Yoga vs strength training - which is better for you?

THE human muscular system is a phenomenal thing.

What our muscles can do is fantastic. And this can be enhanced by strengthening them, while also making them flexible. If you do a lot of weights, your muscles will look big, but you will be without flexibility. If you see people who have grown big muscles, they cannot do a namaskar properly. They cannot even bend.

If you just want muscles that look good, these days there are easier ways to do it. You could get bicep implants. The silicon doesn't just go into the breast – it goes into biceps, into calf muscles, into everything. It does not matter that it is useless. You do not have to work hard, take cortisones and hormones and go on pumping iron. There are easier ways, if it is just about looking good.

Yes, bodybuilding gives you brute strength. But you can build the same strength in a completely different way and above all, you keep your body flexible, which is very important. There are various aspects to well-being, in terms of health, energy, the mind and the spiritual dimension. When we invest 30 minutes to an hour in the morning, we want to see that the benefit is across the board for us, not just in bunched up muscles.

If you want to build muscle, should you not lift any iron? You could, because physical exercise and activity have been taken away from our lives by modern technology. Everything is done by machines. Except for your iPhone, you don’t really have to carry anything. So, since you are not using your limbs throughout the day, light weight training is okay.

Yoga is not an exercise form. It has other dimensions to it. To reduce yoga to a gymnastic process would be a severe crime. But there is something called Upa-Yoga, which means sub-yoga or useful processes of doing things, where there is no spiritual dimension attached to it. If you do Upa-Yoga or Angamardana systems of yoga, fitness is assured. You will not need any equipment. All you need is a six-by-six space on the floor. You will be super-fit and can build your muscle and everything.

Angamardana and Upa-Yoga involve the use of your own body weight to do all the exercises. You can exercise wherever you are because you still have your body. This is just as effective in building the body as any weight training is. It will make you look like a sensible human being and also make you very strong without creating any unnecessary stress on the system. The only thing is you will not become bunched up with muscles. It is not just strength or the bulge of your muscle but the flexibility of your body that is important for the proper functioning of the system.

In yoga, we do not just look at muscular strength alone. Organ health is also very important. The yogic system is evolved so that organ health is also taken care of. Even if you have a lot of muscle, if your liver is not working properly, what is the use? It is very important that the body is flexible and usable. There is also something called organ comfort.

One aspect is that most of the vital organs of the body are in the chest and abdomen region. These organs are not rigid. They are not fixed with bolts and clamps. They are loose, hanging in nets. Only if you sit with your spine erect, your organs will be in the maximum possible comfort. Now, the modern idea of comfort is to lean backwards and slouch. If you sit in such a posture, your organs will never be comfortable. They will not function the way they need to.

Keeping the body erect is not because we do not like comfort, it is because we understand and experience comfort in a completely different way. You can train your muscles to be comfortable with your spine erect but you cannot train your organs to be comfortable while slouching. There is no way to do it. So, we choose to train the body, so that our skeletal system and muscular system are comfortable sitting this way.

Yoga is not something that you do to slim down or for your backache or headache. Becoming healthy and peaceful will anyway happen but these are the side effects of yoga, not the focus of yoga. You don’t have to do yoga to lose weight or to stay healthy. You just have to eat sensibly, play tennis or take a swim.

The focus of yoga is to set another dimension alive within you that is beyond the physical. Only when that is alive, slowly the existence opens up to you in a million different ways. Things that you never thought existed become a living reality for you, simply because a dimension beyond the physical has become alive.

[Ranked among the 50 most influential people in India, Sadhguru is a yogi, mystic, visionary and bestselling author. Sadhguru has been conferred the “Padma Vibhushan,” India’s highest annual civilian award, by the government of India in 2017, for exceptional and distinguished service.]