

Editorial

Passing the Sacred Talking Stick

Trisha Lamb



After many deeply wonderful years of working for IAYT, the time has come for me to pass the sacred talking stick to Kelly McGonigal, so that I may retire to a retreat hut for some intensive internal “editing.” Just prior to being hired by IAYT, Kelly

had envisioned her ideal job as very akin to this position, and then she serendipitously saw our ad in an issue of *Yoga Studies*. It is quite rare to realize such a perfect match between vision and reality, and thus I expect great things from Kelly in her new capacity.

I extend many thanks to Kelly for her outstanding assistance with the editing of the present issue of the journal. Getting this lengthy issue ready on time would not have been possible without her help.

There is an extraordinary amount of information in the present issue, commensurate with the burgeoning interest in the profession of Yoga therapy. The articles cover broad territory, ranging from an in-depth and thought-provoking look at the foundations of Yoga therapy to a montage of possible means of financing Yoga therapy treatments. We also commissioned an article on osteoporosis by Matthew Taylor in response to a recent exchange on the Kripalu Yoga Teachers mailing list about the implications of this epidemic condition for Yoga teachers and Yoga students. We released the article early at our website as both a public and yogic service, and we encourage you to recommend it to your colleagues and students.

In his article “The Yoga of Healing,” Kausthub Desikachar brings an in-depth look at Yoga therapy and the qualities of an effective Yoga therapist. He also brings a different view of the *panca-maya-kosha* model, one with which some of our readers may not be familiar. In his presentation, the concept and term *kosha* is eliminated, as it is deemed too restrictive to accurately convey the interpenetrating nature of each of the five layers of the model. In addition, he assigns somewhat different meanings to each of the layers than is the case in some traditions. In his *pancamaya* model, the five layers correspond to body, breath, intellect, emotions, and personality, whereas some readers are more likely to know them as corresponding to the physical body, the etheric body, the mind, the higher mind, and the bliss body.

Another view brought in the article, that some illnesses are caused by our own actions and some are not, differs from some other yogic views of karmic cause and effect. The view with which I am most familiar holds that everything that happens to us is a result or ripening of our past actions in this and prior lifetimes, yielding a strong incentive for right action in this and all future incarnations. Buddhist practitioners, for instance, embrace illness as a ripening and purification of prior *karma*, creating a potentially more positive attitude toward their illness than might characterize someone who does not feel responsible for his or her condition. This could have a significant effect on the course of treatment a Yoga therapist proposes.

Matthew Taylor reminds us in his article that as Yoga therapists we can help those suffering illness to trans-

form what appears to be a negative circumstance into an opportunity to grow in awareness, the core purpose of Yoga. For example, when I learned I had osteoporosis about two years ago, which came as a great surprise to both me and my physician, my first response was a mixture of horror and anxiety combined with “what do I do now?” I went into a bit of a cocooning stage for a time, considering what the implications were for my *âsana* practice, my weightlifting routine (I had lifted weights for 20 years), my general way of being in daily life, and my spiritual practice altogether. (Note: I had asked my physician when I reached age 50 if he would refer me for a DEXA scan, and he asked if there was any history of osteoporosis in my family. At the time, my mother had not yet fallen and suffered vertebral compression fractures due to severe osteoporosis, so we did not know she had it. I answered in the negative, and my physician responded, “Don’t waste your money; with everything you do healthwise, it does not seem possible you could have osteoporosis.” This was an error, and another physician at his clinic later concurred. I was probably osteopenic at that point, still premenopausal, and could have undertaken intensified natural treatment then and possibly headed off the osteoporosis. I thus suggest heeding the current recommendation to obtain a baseline DEXA scan at age 50 or before. Obtain one earlier if there is a history of osteoporosis in your family, if you have taken medications that may cause bone loss, if you have yo-yo dieted or had an eating disorder, or if you have a history of extreme over-exercising—the latter can be a cause of osteoporosis because of the abnormal stresses it places on the body.)

Once I learned I had osteoporosis, it required cultivating a more refined awareness of my movements and posture at all times. Such an opportunity for a quickening of awareness is something that may be welcomed by a Yoga or any other spiritual practitioner. After my initial resistance, I found it became another means to cultivate mindfulness and awareness and gentle, conscious care of this wonderful human vehicle that provides the opportunity to do spiritual practice.

There also is an interesting potential benefit from the standpoint of subtle anatomy. We are instructed in the yogic scriptures to sit with straight backs as an aid to concentrating *prâna* in the central channel (*sushumnâ-nâdî*), and one of the instructions given to those with osteoporosis is to maintain excellent posture at all times, no slouching, as this always involves rounding of the spine. I can say that having osteoporosis has made me much more aware of maintaining good, open-chested (open-hearted), extended posture, and this has made a noticeable difference in my seated meditation practice, both on gross and subtle levels.

I also read a quote recently by Swami Gitananda that really made an impression on me posturally, and it essentially said, “In the East people sit up, whereas in the West people sit down.” There is wise advice captured in this simple, elegant statement.

As Kausthub, Matt, and Kelly (in her editorial) also remind us, we can only be as good Yoga therapists as we are practitioners. If we really want to help others, and stably bring clarity in our work with them, we must first develop a deep understanding of ourselves through self-inspection and mindfulness. As Kausthub further points out, we can-

not require our students/clients to change their habitual patterns, but we can certainly inspire them to do so through our own self-mastery.

Ultimately, the deepest and truest healing comes from purifying our minds, in coming to rest in our innate pure nature (variously called Buddha nature, *brahman*, the ground of being, naked awareness, ordinary mind, the Self, etc.), regardless of our circumstance. In the Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhist practice I do, we visualize ourself and everyone else as a deity, as Tara or Avalokiteshvara, for example, deities of unbounded compassion and wisdom, and our surroundings as a Pure Land. One of the most important teachings I ever received from my teacher in this regard is the following (paraphrased): “We spend almost all our time imagining ourselves to be a separate, limited, problematic, ailing, egoic being—why not instead spend more of that time imagining ourselves to be a pure being, a deity?” This type of practice helps to purify our view and prepares us for the final stage of practice in which all imagining comes to rest.

It can be difficult at first to grasp the point that we are actively imagining ourselves to be the separate “I” we ordinarily experience ourselves to be, with all our attachments, aversions, and confusions. It is hard to believe that it is all a creation of mind, that the separate, solid-feeling body and firm sense of “I” we experience as “real” is simply a manifestation of, as Buddhism teaches, mental distraction. When the mental distraction, the endless thinking/imagining of all kinds finally comes to rest, the sense of having a separate, solid body abates, and we become infinite in dimension, unbounded in compassion, and unbounded in wisdom/clarity. As Longchenpa so beautifully

renders it, we become “the eyes of the world.”

At that point, there is neither positive nor negative, healing nor non-healing, simply a joyful, open-hearted embrace of whatever our current circumstance may be.

That is the true healing, and may we as Yoga practitioners, Yoga teachers, and Yoga therapists never waiver from this view. May we always guide our own practice and that of our students/clients, however basic it may be, toward this precious root understanding.

We are just at the beginning of

the blossoming of Yoga therapy in the West. As this gentle, profound profession makes its way into Western culture and the Western medical setting, its potential for alleviating suffering in both relative and ultimate ways is unlimited.

It has been exhilarating to watch Yoga’s gifts spread into practically every niche of our culture over the past decade and a half, and it will be equally exciting to observe the flowering of Yoga therapy in the coming years.

Completing this issue of the journal are thoughtful, helpful arti-

cles on conducting Yoga research, Yoga for breast cancer survivors, Yoga following hip replacement surgery, Yoga for Parkinson’s disease, the effect of chanting on depression, teaching Yoga to children, and obtaining financial support for Yoga therapy. May each one benefit your practice.

With love and deepest gratitude for the privilege of being part of IAYT—may it flourish and serve countless beings,

Trisha



“You want the Lord to Shepard you, then first be a Lamb.”

—Swami Veda Bharati

The International Himalayan
Yoga Meditation Societies thank
TRISHA LAMB
for her years of dedicated service
to the
International Association of Yoga
Therapists