

Yoga Therapy as a Path of Holistic Wellness

“Yoga Citta Vritta Nirodha”
Yoga means stilling waves of the mind-body complex
- The Yoga Sutras of Pantanjali, Verse 2

As a Yoga teacher and therapist promoting the benefits of a holistic Yoga Lifestyle for over 20 years, I have found that of the many definitions of yoga this simple verse is one of the clearest summaries of how Yoga works as a comprehensive path of enlightenment. This concept has remained a foundational support in my own practice, as well as the practice of the students in my teacher training programs and one-on-one yoga therapy work.

The Comprehensive Yoga Lifestyle as Yoga Therapy

I experienced the healing power of this approach first hand as a long-term student at the Yoga Institute in 1989, when I was taught in the traditional one-on-one method. This approach allowed for my mentor Dr. Yogendra to apply the aspects of Yoga that were relevant to my personal growth. Weak areas of my personality were explored in order to help maximize the potential for personal transformation. The individual attention allowed the sessions to revolve around my questions, needs and interests. Six months of daily Yoga psychotherapy along with asana, meditation and spiritual company made for a truly life-altering experience.

This traditional approach offers the insight that mind-body health is a by-product of a comprehensive Yoga program aimed at stilling the mind and/or healing the mind-body complex. The challenge that modern Yoga Therapy faces is the potential to reduce Yoga to a set of physical practices in an attempt to replace pills or surgery. If Yoga Therapists diagnose a problem via the Western model of physical only or psychological only parameters, automatically Yoga is reduced to a set of “behavioral pills” designed to treat a specific condition.

We all know that breathing, relaxation and meditation can make a positive impact in one’s life, but it is much less effective when done without recognition of the important psychological aspects that are necessary for a student’s growth. For maximum efficacy and lasting change to occur all aspects of the human being need to be examined, looking past the allopathic model in order to create room for deeper levels of healing.



How the Yogic Diagnostic Model Works: *The 5 Koshas*

In order to do this, Yoga Therapists might consider using a diagnostic model based on a yogic map of consciousness such as the Koshas (The Sheaths or Layers of Reality). The Koshas view a human being from five distinct perspectives, namely, Matter/Physical (anna-maya-kosha), Life force/Breath (prana-maya-kosha), Mind/Emotions (mano-maya-kosha), Intellect/Wisdom (vijnana-maya-kosha), and Bliss/Spirit (ananda-maya-kosha). The model serves as a holistic analysis of the individual and allows Yoga Therapists to discover related weaknesses in the body/mind complex and implement a comprehensive approach for healing.

Case Study: *Diagnosing a Common Complaint*

To better understand how this approach works, let’s consider a common ailment that most Yoga Therapists

continued on page 18

as well as Yoga Instructors deal with - back pain. Our example client is Joe, a 45-year old married business professional with 2 children. Joe has been suffering from back pain on and off since his mid-thirties, but the pain has escalated in the last six months and has caused him to seek out a Yoga Therapist.

If we apply a strictly physical diagnosis to Joe, we would concentrate our energies on releasing the lower back muscles throughout a combination of yoga poses and breathing exercises intended to relieve tension in that area. While both of these things will help Joe, the relief that they bring will be temporary. If he is disciplined enough to practice these things at home, he may get more moments of short-term relief, but in the long run, Joe will never learn how to face the underlying issues of his stress. The inherent fault in the physical-only diagnosis is that the therapist never learns anything about Joe's life that could empower him to understand and eventually transform the deeper issues that are causing his back pain.

If we use the Koshas as a diagnostic model for Joe, we discover that on a physical level, Joe has tight muscles exasperating the low back resulting in nerve pain. We also discover that on an energetic level, Joe changed jobs almost six months ago, and has gained 15 pounds due to the fact that he has been eating more take-out food and has not been able to keep up with his normal exercise routine. On an emotional level he is in a state of fear being that he feels the need to prove himself in order to keep his new position. This has manifested in a heightened state of alertness as his new blackberry device has him feeling like he is "on call" all day long. The emotional strain has created tension at home as his wife and kids are feeling neglected. In addition, his social life is practically non-existent outside of work. Intellectually, Joe is thriving and growing with the new job experience, but spiritually, Joe has had less time to do his nightly inspirational reading and has been skipping church on Sundays to get some extra sleep.

Armed with all of this knowledge, we are now prepared to make a holistic interpretation of Joe's condition. We see that Joe's back pain is the result of three major contributing factors, lack of exercise, poor nutrition and the work/home stress created by being in a new job and working longer hours. We also see that Joe might be feeling isolated from his family and friends, and is feeling slightly depressed by his lack of connection to his spiritual practice. We understand

that Joe's back would be most improved by creating balance between his work life, home life and spiritual practice. We empower Joe with this knowledge and he begins to work out how he is going to create some clear boundaries. He starts to leave work on time and put his blackberry aside in the evenings. When this happens, he finds more time to eat healthier meals, exercise, and spend time with his friends and family. As a side effect, his clarity of mind increases his efficiency at work and he gains the recognition of his co-workers for his productivity and pleasant demeanor.

By addressing the area of his life that is most out of balance and finding lifestyle practices that support the necessary changes to bring balance back, Joe feels a release of tension in the muscles supporting the low back. He still needs to practice his yoga poses, deep breathing, relaxation and meditation, but understands that they only help him if he continues to work on the lifestyle factors that contribute to his back pain. As Joe progresses with his Yoga Therapy he learns and applies the basic tenets of the Yamas (Restraint of Negative Behaviors) and Niyamas (Positive Observances) to his daily activities and becomes better at managing his stress. Further study of the Chakras continues to deepen his level of self-awareness and understanding. Joe's Yoga Therapy program contributes to his overall physical, emotional and spiritual well-being. He continues his practice on his own, comes to a yoga class twice a week and no longer needs to see his therapist on a regular basis.

Conclusion

While this example is somewhat over-simplified for the purposes of this article, I have used this process with thousands of yoga students over the last 20 years and have witnessed tremendous healing occur. If we trust the clear path that the ancients have laid out for us and help our students to connect the dots in the mind/body/spirit, the Yoga tradition does the work for us. However, if we limit ourselves to the Western diagnostic process, the application of Yoga becomes limited and the chances for individual transformation decrease. Yoga's entire culture of consciousness offers a path of complete self-realization that is as broad as human life itself and a holistic diagnostic model that includes physical, life force, mind, intellect and spirit offers Yoga Therapists and students an approach that can transform pain and disease into a path of enlightenment. ▲