

YOGA PSYCHOLOGY TODAY

By Laura Sevika Douglass, Ph.D.

Dr. Douglass, our special section guest editor, developed the Yoga therapy theme for this issue. She was particularly interested in exploring applications of Yoga philosophy and practice in the field of psychotherapy. She conducted many of the interviews in this section and, in this article, she gives us an overview of the field today. We're grateful for her spirit of service and her insights.

Foundations of Yoga Psychology

The simple act of making meaning can turn a horrendous tragedy into an opportunity to learn how to tolerate difficult emotions, improve relationships and begin to connect with the nourishing relationships that surround us. That we are a meaning-making species is evident from the philosophical approach to Yoga psychology grounded in the teaching of Samkhya philosophy, Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, the *Upanishads* and other sacred texts. This philosophical approach enables us to find hope in the face of tragedy. The flip side of this approach, however, is there may be the false sense that what we "do" doesn't matter, if only we think the right thoughts.

The Ayurvedic approach to mental health is much different. It adheres to an understanding that psychological disturbance has a physiological component (called a *doshic* imbalance) and that there is much we can do in terms of diet and lifestyle to put us in right relationship with our bodies. Right relationship to the body is seen as the beginning of mental health, for we often treat those around us in much the same way as we treat our bodies. Ayurveda holds Yoga and Samkhya as essential philosophical schools of thought that help us understand the world around us as well as our place within it.

The *Charaka Samhita*, a textbook on Ayurveda, is the only book that directly addresses psychological disorders. Ayurveda has a lot to offer those who suffer with mental illness. A good Ayurvedic practitioner can help us understand what we need to take in through the five senses to facilitate our development as spiritual beings. We often think of mental illness as something "not spiritual," but it, too, is a path toward a deeper understanding of ourselves.

The *Aitareya Upanishads* say that we all have access to the *atman*, or a state of consciousness that is unperturbed by our mental anguish. In this place we experience ourselves as *satchidananda*, truth, knowledge and bliss. We all have access to this state of consciousness, regardless of any emotional problems we may have. In my experience, this state of consciousness doesn't "fix" mental illness, but it does open us to experience the totality of our being. We begin to see ourselves from a higher perspective. We may say, "Oh yes, my mind is prone to anxiety and has difficulty feeling safe." But we also experience that we are so much more than the body and mind. We experience that our mental suffering is temporary, while our soul is

eternal. We see clearly that our mental afflictions are a path, which if followed, will lead us to develop wisdom, compassion and love.

Higher states of consciousness evoked by Yoga have the unique effect of settling the mind, because we are no longer wrestling with mental illness. We no longer push it aside as something unworthy of our attention, or as a bother. We begin to accept the eating disorder, the traumas, the anxiety and the difficulties connecting with others as functional adaptations to extremely traumatic situations. We begin to see the limitations of these strategies, and can consciously choose to replace them with yogic tools that help to keep us safe in ways that are not harmful to us. We begin to accept that we have to engage in self-care, if we are to truly begin healing and recovering our sense of self.

Applications of Yoga Psychology

Today, the field of Yoga psychology is extremely eclectic but there are three main ways that individuals are approaching the discipline: 1) Yoga as a series of practices that positively impacts our mental health, as can be proven by neuroscience 2) Yoga as practices that are grounded in a long philosophical tradition that help individuals make meaning of their lives and 3) Yoga as the sister science of Ayurveda, that seeks to understand the constitutional imbalances of an individual and the use of lifestyle changes to restore the individual to equanimity. These three schools of thought really differ in their approach to understanding, practicing and studying Yoga psychology.

There is often a prescriptive approach in Yoga psychology for specific psychological effects. For example, if someone suffers from anxiety, the Yoga therapist may assign them a specific series of restorative Yoga poses and breathing practices. This approach is incredibly valuable as a way to begin the individual's commitment to the important role of discipline in healing. The additional value of this approach to Yoga psychology is that it can be researched. Studies are pointing to the benefit of Yoga postures, breathing practices and meditation for anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders, obsessive-compulsive disorder and depression. This practical perspective is imperative to the success of Yoga psychology, but reifies the idea that we are solely our bodies, that, if we manipulate the body in the "right way," we will find peace and happiness.

The practices of Yoga help us to regulate our energy level. If our energy level is too low (a *tamasic*, hypo-aroused state in which we feel dull, heavy, lethargic and tend to dissociate), we may engage in a slightly vigorous posture based practice. If our energy level is too high (a *rajasic*, hyper-aroused state in which we feel anger, anxiety, tension and racing thoughts), we may engage in a slow or restorative posture based practice. Over time, we begin to learn how to uniquely adapt Yoga *asanas*, *pranayama*, meditation, yogic diet, chanting, self-study and exploration of the philosophical texts in ways that help us relate to our emotional landscape.

We may find that despite years of Yoga practice, an excellent ability to self-soothe and to access higher states of consciousness, that we are still prone to habits that cause us to suffer. Perhaps our habitual feeling that the world isn't safe leads us to unhealthy levels of isolation, or we may jump to anger or anxiety in predictable ways. We may find that psychotherapy is an extremely useful tool to help us understand our habits and how we orient toward and away from the present moment.

Yoga and psychotherapy are excellent tools to help us experience what is, and, sometimes, this includes profound grief, depth of longing, fear and desperation. For people who have experienced a lot of trauma, childhood abuse or both, the internalized message is that we are unworthy, bad and deeply disturbed; we often don't go into the depth of our pain because we believe there is a bottomless pit of despair. There isn't. Underneath all mental turmoil is something quite predictable: beauty, resilience, strength, joy and contentment. It helps to know we don't have to do this alone.

It also helps to know that we are spiritual beings with incredible capacity and strength. This strength can be harnessed to resist the temptation to avoid emotions through addictions, food, exercise, and work. Instead, we can allow ourselves to feel, allow the emotions to emerge from their hiding places and welcome them in. In my experience, the simple and difficult act of experiencing the intensity of our emotions, allows them to pass. We emerge refreshed, fortified and surprised at the peace and contentment that are an integral part of our being.

Yoga Therapy's Challenges Today

As Yoga has been adapted to North American culture, it has adopted some of our culture's interests. One way this manifests is our interest in upholding charismatic or beautiful individuals as ideal yogis. Another is that many Yoga teachers spend more time marketing themselves than on Yoga practice. It can seem like it's impossible to find teachers who are truly dedicated to the discipline of Yoga. It isn't that spiritual disciplines aren't available, it's that the media doesn't market these practices because



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they've yet to realize that compassion, love and kindness do have real economic and societal value. For example, in the Boston area where I live, Swami Tyagananda gives free lectures on some aspect of Yoga at the Ramakrishna Center every Sunday. He is a living example of a *sattvic* lifestyle, but his lectures are attended by far fewer individuals than the average power Yoga class.

Yoga therapy is a new profession that is still grappling for its place within North American society. What will the educational standards be? What will insurance cover? What should people pay for Yoga therapy? These questions don't have answers yet, and often the individuals most earnestly seeking to answer them hope to secure wealth, power and prestige for themselves and their organizations. This is a form of suffering that we should try to help each other overcome. We don't need to give up searching for the answers to these questions, but we will certainly be happier if we can maintain an awareness of our spiritual sense of identity as we struggle with the politics of our field.

“Contemplative” Sciences in Education and Research

As Yoga therapy becomes mainstream it has begun to be adopted by higher education. Students can now get masters degrees in Yoga Studies from Loyola Marymount College or take classes on Yoga at Naropa University, California Institute of Integral Studies, Lesley University, Harvard and Brown. Academics are poised to enhance the systematic study of Yoga with the consequence that Yoga therapists will become more educated and better

able to serve specific populations. The down side is that professors are not paid for their cultivation of kindness or even for their mentoring and teaching skills. They are paid for their ability to research and publish, with the unintended consequence that the needs of young individuals new to the field are sometimes pushed to the side and only the ambitious students flourish. Hopefully, universities will partner with places like Yogaville so that students can cultivate not only their intellectual abilities, but their ability to live the practices of Yoga.

Organizations like the Contemplative Mind in Society, Mind and Life Institute and the Fetzer Institute have encouraged professors to research what it is about contemplative practices that opens our hearts, clears our minds and begins to deepen our relationships to self and others. They utilize the phrase “contemplative” in order to include a variety of practices. The phrase “sciences” attempts to encapsulate higher education’s values of rational thinking, secularism and the scientific method.

There is a trend to secularize Yoga and Buddhism, particularly in higher education. Secularism, or the idea that the government and education should exist free from religious beliefs is a value of our culture because it strives to create a neutral public environment. This allows individuals to maintain whatever personal beliefs they like, while the public forum is a place where neutrality and rationality trump any specific religious beliefs.

Despite the fact that “Contemplative Sciences” alludes to the diversity of practices that those in higher education hope to study, in my experience, most schools are integrating mindfulness practices that rest on Buddhist teachings. Buddhist forms of Yoga are thought by many academics to offer true insight into the nature of the human condition, while Hindu forms of Yoga are viewed as being marred by polytheism and a devotional attitude. Academics resonate with the atheistic stance of Buddhism and often see theistic traditions as less sophisticated. This preference for Buddhist teaching by Euro-Americans can be seen in the academic literature as early as the 1800s.

For others in academia, the word “Yoga” hints at religious beliefs. Ever since Freud’s assertion that religion is a group neurosis that emerges out of deep emotional conflict, many academics have been loath to associate themselves with anything that could be considered religious. It’s not only rare for Contemplative Science programs to offer the systematic study of Yoga, but it’s also rare for them to offer the systematic study of practices that arise out of Christian, Sikh, Muslim or other faith-based traditions. Because the majority of academics are looking for secular ways to understand and quantify contemplative practices, there is a tendency to avoid the word “Yoga.”

But you can’t quantify a spiritual experience! Spiritual experiences are, by nature, beyond the mind and body. They are experiences of unity that shift the fundamental way in which we experience ourselves and the world around us. Most researchers are not interested in quantifying these experiences, but they do want to know if these experiences have a positive impact on things that are measurable: cognition, memory, and attributes of our physical and mental well-being.

It may be too much to expect that higher education will be a place that offers the comprehensive study, experience and lived practice of Yoga. Higher education does have a lot to offer in terms of studying the foundational texts of Yoga, understanding the meaning that Yoga practitioners make of their experiences and learning how to systematically study the impact of Yoga on individuals and communities. There have been some wonderful research studies that have increased our understanding of the uses and limitations of Yoga in therapeutic context. There have also been some wonderful qualitative texts on Yoga that have expanded our understanding of what Yoga is: Joseph Alter’s *Yoga in Modern India*, Mark Singelton’s *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice* and David Gordon White’s *Sinister Yogis*, to name but a few.

The experience of Yoga is quite different from understanding Yoga. Spiritual experiences are not ideas; they are quite literally experiences. They give us the felt and embodied sense of humility, empowerment, trust, order, the ability to stay grounded despite the natural flux and change of the world and the skill to discern the complexities that exist behind simplistic categories of right and wrong. The spiritual component of Yoga will ultimately transform us in profound and unexpected ways.

Universities will have to partner with places like Satchidananda Ashram-Yogaville, Kripalu and various meditation centers to help students get the lived experience of Yoga. Students need to have the direct experience of immersing themselves in the yogic practices of silence, meditation, chanting, deep relaxation, *pranayama* and postures. These communities of practice support us to refine our inner lives. Communities like Yogaville help us experience our internal sense of prosperity and wisdom. Through living the practices of Yoga we come into direct contact with joy, contentment, love and compassion. Our culture is slowly realizing that these are significant qualities, worth developing.

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