

PREFACE

YOGA AS THERAPY

The past few years have heralded a quiet explosion in the therapeutic application of yoga, and more and more practitioners are designating themselves ‘yoga therapists.’ The diversity of interpretations of just what these two words, ‘yoga’ and ‘therapy,’ mean when put together has been so broad and disparate that we’re only just beginning to seriously discuss on a contemplative level with what has already been happening on a practical level.

‘Therapy’ basically means ‘a treatment intended to relieve or heal a disorder.’ It is a course of treatment meant to assist the healing process of an injury, as well as to redress imbalances (on any number of levels) that are the cause of the injury, disease or dysfunction. This more or less resembles our present-day understanding of ‘therapy,’ in which therapy addresses what is ‘wrong.’ Ayurveda (the ‘lore of life’ or medical tradition of India) would hasten to suggest that therapy *primarily* seeks to maintain and enhance what is ‘right’ — an already good or excellent state of health — while the healing of injury or disease is secondary. In truth, even in its healthiest state, the body is always in a process of healing itself from breakdowns caused by the environment: the effects of sunlight on the skin and oxidation from the normal processes of breathing are two prime examples. The onset of cancer is a sign that the body is failing to heal itself properly from these types of environmental damage. In truth, ‘therapy’ is not something we undergo occasionally when we are hurt or sick; it is ongoing, especially if we are to *avoid* becoming sick!

Thus there is more than one sense to the word ‘therapy.’ Yet the most hotly debated discussion surrounds the meaning of ‘yoga’ when joined with ‘therapy.’ The problem begins with the meaning of ‘yoga’ itself.

The word ‘yoga’ was classically defined by Patanjali as a set of practices aimed at ‘stilling the thoughtwaves of the mind,’ the result of which would be that the soul, or our essential, pure and eternal spiritual nature (*Purusha*), would reveal itself once the whirlwind of input and distractions stirred up by our material and egoistic nature is quieted. Asana and pranayama are handmaidens to static meditation — meditation as the absolute stillness or nonmovement of the Purusha.

Yet the later tradition of tantra — of which hatha yoga is a signature member — focused more on ‘yoga’ as a dynamic process of the prana, in which the stillness described by the classical yogis is experienced only at the heart of movement or flow of consciousness. Movement and stillness, ‘Shakti’ and ‘Shiva,’ are two sides of the same coin and could not be separated. This outlook subtly but profoundly altered the meaning of the ‘eight limbs’ of yoga practice that Patanjali had originally summarized as the foundation of ‘yoga.’ In essence, hatha yoga in particular, and tantric philosophy in general (the pinnacle of which is represented by Kashmir Shaivism and the later Sri Vidya traditions, which included nuanced understandings of Vedanta), made their ‘yoga’ an ongoing and dynamic process of coming to greater and greater self-awareness in and through the self-revelation of Prana — i.e. through life as we live it, and not apart from it. The stillness of the soul is seen or experienced in the ‘mirror,’ as it were, of the dynamic nature of Shakti — the cause of all material manifestation, including the body and mind.

Thus ‘yoga’ is not something leading to achievement of a state — ‘samadhi’ — as its end term, but rather ‘yoga’ is an ongoing and forever deepening state of the profound self-awareness of divine Consciousness, which we experience as our ‘awakened’ and unfettered awareness of our true Self. What we call the mind and ego are only limited expressions of that true Self, and are not to be rejected. Rather, they are the lense through which we come to experience the true unlimited nature of Self. In a word, ‘yoga’ is an ongoing state of true self-awareness that is supported by practice. Our environment constantly acts upon us in a way that can ‘trip us up’ or limit that self-awareness, leading us to fall into harmful patterns of the ego. ‘Yoga,’ we

might say, is a constant process of healing of our full spiritual self-awareness as it becomes limited by the events of daily life. We fall into egoism when we fail to remember or recognize our true nature properly; like a cancer, our self-awareness gets unhinged, fails to reintegrate with the whole. The ego sets itself apart from the whole and becomes self-seeking in a way that is damaging to our true health or wholeness. ‘Yoga’ in the tantric sense, like ‘therapy,’ is an ongoing process of self-healing — a healing of our awareness or understanding.

When seen in this light, it is perhaps less puzzling to put ‘yoga’ and ‘therapy’ together. When is yoga ‘therapy?’ Yoga is inherently or essentially therapy, or therapeutic. The two terms are essentially one, if we take a more expanded view of the kinds of injuries or imbalances — emotional and spiritual as well as physical — that we suffer while in this world.

We might actually learn more from asking the question by turning it on its head, asking ‘When is therapy ‘yoga?’ For instance, what is the difference between physical therapy for an injury (eg. a regimen of strengthening and stretching exercises prescribed for a rotator cuff injury) and hatha yoga practiced specifically to heal the same injury? Quite often the stretches and exercises seem for all intents and purposes to be the same, and each field may seem to ‘borrow’ from the other. What is the distinction between hatha yoga and physical therapy? (You may well find yourself asking this as you delve into the latter part of this book)

There is not, nor should there really be a hard dividing line separating the two, by which they are judged to be ‘different.’ Rather the distinction between therapy and yoga lies in the degree of self-awareness of the patient. At one end of the spectrum — in the currently accepted medical or ‘clinical’ understanding of therapy — when someone is ill, he goes in for a diagnosis and is given a prescription, along with instructions on how to take it and when, and there is often follow-up by which he is told how well it is going, and also told when he is ‘finished’ with the treatment. There is very little self-awareness on the part of the patient, apart from discussing symptoms and following recommendations as faithfully as possible; participation is limited to taking the medicine and avoiding what is contraindicated. The same goes for performing prescribed exercises in the case of an injury, and avoiding contraindicated actions. The patient doesn’t need to know the ‘whys’ and ‘wherefores’ of his condition.

But it’s one thing to be told, “You have a torn rotator cuff and here’s what we need to do to fix it,” without being given any understanding of how and why you came to have that injury. It’s quite another thing to recognize and understand for ourselves the imbalances that set us up for the injury. Therapy becomes ‘yoga’ to the extent that it more fully engages the self-awareness and participation of the ‘patient.’ That understanding is key to ensuring that we can both heal effectively, and also make sure the injury or illness doesn’t recur.

Any good therapist will of course involve the patient or client at least to some degree, empowering him or her. The point is that the *more* that the therapist does so, the closer we draw to the essence of what we *mean* by yoga, and the more we can say that the therapy *is* a ‘yoga’ for that person. Rather than argue endlessly about styles, techniques and protocols, the heart of what we mean by yoga in any therapeutic context lies in this level of self-awareness, and the tools or means we bestow upon the individual for greater self-awareness in his or her own ongoing process of self-healing.

This by no means eliminates the role of the therapist, either in assessment or treatment. It does enhance the effectiveness of what he or she recommends, because healing is a process of consciousness.

The tradition of yoga does have a wealth of knowledge to offer, specifically in terms of tools of assessment, self-awareness and treatment. The tradition of Ayurveda is closely allied with that of yoga, and Ayurveda provides the context and foundation of all the forms of therapy associated with yoga. It would no more make sense to try to practice yoga therapy without a foundation in an understanding of Ayurveda than it would be to try to walk without feet. You might manage, but not very well or effectively.

Which brings me to my point. A criticism often made of contemporary ‘yoga therapy’ is that it is purely structural or biomechanical. This can certainly be the case, and is also likely to be a complaint made against this book if I don’t make myself clear at this point.

Physical assessments, and physical asanas recommended for an injury or condition will be less effective, and also further from the meaning of yoga, if made apart from the insights provided by Ayurveda. Even purely physical injuries are more than merely biomechanical events, and the process of healing requires the full participation and awareness of the one who is healing. Ayurveda, with its assessment of the subtler imbalances involving the doshas, prana and so on, provide the larger context within which the process of healing even physical injuries becomes more than merely physical.

It’s also safe to say that an enormous amount has been written and is being taught by teachers far more versed in the subtleties of Ayurveda than myself. There is, however, much room for greater insight into the structural and biomechanical issues that lead to a great deal of injury and suffering, as well as to organic problems about which Ayurveda too has a great deal to say. These should not be seen as competing or mutually exclusive approaches, but rather insights that are mutually supportive in promoting the process of healing.

In this book I do attempt to set forth the larger context within which the energetics of Ayurveda and the biomechanics of posture might be understood to be more harmonious, with each shedding greater light upon the other. I do not have the space to do full justice to Ayurveda, nor am I necessarily best suited for that. But at least I hope to make the case for a holistic understanding that *includes* the insights and tools for understanding drawn from contemporary fields of ‘body work’ for the sake of bringing greater self-awareness in cases of structural problems, just as Ayurveda brings greater self-awareness through its own insights into prana and the doshas, as well as through its own tools of assessment.

In short, yoga therapy need not be singularly based on the principles of Ayurveda to merit the name of ‘yoga;’ nor should yoga therapists think that they can dismiss or ignore the context of Ayurveda and think that they are practicing their science fully. Therapy operates on many levels, and with many layers of awareness. In some cases it is entirely appropriate to begin with structure and biomechanics and proceed from there, progressively unearthing deeper levels of insight. In other words, sometimes when there is a tear in the hamstring attachment, the more immediate cause of the injury as well as its failure to heal properly is structural, such as pelvic rotation. Issues such as ‘Vata imbalance,’ while relevant, lie a little further down the road of treatment.

Treating the biomechanical problem is not a case of treating the symptom rather than the cause. Sometimes both symptom and cause *are* structural and can be treated as such. And *after* addressing the immediate, we can begin to peel back deeper layers of causality. There are layers or levels of truth, and the ‘deeper’ layers of truth cannot be accessed until and unless the more immediate layers are addressed.

Thus the greater part of this book is concerned with the more immediate concerns of structure and biomechanics, with hints along the way at the deeper energies at work in the field of prana. I am beginning with the most concrete and accessible, while providing a context for understanding what is happening at a biomechanical level, for the sake of those of us who need to start with what is most concrete. Indeed, what is simplest and most obvious is often the hardest to ‘see,’ and we need some help for learning to see it.

This is by no means the whole of the story of ‘Yoga as Therapy.’ It is a start, but only a start. It does not encompass the whole of the meaning of yoga as therapy, but rather is meant to provide something that is helpful and of use, particularly to ‘beginning’ yoga therapists. In any case, I hope it is a good start, one which can lead to a deeper and deeper understanding of this growing field.

UNDERSTANDING OUR APPROACH

To understand the approach to structural therapy taken in this book, ‘Yoga As Therapy,’ it’s important to understand what the book sets out to do.

When we look at the body, trying to understand what has gone ‘wrong’ when it suffers injury, pain, inflammation or progressive deterioration in the joints, we have to look beyond the immediate problem and ask, how are we to understand not just the most obvious problem (e.g. knee pain), but its relationship to what is going on in the rest of the body? Quite often the cause is not nearly as obvious as the effect, and when there are imbalances in the body, other troubles may be brewing that have not yet manifested. We might ‘fix’ one problem, only to find that another pops up. Why?

What this book presents is a **template for envisioning relationships in the body** so that we might see the ‘big picture’ and understand both the roads that lead ‘to’ the injury or problem, as well as all the roads that lead ‘from’ it. These are very real, empirically established connections and continuities between muscles that ‘communicate’ both the good qualities of muscle tone as well as the bad qualities of stress throughout the body along very specific lines. We will call these lines by the name of ‘**sutras**’ (meaning both ‘thread’ of connection, as well as a statement pregnant with information — something you can ‘read’ to better understand the whole).

This can be initially confusing for yoga practitioners, since we are used to thinking in terms of principles for what to ‘do.’ The ‘sutras’ provide a **description** of important aspects of the functional anatomy of the body; they are **not ‘prescriptions’** for what to do. But once we ‘read’ the sutras and better understand what is going on in the fabric of the whole of the body, it becomes all the more clear what to ‘do’ to correct the imbalances. When we understand and picture for ourselves these relationships between ‘sutras,’ it becomes quite clear that the fundamental principles we follow in hatha yoga for **actions** or what to ‘do’ in the asanas are **inherently therapeutic**, and that specific poses and classes of poses that are the bread and butter of hatha yoga work with almost surgical precision in correcting these imbalances.

Thus we are first attempting to understand the body and what goes wrong with it, in a very integrated, visual and even kinesthetic way. This makes it possible to approach yoga as therapy fruitfully from many different styles of yoga.

So **the ‘sutras’ don’t so much tell you what to ‘do,’ but rather how to ‘see.’** And having seen the problem clearly, it is all the more easy to intuit or ‘know’ what to do. Then yoga as therapy sheds at least some of its mystery and begins in earnest.

