



MIND-BODY MEDICINE

# Yoga meets positive psychology: Examining the integration of hedonic (gratitude) and eudaimonic (meaning) wellbeing in relation to the extent of yoga practice



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**Summary** The present study aims to explore the existence of a relationship between the extent of yoga practice and two dimensions of psychological wellbeing: meaning in life and gratitude. Both of the variables are positive psychology constructs; there is theoretical affinity and empirical evidence that they are related to overall psychological wellbeing. One hundred and twenty four participants aged 18 years and above, with yoga experience ranging from none to over six years, responded to a number of scales. The extent of yoga practice was measured by the number of years during which individuals practiced yoga at least two times a week. Participants responded to the following scales: MLQ (Meaning in Life Questionnaire) and GQ-6 (Gratitude Questionnaire). This study hypothesised that the number of years practicing yoga would be positively correlated to the score obtained on the aforementioned scales. Positive correlations were identified between the extent of yoga practice and meaning in life and gratitude. Important implications regarding the contribution of yoga to both hedonic and Eudaimonic happiness are discussed.

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## Introduction

### Yoga and overall psychological wellbeing

Yoga, which has its roots 5000 years ago in India (De-Michelis, 2005), has gone through several phases throughout the ages, emphasising different aspects such as finding ultimate reality, individual and societal

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psychological enhancement, and learning how to isolate the past, the present, and future. Yoga is increasingly practiced in the West as a way of cultivating aspects of overall psychological wellbeing, which constitutes a focal interest in positive psychology (Singleton, 2010). Wellbeing functions as a general term encompassing optimal functioning, self-actualisation, and flourishing; it refers to both the desirable condition of our existence and the end state of our quest (Ivtzan et al., 2013; Wong, 2011).

In general, modern yoga encapsulates many yoga principles which allow one to accept change in life; this includes elements such as: Yama (moral code), Niyama (self-discipline), Asanas (postures or poses), Pranayama (mindfulness of breathing), Pratyahara (detachment from senses), Dharana (concentration), Dhyana (meditation or positive, mindful focus on the present), Savasana (state of rest) and Samadhi (ecstasy) (Bhavanani, 2011; Iyengar, 2000). Some of those elements are related to concepts that have received theoretical and research attention in positive psychology. For example Yama and Niyama are characterised by self-control, self-discipline and self-awareness and could be viewed as related to the positive psychology concept of flow, i.e., of being entirely engaged and involved in the moment. Although in flow one loses the sense of oneself, the individual remains fully aware of the moment and maintains great levels of control in order to accomplish a task (Csíkszentmihályi, 2008). Although Gannon and Life (2002) claim that contemporary yoga attempts to join the modern world without destroying the ancient teachings of experiencing union with the divine self, others disagree. Singleton (2010), for example, suggests that modern yoga is not so much influenced by the original Indian tradition but rather by Indian nationalism, European bodybuilding, and the women's gymnastics movement in Europe and America. As a result, according to Singleton (2010), yoga practice in the West is primarily limited to postural yoga (Asanas) even though that has never been the primary feature of Indian yoga.

During yoga practice, individuals are able to increase awareness and attention and are led to a mindful and meditative state (Germer et al., 2005; Hart et al., in press; Murphy and Donovan, 1997; Walsh, 1999). Yoga has been reported to lead to an increase in empathy (Walsh, 2001) and to connect awareness with higher levels of compassion, gratitude, and respect toward both human and nonhuman relationships, ideas and beliefs (Radford, 2000). Similarly to positive psychology, there is a focus on attempting to increase mindfulness while enhancing wellbeing and awareness of self and environment, along with disciplining the mind and emotions (Levine, 2000).

It was this close relationship identified between the aims and initial reports of findings on the commonalities between yoga and positive psychology that lead to the idea of further exploring this relationship by focussing on two specific aspects of overall psychological wellbeing: meaning in life and gratitude.

### Specific aspects of overall psychological wellbeing

According to Straume and Vittersø (2012), overall psychological wellbeing is thought to consist of both hedonic and

eudaimonic aspects. Eudaimonic aspects focus on concepts such as purpose in life, growth, and meaning, while hedonia, which is based upon SWB (Subjective Wellbeing), consists of satisfaction in life and high positive affect combined with low negative affect. To examine both aspects of wellbeing, the current study attempted to tackle one eudaimonic based wellbeing variable (meaning) and one hedonic based wellbeing variable (gratitude).

Research findings have offered support for the claim that physical exercise contributes to the promotion of mental health and wellbeing (Penedo and Dahn, 2005). However, the relationship between psychological benefits and physical exercise appears to be complex, and the primary mechanisms remain poorly understood (Scully et al., 1998). It appears reasonable to hypothesise that engaging in practices such as yoga, which are not limited to physical exercise but are embedded in a spiritual system (Singleton, 2010), will have a positive relationship with overall psychological wellbeing. Spirituality is strongly related to eudaimonic wellbeing and is considered one of its most significant dimensions. Spirituality has been shown to promote psychological wellbeing (Ivtzan et al., 2011), and therefore it naturally follows that a spiritual practice such as yoga, which combines the physical and theoretical aspects of the spiritual practice, would also be beneficial to wellbeing. Meaning is considered a central building block in spiritual experience (Wong, 2012) and, therefore, as spirituality is strongly linked to yoga, and meaning is so central to spirituality, meaning has been a natural choice for the examination of eudaimonia in yoga.

Frankl (1965) claimed that life is deeply meaningful and that every individual has a specific purpose in this life, reflecting his or her personal values. Emmons (2003) and Ryff and Singer (1998) have argued that a meaningful life is a purposeful one which is goal oriented and enhances personal growth. Purpose in life is a goal-centered approach that provides one with meaning (Reker et al., 1987). Purpose works as a guide that organises one's life, and a purposeful life allows positive transformation (McKnight and Kashdan, 2009). Meaning has several sources, the combination of which is unique for each individual (Wong, 1998); some scholars argue that one's source of meaning stems from action and involvement in activities such as work, giving, and receiving love (Frankl, 1963), while others claim that meaning is derived from close relationships, spirituality, and nature (Emmons, 2003; Fegg et al., 2007). Baumeister and Vohs (2002) claim that finding meaning works like a puzzle of connections in our minds. The pieces of this puzzle are the self, external world, and balance these can strike (Heine et al., 2006). Those elements of self, others, and the universe are dimensions addressed by yoga. As Eggleston (2009) has succinctly stated, "yoga is the recognition of the divine within the self, outside of the self, and the connection between the self and others outside the self" (p.11). Therefore, it appears that research findings showing that regular practice of yoga is related to an increase of meaning in life and wellbeing (Stebbins, 2003; Heo, 2007), should be understood within this context.

Following that, it is hypothesised that a positive correlation exists between extent of yoga practice and the presence of meaning in one's life. This hypothesis is also

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