

What is Yoga Therapy?

by Joseph Le Page

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Yoga Therapy is that facet of the ancient science of Yoga that focuses on health and wellness at all levels of the person, physical, psychological and spiritual. Yoga Therapy focuses on the path of yoga as a healing journey that brings balance to the body and mind through an experiential understanding of the primary intention of yoga: awakening of Spirit, our essential nature. The Healing journey is unique to each individual and Yoga Therapy therefore selects, adapts and modifies the practices of yoga appropriately for the individual with respect to age, culture, religion, and specific physical challenges and conditions to facilitate optimal health and healing of the body/mind.

The Yoga therapy process begins with a thorough description of the student's present status at physical, psychological and spiritual levels. It takes into consideration the student's Ayurvedic constitution, specific areas of physical and psychological strength and weakness, the role of stress and areas of separation in the life of the student. It then looks at which facets of yoga would facilitate optimal wellness and finally designs a program of yoga practice to meet the needs and goals of the student.

The Role of the Yoga Therapist

The yoga therapist serves as a guide or mentor in the student's journey of healing and self discovery. Rather than offering a diagnosis and treatment for a specific condition, the yoga therapist creates a safe learning environment where the student can remember his/her own innate healing resources.

The Yoga Therapy journey is a remembering and homecoming to a place of inner balance, awareness and wholeness that, however distant, is always present in the student. Yoga Therapy sees each person as an expression and reflection of infinite possibilities and intelligence. The skill and practice of the Yoga therapist comes through an in-depth understanding of all the facets of yoga in order to open the door to the own potential for health, healing and awakening

A traditional Tibetan medicine man chants healing mantras over a bowl of fresh flowers. He then stamps each one with a mantra in red wax. They are now ready to be taken as medicine!

Possibilities of Yoga Therapy

Yoga Therapy has tremendous potential to play an important role in the evolving field of healthcare. The scope of the yoga therapist will include offering yoga/wellness classes to the general public, working with specific groups and individuals facing health challenges and also personal yoga training and instruction for individuals based on their particular needs. There is also a growing need for therapists who can work with those who have been injured in their yoga practice and are require a safe and effective way to continue. For yoga therapy to achieve this potential, an agreed upon model is required. Within this model, a whole spectrum of different approaches, methodologies and techniques can be applied, but a basic agreement on the description, function and goals of Yoga Therapy is needed in order to create a viable profession.

Yoga therapy offers a unique perspective on health and healing distinct from the western allopathic model. The Yoga Therapy approach to health is based on the integration of body, mind and spirit through an experiential connection to the source of life itself. Illness is seen as a separation from our true essence. Yoga Therapy addresses the larger questions of the meaning of life and the role of health and healing within it. From the Yoga Therapy perspective, the entire life journey is a healing process of reunion with us, with nature, with other people and with Spirit.

A traditional Yoga approach to health focuses on the integration of all aspects of being through experiential knowledge of the true Self

The Five Koshas as the Foundation of Yoga Therapy

Addressing the various levels of healing the whole person is at the heart of Yoga Therapy. This is achieved through an ancient psychological model of the human being called the five koshas. This model describes the person as multidimensional, with the source and foundation of the person being the spiritual dimension. By using the five koshas as a starting point, Yoga Therapy addresses every level of the person individually and as an integrated whole. We begin with an understanding of the five koshas as a model for our work.

1. Annamayakosha (Physical Body)

The first level to take into consideration is the physical body as understood by western science including the anatomical structures and physiological processes. From the eastern perspective, the body is considered from the perspective of the three ayurvedic doshas. These doshas describe the overall body type of the individual.

2. Pranamayakosha (Energy Body)

From the eastern perspective, the body is an interconnected network of energy and intelligence. The proper flow of energy is necessary for maintaining good health. The energy body encompasses the pranavayus or patterns of energy within the body, the energy channels or nadhis and the energy centers or chakras. The breath forms a bridge to the energy body and the breathing patterns are a window into it. Correcting breathing patterns can enhance energy flow.

Exhibit from a Yoga Therapy Conference in India, showing the relationship between breathing rates per minute and longevity.

3. Manomayakosha (Psycho-emotional Body)

The third level to be addressed is the psycho-emotional body including the dominant emotional and thought patterns that make up the personality. These patterns are assessed in relation to the three gunas: rajas, tamas and sattva. The gunas are states of mind. Rajas refers to an aggressive, fiery or volatile state of mind. Tamas is a dull or lethargic state of mind. Sattva is the balanced state.

4. Vijnyanamayakosha (Wisdom Body)

The fourth level is mind as witness. At the third level, the mind functions as stimulus/response. The actor is caught inside his/her own drama and cannot see beyond it. At the fourth level, we're able to step out of our personal conditioning and, to some extent, look beyond our personal roles to see the larger picture of who we are. This is the level of recognizing, and de-conditioning our core beliefs. The most deeply rooted belief is, " I am my personality".

5. Anandamayakosha (Bliss Body)

The fifth level is most easily explained as the level of meditation in which the mind rests in a natural state of bliss and ease. This is an important concept in terms of health and healing because it describes health as our essential nature once the confusions and distractions have been removed.

Samadhi - The final level is beyond the koshas. It is a concept of complete oneness or wholeness. It is the state of mind of enlightened masters. It describes reality as a unified field, a whole in which the individual self, like a drop in the sea, has reunited with the ocean of life. These five koshas along with samadhi provide a framework for Yoga Therapy as a healing art in the truest sense.

Shiva represents the evolutionary potential of all yogis to reach the highest state of being. Physical and psychological health are reflections of this journey towards wholeness and self-knowledge.

The Process of Yoga Therapy

Creating a Yoga Therapy program for a specific group or individual has five steps.

1. The process begins by describing what is happening at all levels of their being, each of the five koshas.
2. The next step is looking at areas of separation — Where is there separation from the physical body, the breath, nature, parts of one's own personality, other people or God.
3. Stress is the result of separation and step 3 examines the role of stress in a person's life or in a

particular health challenge at each level of their being.

4. The next step is determining which factors would facilitate wellness for this particular group or individual and selecting the yogic techniques that would accomplish this

5. Finally, we establish a program using these techniques which will change from session to session depending on the needs of the individual or group. This would be the lesson plan for a particular class day.

Traditional ways of knowledge describe life and health as a series of levels within an overall framework of the evolution of consciousness.

I will begin by describing how the five-step system could be applied in understanding a particular situation:

Step One – Describe What is Happening

The first step is a Yoga Therapy description. Simply stated, we're looking at the person or group and asking what is going on at each level. What is happening in their physical body, the doshas, and their breath? How is the energy flowing in the body? What is the state of mind and emotion? What is the relationship and connection to Spirit?

From a Yoga Therapy perspective a 'health condition' is a reflection of where this person is in relation to their lives both internally and externally. Our assessment will include an analysis of posture, breath, energy, movement, and mind. The Yoga Therapist always begins work with a group or individual by gaining a global picture of the situation. This may include symptoms related to a medical condition but the framework is greatly expanded to include all levels of a person's being.

This description in itself is a critical part of the healing process because clarifying and becoming conscious of what is happening is the first and most fundamental part of the process of change. In fact, from the Yoga perspective, this raising of consciousness or heightening of awareness is the ultimate definition of health. The meaning of illness is to point us back toward greater awareness and balance.

Step Two – Explore the Role of Separation

Step Two takes us to the very heart of Yoga Therapy. The foundation source material for Yoga Therapy is the Yoga Sutras. One important tenet of the Sutras is that ignorance of the truth of oneness, called avidya, is the source of all forms of dis-ease. The ignorance referred to here is a lack of understanding that all life is interconnected and that we are each an integral aspect of the web of life. It is the inability to see the larger picture in terms of oneself, relationships and the world as a whole.

How something as apparently abstract as separation can become the cause of physical illness becomes clear when we examine it in detail.

Unity, Consciousness is a foundation of traditional way of knowledge.

How separation affects the physical body

In relation to the physical body, separation is seen as a lack of body awareness. Increasing body awareness can be an important part of the healing process. As the individual becomes more aware of the messages from the body including areas of stress and tension, a foundation is created for activating the relaxation response allowing the body to return to a state of balance.

How separation affects the energy body

In relation to the energy body, separation manifests as a lack of awareness of the breath as well as the flow of energy in the body. Another form of separation is separation from nature. Imagine a commuter train on a typical crowded workday. There's often a sense that no one is breathing and that the tight clothing and neckties further restrict the flow of breath and energy. The train may be passing through beautiful natural scenery but there's a sense of separation from the outside environment. This separation from breathe, the flow of energy in the body, and the natural world are key factors in the onset of illness.

How separation affects the mind and emotions

Separation is almost synonymous with the "type A" personality. It's a mindset of "me against them" with fear and anxiety as a result. This separation from society at large along with a hostile attitude has been shown to be a strong factor in heart disease and other conditions. Another form of separation is from parts of us. These are all the aspects of us, which are repressed or denied. These unconscious beliefs form the basis of daily living patterns where we separate from other people, even those in our family who should be the foundation of our emotional support.

How separation affects the wisdom body

The wisdom body is the part of ourselves that has the ability to see the separation at the various levels and allows us to change. Without this faculty, we are so busy putting out self-created fires that we are unable to access whatever liberating insights might arise from within our own being. The Yoga Therapy process is one of de-conditioning and deprogramming our core beliefs.

How separation affects the bliss body

Separation from the bliss body amounts to a denial of our true nature and the disconnection from Spirit, the most powerful source of healing.

Step Three – Understanding the Stress Response

Step three is looking at the relationship between a condition and the stress response. The separation described in step two leads to competition and attachment on one hand, and fear and anxiety on the other. Anger and fear are hallmarks of the stress response. As short-term defense mechanisms, fear and anger are ideally suited to defending the human body and mind. When the mechanism becomes chronic, a whole series of stress related illness result. These normally begin as common and garden health issues but if unchecked can evolve into serious conditions. Let's look at how this works in relation to each of the koshas.

kosha 1 - How stress affects the physical body

At the level of the physical body, one aspect of the stress response is to constrict the arteries and increase the heart rate. In an emergency situation, this ensures a rapid supply of energy for survival. When the stress response is engaged continually, the body adapts by maintaining this condition with a steadily elevated blood pressure. This is the body's way of adapting to what it sees as an ongoing need. The physical body was not however designed to be constantly in a state of emergency. The tissues and organs involved are subjected to abnormal pressures and tensions resulting, eventually in heart disease.

Within India's traditional system of medicine, Ayurveda, stress reduction place an important role as in this retreat center in South India.

kosha 2 - How stress affects the energy body

The contraction in the physical body is actually a response to and a reflection of what is happening in the energy body. The breath becomes short and stifled and the flow of energy obstructed. The shortness of the breath and contraction of the whole energetic being are the hallmark of the stress response. Again, this may be useful in an emergency situation but detrimental long term.

kosha 3 - How stress affects the psycho-emotional body

The contraction in the physical body and energy body actually begin at the level of the mind as a

state of separation that becomes a chronic swing between running after what we want and avoiding that which we fear. Competition, resentment, and hostility characterize relationships. In real emergencies, these emotions are a healthy response to threats and create boundaries necessary for survival. When they become chronic and repetitive patterns in the mind however, they perpetuate the physical stress response.

Koshas 4 and 5 - How stress affects the wisdom and bliss bodies

This contraction and defense mode at all levels of being keeps us in a state of emergency in which a connection to higher wisdom and true Self are not possible.

Step Four - Approaches to Wellness

Step Four describes our plan of action. Again using the koshas as a framework, we put together a list of principles that would facilitate wellness in relation to this condition. This step includes looking at the science of yoga as a pool of resources that can support and encourage the wellness principles we define. The Eight Limbs of yoga provides a framework to organize these resources.

Kosha 1 - Approaches to Wellness for the Physical Body

In terms of yogic approaches at the level of the physical body, our focus will be on the first three of the Eight Limbs of Yoga. The first two are called yama and niyama. In relation to the health of the physical body they refer to lifestyle and diet appropriate for the individual. The next limb is called asana. This refers to the physical Yoga practice as well as traditional cleansing techniques.

Kosha 2 - Approaches to Wellness for the Energy Body

Yogic techniques would focus on the next limb of the Eight Limbs called Pranayama which refers to breathing exercises to enhance the flow of energy in the body. We would also want to reestablish a natural balance in the flow of prana and apana through breath and guided imagery along with prana vidya exercises to direct healthy energy into the circulatory system. Chakra Therapy would also be an aspect of our work at this level.

Prana, the life force vibrates through all of creation.

Kosha 3 - Approaches to Wellness for the Psycho-emotional Body

At the level of the mind and emotions, the yogic techniques would draw from all the areas utilized up to this point and also focus on the next of the Eight Limbs which is called pratyahara. This refers to bringing the focus inside and reducing external stimulus. A main resource here is Yoga Nidra, a ten step Yogic process for exploration and integration of all the koshas.

Kosha 4 - Approaches to Wellness for the Wisdom Body

At this level, we want to encourage the development of the witness, the part of ourselves that has the ability to stand back and take a wider view of our situation in life. The yogic techniques will focus on the next of the Eight Limbs called dharana which refers to all the ways we seek to develop consciousness and awareness. An example of this would be Tratak, in which the mind is focused on a particular point such as the flame of a candle.

Kosha 5 - Approaches to Wellness for the Bliss Body

At this level, we want to facilitate the remembering of the joy and peace that is always already present. The yogic practices will focus on the next of the Eight Limbs which is called dhyana and refers to meditation. This experience of bliss, developed and stabilized over time, leads to Samadhi, the final stage of the eight limbs. The Bliss Body is a key concept in Yoga Therapy because it reminds us that we are already whole and healed within ourselves, and our work is to access, discover, and recover that which we already are.

Step Five – Designing a Program for the Individual

The final step of the Yoga Therapy process is to create a specific program based on all of the understandings and principles gained up to this point. This program will ultimately be a practice for the overall wellness of the individual and not for the treatment of the condition. However, our knowledge of the condition as understood within this model of Yoga Therapy is an essential foundation for developing an appropriate approach for the individual. The practice that we develop is of course not static and will change along with the changing needs of the individual.

Yoga Therapy as a Vision of Optimal Health

Yoga Therapy offers a vision of complete health at each level of the person, physical, energetic, psychological and spiritual. The process of Yoga Therapy is a journey of healing and integrating all these aspects of ourselves within a growing awareness of who we are and the spiritual source of our being. Yoga Therapy offers a vision of health that respects the interconnectedness of all of life and is aligned with our highest evolutionary potential

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