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Coronavirus: The role of Philosophy in the time of crisis

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Abstract:

In the rise of COVID-19 virus, uncertain prognosis, shortage of medical resources, and imposition of strict public health measures, such as isolation and restriction to movements contribute to widespread depression, anxiety, and fear among all. Though these measures are the only way to curb the spread of the virus, Indian philosophical principles have an important role in addressing these emotional outcomes arising due to the pandemic. In this essay, I shall discuss about the yogic principles of asanas, and the spiritual effect of meditation to promote physical and psychological well being of an individual. Further, I will address the Vedanta and Jain principle of 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' which has positive implications in the fight against the virus.

Keywords: COVID-19, Fear, Meditation, Yoga, Vedanta philosophy.

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Introduction:

The outbreak of the coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 (coronavirus 2019), epicentred in Hubei province of China, spread to many other countries rapidly (Usher, Durkin, & Bhullar, 2020). The virus has affected people worldwide and caused multiple deaths, especially among the elderly patients (W. Wang, Tang, & Wei, 2020). On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global health emergency amidst the growing number of cases. While the efforts to control and limit the spread of virus has been enormous, until May 04, 2021, 153 million cases have been reported worldwide, leading to 3.20 million deaths (WHO website dated May 04, 2021 at 11:25 am IST). India's COVID-19 death tally has been reported at 2,22,408 – the third highest in the world (the U.S had the highest tally, followed by Brazil) (WHO website dated May 04, 2021 at 11:25 am IST).²

To tackle the rapid rise of COVID-19 cases in India, the Government adopted measures such as vaccination, wearing masks, practising

social distancing, and hand hygiene to curb the community spread (Barkur & Vibha, 2020). While lockdown may be an effective strategy to deal with the COVID-19 spread, at the same time, the virus and its implication on people's lives can have psychological impact. Problems such as anxiety, fear, depression, anger, and sense of loneliness is seen common among the patients suffering from COVID-19, and this fear and apprehension is common among general public whose freedom of movements are severely restricted (Reynolds et al., 2008; Varalakshmi & Swetha, 2020). In this paper, we will discuss how philosophy and its practices offer practical solutions to people suffering from mental and physical health issues due to the pandemic, and how they can maintain mental tranquillity and peace amidst the exponential increase of COVID-19 cases in India.

The power of Yoga and Meditation:

Yoga is one of the spiritual practices developed by Yoga school of Hindu philosophy. The *Ashtanga Yoga*

² Until May 04, 2021, total deaths reported in USA (United States of America) is 5,71,740, and in

Brazil 4,07,639. For the current situation refer, <https://covid19.who.int/>.

(eight-limbed path) under the sage of Patanjali codify various practices. The term 'yoga' is derived from the Sanskrit word "yuj" which means "to unite". Out of the eight limbs enunciated by Patanjali, *Asana* (assuming certain body postures), *Pranayama* (regulation of breath), *Dharana* (steadying of mind), *Dhyana* (meditation), and *Samadhi* (contemplation of the mind) are critical with respect to dealing with the pandemic.³

In the rise of the COVID-19 virus, when the outcomes and the treatment of disease are unclear, people experience negative emotions such as sadness, anxiety, frustration, fear, and apprehensions. Some group, particularly the elderly patient, are more vulnerable to the exposure of virus. The recent studies documents that COVID-19 affects the functioning of lungs, and cause a severe reduction in the oxygen level of patients suffering from co-morbidities like diabetes, obesity, and hypertension (Medicine, 2021).⁴

There has been a significant documentation stating the effect of exercises and meditation on the psychological and physical well-being of an individual (Cowen, Adams, & Therapies, 2005; Ross, Friedmann, Bevans, & Thomas, 2013; Ross, Thomas, & medicine, 2010). The breathing exercises (inhaling breath, holding for 5 seconds, and exhaling breath) are found to increase lung volume, improves gas exchange, redistributes ventilation, and aid in the re-expansion of air spaces (Belur Krishnamacharya Sundaraja Iyengar, 1981). The deep inspiration and expiration of air volume cause an expansion of alveoli in lungs which leads to better air circulation. This is quite useful to maintain the efficiency and functioning of lungs.

The long quarantine periods, where disruption of normal life becomes a "new normal", stress, anxiety, and depression is seen commonly among infected patients and the community members (Rubin &

³ The eight limbs enunciated by Patanjali are *Yama* (self-control), *Niyama* (observance of rules), *Asana* (assuming body postures), *Pranayama* (regulation of breath), *Pratyahara* (control on senses), *Dharana* (steadying of mind), *Dhyana* (meditation), and *Samadhi* (achieving contemplation) (Bellur Krishnamukar Sundara Iyengar, 1993).

⁴ For more on this refer, <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/what-coronavirus-does-to-the-lungs>.

Wessely, 2020). Individuals and family experience sadness, hopelessness, and moments of grief either due to loss of family members or long-term uncertainty of the disease (Perrin, McCabe, Everly Jr, Links, & medicine, 2009). The tenets of meditation play an important role here. The principles of spirituality are imparted in every Indian philosophical tradition. The Samkhya philosophy focuses on the realization of "*purusha*" (self) to experience the nature of being (Virupakshananda, 2015).⁵ The yoga principles of meditation focus on controlling thoughts (both past and present) in the mind to bring a sense of peace and joy within oneself (Desikachar, 1980). The Jain tradition of philosophy follows the principle of '*kayotsarga*' to detach oneself from the endless desires and attachment and focus instead on the existence of oneself (A. K. Jain, 2009). These philosophies though diverse, collectively aim to facilitate the distance between bodily activities and mind's thoughts. Once we are able to understand that everything is temporary including the

body, and that we as human being are neither body nor mind, but an existence of pure consciousness, then we can attain the state of absolute pleasantness in mind (meditation) (Da Silva, Ravindran, & Ravindran, 2009). Though it is easier said than done, in times of COVID-19 crisis, the more we practice meditation, the more we maintain peace within our mind. We understand that this situation is temporary and will go in few years' time. During this time, to be positive in our thoughts and approach is the best way to deal with the COVID-19 situation.

"Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam": All world is Family:

Almost every Indian philosophical school follows the principle of '*Vasudhaiva kutumbakam*' which means all of mankind is one family. In line with this philosophy, every human being must unite with each other to fight the existing COVID-19 crisis.

The aphorism '*Vasudhaiva kutumbakam*' is a vedantic dictum that appears in the Maha Upanishad (VI.71-

⁵ The term 'Being' carries a lot of metaphysical baggage in Western philosophy. In my usage of the term, I refer Being to the individual who has

realized an utmost sense of tranquillity and peace in his mind by understanding the nature of the soul from the body.

73), an Upanishad that belongs to the group of Vishnu Upanishads (these Upanishads follow Lord Vishnu or Narayana as the supreme being) (Seelan & Universalism, 2017). The verse dictates that only small-minded people discriminate between rich and poor, kin and stranger, while for a magnanimous person the whole world is one family. The theoretical context of the verse follows the principle of non-attachment, which is a path towards *jivanmukti* (liberation) (Fort, 1998). When one detaches from the material worldliness, one finds magnanimity in his behaviour and he perceives the entire world as his own. On the one hand, the aphorism expresses the philosophy of oneness, and plays a significant role in one's ethical and spiritual life; while on the other, it has implications in fighting the current COVID-19 epidemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic posed a threat to population leading to increased feelings of fear and panic among all. The strategic measures adopted against the virus such as wearing a mask, practicing hand

hygiene, and distancing socially from others (Esposito, Principi, Leung, & Migliori, 2020) is only possible when we view the community members as one family. The disease can be fought when the entire population collectively works against it. This can happen when we adopt the above aphorism and see other members of community as part of our family. When we become morally responsible towards others, we strictly adopt the hygiene measures to protect others from the infection. This collective responsibility of individuals is the only effective way by which we can fight against the virus. The aphorism 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' is a symbol around which the fight against virus can be successfully accomplished.

Lord Mahavira (the 24th Tirthankara) included *ahimsā* (non-violence) as a fundamental principle of Jain's moral ethics. It aims at non-injury and absence of desire to harm any life forms whether it be humans or animals.⁶ The concept of vegetarianism follows from the principle of non-violence. We are aware of the fact that

⁶ There are five specific offenses of *ahimsā* principle in Jain philosophy- binding of animals, beating, mutilating the parts of animals,

overloading and using them excessively for own use, and withholding good and drink. For more on this refer, (V. K. J. D. Jain, India: Vikalp Printers, 2011).

the initial cases of the COVID virus were linked directly to Huanan seafood market in Wuhan, in the Hubei province (C. Wang, Horby, Hayden, & Gao, 2020). The market sold fish, seafood, and wild animals. The hypothesis is that the outbreak originated at Wuhan, with its initial transmission to humans from eating animals, which then followed by rapid human to human transmission (Lu et al., 2020). The principle of non-violence aims at promoting complete absence of eating and harming animals for one's aesthetic pleasures. When one adopts this principle, one saves himself from any future outbreaks of viruses.

The Jain monks and followers cover their faces with masks or *Muhapatti* to be careful to not to hurt even small insect while unconsciously swallowing them. It is symbolic to the *shvetambar Sthanakwasi* sect to wear the masks. Today, in the light of COVID situation, wearing masks is one of the main strategies to avoid transmission of virus. Wearing a mask not only prevents human transmission of virus, but it also promotes non-violence of the organisms that are present in the air.

transgressions

Conclusion:

To unite the world in the fight against coronavirus is possible when we strictly follow strategies such as wearing masks, practicing hand hygiene, and maintaining social distance. By practising techniques such as meditation and doing regular exercises, one reduces the negative implication of virus and promote physical and psychological well-being. These strategies help to control and suppress the spread of virus in the community.

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