

# Perspectives and Issues in Yoga Therapy

## Yoga Therapy: Building a Holding Environment for Somatic and Psyche Change

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### Abstract

Drawing on ideas from D.W. Winnicott and the work of Quaker theologian Parker Palmer, this article discusses the concept of a holding environment, its refined understanding in the literature over the years, and how it can be optimally used in yoga therapy. The evidence shows that effectively establishing a holding environment can facilitate both somatic and deep structural change in a client, facilitating healing from primal wounding as well as the potential reconnection to the true self.

Yoga therapy is a holistic healing art. Rather than prescribe treatments, it invites presence and awareness. Using age-old yogic approaches to deeper presence and awareness, we are able to know ourselves more fully. Out of that knowing, we are more easily moved to embrace the opportunity for change, growth, and enhanced well-being in body, feelings, thought, and spirit.

— Michael Lee, Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy

There are numerous references in the yoga-based literature to creating a safe space or healing container in which clients feel secure enough to allow anxiety and other traumatic experiences to surface and be experienced (e.g., Caplan, Portillo, & Seely, 2013; Cohen Harper, 2010; Spinazzola et al., 2011; Swart, 2011). However, there are few concrete ideas about how such a safe space or holding environment might be created. Insight into the mechanisms by which the holding environment itself facilitates change and the yoga therapist's role in structuring and maintaining that secure space by his or her presence is a critical therapeutic ingredient. Creating a proper holding environment in the therapeutic relationship invites clients to enter into a liminal state in which rigid personality characteristics formed by early childhood experiences may give way to more spontaneous behavior. In the safety of the studio, clients may experience an unintegrated state. By unburdening ego bound-

aries and relinquishing compulsivity the client may develop a more enlarged, more conscious sense of self.

Yoga therapy in its most practiced form combines yoga, meditative practice, and breath awareness in varying intensities depending on the needs of the client. Creating a proper therapeutic container or holding environment is key to promoting deep innermost change.

D.W. Winnicott's work forms the basis of object relations theory and introduces the ideas of unintegrated space, the capacity to be alone, and the personalization process, each an important concept for understanding the holding environment and its full therapeutic potential. Winnicott's developmental model chronicles the mother-child matrix, which provides a good framework in which to consider the therapist-client relationship.

To add further clarity to the role of the yoga therapist in maintaining the strong boundary conditions to contain the therapeutic work, some ideas from the Quaker theologian Parker Palmer are included. This journey through the ideas of Winnicott and Palmer leads to a fuller understanding of the significance of a properly constructed therapeutic container. From those ideas, suggestions are made for how to construct a proper holding environment and then how to maximize its effectiveness.

### Object Relations

The object relations theorists, of whom Winnicott (1965/1989) was a prominent member, hypothesized that the caregiver-child relationship formed the crucible in which the child's sense of self was formed. They believed that each child was a unique being, expressed via the true self. With proper nurturing or mirroring, this true self would unfold over the course of a lifetime. Conversely, a failure to properly facilitate a child's spontaneous unfolding could result in the development of a false self—a distorted amalgamation of self-images developed in response to survival needs perceived as necessary to cope with caregiver projections. These projections, albeit unconscious, issue

from the caregiver's own wounding, and the caregiver seeks to fill these needs through the child. For example, the unloved caregiver may demand that the child love in ways that meet the caregiver's needs while simultaneously denying the child's own needs. In this way, the child is wounded and his or her self-expression is thwarted. Wounding, which is essentially an ego boundary violation, has implications that may influence the child's life forever (Firman & Gila, 1997). In these cases, the child's inner light dims and he or she learns to respond to external demands. The child's own self-expression is silenced and over time becomes unacceptable and even foreign. In its place, the false self, or what has been called the "survival personality," is erected. As the child matures with the false self predominant, the child always looks beyond self to determine how to act and how to respond appropriately to external demands. With the inner voice silenced, the child can do no more. This behavior is normalized and life is lived inauthentically. In sum, the child suffers from a missing sense of realness.

### Winnicott's Ideas

Three of Winnicott's concepts (1958, 1965, 1965/1989)—the holding environment, the capacity to be alone, and the notion of an unintegrated state—provided the foundation for important aspects of his developmental theory. These ideas also provided an understanding of how a carefully structured space in which to practice yoga therapy can create a liminal environment and facilitate deep emotional and spiritual healing.

### The Holding Environment

A primary task of the caregiver is to provide a safe and secure environment, one in which the child feels held in what has been called "empathic concern." In this holding environment, the child's true self is allowed to unfold, unimpeded by the needs of the caregiver. Heinz Kohut (1977), another object relations theorist, used the term "nuclear program" to explain how the true self unfolds. When properly held and affirmed, the self unfolds across the lifespan, providing the child with a stable and coherent sense of identity. The nuclear program is not pre-determined; instead, it is the highest possible expression of the child's unique potential, however that manifests itself.

The holding environment is constructed by touch as the caregiver caresses, handles, and holds the child (Winnicott, 1947/1997), a process through which the child becomes grounded in the body or, as Winnicott noted, comfortable in his or her own skin. Winnicott named this organic development the *personalization process* (1958) or the "indwelling of the psyche in the soma" (Winnicott, 1970/1989, as cited in Robert, 2011, p. 22).

This *personalization* process fosters a partnership between the psyche and the body of the child, and as the psyche becomes ensconced within the body, the baby achieves the state of 'I am' (Winnicott, 1965, as cited in Roberts, 2011, p. 4).

To summarize, the child first becomes grounded in the body, then the body becomes the secure container in which the psyche dwells. The expression "he is grounded in a strong sense of self" flows from this process and, when realized in infancy, may ensure that the unfolding of the true self becomes the path followed over a lifetime.

The personalization process is a delicate dance between the caregiver and child. It is a two-way communication as the child signals what is needed from the caregiver, who must be ever-present and receptive to those signals. Child and caregiver learn from one another. But, as one can imagine, this is a difficult process. Given the life demands of the caregiver, the ability to be ever vigilant, patient, and present with the child seems unrealistic. This is probably why Firman and Gila (1997) concluded that wounding is ubiquitous in our culture, that almost everyone suffers from some sort of childhood wounding. Roberts (2011) added that even if the caregiver can provide physical safety for the child, there is no guarantee that the bond is deep enough to facilitate the connection of soma and psyche.

Without the protection and motility of the body boundary, the psyche is particularly vulnerable to threats of annihilation because it has no place to rest, or no frame with which to assert its spontaneous gesture—that is, make meaningful impact—in and on the environment (Roberts, 2011, pp. 17-18).

The holding environment or safe space extends to the child's entire milieu and does not require the presence of the caregiver for the child to feel secure. As long as the child experiences being held in empathic concern, the child is able to thrive. Winnicott (1958) used the term "good-enough mothering" to represent a holding environment in which the caregiver is neither over- nor under-involved with the child and is instead attuned to the child's needs and responds accordingly.

### The Unintegrated State

Winnicott proposed that within the holding environment the child experiences an unintegrated state (1965). Later, he described this state as formlessness (Winnicott, 1971) in which an individual could float freely without taking shape or form. Thus, a proper holding environment, the milieu in which the child is held, is an amorphous place that allows for spontaneous self-discovery as the child plays and comes

to experience his body. In this state, the child is free to just be, to rest, and to be present without intrusion or demands from others, specifically the caregiver, who is expected to properly guard the child's boundary even as the child is held and caressed.

To describe that protected boundary relationship, Winnicott (1965/1989) conjured up a terrific example that exemplifies the freedom the child might experience while remaining in non-intrusive contact with the caregiver. Comparing it to the experience after satisfactory intercourse he says:

It is perhaps fair to say that after satisfactory intercourse each partner is alone and is contented to be alone. Being able to enjoy being alone along with another person who is also alone is in itself an experience of health. Lack of id-tension may produce anxiety, but time-integration of the personality enables the individual to wait for the natural return of id-tension, and to enjoy sharing solitude, that is to say, solitude that is relatively free from the property that we call 'withdrawal' (Winnicott, 1965, p.31).

In that formless state, surrounded by a consistent, secure, and reliable holding environment, the child is able to internalize the experience of the good-enough caregiver, the consistent other. Specifically and ideally, the child's ego immaturity is balanced by the mother's ego support. It is this ego support that is internalized (Roberts, 2011). This introjection process is an essential aspect of being grounded in a solid, dependable sense of self. Properly contained in the holding environment, the child's sense of "I am" emerges from the interactions between caregiver and child. The caregiver offers ego-support and affirms the child's emerging bodily impulses as real.

Jung's conception of a transcendent function (Miller, 2004) that holds together opposites until a third thing emerges is a useful way to understand how tension might be held between the "me" aspects of the child and the "not me" aspects of the caregiver. The state of unintegration is the space in which me and not me are vibrating and floating, "vacillating... and being tossed back and forth... contained in opposites [as] they become one thing and now another" (Jung, 1955-1956/1963, as cited in Miller, 2004, p.127). The tension is maintained until the new thing—in this case, the child's sense of "I am" or "I exist"—emerges and is experienced. Simultaneously, the child introjects the experience of the good-enough caregiver as the child comes to recognize what is me and not me, what is mine and what belongs to the other. As a result, the child develops a critical skill set known overall as the capacity to be alone (Winnicott, 1965).

## The Capacity to be Alone

The capacity to be alone encompasses abilities that include the competence to self-soothe, to manage affect and impulse control, and to be able to cognitively focus (Roberts, 2011). Winnicott (1965) equated the capacity to be alone with emotional maturity. It has also been likened to the state of authenticity (Roberts, 2011).

Having developed the capacity to be alone, the child now feels a sense of agency. Simply, the child can count on and trust feelings and follow internal directions without anxiety and worry about decision-making. The child operates from the true self and is not buffeted about by external demands or circumstances. This is a result of a good-enough holding environment that is secure and in which the child engages in self-discovery at his or her own pace. Effectively internalizing the caregiver experience is the foundation for acquiring the capacity to be alone.

Unfortunately, this capacity to be alone is missing for many people as a result of early wounding experiences. Without the ability to tolerate frustration or self-soothe, anxiety is mostly dissipated by taking some curative action. Oftentimes, these actions become repetitive; sometimes compulsive or addictive behaviors may develop that temporarily produce a calming effect. Drugs, alcohol, eating, shopping, sex, exercise, or just about any behavior can be used to calm anxiety. Without the ability to self-soothe, one is left to look outside oneself for resolution. Moreover, one's ability to stay present and focus on the task at hand is severely curtailed. Lacking the ability to self-soothe limits creative expression. Without the ability to tolerate frustration and ambiguity, there is no container for creative leaps of insight.

## Quaker Ideas

Parker Palmer's (2009) ideas about the structure of circles of trust provide clues to how Winnicott's concepts might be translated into creating a holding environment to be used by yoga therapists. The ideas for these circles of trust are taken from the Quaker practice of discernment and speak to the general notion that when a safe and non-judging holding space is provided, the inner teacher (true self) will reveal itself. In these meeting spaces, people learn to sit, wait, and listen for this inner awareness to speak in a voice loud enough to be heard. These circles have what Palmer called a "no change agenda." Participants are not there to change, fix, or save anyone. Instead, they believe in the inherent nature of the individual's own capacity to heal. As Palmer says, these circles support the individual's quest for integrity and do not supplant it. In what may appear to be a paradox for someone searching for answers or direction,

other people listening but not offering advice assists the individual in holding the tension of not knowing, which can eventually lead to a deeper and fuller knowing. This resolution often represents the self's unfolding. The need for a guide in this quest for self is important. The solo journey is perilous, especially when the shadow is encountered. When venturing into the unconscious, it is helpful to have our own Beatrice by our side. Moreover, the guide can shore up courage for these visits to the underworld.

As Palmer noted (2009), the voice of the self is delicate, and if it has not been listened to for a while, it is almost imperceptible. Encouraged and challenged by a guide, one can discern that voice in one's own way and time and, as Palmer noted, distinguish "the inner voice of truth from the inner voice of fear" (p. 27). The guide can serve as a mirror for the reflection of self and shadow, and in its embrace, the individual can look and see. The guide stands at the boundaries of the other's solitude, protecting it by neither invading the mystery of another's true self nor evading another's shadow material (Palmer, 2009).

These spaces embody the paradox of "being alone together," reflecting Winnicott's insightful example of the experience between two people after satisfactory intercourse. Palmer cites Rilke (1904, as cited in Palmer, 2009) who, in a similar sense, when talking about authentic love noted it was "the love that consists of two solitudes, which border, protect, and greet each other" (p. 62).

Palmer (2009) counseled that to know the true self requires "both the interior intimacy that comes from solitude and the otherness" (p. 54) that comes from connection to another. As a result, the growth that occurs is not forced by external demands but "drawn forth by love." The drawing forth is made possible by our presence, our attentiveness to another, and bearing witness to the mystical unfolding of self.

## Yoga Therapy

Bodywork has long been considered a direct path to the psyche, bypassing the limiting and censoring mind. Wilhelm Reich (1980), Ida Rolf, (1989), F. Matthias Alexander (2001), Moshe Feldenkrais (2009), and Thomas Hanna (2004), among others, developed theories on working with the body to relieve muscle tension, correct posture, facilitate ease of movement, and re-educate the body toward correct alignment. In many cases, working directly with the body can release trapped emotional experiences and even unleash flashbacks of early trauma. Erwin Singer's (1994) wonderful definition of mental health as "the ability to tolerate surprise" also applies to an emotionally healthy and flexible body that is open to all experiences and can process them as they occur, without holding on to those experiences.

In many yoga studios, it is possible to create a proper holding environment with the intent to provide space for healing; in fact, many studios approximate that kind of environment. The growing field of yoga therapy with its emphasis on the body-mind connection provides a real opportunity for transformative healing. In many ways, yoga therapy is eclectic and draws from a variety of body therapy modalities such as massage, body alignment techniques, stretching, yoga, and breath work. These techniques are tailored to the client's needs and aim to achieve relaxation, relief from chronic pain, and body re-alignment, as well as changes in the muscles and organs of the body. There is also a psychological component of yoga therapy in that somatic introspection leads to self-awareness as work with the body can release trapped impulses or energy (Forbes, 2008), making it available in the healing process.

Yoga therapy's integrated approach to healing, with a primarily body-first intervention strategy, offers clients the real possibility of achieving a state of unintegration in which they can reconnect with those aspects of the personality that have become unacceptable or from which they have become dissociated. In a real sense, reintegrating disparate aspects of the self loosens the false self and allows reconnection with the true self.

It has been noted that yoga therapy practitioners draw from many modalities. While their styles to making therapeutic interventions may differ, it is important that all of them create a proper holding environment in which clients can feel safe to explore. To do so, there is a set of common principles that can aid in creating both a secure physical and psychological container.

## Physical Space

All aspects of the physical space should be considered when creating a milieu in which to work with a client. The space must be secure; access to the space should be limited during the session. Indirect lighting should be used when possible. Soothing music should be considered, especially if there is ambient noise outside of the space. When the therapy takes place in a large room, dividers or Asian screens may be considered. Room temperature is important for the client's comfort, and having access to temperature controls is important as the client may experience a range of bodily changes during the session. Moreover, it is important that the same space is used across multiple sessions. Making the space as predictable as possible is key to creating a healthy holding environment. In spaces that are less than secure or that change from session to session, much of the client's attention will be focused outward. Only in a secure and predictable space will clients feel contained or held in a way that allows them to turn their attention inward and focus on the work at hand.

## Psychological Space

Securing the psychological space is more difficult and is perhaps the most important aspect of building a proper holding environment. The most obvious requirement is to create a non-judging space. This is not simply an intention adopted by the therapist but one that becomes integrated into the therapist by his or her own practice, training, and therapy. In accredited yoga therapy programs, a significant portion of the training curriculum focuses on the personal development of the therapist to include significant shadow work. There is no shortcut to this kind of work and, in most cases, it is lifelong. But the benefits to the client are significant, beginning with the therapist's own empathic understanding of the client's journey. Closely attendant with this non-judging stance is the "no change" agenda encouraged by the Quakers. This agenda acknowledges the client's own inherent healing potential emanating from the true self and celebrates the client's integrity.

Being present with and attentive to the client are important facets for building a therapeutic relationship. The ability to stay present with the client is roughly equal to the therapist's own therapeutic work. The more conscious the therapist is to his or her own processes, the more attentive to the client and his or her processes.

## Touch

In working with the client's body, touch is an important therapeutic ingredient. Assisting the client by supporting a posture or bringing awareness to a particular part of the body through touch can be very healing. However, the client's needs, not the therapist's, should guide physical contact with the client. Therapeutic touch can be used to deepen or support an experience, but sometimes physical interventions may interrupt the client's processes. This is especially true when the client is experiencing strong emotions that may become uncomfortable for the therapist. Touch during these moments may interrupt the process.

When the physical and psychological spaces are secure, a holding environment is created as the therapist works somatically. The client's deeper emotional release may occur and healing from wounding experiences may take place. There is nothing to be done here, but therapists should remain mindful of this possibility and can even hold that intention for their work. Nothing else is needed. Holding the client's experience is tantamount to affirming it; trusting in the innate healing potential of the client validates it.

## Movement

In somatic work, the client's freedom of movement is important. The yoga therapist facilitates and soothes but does not direct; he or she guides but does not intrude into the client's experience, thus freeing the body to develop its own range of motions. The yoga therapist encourages movement that finds its own center within the client's experience. Gently inviting the client to move deeper, the therapist is guided by the client's own kinesics. As the therapist observes and listens to what the client needs, a kind of resonance or dance develops between them. When movement is synchronized between them, a kind of spontaneous play ensues. This frees the client to relax ego boundaries and enter an unintegrated state. In this space, discovery or re-discovery of the self may take place.

## Understanding

While clients may wish to give voice to their experiences at the end of the session, the therapist should remain mindful not to interpret those experiences. Somatic or emotional experience has no direct language equivalent and interpreting it can reduce its impact. Understanding is only important to the extent that it is soothing for the client's overall experience.

The therapeutic opportunity described here issues forth from building a secure container in which to hold the experience. Without these firm and predictable boundaries, the therapeutic container resembles a colander through which the client's experience is simply dissipated. No tension is held, no emotional energy builds, and there is little opportunity for transformative change. On the other hand, a secure container makes possible deep structural change.

## Summary

With careful attention to creating the holding environment in which yoga therapy takes place, a real possibility for transformative change is possible in both soma and psyche. In working with the body in this holding space, the yoga therapist should remain mindful that beyond the somatic intervention, healing from primal psychological wounds may be taking place as well. While this might not be the primary intention of the therapeutic intervention, it is important to remain conscious of the effect movement might have on the wounded psyche. With this awareness, the yoga therapist is better prepared for whatever changes might take place within the client.

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