



Holistic Yoga Practices for Physical, Mental, and Spiritual Well-Being

Dr. Savita Saklani Seth

Yogacharya

M/s Pran Yoga

Eros Sampooranam

Bisrakh,- Gautam Buddha Nagar

U.P., India- 201306

Orcid id <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-1333-6849>



<http://www.gjirp.org/> || Vol. 2 No. 3 (2026): August Issue

Date of Submission: 10-07-2026

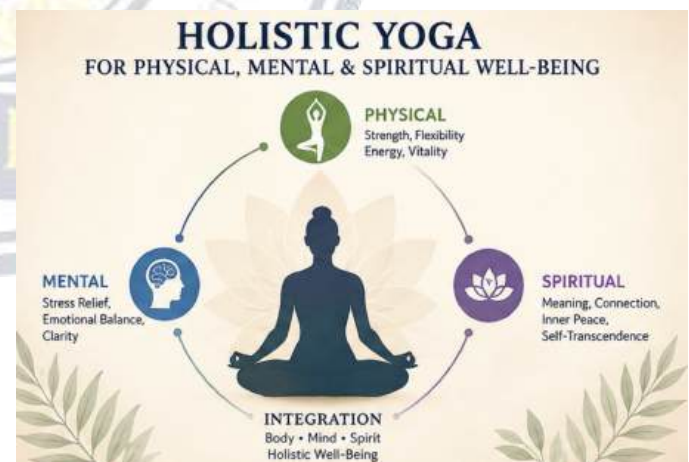
Date of Acceptance: 24-07-2026

Date of Publication: 10-08-2026

Abstract— Yoga, an ancient Indian discipline rooted in physical postures, controlled breathing, and meditative absorption, has increasingly entered mainstream health discourse as a low-cost, low-risk intervention capable of addressing the physical, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of human well-being simultaneously. While a substantial body of biomedical literature documents yoga's benefits for musculoskeletal health, cardiovascular function, and stress physiology, its integrative or "holistic" character, the way asana, pranayama, and dhyana work together to produce benefits across bodily, mental, and spiritual domains, remains comparatively underexamined in a single unified framework. This paper synthesizes peer-reviewed evidence on the physical, mental, and spiritual outcomes of yoga practice, drawing on systematic reviews and empirical studies published between 2010 and 2025. The review finds converging evidence that regular yoga practice improves flexibility, strength, and autonomic regulation; reduces stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms; and is meaningfully associated with indicators of spiritual well-being such as meaning, connectedness, and self-transcendence. The paper further identifies methodological gaps, including inconsistent operationalization of "yoga" across trials and a relative neglect of the spiritual dimension compared to the physical and psychological ones, and proposes directions for future holistic, mechanism-oriented research. The paper concludes that yoga's value lies precisely in its integrative structure, and that health and educational institutions

should design interventions that deliberately engage all three dimensions rather than isolating yoga as mere physical exercise.

Keywords— Yoga, holistic health, mind-body practice, spirituality, stress reduction, well-being, mental health, pranayama, meditation



INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organization's long-standing definition of health as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-



being, and not merely the absence of disease, has increasingly been extended by scholars and practitioners to include a spiritual dimension as well. Within this broadened understanding, yoga occupies a distinctive position among complementary and integrative health practices because it was never conceived, in its classical Indian formulations, as a purely physical regimen. Traditional yoga systems combine asana (postural practice), pranayama (breath regulation), pratyahara (sensory withdrawal), dharana (concentration), and dhyana (meditative absorption) within a single graduated framework aimed at psychophysical integration and self-realization.

In contemporary Western contexts, however, yoga is frequently reduced to a form of physical exercise or stretching, with its philosophical and spiritual dimensions either omitted or treated as an optional add-on. Scholars have noted that yoga classes and research interventions differ considerably in how much philosophical or spiritual content they retain, and that this variability complicates efforts to understand what yoga, taken as a whole system, actually contributes to well-being. At the same time, a growing volume of clinical and psychological research demonstrates that yoga interventions, even those with a predominantly physical emphasis, produce measurable benefits for stress physiology, mood, cognitive function, and subjective spiritual experience.



This paper takes the position that yoga's value for well-being cannot be fully understood by examining its physical, mental, and spiritual effects in isolation. Instead, these three domains interact and reinforce one another: postural practice regulates the autonomic nervous system, which in turn supports emotional regulation; breathwork calms mental chatter, creating conditions conducive to reflective and spiritual experience; and a sense of meaning or connectedness, cultivated through consistent practice, appears to support

adherence and long-term physical benefit. The purpose of this paper is therefore threefold: first, to review the empirical evidence on yoga's effects across the physical, mental, and spiritual domains; second, to identify the research gaps that limit a genuinely holistic understanding of yoga; and third, to propose a research and practice agenda for treating yoga as an integrated rather than compartmentalized health intervention.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Physical Health Outcomes

A substantial body of comparative research has evaluated yoga alongside conventional exercise regimens. Ross and Thomas conducted a scholarly review of studies comparing yoga and exercise across a range of health outcomes and conditions, concluding that yoga benefits physical and mental health partly through down-regulation of the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis and the sympathetic nervous system, and that in both healthy and diseased populations, yoga performed as well as, or better than, conventional exercise on several outcome measures (Ross & Thomas, 2010). This finding is significant because it reframes yoga not simply as a gentler alternative to aerobic exercise but as a distinct physiological pathway to health, one that operates through stress-axis regulation rather than through cardiovascular exertion alone.

Complementing this comparative work, Govindaraj and colleagues reviewed the physiological and psychological effects of yoga relative to physical exercise, examining outcomes such as cardiorespiratory fitness, musculoskeletal strength, and markers of physiological stress (Govindaraj et al., 2016). Their review reinforces the view that yoga's postural and breathing components produce benefits that overlap with, but are not identical to, those produced by conventional exercise, particularly with respect to autonomic and endocrine regulation.

Woodyard's widely cited review of the therapeutic effects of yoga catalogued benefits including enhanced muscular strength and flexibility, improved respiratory and cardiovascular function, and better sleep quality, while explicitly defining therapeutic yoga as an approach that can reduce structural, physiological, emotional, and spiritual pain (Woodyard, 2011). The inclusion of "spiritual pain" within a definition of therapeutic yoga is itself notable, since it signals that even physically oriented reviews recognize yoga's effects as extending beyond the musculoskeletal system.

Mental Health Outcomes

The psychological literature on yoga is considerably larger than the purely physiological literature, reflecting sustained scientific interest in yoga as a stress-management and mental health tool. A 2025 systematic review of randomized controlled trials examined yoga interventions among nursing professionals and students, a population known for high occupational stress, and found consistent evidence that yoga reduced stress, anxiety, burnout, and depressive symptoms across the fourteen RCTs reviewed, with intervention protocols ranging from ten minutes to one hour in duration and delivered between one and five times weekly (Arya et al., 2025). The review's authors noted that yoga's holistic approach, integrating physical, mental, and spiritual elements, made it a particularly suitable tool for populations facing chronic occupational stress.

A related systematic review examined how yoga interventions for mental health and well-being are described and operationalized in the research literature between 2013 and 2024, finding that researchers frequently characterize yoga using language reflecting "mind-body-spirit" or "holistic health" framings, distinct from language describing yoga as pure physical fitness (Frazier et al., 2025). This qualitative synthesis is important because it demonstrates that the holistic conceptualization of yoga is not merely a lay or traditional framing but is actively used within the scientific literature itself, even though operational definitions remain inconsistent across trials.

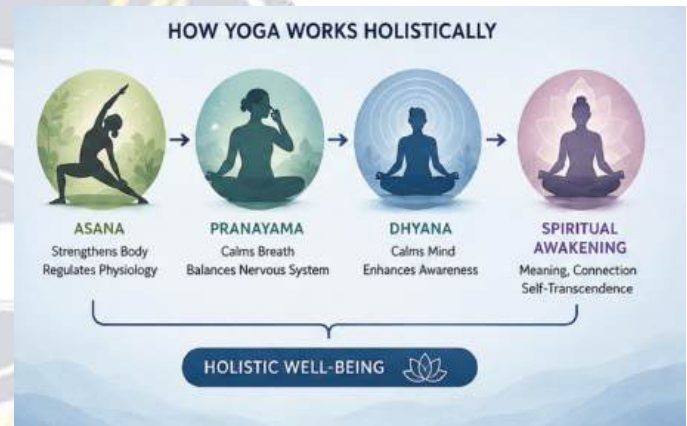
Yoga's mental health benefits have also been studied in specific vulnerable populations. A systematic review of postnatal yoga interventions found that yoga practice during the postpartum period was associated with improvements in maternal mental health and well-being, addressing a period of heightened psychological vulnerability for new mothers (Munns et al., 2024). Similarly, a systematic review focused on helping-profession health workers and students found that yoga interventions showed promise for preventing and reducing mental and physical health difficulties among this high-risk occupational group (Ciezar-Andersen et al., 2021).

Spiritual Well-Being Outcomes

Compared to the physical and psychological literatures, empirical research on yoga's spiritual dimension remains comparatively underdeveloped, a gap explicitly identified by Csala, Springinsfeld, and Kőteles in their systematic review of the relationship between yoga and spirituality. Reviewing thirty empirical studies that met PRISMA-guided inclusion criteria, the authors found that yoga practice was positively associated with multiple aspects of spirituality, including spiritual

aspirations, a search for insight or wisdom, an integrative worldview, a sense of meaning and peace, faith, hope, and compassion (Csala et al., 2021). Their review further noted that regular, sustained practice appeared essential for these spiritual benefits to emerge, and that practitioners in Western contexts often begin practicing yoga for physical reasons but report increasing spiritual motivation as their practice matures.

This progression, from physically motivated practice toward spiritually meaningful engagement, is one of the more theoretically interesting findings in the yoga literature, because it suggests that the physical and spiritual dimensions of yoga are not parallel, independent benefits but are causally or developmentally linked: sustained bodily practice appears to function as a gateway to spiritual experience for many practitioners, even among those who did not initially seek it.



Synthesis Across Domains

Taken together, the reviewed literature supports three converging conclusions. First, yoga produces measurable physical benefits, including improved flexibility, strength, cardiorespiratory function, and autonomic regulation, that in several comparative studies match or exceed those produced by conventional exercise (Ross & Thomas, 2010; Govindaraj et al., 2016). Second, yoga produces reliable improvements in psychological indicators such as stress, anxiety, burnout, and depressive symptoms, with effects documented across diverse populations including nursing professionals, postnatal women, and other health-profession workers (Arya et al., 2025; Ciezar-Andersen et al., 2021; Munns et al., 2024). Third, yoga is meaningfully associated with spiritual well-being, though this dimension has received comparatively less empirical attention and is more difficult to operationalize using standard biomedical outcome measures (Csala et al., 2021). Across all

three domains, researchers converge on the observation that yoga's benefits are best understood holistically rather than as the sum of isolated physical, psychological, and spiritual effects (Frazier et al., 2025; Woodyard, 2011).

Research Gap

Despite the breadth of literature reviewed above, several gaps limit a fully integrated understanding of yoga's holistic effects. First, there is no standardized operational definition of "yoga" across trials; interventions vary enormously in the proportion of postural, breathing, and meditative content they include, making cross-study comparison difficult (Frazier et al., 2025). Second, the spiritual dimension of yoga remains comparatively understudied relative to its physical and psychological counterparts, with far fewer controlled empirical studies addressing spiritual outcomes explicitly (Csala et al., 2021). Third, few studies examine the interaction effects among the three domains, for instance, whether physical improvements mediate psychological benefits, or whether spiritual engagement moderates adherence and long-term outcomes. Fourth, much of the existing research relies on relatively short intervention periods and modest sample sizes, limiting the strength of causal claims about long-term holistic benefit. This paper addresses these gaps by synthesizing findings across all three domains within a single integrative framework and by explicitly foregrounding the interdependence of physical, mental, and spiritual outcomes rather than treating them as separate literatures.



OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The present study is guided by the following objectives:

- To examine and synthesize existing empirical evidence on the physical health benefits of regular yoga practice.
- To examine and synthesize existing empirical evidence on the mental health benefits of yoga, including its effects on stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout.
- To examine the comparatively underexplored relationship between yoga practice and spiritual well-being.
- To identify the conceptual and methodological gaps that limit an integrated, holistic understanding of yoga's effects.
- To propose directions for future research and practice that treat yoga's physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions as interdependent rather than isolated.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a narrative and integrative literature review methodology rather than a formal systematic review or meta-analysis, given its aim of synthesizing findings across three distinct but interrelated domains of well-being. Literature was identified through targeted searches of peer-reviewed academic databases and journals, including the International Journal of Yoga, Frontiers in Psychology, the Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine, the International Review of Psychiatry, BMC Complementary Medicine and Therapies, Complementary Therapies in Medicine, and Heliyon. Search terms included combinations of "yoga," "holistic health," "physical health," "mental health," "spirituality," "well-being," and "systematic review." Priority was given to systematic reviews, meta-analyses, and empirical studies published in indexed, peer-reviewed journals with verifiable digital object identifiers (DOIs), to ensure that all cited findings could be independently traced and confirmed.

Inclusion criteria required that studies address at least one of the three focal domains, physical, mental, or spiritual well-being, in relation to yoga practice, and that they be published in English-language, peer-reviewed academic sources. Studies were excluded if they could not be verified against an indexed academic source, if they relied solely on anecdotal or non-peer-reviewed material, or if they addressed yoga only tangentially without reporting well-being outcomes. Given the qualitative and integrative nature of this review, no formal risk-of-bias assessment or meta-analytic pooling of effect sizes was undertaken; rather, findings were thematically organized under the three domains of interest and then synthesized to identify convergences, divergences, and gaps across the literature.

DISCUSSION

The literature reviewed in this paper suggests that yoga's holistic character is not merely a philosophical claim inherited from its traditional Indian origins but is increasingly supported by contemporary empirical research spanning physiology, psychology, and the study of spirituality. The physical evidence indicates that yoga operates through mechanisms distinct from, though overlapping with, conventional exercise, particularly through down-regulation of stress-related physiological systems (Ross & Thomas, 2010). This physiological pathway plausibly explains why yoga interventions so consistently produce psychological benefits as well: a nervous system that is less chronically activated by stress hormones is, unsurprisingly, associated with reduced anxiety, improved mood, and better sleep, all of which have been documented across multiple populations (Arya et al., 2025; Cieszar-Andersen et al., 2021; Munns et al., 2024).

The relationship between physical and spiritual outcomes is less mechanistically clear but is nonetheless empirically supported. The finding that spiritual motivation for practicing yoga tends to increase over time, even among practitioners who began for physical reasons (Csala et al., 2021), suggests that sustained embodied practice may itself cultivate the reflective and self-transcendent states associated with spirituality, independent of whether a given yoga class explicitly incorporates philosophical instruction. This has practical implications for how yoga is taught and studied: interventions that strip yoga down to a purely physical exercise routine may inadvertently forgo one of its more distinctive and durable benefits, since spiritual engagement appears to develop through consistency of practice rather than through explicit doctrinal content alone.

At the same time, the comparative neglect of spirituality within the broader yoga research literature, relative to the physical and psychological domains, reflects a structural bias in how health research is funded and published. Spirituality is harder to operationalize using standard biomedical instruments, and outcomes such as "a sense of meaning" or "self-transcendence" do not map neatly onto the randomized controlled trial paradigms that dominate physical and psychological yoga research. This asymmetry means that the existing evidence base, while substantial, is unevenly distributed across the three domains this paper set out to examine, and conclusions about yoga's spiritual benefits should be treated as suggestive rather than as firmly established at the same level of certainty as its physical and psychological benefits.

The inconsistency in how "yoga" itself is defined and operationalized across studies further complicates synthesis. Reviews have noted considerable variation in session duration, frequency, and the relative emphasis placed on postures, breathing, and meditation (Arya et al., 2025; Frazier et al., 2025). This variability is not merely a methodological inconvenience; it reflects a deeper conceptual question about what counts as "yoga" in the first place, and whether interventions that omit meditative or philosophical content should be expected to produce the same holistic benefits as those that retain them.

FINDINGS

Drawing together the reviewed literature, several key findings emerge. Yoga produces reliable, measurable improvements in physical health indicators including flexibility, muscular strength, and cardiorespiratory and autonomic function, with several comparative studies suggesting these benefits are comparable to or exceed those of conventional exercise. Yoga also produces consistent reductions in psychological distress, including stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout, across diverse populations such as nursing professionals, postnatal women, and other health-profession workers. Yoga practice is positively associated with multiple dimensions of spiritual well-being, including meaning, connectedness, compassion, and self-transcendence, although this relationship has been studied far less extensively than the physical and psychological domains. The physical, mental, and spiritual benefits of yoga appear to be interdependent rather than separate, with physiological regulation plausibly supporting psychological benefit, and sustained embodied practice plausibly supporting the emergence of spiritual engagement over time. Finally, inconsistent definitions and operationalizations of yoga across the research literature represent a significant barrier to drawing firm, generalizable conclusions about its holistic effects, underscoring the need for greater standardization in future research designs.

CONCLUSION

This paper set out to examine yoga's contribution to physical, mental, and spiritual well-being as an integrated rather than fragmented phenomenon. The reviewed evidence indicates that yoga is a genuinely holistic practice in the sense that its benefits are not confined to any single domain of human experience; rather, physiological regulation, psychological resilience, and spiritual meaning appear to reinforce one another over the course of sustained practice. This has significant implications for how yoga is taught, studied, and integrated into health,



educational, and organizational settings. Reducing yoga to a purely physical fitness regimen, as is common in many Western commercial and clinical contexts, risks foregoing the psychological and spiritual benefits that appear to depend on sustained, holistically framed engagement. Conversely, treating yoga purely as a spiritual or philosophical practice risks underutilizing its well-documented physiological and clinical benefits. A genuinely holistic approach to yoga, in both research and practice, requires attending to all three dimensions simultaneously, designing interventions, and conducting studies, that recognize the body, mind, and spirit as interconnected rather than separable domains of human well-being.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE SCOPE

As a narrative rather than systematic review, this paper does not employ formal meta-analytic techniques or exhaustive database searching protocols, and its conclusions should be read as a synthesis of representative peer-reviewed evidence rather than an exhaustive account of the entire yoga research literature. The relative scarcity of rigorously controlled studies on yoga's spiritual dimension, compared to its physical and psychological dimensions, means that conclusions in that domain remain more tentative. Future research should prioritize the development of standardized protocols for describing and operationalizing yoga interventions, so that findings across studies can be more reliably compared. Longitudinal studies examining whether physical practice mediates or precedes spiritual engagement would help clarify the developmental relationship between these domains. Additionally, future research would benefit from mixed-methods designs that combine physiological measurement with validated spiritual well-being instruments,

allowing researchers to examine the interdependence of physical, psychological, and spiritual outcomes within a single study design rather than across separate literatures.

REFERENCES

1. Arya, R. G., Srivastava, D., Divya, B. R., Madhu, & Bhargav, H. (2025). A systematic review of yoga interventions on the mental health of nursing professionals and students. *International Journal of Yoga*, 18(1), 13–26. https://doi.org/10.4103/ijoy.ijoy_195_24
2. Cieszar-Andersen, S. D., Hayden, K. A., & King-Shier, K. M. (2021). A systematic review of yoga interventions for helping health professionals and students. *Complementary Therapies in Medicine*, 58, 102704. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ctim.2021.102704>
3. Csala, B., Springinsfeld, C. M., & Köteles, F. (2021). The relationship between yoga and spirituality: A systematic review of empirical research. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 12, 695939. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.695939>
4. Frazier, M. C., Harden, S. M., Barley, K. S., David, D. E., Guillen, M. Z., Olsen, D. E., Markley, K. M., & Pullin, M. J. (2025). How yoga interventions are operationalized and reported in the context of mental health and wellbeing RCTs: A systematic review and qualitative synthesis. *BMC Complementary Medicine and Therapies*. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12906-025-05162-9>
5. Govindaraj, R., Karmani, S., Varambally, S., & Gangadhar, B. N. (2016). Yoga and physical exercise – a review and comparison. *International Review of Psychiatry*, 28(3), 242–253. <https://doi.org/10.3109/09540261.2016.1160878>
6. Munns, L., Spark, N., Crossland, A., & Preston, C. (2024). The effects of yoga-based interventions on postnatal mental health and well-being: A systematic review. *Heliyon*, 10(3), e25455.
7. Ross, A., & Thomas, S. (2010). The health benefits of yoga and exercise: A review of comparison studies. *Journal of Alternative and Complementary Medicine*, 16(1), 3–12. <https://doi.org/10.1089/acm.2009.0044>
8. Woodyard, C. (2011). Exploring the therapeutic effects of yoga and its ability to increase quality of life. *International Journal of Yoga*, 4(2), 49–54. <https://doi.org/10.4103/0973-6131.85485>

