

Editorial

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Yoga is a highly personal process. It involves the transformation and, in the final analysis, the transcendence of our private universe. Therefore, all commonalities notwithstanding, each person's yogic journey is unique. The same must be true of Yoga therapy, which is simply Yoga applied to situations calling for therapeutic intervention—a “bad” back, inefficient lungs, a fugitive mind, or a heart longing for deeper answers to the big questions through meditation.

There are a number of universal principles that have been gleaned from direct experience accumulated over many generations and that any Yoga practitioner would do well to heed. (I'll try to address the latter in a future editorial or article.) But *universal* principles must always be made to fit *particular* circumstances. In the case of Yoga and Yoga therapy, we must take into account the “competence” (*adhikâra*) of the student but also of the teacher. That is to say, competence can be understood to refer to (a) the ability of the student to respond to yogic practices and (b) the skill of the teacher to assess the student's level of competence and teach appropriately.

When I take an in-depth look around, I find a good many competent Yoga teachers, but also many whose *adhikâra* seems limited and whose guidance I would not seek if I needed assistance. This is in fact also a problem with Yoga therapy. A growing number of Yoga instructors seem to be assuming the role of “Yoga therapist” without having had the necessary training and experience to do so. Part of the reason for this is a lack of generally agreed upon minimal standards for what should constitute Yoga therapy as a profession (similar to what the Yoga Alliance provides for Yoga teachers)—and

from previous editorials and articles in this journal you will know that we are still trying to define what Yoga therapy is in the West. Another part of the reason may be the desire to catch the wave of a clear trend in alternative and complementary medicine.

The reason for bringing up the matter of competence is that this issue of the journal features several contributions that represent particular approaches to Yoga therapy in general, including a side-by-side comparison of two Yoga therapy modalities and a non-yogic modality—Viniyoga, Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy, and Feldenkrais®—authored by John Kepner, Victoria Strohmeier, and Staffan Elgelid respectively. In addition, Rajvi Mehta carefully outlines Yogacharya B. K. S. Iyengar's approach, Joseph LePage gives us a detailed overview of his own Integrative Yoga Therapy, and

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Patricia Hansen and Hansa Knox bring an Ayurvedic orientation to their eclectic approach to Yoga therapy. You will also find a richly informative selection of articles on the therapeutic application of Yoga to specific disorders and constellations of disorders.

We can see in these and all other approaches to Yoga therapy efforts to serve a particular individual or group of individuals (sharing similar needs). That is to say, they speak to a specific *adhikâra*. To make my meaning clear:

Take a person with lower back problems (which I will leave undefined) for which he or she seeks relief. Depending on that person's age and phase of life, overall state of health, flexibility, strength, psychological condition, social circumstance (e.g., available time, etc.), and spiritual orientation, a Yoga therapist will prescribe a more or less complex remedial program.

Within a given approach, we would expect this program to be similar from one therapist to another. Between diverse approaches, however, there may be a noticeable degree of variation. At present we simply do not have the means to determine the relative effectiveness of the many approaches, but it seems perhaps reasonable to assume that some approaches may be more effective than others for various conditions. I know the latter statement may invite strong disagreement, but when we are dealing with a condition that involves a physical challenge (e.g., a "bad" back), we may expect an approach that, at least at the physical level, is anatomically more correct to yield better results with less risk of exacerbation—even given that back and similar problems

generally have a strong emotional/psychological component as well. This is an area amenable to research and one for future researchers to consider.

Given that the human being is not only physically but also mentally present, Yoga's multidimensional (holistic) approach is intrinsically sound, yet what degree of influence on the healing process in cases of physical challenges can we attribute to the mental component in a given therapeutic approach? Further, discounting the placebo effect, which we know is present in all forms of healing, which yogic methods that target the mind have truly therapeutic impact? Although it would be difficult to measure with current methodology, I venture to suggest that we see the greatest benefit associated with those approaches that are Tantric in nature, that is, operate at the level of the life force (*prāna*). Tantric therapy is rare in Western Yoga circles, however, and it definitely calls for high competence in teachers/therapists. (By Tantra, I am referring to the complex tradition of Hindu and Buddhist Tantra, not the Western neo-Tantra marketed as sexual techniques.)

Since these editorials afford me an opportunity to freely air my opinions, I would like to articulate one more thought: As long as Yoga therapy seeks to honor the holistic psychosomatic and spiritual orientation of Yoga, it cannot afford to ignore the dimension of *prāna*, which the Yoga masters have identified as the hidden link between body and mind. And I do not merely mean *prāna* in the sense of the breath or as some abstract symbolic reality, but as the energetic matrix of psychosomatic processes. More specifically, the *cakras*—which are *prānic* nodes—should not merely be approached as a useful psychological (symbolic) model but as actual structures of the body's subtle energetic template. Clearly, however, for this to become practically meaningful, Yoga therapists must acquire competence in Tantra and Tantric healing.

Yoga and Yoga therapy in the West are in their infancy, and consequently we must expect to encounter growing pains. The wonderful thing about infancy, however, is that the future lies wide open before us.

As always, your feedback is welcome.