is often said that the Olympics were first introduced in Greece but it's a fact that the origin of several sports can be traced back to the ancient Indian knowledge system, particularly the Vedic era. Thus, the concept of fitness and wellness in sports is not recent in India. In the Atharva Veda, some well-defined values bear the same sentiments as the traditional Olympic oath "For the Honour of my Country and the Glory of Sport". (Sathyanarayana & Vaidyanatha, 2016)

Introduction

India is a country of Hindu mythology where sports played an important role as a part of ancient Indian knowledge. Sports in Hindu mythology refer to a large body of traditional narratives mentioned in epics like Mahabharata and Ramayana, the Puranas, and the four Vedas i.e. Rigveda, Yajurveda, Samaveda and Atharva Veda. The traces of sports can also be found in ancient Tamil literature such as the Sangam literature and Periya Puranam as well as the Bhagavata Purana. It is also evident that Indian sport reached its peak of excellence during the emergence of Buddhism in India. Gautam Buddha himself is said to have been an ace at archery, chariot-racing, equitation, and hammer-throwing. Buddhist monks used to travel unarmed across different countries to spread the teachings of the Buddha, and accepted this form of self-defense, as their philosophy of non-violence. (Sathyanarayana & Vaidyanatha, 2016)

Moreover, many indoor and outdoor sports that got recognition in the rest of the world show their origins in India such as Yoga, games like snake and ladder, ludo, chess, playing cards, etc. Physical activities both outdoor and indoor have been practiced highly in ancient India as revealed through the archaeological and written records during different historical periods. Upanishads have strongly advocated that the attainment of the powerful soul is not possible for a weak individual. (Phor, 2021). In the Rigveda, Ramayana, and Mahabharata, men of a certain



status were expected to be well-versed in archery, chariot racing, swimming, and wrestling. They were also experts in hunting practices like the bow and arrow, the axe, and the dagger. Apart from these, weapons of war such as the javelin (toran) and the discus (chakra), were also often used in the sports arena. Lord Krishna wielded an impressive discus or Sudarshan Chakra as mentioned in Mahabharata. Ball games were popular as well and it is said that Lord Krishna played ball games with maidens on the banks of the Yamuna." Iti-Danda " or "Gulli Danda" was also one of the games played and it involved one long and one short stick. Bhima was well versed in it and it is similar to present day cricket. There is also a mention of the Kauravas and the Pandavas playing Gulli Danda in the Mahabharata. Two mighty Pandavas i.e. Arjuna (student of Dronacharya) and Bhima excelled in archery and weightlifting respectively. (Sathyanarayana & Vaidyanatha, 2016) . Thus ancient India had a rich tradition of games that were played and passed on through generations and cultures for not only leisure but also to develop mental capabilities and maintain physical fitness. The Indian physical activities such as chariot races, riding elephants and horses, swordsmanship, wrestling, boxing, kabaddi, kho-kho, tapasya, dancing, dands baithak, markham lezim, lathi, and some local games, etc. have been in practice from time immemorial. But neither the names of the inventors of the Indian system of physical culture nor the dates of their origin can be found in the historical records. But it is evident that the scientific system of physical education was in existence in India and was practiced by the people. Yoga, an activity common in India and involving exercises in posture and regulated breathing, was popular. This disciplining of mind and body required the instruction of experts and a person fully trained in this activity followed a routine involving eighty four different postures.

Importance of Fitness and Wellness in Ancient Indian Knowledge in reference to Bhagavad Gita

1. न चास्ति सदृशं तेन किञ्चित्स्थौल्यापकर्षणम्।
प्रसन्नात्मेन्द्रियमनाः है स्वस्थ इत्यभिधीयते।।

- Chapter 2, Verse 70

Translation: There is no other medicine than exercise to remove excessive grossness. The enemies of the exercising man are always afraid of him and do not give him sorrow.

Think of exercise as the cape that superheroes wear to help them against the villains of ill health and poor lifestyle. When you indulge yourself in physical activity on a daily basis, you set free a strong force against the very elements that plot to tip the scales towards putting on weight and health distress. If you are burdened with excessive weight, you can get on a life changing journey by committing yourself to exercises because those ain't just a routine.



You unlock a secret weapon of a newfound vitality at this stage which scares off adversaries like obesity, lethargy, inactive lifestyle and other health challenges. Think of exercising as a shield which defends you against potential anguish that accompanies an unwell way of living. Exercising then acts like a vibrant energy zone, deterring these fitness and wellness foes from settling in.

You don't just chisel your physique through consistency in your exercise routine; you also cultivate adaptability that acts as a protector against the invasion of factors that threaten your wellness and well-being. It's not just a training session; it's a heroic stance against the enemies of a healthy, vibrant life.

2. श्रमक्लमपिपासोष्णशीतादीनां सहिष्णुता। आरोग्यं चापि परमं व्यायामदुपजायते।।

- Chapter 6, Verse 16

Translation: The power to bear labor, exhaustion, guilt, thirst, cold (winter), heat etc. comes only through exercise and attainment of ultimate health i.e. health also comes from exercise.

Exercise is the key that unlocks the reservoir of endurance within us. The ability to withstand labor, exhaustion, guilt, thirst, cold, and heat is a testament to the resilience cultivated through regular physical activity.

Labor and exhaustion, often daunting challenges, become more manageable as exercise enhances stamina and endurance. The physical exertion becomes a training ground, preparing the body to tackle demanding tasks with greater fortitude.

Exercise also plays a pivotal role in managing guilt by providing a constructive outlet. The endorphins released during physical activity contribute to an improved mood, helping alleviate feelings of guilt and stress. It becomes a therapeutic process, not just for the body but also for the mind.

The adaptability to environmental factors like thirst, cold (winter), and heat is honed through the conditioning effect of exercise. The body becomes more adept at regulating temperature, staying hydrated, and navigating various climates, fostering a robust and adaptable physiology.

Exercise is the catalyst for the attainment of ultimate health. The physical benefits of a well-conditioned body extend to mental and emotional well-being. The power to endure and thrive in the face of life's challenges is a direct outcome of regular exercise, making it not just a means to health but a transformative journey toward a more resilient and adaptable self.



3. पुनर्वित्तं पुनर्मित्रं पुनर्भार्या पुनर्मही। एतत्सर्वं पुनर्लभ्यं न शरीरं पुनः पुनः॥

- Chapter 9, Verse 28

Translation: Everything in life can be regained- wife, kingdom, friend and wealth. The only thing that you can't ever regain is your body. Once your body / health is lost, it can never reach its fullness again. Therefore, it is important to take care of your body on a daily basis.

The long term complications of diabetes include heart stroke, nerve damage, brain damage, blindness and even death. Therefore, you should keep a regular tab on your sugar levels and immediately contact your doctor or health coach in case of emergencies.

The saying "Everything in life can be regained- wife, kingdom, friend, and wealth. The only thing that you can't ever regain is your body" underscores the irreplaceable nature of one's health. Once lost, the full restoration of health is often challenging, emphasizing the importance of daily care.

Maintaining good health involves proactive efforts in various aspects, and this sentiment is particularly relevant in the context of chronic conditions like diabetes. The long-term complications associated with diabetes, such as heart stroke, nerve damage, brain impairment, blindness, and mortality, underscore the critical need for vigilance.

Regular monitoring of blood sugar levels becomes a crucial aspect of managing diabetes. This practice allows for early detection of any deviations from the normal range, enabling timely intervention to prevent or manage complications. Immediate consultation with healthcare professionals or health coaches during emergencies is imperative, ensuring swift and appropriate responses to any health challenges that may arise.

The narrative highlights the preciousness of health and the irreversible consequences of neglecting it. By incorporating daily care routines and staying vigilant in managing chronic conditions, individuals can strive to safeguard their most invaluable possession—their health.

4. योगस्थः कुरु कर्माणि सङ्गं त्यक्त्वा धनञ्जय। सिद्ध्यसिद्ध्योः समो भूत्वा समत्वं योग उच्यते॥

- Chapter 2, Verse 48

Translation: You should be sincere in performing your everyday duties. You should abandon your attachment to success and failure. Such balance can be achieved through Yoga.



Yoga and diabetes are intricately related. It has been proven that Yoga can help in improving a person's diabetic condition. With certain meditative exercises, it can help in bringing down a person's stress levels which can in turn have a positive impact upon their sugar levels.

The emphasis on sincerity in daily duties and detachment from outcomes resonates with the fundamental principles of balance and mindfulness. This equilibrium is often pursued through practices like Yoga, where the journey itself takes precedence over fixating on success or failure.

Yoga's profound connection with diabetes unfolds as a captivating synergy. Scientific research substantiates the positive impact of incorporating Yoga into one's routine on diabetic conditions. Specific meditative exercises within Yoga act as powerful tools in reducing stress levels, subsequently exerting a positive influence on blood sugar regulation.

The meditative facet of Yoga involves cultivating mindfulness and conscious awareness. This deliberate focus creates a state of mental and emotional equilibrium. As stress diminishes through these practices, the body's response to insulin is potentially enhanced, contributing to improved metabolic health.

Yoga evolves beyond a physical exercise routine. It becomes a holistic approach encompassing not only bodily well-being but also mental and emotional harmony. By embracing the principles of Yoga, individuals can nurture a mindset that fosters sincerity, detachment from outcomes, and an overall balanced approach to life. This, in turn, has the potential to positively impact the management of conditions like diabetes, offering a comprehensive avenue towards holistic health and well-being.

5. व्यायाम कुर्वतो नित्य विरुद्धमपि भोजनम्। विदाधमविदग्धं वा निर्दोष परिपच्यते॥

- Chapter 6, Verse 16

Translation: When one exercises regularly, even food that may be contradictory or impure gets digested, whether it is overcooked or undercooked, it becomes free from impurities.

Regular exercise is akin to a digestive maestro orchestrating a symphony within the body, transcending the intricacies of food preparation. The notion that even contradictory or impure foods can be effectively processed through consistent exercise speaks to the transformative influence physical activity can wield over the body's digestive intricacies.

Exercise becomes a catalyst for an enhanced metabolism, acting as a facilitator for the efficient absorption, utilization, and elimination of nutrients. This means that regardless of whether food is overcooked or undercooked, a well-conditioned body through regular exercise adapts to become more proficient at breaking down and assimilating essential nutrients.



The idea that exercise renders food free from impurities aligns with the concept of a well-exercised body operating as a resilient and efficient system. Through regular physical activity, the digestive system receives vital support, aiding in the elimination of toxins and fostering a healthier gut environment.

The symbiotic relationship between regular exercise and digestive processes creates a harmonious interplay. This dynamic synergy not only mitigates the impact of dietary inconsistencies but also underscores the broader role of exercise in contributing to the overall well-being of the body's internal functions. It's a testament to the holistic benefits that a lifestyle incorporating physical activity can offer, extending beyond fitness to optimize the body's internal processes and promote long-term health.

6. न चैन सहसाक्रम्य जरा समधिरोहति । स्थिरीभवति मास च व्यायामाभिरतस्य च ॥

- Chapter 6, Verse 19

Translation: Nor does one who is moderate in eating, sleeping and recreation, & who is disciplined in their exercise, suffer from diseases, and the process of aging does not trouble them. They become steady in their spiritual practice & maintain strength in their body.

This philosophy champions a holistic lifestyle, emphasizing moderation, discipline, and holistic practices as the pillars of well-being.

Moderation in eating advocates for a balanced and nutritious diet, steering clear of excesses and deficiencies. By meeting the body's nutritional needs, this approach becomes a cornerstone in fostering a resilient and healthy system. It's not just about what one eats but the mindful and balanced approach to nourishment.

Similarly, moderation in sleeping and recreation recognizes the crucial role of a balanced lifestyle. Adequate and consistent sleep is viewed as essential for both physical and mental rejuvenation. Controlled recreation ensures that leisure activities contribute positively to overall well-being, promoting relaxation and stress reduction.

Disciplined exercise takes center stage as a powerful fortifier of the body. Regular physical activity is not just a routine; it's a commitment to cardiovascular health, muscle and bone strength, and overall fitness. This disciplined approach becomes a preventive measure against diseases and a promoter of a robust immune system.



The notion that such a balanced lifestyle leads to freedom from diseases underscores the preventive power of these habits. By maintaining harmony in various aspects of life, individuals can potentially reduce the likelihood of falling prey to various health issues, creating a shield of well-being.

Furthermore, the extension of this holistic approach to spiritual practice highlights the interconnectedness of physical and spiritual well-being. A balanced lifestyle doesn't only nurture the body but also supports mental and emotional resilience, contributing to a holistic sense of self.

This philosophy offers a prescription for well-being that goes beyond the physical realm. It advocates for a lifestyle that embraces moderation, discipline, and holistic practices. It's not just about avoiding diseases and aging concerns but fostering a balanced and resilient existence that encompasses both the physical and spiritual dimensions of life, ultimately leading to a harmonious and fulfilling life journey.

**7. अर्जुन उवाच- अयतिः श्रद्धयोपेतो योगाच्चलितमानसः।
अप्राप्य योगसंसिद्धिं कां गतिं कृष्ण गच्छति ॥**

- Chapter 6, Verse 37

Translation: Arjuna said: O Krishna! One who has faith in the path of Yoga but lacks self-discipline, and whose mind deviates from Yoga at the end, what fate does such a practitioner achieve, meaning, what destination does he attain, failing to reach the direct realization of the divine?

In the realm of physical education, Arjuna's contemplation on the fate of an undisciplined yogi offers a poignant analogy. The journey toward physical well-being mirrors the path of Yoga, demanding a harmonious blend of faith and discipline. Without unwavering commitment and consistent effort, individuals pursuing physical fitness may find themselves falling short of attaining their desired prowess or health objectives.

Much like the yogi whose mind deviates from the path of Yoga, a person without discipline in physical education risks veering away from the trajectory of optimal health. The disciplined approach serves as a crucial bridge between mere intentions and the tangible achievements one seeks. It is the daily commitment to structured routines, nutritional balance, and perseverance through challenges that ultimately propels individuals toward their fitness goals.

In both contexts, the lack of discipline can lead to missed opportunities for profound growth and realization. The undisciplined yogi may fail to achieve direct realization of the divine, just as an



individual neglecting the principles of discipline in physical education may fall short of unlocking their full physical potential.

Arjuna's inquiry resonates across disciplines, underscoring the universal importance of discipline as an indispensable companion on the journey toward self-realization, whether it be in the spiritual realm of Yoga or the physical pursuit of optimal health and fitness.

8. यं संन्यासमिति प्राहुर्योगं तं विद्धि पाण्डव । न ह्यसंन्यस्तसंकल्पो योगी भवति कश्चन ॥२॥

- Chapter 6, Verse 2

Translation: Hey Arjuna! Understand that one who is called a renunciant (sannyasi), the same person is a true yogi. Because one who does not renounce desires cannot be a yogi.

In the pursuit of physical education, embodying the mindset of a renunciant involves a profound commitment to letting go of detrimental desires and habits that undermine overall well-being. Similar to the yogic path where renunciation is central, individuals dedicated to physical fitness recognize the imperative of relinquishing sedentary lifestyles, excessive indulgence, and other unhealthy choices.

The renunciant approach in physical education transcends a mere denial of pleasures; it is a conscious decision to release attachments to habits that hinder progress. This might encompass bidding farewell to a sedentary lifestyle by embracing regular exercise, parting ways with excessive indulgence in unhealthy foods, and renouncing the inertia that impedes physical activity.

By shedding these hindrances, one lays the foundation for a disciplined and balanced approach to fitness. Discipline becomes the guiding principle, steering individuals away from distractions and towards a focused, goal-oriented fitness journey. The renunciant in physical education understands that true liberation lies in breaking free from habits that limit potential.

Just as a renunciant in the spiritual realm seeks a harmonious connection with the divine, a dedicated individual in physical education aspires to achieve a symbiotic relationship between the body and mind. This synergy is essential for optimizing performance, fostering endurance, and nurturing a holistic sense of well-being.

Adopting the mindset of a renunciant in physical education involves a deliberate and conscious effort to let go of counterproductive habits, paving the way for a transformative journey toward optimal health, performance, and a balanced integration of the physical and mental aspects of well-being.



9. भगवानुवाच- अनाश्रितः कर्मफलं कार्यं कर्म करोति यः। स संन्यासी च योगी च न निरग्रिर्न चाक्रियः ॥

- Chapter 6, Verse 1

Translation: The Supreme Divine said: One who performs actions that are appropriate without attachment to the fruits of the actions is a true renunciant (sannyasi) and a yogi. Mere renunciation of the fire sacrifices does not make one a true renunciant, and one who only renounces the actions is not a true yogi.

In the landscape of physical education, the Supreme Divine's counsel underscores a profound philosophy applicable to a holistic approach to fitness. A true renunciant and yogi in this context embodies a mindset that transcends the superficiality of specific exercises or fitness routines. It is about embracing the entirety of the fitness journey with unwavering dedication, emphasizing the significance of the process over fixating on immediate outcomes.

Mere renunciation of particular exercises or routines is insufficient in cultivating the essence of a genuine renunciant. The transformative power lies not in avoidance but in confronting physical challenges with a mindset detached from the craving for instantaneous results. The true yogi in physical education navigates the journey with a deep commitment, understanding that sustainable health and fitness emerge as natural byproducts of consistent, purposeful actions.

Conversely, one who merely renounces physical activities without a thoughtful approach isn't a true yogi. Authentic yogic practice in physical education isn't about avoidance but about engaging in appropriate actions with the right mindset. A genuine yogi comprehends the intrinsic value of a balanced exercise routine, recognizing that it contributes not only to physical fitness but also to overall well-being, encompassing mental and emotional facets.

In essence, this wisdom advocates for a mindful and purposeful engagement with physical activities. Being a true renunciant and yogi in physical education involves performing actions that align with your fitness goals while maintaining a healthy detachment from immediate results. This approach fosters a holistic and sustainable path to fitness, promoting not only physical health but also a harmonious integration of the body, mind, and spirit on the transformative journey of well-being.

10. योऽयं योगस्त्वया प्रोक्तः साम्येन मधुसूदन। एतस्याहं न पश्यामि चञ्चलत्वात्स्थितिं स्थिराम्॥

- Chapter 6, Verse 33

Translation: Arjuna said: O Madhusudana! The steady state of this Yoga that you have described, I do not see its constant presence due to the restlessness of the mind.

Arjuna's concern about the restlessness of the mind in maintaining a steady state of Yoga parallels challenges in physical education. The consistent practice of yoga, both mental and physical, faces hurdles when the mind is unsettled, hindering the achievement of a harmonious balance.

In the realm of physical education, maintaining a steady commitment to a fitness routine is akin to the steady state of Yoga. Arjuna's observation reflects the common struggle individuals face in adhering to exercise regimens due to the restless nature of the mind. Distractions, lack of motivation, or external pressures can disrupt the consistency needed for optimal physical well-being.

Addressing this challenge involves not only physical exercises but also cultivating mental discipline. Techniques such as mindfulness, goal-setting, and creating a supportive environment can help overcome the restlessness of the mind, fostering a more steadfast approach to physical education. Just as Arjuna seeks guidance to calm his mind for spiritual practice, individuals in physical education may benefit from strategies to attain a serene mental state, ensuring a more enduring commitment to their fitness journey.

11. यस्त्विन्द्रियाणि मनसा नियम्यारभतेऽर्जुन। कर्मेन्द्रियैः कर्मयोगमसक्तः स विशिष्यते॥

- Chapter 3, Verse 7

Translation: O Arjuna! The one who, with a mind free from attachment, controls the senses and engages in the practice of Karma Yoga (action without desire) through all the senses, is considered the best.

In the context of Physical Education, this guidance emphasizes a mindful and disciplined approach to exercise and overall well-being:

1. Mind Free from Attachment:

- Physical Education encourages individuals to engage in exercise with a mindset free from attachment to specific outcomes. Instead of fixating on achieving certain results, the focus is on the process of engaging in physical activities for overall health and fitness.



2. Control of the Senses:

- Controlling the senses in Physical Education involves being mindful and attentive during exercise. This includes listening to the body, understanding its limitations, and avoiding overexertion or neglecting signs of fatigue or injury.

3. Karma Yoga - Action without Desire:

- Applying the principle of Karma Yoga in Physical Education means performing exercises and activities without being solely driven by the desire for specific physical outcomes. It's about enjoying the process of movement and recognizing the intrinsic value of physical well-being.

4. Engaging in Physical Activity through All the Senses:

- Physical Education extends beyond conventional exercise routines. It includes activities that engage all the senses, promoting overall sensory well-being. This could involve activities like mindful walking, outdoor exercises, or sports that integrate various sensory experiences.

5. Considered the Best:

- In Physical Education, the individual who approaches exercise with a balanced and mindful perspective, free from attachment and desire for specific outcomes, is considered to be following the best approach. This individual is likely to experience holistic benefits, both physically and mentally.

This guidance aligns with the principles of mindfulness, moderation, and a holistic approach to physical well-being. It encourages individuals to enjoy the process of engaging in physical activities, fostering a positive and sustainable relationship with exercise and promoting overall health.

Conclusion

The finding of ancient Indian history concludes that the sports culture has existed in India since the time of Mahabharata and Ramayana, as it is also mentioned in our Vedas. This research work devours the misconception that the origin of sports and physical education came into being in ancient Greece. As suggested by the slokas of Bhagavad Gita which are mentioned in this paper, it is evident that these concepts of physical education have been deeply rooted in the ancient Indian knowledge system just waiting to be explored. These concepts of fitness, wellness and well-being are the heritage of our ancient history which needs to be valued and taken care of. Moreover, the importance of fitness, wellness and well-being in Harappan/Indus valley civilization comes up to today's modern sports through various ancient periods like the Vedic period, early Hindu period (Vedic Literatures - Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranas, Buddhism,



and Jainism), later Hindu period and medieval period. It is correct to say that ancient Indian history is rich with the knowledge of the concepts of fitness, wellness and well-being. Further research by scholars on these evidences from ancient history, especially Hindu mythology can bring us closer to finding more such relative concepts which would not only help us with the research but would also make it comparatively easier to understand the modern day concepts of the same.

References

- Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 2, Verse 70
- Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 6, Verse 16
- Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 9, Verse 28
- Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 2, Verse 48
- Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 6, Verse 19
- Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 6, Verse 37
- Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 6, Verse 2
- Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 6, Verse 1
- Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 6, Verse 33
- Bhagavad Gita, Chapter 3, Verse 7