

Aspects of Contemporary Yoga Therapy

by Ellen Serber

At the center of Yoga lie both the desire for transformation and the recognition that we need not change anything, that our true nature need only be uncovered. The uncovering of this essence is approached differently by different teachers, but all agree that physical and mental suffering must be addressed in the journey toward self-realization. To focus on the suffering, however, and not the freedom beyond it, would be an error. Yet it also would be incorrect to overlook pain, for it is the first barrier we approach in the process of self-awareness.

Since its introduction one hundred years ago, Yoga has become increasingly popular in the United States. It is presently enjoying a major surge of attention, complete with endorsement by movie stars, special clothing, special music, workshops, books, and videos. Often the atmosphere surrounding Yoga these days resembles a marketplace of goods and celebrities. Who is the Yoga superstar of the month? How much money can be made as a traveling workshop leader or retreat facilitator? How quickly can one become credentialed to teach Yoga or, even, to do what is being called “therapeutic Yoga”? Yoga has entered the mainstream of our culture, and not only is it pursued as exercise and recreation, but it also is emerging as an addition to Western medical treatment in clinic and hospital settings.

In order to gain some perspective on the emerging popularity of “therapeutic Yoga,” I have interviewed some longtime Yoga teachers in the United States concerning their training and their approach to therapeutic applications of Yoga, and I have found a community of highly dedicated people. As T.K.V. Desikachar observes in an interview reproduced in *The Heart of Yoga* (Inner Traditions International, 1995), “Illness is an obstacle on the road to spiritual enlight-

enment; that is why you must do something about it.”

Many American Yoga teachers have been taught by one of the three well-known students of T. Krishnamacharya: T.K.V. Desikachar, Patabhi Jois, and B.K.S. Iyengar. The lineage of T. Krishnamacharya traces its roots back to an ancestor named Nathamuni, a famous South Indian sage of the ninth century C.E. Nathamuni is the author of *Yoga-Rahasya*, a lost text, in which the main concepts of Viniyoga are described.

In this tradition, Yoga practice must be adapted not only to each stage in a person’s life but also to each individual’s unique and specific needs. In the early years (ages 1 to 27), the student is involved in growth and development of the body and mind. In the mid-stage (ages 27 to the 60s), one looks for stability in one’s psycho-emotional, financial, and physical life. In the sunset stage (elder years), there is a withdrawal from external activity, a turning inward toward self-realization.

The classic presentation of this tradition stresses a personal orientation toward health and meditation. Krishnamacharya, who died in 1989, combined the lineage of Nathamuni, the South Indian tradition of Vaishnavism, and eight years of living and studying in the Himalayas with teacher Ramamohan Brahmachari, who instructed him in the *Yoga-Sutra* of Patanjali and taught him how to help the sick by means of Yoga. Krishnamacharya also studied Ayurveda, a traditional Indian healing system, with a well-known teacher named Krishna Kumar in Bengal. Krishnamacharya included Ayurveda and pulse diagnosis in his analysis of those who came to him for advice.

T.K.V. Desikachar, Krishnamacharya’s son, brings an additional perspective to this great family tradition. Schooled in Western scientific thinking as a

structural engineer, he brings to the ancient teachings a Western perspective and vocabulary. In his teaching, he stresses the science of observation, the sequencing of postures, and how to select which postures are appropriate for each pupil.

In 1976 Desikachar opened the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram, a Yoga school located in Madras. The healing modalities at the

At its roots, Yoga is a spiritual discipline (*sadhana*).

school are asana, pranayama, meditation, and diet. Among the ailments that are treated are diabetes, heart disease, mental retardation, and structural pain. In his book *The Heart of Yoga*, Desikachar comments, "The essence of my father's teachings is this: it is not that the person needs to accommodate him or herself to Yoga, but rather the Yoga practice must be tailored to fit each person" (p. 223).

Gary Kraftsow, who lives in Maui and trains students worldwide, has studied with Desikachar since 1974. When he began, as a boy of nineteen, he was trained in asana and chanting the 195 aphorisms of the *Yoga-Sutra*. Over the years, Gary developed his own method of teaching Yoga based solidly on the teachings of Desikachar.

He works with clients in a variety of ways. A program for a client might stress increasing the client's capacity, perhaps through creating a fitness program or developing a structure to help increase mental concentration. In therapeutic sessions, Gary focuses on three areas: structure (biomechanical problems), physiology (organic problems such as diabetes, cancer, etc.), and emotional states (depres-

sion, anger, anxiety). In developing a personal practice for a client, Gary may or may not include asana; he may recommend an external activity, such as walking; he may include mantra practice or formal study of a particular text. Gary works with his clients at their own level, moving them toward a spiritual practice.

Gary is strongly committed to training teachers in the traditional methods that he learned from Desikachar, and he travels throughout the United States and Europe conducting seminars. He feels that the training programs available in the United States are often quite confusing and incomplete, giving students a little bit of many different approaches. Gary believes that at present Yoga is often reduced to an alternative fitness program, a therapeutic modality, or humanistic psychology. He feels that it is important to remember that at its roots, Yoga is a spiritual discipline (*sadhana*).

Richard Miller, Ph.D., also a student of Desikachar, began his Yoga studies at the Integral Yoga Institute of San Francisco in 1970. He studied with Bikram Choudury in 1973 and was invited to teach as a substitute for Choudury in 1974 at the Yoga College of India in Los Angeles and San Francisco.

Richard describes Bikram Choudury's teaching as being in the lineage of Bishnu Ghosh, who was a physical culturist. Ghosh stressed athleticism as well as the use of Yoga as a therapeutic modality.

During his early years of Yoga practice, Richard began to notice that his body was asymmetrical and that while performing asanas some things didn't feel right. He realized that students need individual attention. He became interested in how

Yoga acts on the mind as well as the body and began to study the psychology of Yoga. He also studied traditional Chinese medicine, herbology, acupuncture, and homeopathy.

In 1975, he met some of the senior U.S. Iyengar teachers and was struck by the therapeutic applications of the Iyengar system. However, he also saw that, wrongly practiced, Yoga could cause problems such as migraine, backache, headache, and sciatica. He realized that in group classes everyone actually needed different poses, and he developed the feeling that Yoga should be taught as an individual practice.

He encountered the work of Desikachar in 1979 and studied with him over the next eight years in India, Europe, and the United States. In group seminars, Desikachar would follow the Viniyoga tradition in which the Yoga practice is individualized to fit a person's needs. He would give students individual case studies and ask how they would design a Yoga program for a particular person based on observation and listening.

Richard's interests also included spiritual self-inquiry and meditation. Desikachar supported Richard continuing his studies with Jean Klein, a naturopathic physician, musicologist, and teacher of Advaita nondualism and Kashmiri Yoga, who also had been a student of T. Krishnamacharya in the 1950s. During his years of ongoing study with Jean Klein, Richard also completed a doctorate in clinical psychology.

Today, Richard does not separate his role as a psychologist and a yogi. "Yoga," says Richard, "is actually *viyoga*—an approach to self-understanding that is designed to remove obstacles which prevent

clear perception of oneself and the world.” According to him, both Patanjali and Jean Klein address the process of self-discovery and spiritual self-understanding by addressing the questions: “Who am I?” “What am I?” and “What is another?”

Richard sees individual Yoga clients, teaches group classes, and also leads meditation groups. In his individual sessions, his approach is based on an attitude of listening. He assesses two things: “What does the person want, and what does he or she need?” For example, a person may want greater flexibility but in fact need more strength. Richard will give this client something to satisfy his or her desire for flexibility but also work with the person on what is really needed.

To illustrate this point, Richard relates the case of a client who came to him with sciatica. The man wanted to continue stressing flexibility in his practice, but it was evident that that would merely increase his sciatica. Richard gave him an additional practice to relieve the sciatica, while allowing the client to continue the flexibility exercises he wanted. Richard then encouraged him to understand what helped and what was counterproductive. On the level of meditation, a student may come to a class wanting to be more relaxed, but, says Richard, what he or she needs is to better understand him- or herself.

In group classes, Richard teaches generalized concepts and leads students through the experience of them. Then he dialogues about how to apply the concepts to one’s individual practice, adapting the concepts to each individual’s specific needs.

Richard Freeman is a teacher of Ashtanga Yoga in the tradition of

Pattabhi Jois. He observes that traditionally people came to yogis not necessarily for higher spiritual truth but with very practical problems, such as, “I can’t get pregnant,” or

Even the best students will encounter knots or faults in their practice and will need “therapy” to match their individual needs.

“I hurt my back.” The working away of these obstacles into meditative awareness was part of the yogi’s role. Yoga as a physical therapy was based in the tradition of the working away of obstacles.

Psychological problems received commonsense advice. Often this advice was along the line of, “Do what you can and then surrender.” Psychological counseling often took the form of relating myths. Within the cultural context of the myths lies imagery that has healing potential.

In a traditional context of Yoga teaching, the student comes to the teacher already imbued with a cultural base of myth and scripture that is consistent with that of the teacher. This is very different from non-Indian students, who have an entirely different cultural base and arrive in India with little or no knowledge of Indian philosophy, language, and culture. In the Ashtanga tradition of Pattabhi Jois, the advice is, “Practice and it will come to you.” However, when Richard met Pattabhi Jois, he had been a student of Yoga and Eastern philosophy for twenty years and was, as he said, “primed to go.”

In the Ashtanga tradition, therapy is considered incidental to Yoga. The teachers are not prima-

rily therapists, but rather, as Richard Freeman puts it, “They want to get to the nectar of truth.” Their attitude is that if one has a physical or emotional problem, one should take care of it elsewhere and then come back to Yoga class. This attitude is reflected in many Yoga scriptures, which recommend accepting only physically and mentally fit students who are eager for spiritual knowledge.

Richard believes that even the best students will encounter knots or faults in their practice and will need “therapy” to match their individual needs. Their problem will then become their gateway into higher Yoga. Therapy can be a spiritual practice and should not be neglected in the name of “higher” Yoga.

But Richard also is concerned with the other extreme: As the emphasis on Yoga’s health benefits takes over the contemporary practice of Yoga, we are losing its spiritual properties. While one must get through pain to reach self-awareness, he feels the proper balance has been lost; people are becoming attached to both their emotional and physical impediments. Some pick at their wounds and indulge their various neuroses. At best, they are becoming attached to harmony, to health and happiness, rather than to spiritual awakening. He sees this as a big obstacle.

Richard only occasionally offers private study. He refers people to the teachers trained by him for one-on-one sessions. However, when a student needs individual attention, Richard will work with him or her before class.

According to Richard, Pattabhi Jois did not stress therapeutics; rather, he believed that traditional practice will take care of problems. This often works, comments Rich-

ard, but not always. Some people make great progress. Others fall by the wayside. "By enveloping our specific difficulties with intelligence and compassion, we're going toward pure Yoga."

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Ramanand Patel, a longtime student of B.K.S. Iyengar, began doing therapeutic work in the 1950s. Growing up in an East Indian community in Africa, Ramanand recalls, it was common knowledge who did Yoga. Those were the people one sought for advice about common problems, both of a physical and spiritual nature.

Ramanand met Mr. Iyengar in 1968 in England and began his studies with him. He recalls that Mr. Iyengar would treat patients with an intuitive approach based on his observation of their bodies. He worked structurally, psychologically, and energetically, sometimes using his personal energy for healing.

Mr. Iyengar is well known for his use of props to modify poses, so that they are accessible to people with limited physical range. Ramanand notes that props have been used in India for a long time but that Mr. Iyengar has refined their use and even has invented many special props, such as the back bender and the heart bench.

Ramanand observed the medical classes at the Iyengar Institute in Pune (India) and, as a senior student, assisted with them. He reports that B.K.S. Iyengar does not always explain the reasons behind his actions, and Ramanand feels that much of Mr. Iyengar's knowledge will die with him, partly because it is intuitive and partly because it is

guarded against wide distribution.

Ramanand also believes that there are malpractice issues when treating students' ailments. For that reason, as well as for reasons of professional ethics, he feels that students should be encouraged to check everything with a doctor. In his own words, "We teach Yoga and if that benefits people that's wonderful."

He recommends that we teach Yoga as recreational, as health-giving, and as a way of looking at the deeper issues of self-awareness. If a student says, "I have an injury, will you help me?" then one can address that, but if a new student walks in with an injury, he or she should be referred to a doctor.

Ramanand acknowledges that one must treat the physical so that it doesn't get in the way. He sees that people suffer twice: They have physical pain, perhaps a sprained ankle, and as a result of this pain they then have emotional suffering. He is interested in getting rid of the second kind of suffering; this is what he calls "exploring the nature of the self."

Judith Lasater also has been a student of B.K.S. Iyengar. She first met him in 1974 when he came to San Francisco. In 1976 and 1977, she went to India as a student and observed his therapeutic classes. Judith had a degree in physical therapy as well as prior Yoga training, but she reports that she found the medical classes in Pune to be "baffling." She began to assist in the therapeutic classes, but there was little discussion about the problems or the suggested sequences of poses for their treatment.

The turning point in Judith's practice came after she developed pneumonia following the birth of her

first child in 1978. Extremely fatigued and depleted, she turned to the therapeutic sequences in Mr. Iyengar's *Light on Yoga* (Schocken Books, 1966, 1995) for help. The suggested series consisted of forward bends, the opposite of the chest-opening poses she had assumed would be appropriate. In the case of pneumonia, there apparently is an excess of prana heat, which has to be cooled down, and the forward bends were cooling.

Judith began to pay attention to the "inner body" and saw that the poses made sense in another way: They were influencing the internal organs in such a way as to effect energy flow. Judith began to understand that the poses were not only dealing with structure, but were also working with various forms of prana, or life energy. As to Mr. Iyengar's intuitive approach, Judith says that he looks for the flow of blood, the flow of energy.

To aid her teaching, Judith would write to Mr. Iyengar with questions about students, and he would immediately respond with sequences of poses for them. She says, "Mr. Iyengar burns hotly and expects others to pick up his information. It helps if you know about Ayurveda and prana. Mr. Iyengar used to practice ten to twelve hours a day. He is unique in that he was an intense practitioner."

Judith's current approach to Yoga emphasizes the internal and psychological part of the postures. "People come to Yoga because they look outside and find no answer. They come to Yoga to find strength in the midst of chaos. The organs are a metaphor of what's going on inside. Yoga in itself is therapy. Yoga is the path to recover our innate health."

Judith cautions about the title "Yoga therapist." She feels that in

order to be considered a Yoga therapist, one should have medical training and knowledge of Ayurveda and psychology. She has augmented her physical therapy degree with a doctorate in East-West psychology, focusing on the *Yoga-Sutra*.

The Iyengar Yoga teachers in the United States meet at teaching conferences every two years, at which Mr. Iyengar or his daughter Geeta teaches. Although the emphasis is on teaching the basic asanas, demonstrations on people with medical and structural problems are always included. There is not much explanation of why something is done, but the students may observe the treatment and attempt to figure out the reasoning for themselves. With Mr. Iyengar's permission, the Iyengar Association in the United States is now attempting to record the various asana "prescriptions" that Mr. Iyengar has given people, so that the information about them won't be lost.

Judith introduced Mary Schatz, a physician, to Iyengar-style Yoga in 1977, and Mary began going to India in 1980. Mary became a leading force in the Iyengar community, teaching workshops on back care based on yogic asanas but using Western medical information as a diagnostic tool. Mary's book *Back Care Basics* (Rodmell Press, 1992), is the most complete presentation of the Iyengar approach to treatment for back pain currently available.

When Judith discusses relationship to gurus, she says that in our culture (unlike in the Indian culture, in which strong teacher-student relationships are part of the social fabric), it is important to observe "whether you are escaping by projecting onto someone else or whether the teacher is bringing you

deeper. If you don't surrender to the process of growth totally, you don't experience wholeness, but there can be problems if there is not a clear boundary when one works intimately with a teacher."

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The issue of guru-student relationship lies beneath the surface of the present-day Kripalu experience. The former resident community at Kripalu, in western Massachusetts, had to look deeply at its belief system, its premise, its very existence when it called for its guru's resignation a few years ago. The kind of healing that has taken place within that community since then is in itself a journey of Yoga therapy.

The traditional foundation of Kripalu came from Amrit Desai, who, although he had very little traditional Yoga training with his guru Bapuji, had powerful energy experiences with him. According to Christopher Baxter, who together with many colleagues is continuing to develop Kripalu Yoga, the essence of Kripalu's tradition is that energy is awakened through various techniques in the context of a safe space, a sacred place of love, where one may open to the healing power of prana.

Christopher claims that "when Amrit said to follow the wisdom of your body, injuries occurred because of insufficient knowledge of anatomy and physiology as well as unsafe teacher-student boundaries." He apparently understood energy but was unschooled in anatomy and

couldn't let his disciples go beyond his limited understanding. So the Kripalu teachers learned from other traditions—Iyengar, Feldenkreis, Oki-Yoga, Bikram. They added their own insights to these styles. Although there was an eclectic philosophy and a variety of styles, a connection to prana prevailed. Christopher observes, "The teachers' hearts and the students' hearts were opened. The attunement through dedicated practice enabled physical, emotional, and spiritual healing to take place."

Christopher remains deeply grateful for his experience and feels "nothing is so powerful as my relationship with prana." He says that Kripalu teachers attempt to "energetically hold sacred space for their class" and that there is an "energetic entrainment between teacher and student." They attempt to build an authentic relationship based on unconditional love, and they intend the energy of love to be present in the room as a healing force.

For them, therapy uses techniques, whereas healing does not arise from technique but from a deep nurturing of the heart chakra. The class, or the ashram, then becomes a spiritual haven where people are renewed and can release anxiety and feel fulfilled.

In the early days of Kripalu, Christopher relates, there was a combination of spiritual awakening and premature transcendence. People let go of all boundaries and had experiences of spiritual ecstasy without being able to integrate the transcendental back into their ordinary lives. Now there is a 200-hour "level one" training program for teachers, based on a balanced curriculum of asana, pranayama, philosophy, professional ethics, communications, spirituality, teaching methodology, and personal development.

The teaching faculty has developed this in collaboration with psychologists, physiologists, and medical doctors. This is part of a concerted effort by the present staff to systematize the Kripalu training to include a methodology and a more scientific approach without discarding the essence of conscious awareness that is at the heart of the approach. The Kripalu teacher sees that the art of healing lies in the circle of energy from teacher to student and back to teacher combined with the intention that the teacher create a safe and loving space in which the students can learn.

A community of yogis and yoginis living and working together—the ashram experience—also lies at the center of the Ananda tradition. Ananda was begun by J. Donald Walters who took the name Swami Paramahansa Kriyananda. He was a student of Yogananda and lived with him in the United States the last three and a half years of his life, until Yogananda died in 1952.

In 1967, Kriyananda moved to the Sierra foothills outside Nevada City, California, to manifest Yogananda's dream of developing spiritual communities. The Ananda community grew and now is flourishing, with additional branches in Sacramento, Palo Alto, Portland, Seattle, Australia, and Italy. The community has gone through many challenging events in its evolutionary process and has emerged over the last thirty years as a place dedicated to supporting spiritual growth and community living according to the ideals of Yoga.

Adam Bornstein was the director and principal instructor of Yoga teacher training at Ananda's Expanding Light retreat center. Adam helped develop a rigorous training course that includes anatomy, physiology, and teaching for spe-

cial needs. Emphasis is also given to understanding the underlying philosophy behind all the practices of Yoga, including Patanjali's eight-limbed path and the cakra system.

At the core of Ananda Yoga is the inward journey that Adam describes as "body awareness to prana awareness to soul awareness." The main techniques used are asana, pranayama, meditation, affirmations, and Yogananda's Energization Exercises. Adam explains that the Energization Exercises were developed in the 1920s by Yogananda. Used in self-healing, these exercises are accompanied by visualizations, affirmations and breath work. While the physical postures work the physical body, the mental affirmations "tune into the specific energy flows and thus the specific psychological benefits that each posture promotes." Affirmation is able to repattern the subconscious mind, forming new grooves of positive thinking. The positive thinking then has the power to change attitude, thought, and feelings which in turn affect the internal flow of prana.

As Adam observes, "My background is eclectic, having studied in depth with various teachers representing many of the major systems of Hatha-Yoga. In addition, I received Yoga therapy training with Integrative Yoga Therapy. Since 1984, my primary teacher has been Swami Kriyananda. He has helped me understand the importance of balancing physical practices with the spiritual essence of Yoga."

Swami Satchidananda's approach, Integral Yoga, also is physical, spiritual, and subtle. It is an approach that has influenced many of the major medical applications of Yoga in the United States

in the last twenty years. Both Dr. Dean Ornish, M.D., who has revolutionized the treatment of heart disease with lifestyle modifications, and Michael Lerner, Ph.D., who has created an adjunct treatment to traditional cancer therapies, studied at the Integral Yoga Ashram in Connecticut.

Nischala Devi, who was one of the early teachers of Integral Yoga, says that Swami Satchidananda was a naturopath and taught natural ways to heal, calling asana and pranayama the best medicine. Satchidananda stressed the connection between physical health, mental health, and spiritual well-being. He taught that Yoga addresses imbalances that lead to disease, and Yoga brings balance.

Satchidananda taught a series of postures that came from his teacher, Swami Sivananda, including back bends, forward bends, twists, inversions, bandhas, kriyas, mudras, and deep relaxation, as well as pranayama and meditation. The series is the same for everyone. It starts with the physical body and ends in a point of stillness in the mind. There is no mention of muscles, but one goes deep into the organs and central nervous system.

Integral Yoga classes may be modified; for example, the version for heart patients is more gentle and there is added deep relaxation.

When Nischala began Yoga, she was already trained as a physician's assistant, and so when she moved to the Connecticut ashram in 1979 she became part of the ashram's Integral Health Services. She first worked as an assistant to one of the physicians in charge but soon began her own practice. She interacted with patients with hypertension, pain, lupus, and eating disorders—all problems that are difficult to control

with Western medicine. In 1981, Nischala refined the Integral Yoga Teacher Training Program and commenced training teachers.

In 1982, Dean Ornish, then a medical resident at the Massachusetts General Hospital, began to use the tools of Integral Yoga to start his research program for the reversal of heart disease. From the findings of that study, and two other prior trials, his program of diet, exercise, and Yoga developed.

Michael Lerner took the Integral Yoga teacher training in 1982, and later that year started Commonweal, a Yoga-based cancer help program in California.

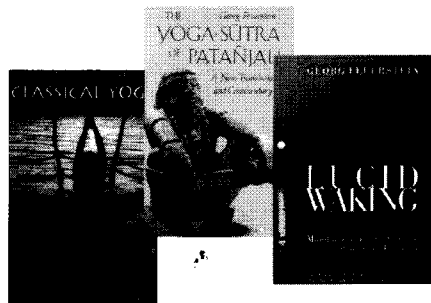
Nischala continued her therapeutic work first at Commonweal and then as the director of the Yoga portion of the Ornish Program, which is now in a number of hospitals around the country. Nischala is concerned about taking something as natural, simple, and healing as Yoga practice and turning it into allopathic medicine. "You have to do very little to restore balance," she explains. As with homeopathy, one intuit, almost dreams a remedy. "Yoga works from the spirit out," she says.

All of the teachers discussed here are immersed completely in their Yoga practice. For them, Yoga

is not just a physical experience of exercise but a way of life. They have differing approaches to asana teaching and meditation, but at the very center they share a sincere desire to alleviate suffering and increase self-awareness.

As Yoga becomes more popularized in the United States, Yoga teachers confront a great challenge. We can take the essence of the practice into our lives and become transformed, or we can transform Yoga into a commercialized—and degraded—version of itself, selling clothing, props, videos, certifications and, finally, ourselves as commodities in the marketplace.

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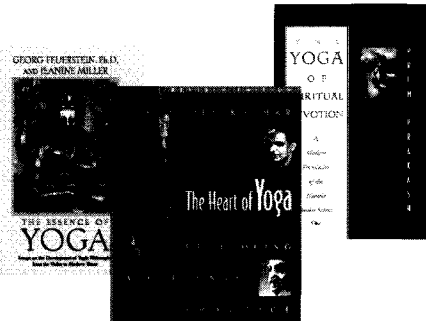


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