

Issues in Yoga Therapy

Perspective

A Perspective on the Creation of Educational Standards for Yoga Therapy Practitioners

Elissa Cobb, MA, RYT

IAYT Advisory Council; Director of Programs, Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy

“Discovery consists in seeing what everyone else has seen but understanding it for the first time.” —Albert Szent-Gyorgi

At this point on the great timeline of Yoga, Yoga therapy is coming of age in the Western world. As it establishes itself as a viable profession, creating standards makes sense. In doing so, we may lessen the possibility that government agencies will step in to dictate regulations for us. And by creating standards, we have the opportunity to support Yoga therapists in building respected, thriving livelihoods.

In writing this perspective on standards, I hope to take what has become an old and tired argument and infuse it with some wondering and perhaps some discovery.

While all Yoga therapy styles and schools share a common Yogic lineage of knowledge and understanding, we choose to pass on Yoga’s teachings in a variety of ways. True to Albert Szent-Gyorgi’s quote above, we are all able to “see” this reality of differences, but in our debates about what should constitute educational standards for Yoga therapists, it is difficult to recognize how different our various approaches truly are. Unless we have directly experienced one another’s particular approaches, it is too easy to assume that standards can be one-size-fits-all. The reality that needs to be seen is that the paradigm differences in core philosophy go beyond what could be considered simple variations in traditional application.

If the only thing that differed among approaches were the application of Yoga tools and techniques, it would be relatively easy to create standards. Approaches that take a clinical approach all adhere to the same basic pattern, from client intake to follow-up techniques. But consideration should be given

to schools and techniques that diverge, not from the ancient teaching of Yoga, but from the common pattern of a clinical approach. To serve and support this wider base of practicing Yoga therapists, we must be willing to understand for the first time the value and potential of this rich diversity.

One important reason why Yoga has survived for thousands of years, and has infiltrated popular culture worldwide, is that it is an experiential, living thing. It has survived through its followers’ personal experiences and their capacity to teach from unique perspectives. Yoga has also depended on divergent views and the creation of new applications to carry forth its core guiding principles in a variety of ways.

Each new school, each philosophical emphasis, and each creative use of Yogic principles and tools has remained close to the heart of Yoga, and in turn has contributed to its evolution, richness, diversity, and effectiveness. Everything that we now call the “Yoga tradition” was, at one point in time, not traditional. Any standards created should support such continued evolution.

Standards can be defined as “structures built by authority and general consent that serve as a base of support.” They are intended to create a solid foundation upon which something well-rooted can flourish and expand. In the process of creating educational standards for our profession, we should strive to include a broad spectrum of creative approaches to Yoga therapy. The charge of developing entry-level standards translates to building a broad foundation that leaves a path open for prospective schools and students in the future. Such an approach can verify that schools and students are rooted in the original sources of Yogic knowledge, but leaves them free to apply that knowledge in an open-ended manner.

If instead we create a foundation that is, at its inception, already narrow, it will suffocate the very thing we have come together to support. High integrity and narrowness do not necessarily go hand in hand. It is possible to have high standards of knowledge and professional ethics without imposing one method of application of said knowledge. And there is no integrity in exclusion if exclusion is based in fear, greed, and scarcity.

At the heart of our public controversy lies the uncomfortable reality that IAYT has still not defined Yoga therapy in a way that satisfies the majority. This appears to be impossible, since we all apply the essence of Yoga in personal ways to ourselves and to our clients. Whatever definition we settle on, might we remain true to the ancient teachings, but do so with a more expansive hope for both integrity and freedom of practice?

In the December 2007 issue of IAYT's publication *Yoga Therapy in Practice* (now *Yoga Therapy Today*), a definition of Yoga therapy came of age: "Yoga therapy is the process of empowering individuals to progress toward improved health and well-being through the application of the philosophy and practice of Yoga." This is a clear, understandable, working definition that lends itself to the solid foundation from which standards can emerge.

Expanding upon IAYT's definition, a Yoga therapy practitioner could be described as someone who has received a documented minimum of hours of combined education in Yoga philosophy, therapeutic theory and application, anatomy and physiology, ethics of relationship, and supervised practicum of individualized client session work.

We could further add that a Yoga therapy practitioner uses the practical and spiritual aspects of Yoga, combined with elements of effective, complementary Western health-

care modalities, to educate and support clients toward more fulfilling and less stressful lives. He or she creates an empowering environment in which clients learn to use the life "tools" of Yoga and self-exploration to sustain long-lasting relief from symptoms related to the stress of life.

However our definitions evolve, they should reflect the essence of our profession without dictating the sort of compliance that removes uniqueness of approach.

Another obstacle is deciding what constitutes an authentic Yoga therapy and what does not. The argument that only schools of a certain lineage should be allowed to practice Yoga therapy is fundamentalist and territorial. It implies that Yoga can be owned by a precious handful of styles and approaches. In this context, to be authentic means to conform to an original source so as to reproduce its essential features. Surely, the essential features of Yoga should be at the core of any Yoga therapy approach. However, the authentic DNA of Yoga lies not specifically in its details but also in the overall essence of what it teaches us. The most essential feature of Yoga is the relationship of self to Self. This would then logically and fairly suggest that any approach to Yoga therapy that upholds this teaching and is found to also stand on a solid foundation of source should then be considered authentic. That is, the heart of healing is found not in assessment or prescription but in the integrity and intention that comes from a source far bigger than the details of human knowledge and technique—a source that enters the room when practitioner and client come together with clear intention. This most Yogic principle of divine intervention cannot be regulated by standards or owned by any short list of qualifying schools and approaches.

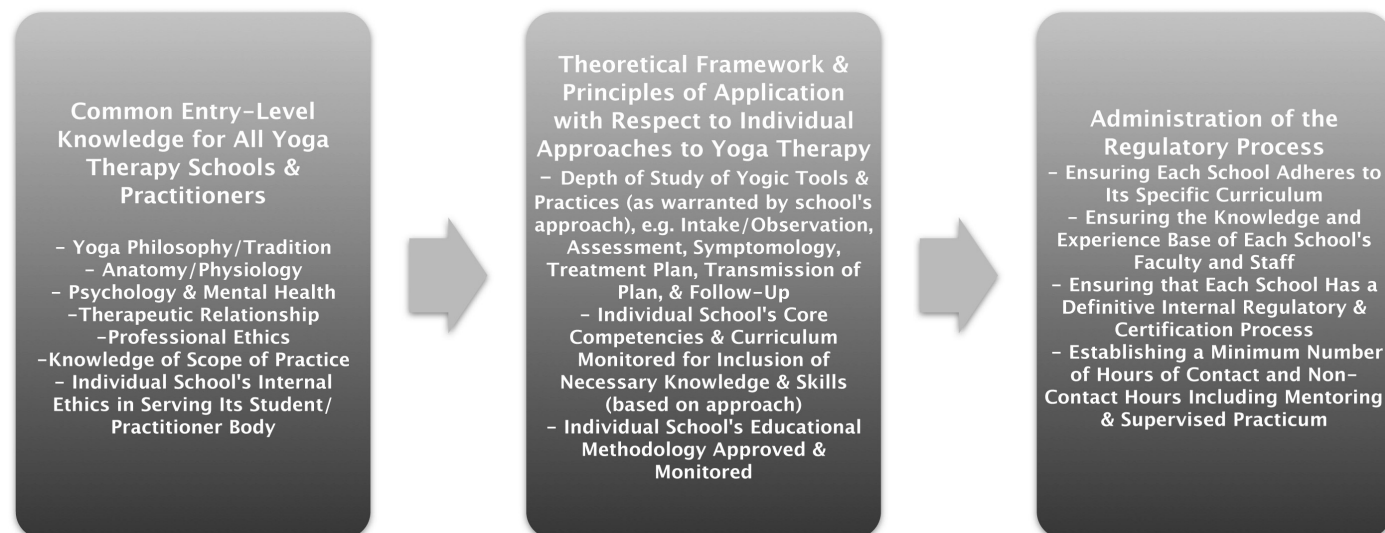


Figure 1. Proposed path from knowledge base to regulation.

Hence, I propose that we move toward developing a standardized knowledge base for all Yoga therapy schools and practitioners upon which deeper, more specific knowledge and skills are then added according to the individual style of Yoga therapy. [See Figure 1 on the previous page for an outline of how such an approach to standards might be organized.]

Each school's method for applying the overall base of knowledge would dictate the need for said specifics. For example, the knowledge of what constricts or frees a person's gait, and the ability to assess with discernment the tools needed to improve that gait would be essential learning for a practitioner whose intention was to deliver such improvements. But for the Yoga therapy modality that did not intend to create such adjustments, this knowledge would be nonessential. On the other hand, the knowledge of how to retrieve and follow-up with a client who disassociates during *asana* would be an essential skill for a practitioner in the more psycho-emotional realm of Yoga therapy, but not as likely to be needed in a more clinical approach that emphasizes biomechanics.

The task of the future regulatory body would be to make sure that the overall base of knowledge was indeed being included and that each school also clearly added and was being accountable for the additional knowledge and skills pertinent to the individual modality. This would include monitoring and supporting schools' operations, and ensuring that they are actually teaching what they claim to be teaching with transparency and integrity.

This school-by-school, individual approach may even prove to be a more successful way to ensure that standards are actually met, lessening the probability of a school merely crossing its t's, dotting its i's, and paying its fees. After all, it has been shown that registration as a Yoga therapy school does not, by itself, ensure great practitioners, nor does it eliminate charlatans.

Lastly, it is important to recognize that if we pursue a more narrowed vision of Yoga therapy standards, it is possible that such an exclusionary approach may inspire the birth of one or more alternative Yoga therapy associations, any of which could essentially assume equal authority to IAYT. This splintering has occurred in other professions, including fitness and athletic training, massage therapy, and counseling. This process often adds confusion to both practitioners and clients—exactly what IAYT is hoping to avoid by creating educational standards for Yoga therapy practitioners.

Would it not be to the advantage of all to choose a path that invites inclusion and encourages the future of one association, intact and more credible through our compiled diversity?

Direct correspondence to elissa@pryt.com.

We Proudly Announce The Expansion Of



Inland Northern California's premier evidence-based psychiatric practice – integrating Yoga and other complementary and alternative medicine therapies

In response to growing demand, Healing Pathways has moved into a larger, state-of-the-art facility. Our electronic medical records system complies fully with the patient confidentiality standards of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).

Dr. Paul C. Copeland, M.S., D.O., founder of Healing Pathways, is a board-certified psychiatrist with more than 25 years of experience practicing clinical psychiatry for children, adolescents and adults. Dr. Copeland trained under Yoga master Sri Tirumalai Krishnamacharya and taught at the Institute for Yoga Teacher Education in San Francisco.

Our practice includes:

- Conventional psychiatry and psychotherapy
- Yoga, hypnotherapy, acupuncture and traditional Chinese medicine
- Independent educational assessments, psycho-educational testing and coordination with schools

We treat ADHD, developmental and learning disabilities, bipolar disorder, autism, depression, anxiety, personality disorders, phase-of-life and relationship problems, and other emotional and mental conditions

Healing Pathways Medical Clinic Inc.

2101 Stone Boulevard, Suite 240
West Sacramento, California 95691

Phone: 916-376-8416

Open Mon – Fri 8-4, and Sat 7:30-noon

www.hpathways.com