

# Interview with Dr H.R. Nagendra, Chancellor, Swami Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana (S-VYASA)

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## Abstract

Health and wellness have become key considerations in human resource management in the context of stressful world of work in a highly globalized, technology-intensive and 24/7 work environment. Holistic development through Yoga, a ‘science of body, mind, consciousness and soul’, has been a part of the Indian culture for thousands of years, and the popularity of yoga as a means of physical and psychological well-being has been recently globally recognized with the United Nations (UN) declaring International Day of Yoga on 21 June 2015. According to Harvard Medical School, “available reviews of a wide range of yoga practices suggest they can reduce the impact of exaggerated stress responses and may be helpful for both anxiety and depression” (HMS (2015). *Yoga for anxiety and depression*. Boston: Harvard Health Publications, Harvard Medical School).

It is in this context that Swami Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana (S-VYASA) founded and headed by its current Chancellor Dr H. R. Nagendra started using Yoga for wellness not only for better health but also for the societal well-being. Over the years, S-VYASA has been substantiating the scientific validation of Yoga through Research at S-VYASA, which has set up a Centre of Advanced Research (CAR) in Yoga and Neurophysiology accredited by the Indian Council of Medical Research (ICMR). S-VYASA is also supported by Yoga Therapy Research health Home with a 250-bed in-patient treatment facility called Arogyadhama run by VYASA. This is essentially envisioned to prevent and treat modern NCDs, long-term rehabilitation and to promote positive health. More details of S-VYASA can be found at <http://svyasa.edu.in/>

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Dr H. R. Nagendra, the current Chancellor of S-VYASA, holds a PhD in Mechanical Engineering from the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), Bangalore where he served as a faculty in the Department of Mechanical Engineering. He later served as a Post-Doctoral Research Fellow at the University of British Columbia, Canada; a Post-Doctoral Research Associate at NASA Marshall Space Flight Center, USA; Consultant to Engineering Science Laboratory, Harvard University, USA, followed by a Visiting Staff at Imperial College of Science and Technology, London.

He has also served at Vivekananda Kendra, a service mission as a whole-time worker; Honorary Director of Training Centre, Kanyakumari; All India Secretary, Yoga Shiksha Vibhag, Vivekanand Kendra, Kanyakumari; Secretary, Vivekananda Kendra Yoga Therapy & Research Committee (VK YOGAS) and All India Vice-President of Vivekananda Kendra, Kanyakumari. From 1986 to 2000, he was the Secretary of Vivekananda Kendra Yoga Research Foundation, Bangalore, and the Director of Indian Yoga Institute, Prashanti Kutiram. From 2000 to the present, he has been serving as the President, Swami Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana, Bangalore. Between 2002 and 2013, he served as the Vice-Chancellor of Swami Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana, Yoga University in Bangalore. He is currently the Chancellor of S-VYASA, a deemed university. In addition to having published 30 research articles in engineering, Dr Nagendra has authored 110 articles and co-authored 35 books on Yoga. He has also guided 20 PhD students.

In this interview, Dr Nagendra shares the origin and history of S-VYASA and its contribution to the health and well-being of millions of people in India, South Asian countries and beyond. He also describes how S-VYASA has systematically worked in the area of capability building and institution building in health and wellness, specifically in critical areas of Stop Diabetes Movement (SDM), Integrated Medicine, World Yoga Day and the like.

### **Please give a brief overview of your organization and how it has evolved over the years**

Based on the teachings of Swami Vivekananda, our organization Vivekananda Yoga Anusandhana Samsthana (VYASA) was set up in 1986. Swami Vivekananda had said that Yoga could become a socially relevant science by combining the best of the East with the best of the West. Best of the East is the holistic yogic perspective, knowledge based and practical dimensions contained in our Upanishads and Vedic lore. The West focuses on the modern scientific research. So we call our organization as a Yoga Research Organization. The organization has grown from strength to strength with our yoga courses catering to general public, corporate and treating modern NCDs.

The first camp on Asthma in Bangalore with nearly 250 persons was a big success which paved way for a long-term research in yoga and bronchial asthma. Nearly five years of followup of these patients brought our Yoga Research for Bronchial Asthma: A Controlled Study to get published in the *British Medical Journal* and also in the *Journal of Asthma* in 1986. This opened up the organization

to the world and people started looking at the integrated approach of yoga for various ailments. In 1991, the GAIA Publisher published our book *Yoga for Common Ailments* in which we elaborated Yoga for 18 common ailments using *integrated approach of yoga therapy*. This book was launched in London, New York and Sydney simultaneously, and was a sellout. It was translated into six European languages and became an authentic textbook for all practicing yoga therapists.

People slowly started recognizing the usefulness of yoga for modern ailments and for the promotion of positive health. The research collaboration with the University of California, San Francisco, on pre-diabetic and HIV, MD Anderson Cancer Center on breast cancer and White Memorial Hospital in LA on irritable bowel syndrome (IBS) brought us world's attention. A large number of research articles (nearly 400) have made VYASA a standout among thousands of yoga institutes in the world. The establishment of S-VYASA, a full-fledged yoga university in India brought yoga to a higher education level by training a large number of students at the bachelor, masters and doctorate levels.

### **What is the contribution of your University in the field of spirituality based holistic education?**

According to Swami Vivekananda, "Education is the manifestation of the perfection already in man." The objective of education should be not merely bread earning but should also be man making and nation building. It should develop total personality development at the physical, mental, emotional and intellectual levels with a spiritual basis. With these set of objectives, in 1976, we started introducing, developing and applying yoga in the field of education at the primary, secondary and high school levels in Arunachal Pradesh, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, etc. At the higher education level, the government asked us to introduce yoga in eight university campuses based on our success in building wonderful students and conducting systematic research programmes in the school education system. These free offering of yoga classes in these campuses to students, faculty and their families proved a great success all over the country. Yoga departments were started in various universities under the auspices of United Grants Commission, India.

In 2002, we (S-VYASA) were accorded the deemed university status and the challenges in human resource development grew. So we had to develop new syllabus on every subject containing the latest knowledge based on the West and associated with that we had to incorporate the inputs of Vedic and Upanishadic lore of India. Over 5–6 years, we were able to bring about the syllabus on modern lines to be incorporated in the university curriculum before we started programmes in S-VYASA in 2003.

### **How integral is the human resource development strategy to the overall strategy of your Institution? How is it exactly operationalized?**

While we developed the syllabus for the students, the faculty development also has to be geared up along with syllabi at all levels as a part of our ongoing human resource development (HRD). Fortunately, we had help from several visionary staff who were able to bring these to fruition.

As the student enrolments started picking up, we were able to evolve the faculty by systematic training to operationalize the university process. So we installed, trained and developed *Peethams* and Chairs for each of the five divisions in our university. With the Division of Yoga and Spirituality, we have Swami Dayananda Saraswati, the topmost spiritual celebrity in the field of Vedanta, to head the Jnana Yoga Peetham. For Bhakti Yoga, we have Professor Prema Panduranga as Peetadhipati. For Raja Yoga Peetham, we have 83 years old Swami Prajnaranya coming from the lineage of Ramana Maharshi, the great Pracharak (Master). For the division of Yoga and Physical Science, we have Professor E. C. G. Sudarshan of the highest repute in the field of modern physics from the University of Austin, Texas. In the Humanities, we have Dr Balamurali Krishna, the music veteran of our country to guide us.

These great spiritual/thought leaders are the role models who inspire the faculty to raise the standards of teaching to the highest level. Furthermore, continuous training on a daily basis, for example, *Maitri Milan* (community gettogether) in the morning, weekly faculty training programmes and various other developmental means help faculty members to upgrade their skills and strengthen their commitment along with a better communication system.

### **How do you manage sufficient corporate oversight from your headquarters in Bangalore and yet provide autonomy to operational units?**

Prashanti Kutiram, the residential campus of S-VYASA, provides an opportunity for the faculty to transform themselves systematically under the guidance of resident seniors through personal interactions and guidance. We have *Resident Acharyas* (resident gurus and faculty members) who have devoted their lives for realizing the truth and bringing out the wisdom based on Upanishads and Yoga lore. Each of the five divisions has a dean who gives guidance to the entire faculty. The faculty has autonomy to learn and practice yogic wisdom through interactions with students on an ongoing basis. As such, freedom and autonomy also bring about newer dimensions in the field. These new dimensions are added on to the syllabus to help improve studies and academic challenges year after year. In fact, they are transmitted to the S-VYASA Community all over the world through international yoga conferences, seminars, workshops, visits of dignitaries, visits by the centre heads and faculty members to various global centres.

### **In what countries does your University operate and what has been their contribution?**

Soon after our article in the *British Medical Journal* published in 1986, our work got publicity throughout the world. Many people started asking us as to how they can come to Prashanti Kutiram and learn these special techniques of yoga therapy, can we go to their places and train them, can they collaborate on research projects, etc. Through one single article we went global which is now spread to nearly 30 countries.

Our courses are offered in various countries particularly Nepal, Australia, Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Japan where the yoga instructor course

started training a large number of yoga instructors. Japan was the fore runner of this big spread. In spite of the language differences (rather challenges) with Japan, we were able to train 2,000 yoga instructors and 1,300 yoga therapy instructors. Based on a very high impact of this yoga therapy for various ailments, these yoga therapy instructors started contributing to address different diseases of aging population in Japan to promote positive health particularly in the area of geriatric care (for elderly population) of Japan.

Soon other Asian countries like Singapore started training the yoga instructors, and we have nearly 1,500 yoga teachers today in Singapore. Sri Lanka sent many students and doctors to get trained in our university who are spreading the message of yoga and yoga therapy to various parts of Sri Lanka. Similarly, many people from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Nepal also came here to learn techniques of yoga in Arogyadhama. Periodic conferences offer them pre- and post-conference workshops in which they keep themselves up to date with yoga therapy programmes. Thanks to information technology, we have started on-line education which updates them continuously.

### **How do you maintain standards as you expand globally?**

As our work force is increasing in various countries and as we are expanding, we are trying to establish standards with our instructors and teachers through tests and examinations. To set up the standards, we registered Indian Yoga Association bringing all the yoga masters in the country including 15 yoga *paramparas* (lineages or traditions) registered in Delhi. In Washington, DC, we set up the Council of Yoga Accreditation, International (CYA, International) synergizing the efforts of top yoga masters of the world. Efforts to standardize yoga instructors, yoga teachers, yoga therapists are going on, and we aim to achieve this in the next 2–3 years.

### **How do you spread your organizational DNA on a global scale?**

People from China, Korea, Japan, etc., who came here with the challenges of language and other learning handicaps, for them, we are effectively making use of suitable training programmes, and, as a result, yoga therapists from various countries find themselves at peace and harmony when they hear about the yogic wisdom base and practicing holistic dimensions of yoga. Dr R Nagarathna, our Medical Director, who had her training in Medicine in UK and served in the medical profession, returned to India to practice yoga therapy. She is able to address the problems of a large number of women and also produced impressive research articles to prove the efficacy of yoga therapy in dealing with these challenges of women and young adolescents. We have nearly 50 per cent of our faculty members and students who are women. We keep adding more senior academicians and administrators to take the University to greater heights. Visiting S-VYASA, one will observe various reputed specialists joining this movement from all over the country and various parts of the world to make this a worldwide movement.

### **How does your University contribute to the health and well-being at the organizational and societal levels?**

In the field of management, we have developed Holistic Systems Management (HOLSYM) which adds dimensions of health, personality development and contribution to the society to total quality management. This holistic system has been in vogue in both VYASA and S-VYASA for nearly 10 years. This exhibits the yogic cultural dimensions brought into corporate governance.

We opened the School of Integrative Medicine to integrate systems of modern medicine and AYUSH so that the best of the each system can be brought to the patients at large. This will be the future of health delivery systems to integrate all health systems all over the world. We are fortunate to have Dr Nagaraja, the former director of the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuroscience (NIMHANS) and a top neurologist of the country, to join us as the Director of the School of Integrative Medicine.

We have taken up the challenge of diabetes, which is making India the diabetic capital of the world. The SDM that started five years ago is now being taken up all over the country. We have had nearly 2,000 camps from 20–28 June 2015 catering to thousands of diabetic patients and also pre-diabetics in the country. This way the University would like to contribute to the country at large, bringing yoga and its applications not only to help health and well-being through yoga but also in the field of education, corporate governance, women welfare and various other developmental activities.

### **Please share your views on International Yoga Day organized by the Government of India recently on 21 June 2015 and your role in making it a global success**

21 June 2015 was a great day for India and the beginning of a new world order. The common protocol of 35 minutes consisting of a prayer, 5 minutes of loosening practices, 15 minutes of *asanas*, 5 minutes each of pranayama and meditation followed by a resolve and closing prayer was demonstrated in Rajpath in Delhi creating two Guinness Book of World Records. This event, organized by the Ministry of AYUSH, saw the largest number of persons practising yoga at a single venue with people from 82 countries participating in the event. A large number of people practised this in their own houses looking at the TV. It is estimated that about 30 crores of people would have practised and demonstrated the same on that day in India. The International Day of Yoga (IYD) was enthusiastically supported by 177 out of 193-member countries of the United Nations (UN). It was a great honour that I was made the Chairman of IYD Experts Committee by Ministry of AYUSH, Govt. of India.

### **What next for Yoga in India?**

Yoga will soon become an integral part of our education system. The National Council of Technical Education (NCTE) has brought out three books for the primary and secondary school levels as well as for the Bachelor of Education and

Masters of Education levels. So, about 25 lakh teachers in the country will have this in their syllabus, which will be learnt and practised by themselves (taught by some yoga teachers wherever possible). The National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), Government of India, brought out two booklets for classes 6–10 which will be taught in schools all over the country from the next session. The syllabus committee took inputs from our experience.

There are a large number of yoga teachers in the country, but this number is still too small. To augment this, the AYUSH Ministry and Quality Control of India (QCI) joined hands to create a process for certifying yoga teachers in big numbers throughout the country based on the competency model. Chaired by Sri Sri Ravishankar of The Art of Living Foundation, we all met to formulate the syllabus and the modalities of the same. Again, I was made the Chairman of the Experts Committee for working out the details. Combining the expertise of QCI and the Expert Committee, the process has been formalized, which consists of testing of yoga teachers for their knowledge and skills. To take yoga to masses down to the village levels, NCERT in collaboration with the S-VYASA University is planning to have the Himalaya Yoga Olympiad in the later part of 2015. With these initiatives, yoga is entering in a big way in our country. The next levels of the competency model are also being prepared by the QCI to certify yoga masters, yoga gurus, etc. We have invited all our alumni to join hands with us to take these things forward and upward.

## Reference

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