

# Perspective

## Keeping Compassion in Yoga Therapy

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Many students initially come to Yoga because they are suffering, whether in body, mind, emotions, or from our most common suffering, a disconnection from spirit. They ask Yoga for “just one technique that would work to cure me,” something simple to do that would alleviate back pain, headache, depression, and even cancer or heart disease.

The temptation is to apply Yoga as an allopathic remedy that fights disease. However, Yoga is a holistic approach that creates a balance of energies and invites the natural aptitude of the body to right itself. It is with this understanding that even the most gentle of practices can positively affect *any* disease or imbalance.

If we pursue fighting disease, we perpetuate the attitude and thinking that we are simple beings, or as some recount, “great and mighty machines.” In fact, we are complex multi-dimensional beings. Even a pain in the back is not simple. The pain is comprised of the use or abuse of muscles and nerves; how we think, feel, eat, and sleep; and how we live and love. Yogic practices enable us to acknowledge and even to touch the essence of who we are. In the process, the back pain is lessened and even dissolved.

For this to occur, the ancient techniques of Yoga must be used as a complete and whole system. It concerns me greatly when I read, see, or hear a “natural and holistic” health practitioner dissect the ancient practices and prescribe them as if they were drugs: “Take three minutes of shoulderstand, two neck movements, three deep breaths, and a glass of pure filtered water, and call me in a week. This will make you better.”

If we follow this Yogic prescription and do not get better, we lose faith in natural methods. Instead, ask, “How long did it take to get sick?” “How many years of stress and emotional buildup?” All that cannot be changed overnight. Even in the case of complete cures, if an adjustment in lifestyle is not followed, the disease is likely to return. Yoga is not a treatment; rather, it is an *evoking of consciousness* that allows health, balance, and joy to be our companions throughout life’s journey.

The great uncertainty in Yoga therapy, as it continues to become more and more academic and research-oriented,

is will it be able to continue to embrace the intuition and compassion in its abilities to heal?

Along with the new academic sanction for Yoga therapy is the ballooning need to “prove the efficacy of Yoga.” We live in a society that believes in research. As Yoga therapy comes into its own, the need to adapt it to the Western medical model and fit it into what the insurance companies deem a defined benefit seems imperative to many. Will we amend our therapeutic structure so that Yoga can be measured and proven as a viable and verified therapy?

At this junction of ancient and modern, research seems to be necessary, but with a large caution: *to keep the sacred practices of Yoga complete, not turn them into another branch of Western medicine.* Western medicine extracted the compassion and intuitive components from healing with detrimental results. Could this be one of the main reasons so many seek alternative therapies? If we do not strive to keep these qualities in Yoga therapy, the difference between Yoga therapy and Western medicine becomes negligible.

As we cultivate compassion, it blossoms as our inner guidance. It constantly reminds us that it is not the exactness of a technique that gives students the experience of Yoga, but the ability to access the sacred healing energy. All the formulas and structures accrued often dissolve as we embrace a person in their deepest suffering. A prayer that the person is able to stand or bend without discomfort replaces the alignment once thought to be so important in *āsana*.

The greatest gift of learning compassion comes from sharing the wisdom of Yoga with people whose lives are intimately infused with pain and fear. Compassion is the catalyst that guides them into the realization that the physical body is the temple housing the Divine Self. Weaving our understanding of the miracle of the human body with the elegance of the spirit creates a new way of looking toward the Divinely Human person.

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