

## PERSPECTIVE

**Yoga Therapy Research****Eleanor Criswell, EdD***Novato Institute for Somatic Research and Training, Novato, California**email: ecriswel@ix.netcom.com*

Yoga research has been enormously helpful in popularizing the practice of yoga in the United States and other parts of the world and encouraging its acceptance as a complementary care modality. Word of what yoga contributes to daily living abounds. It is part of the general public's understanding of the benefits of yoga. Yoga research and clinical experience are very important for yoga therapists in their attempt to practice evidence-based yoga therapy. A tremendous amount of research has been done in India. It would be useful if this research were accessible in the West.

Yoga research in India stretches back to the early 1900s at The Yoga Institute, Santacruz, Mumbai, in 1918 and at Kaivalyadhama, Lonavla, in 1924. More recent yoga research in India at S-Vyasa University, South India, and the Patanjali Research Foundation, Haridwar, among others; in the United States; and in other parts of the world has examined the effect of yoga practice on various mental and physical disorders, including anxiety, depression, schizophrenia, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), back pain, asthma, high blood pressure, and other conditions. This research employs both quantitative measures, such as functional MRI and electromyography, and qualitative measures, such as patient symptoms and questionnaires. The medical and psychological worlds are just beginning to explore the potential of yoga research.

Currently, the yoga intervention is classified as a “treatment package.” A treatment package is a research term for all the conditions that are part of the intervention being studied. At this point, we need to “unpack” the treatment package. What specific aspect of yoga is being used as the intervention, the independent variable? Different yoga practices have different effects. Yoga research differs from yoga therapy research. We need to explore the differences.

We need to examine the kind of yoga therapy being done, the approach (the lineage or other description), the activities that constitute the particular approach, the relationship between the therapist and the client, the client outcomes, and so forth. Whether the benefits of yoga result from non-specific treatment effects—the intangible parts of yoga practice—also needs to be addressed. Perhaps it is the larger experience of yoga therapy that fosters healing.

We should also mine the existing research. Much of the data remains in journals and archives inaccessible to Western researchers. We need to delve more deeply into the yoga therapy approaches. Yoga therapy affects different people in different ways. We need to understand what works and for whom. Some people view yoga therapy as directly therapeutic, whereas others see it as a developmental/educational experience that happens to be therapeutic. Nevertheless, there is the common understanding that we need to keep the yoga in yoga therapy. As we interface with the medical world, we need to resist efforts to turn yoga therapy into a set of guidelines that ignore individual differences.

What is going on in the yoga therapy experience? What can research tell us about it? While quantitative research can measure specific outcomes of yoga therapy, qualitative research can clarify aspects of yoga therapy not apparent in the quantitative data. We need more of both. Statistics can tell us how yoga therapy compares with other interventions, but we still need to ask, “What can clients tell us about the quality of the yoga experience?”

We need psychophysiological phenomenological studies of the yoga therapy experience. We need to look at treatment outcomes. We need to be able to track client/student change. We need to evaluate different approaches to assessment and how treatment plans are created based on yoga research evidence and clinical judgment. We need to look at the therapist's personality style and how it affects the client. We need to look at the effect of the therapist's personal yoga practice on client outcomes. Measuring the effects of different therapeutic approaches will not be easy, because there are so many factors at play: the theory and practice of the particular yoga lineage or style; the therapeutic setting; the client's personality, beliefs, and attitudes; the client's health status; the client's learning style; and so forth. Yoga therapists must be involved in the design of these studies.

We need to develop an approach to yoga therapy research that honors the nature of the yoga therapy experience. We need to collect quantitative and qualitative measures. Assessments should include first-person reports of the experience, elicited by interview or personal accounts, as well as behavioral observations.

Yoga therapy research faces certain complexities that are worth mentioning. In the practice of yoga therapy, the usual boundaries between therapist and client are blurred. Issues of transference and counter-transference arise when the yoga experience decreases the sense of boundaries as both client and therapist deepen their interconnectedness with others and the environment. Keeping secret the purpose of a study becomes a major challenge, because of the emerging perceptiveness of the yoga participant. An increased desire on the part of research participants to please the experimenter could lead them to behave in ways they think the experimenter expects, rather than based on how they actually feel. In real life, clients select the therapist and approach based on personal preference. Randomly assigning research subjects to treatment groups may yield very different results. Finally, non-hypothesis-driven studies might prove useful to allow outcomes to emerge naturally, rather than being constrained by the investigator's expectations.

In some ways, yoga therapy fits within the field of transpersonal psychology. As such, it needs to honor the client's different sense of self. Transpersonal research uses different procedures (see Braud & Anderson, 1998). Transpersonal research in yoga therapy needs to take into consideration the fact that it is impossible to blind the participant to the experience. Randomized controlled clinical trials do not honor the need to make the yoga therapy experience individually relevant. Researchers must keep in mind that the usual sense of participants as separate from each other, not knowing what the other's experience is, may have little relevance among individuals practicing yoga.

#### References

Braud, W. & Anderson, R. (1998) *Transpersonal Research Methods for the Social Sciences: Honoring Human Experience*. Thousand Oaks, CA.



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## PERSPECTIVE

# Individualized Yoga Therapy: Changing *Samskaras*, Reflecting on *Vasanas*, and Realizing *Svabhava*

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Individualized yoga therapy can effectively address many of the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual challenges of modern life, from lifestyle diseases to stress, anxiety, depression, and the search for a meaningful life. Yet a deeper understanding of ancient yoga wisdom, particularly as captured by the sage Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutra*, can enrich our approach as yoga therapists today. Patanjali likely compiled the sutras more than two millennia ago, but they synthesize the teachings from an even more ancient oral yoga tradition.

## ***Samskaras*—Habits and Patterns**

Individualized yoga therapy seeks first to change clients' samskaras. The Sanskrit word *samskara* refers to deeply entrenched habits or patterns that exist on a physical, mental, or emotional level. Some samskaras serve us well; others do not. Often we are not conscious that we have these patterns.

A harmful samskara in the body might cause the low back to hurt or a knee to get injured or a gall bladder issue or infertility. Once the underlying samskara has been identified, physical issues such as these can be, and have been, effectively mitigated through yoga therapy. We bring our bodies to a state of illness step by step through our conscious and unconscious choices and patterns. Fortunately, yoga therapy can lead the body back toward health.

One of my clients, a 65-year-old man, has been fairly active his entire life and wants to continue hunting with his dog. Over the past five or six years, he has experienced more and more hip pain. When he does his yoga therapy exercises in the morning and at night, his hip pain goes away. When he doesn't do the exercises, he starts hobbling again. He can barely make it up and down the stairs and has a lot of pain in bed at night. Every time he starts doing his yoga therapy exercises and creates new helpful samskaras in his body, the pain disappears. Sadly, he often doesn't do the exercises consistently and, as a result, experiences more pain and cannot do the things he loves.

His story is both a rich reflection of how much benefit one can obtain by changing harmful samskaras and an illus-

tration of how difficult it can be to do so. Making the necessary changes requires effort because, paradoxically, the body feels very comfortable going in the old direction, even though it is causing pain. We seek comfort, safety, and security in the habits that are familiar to us and seem natural.

Whenever we are asked to shift our patterns in a new direction, it creates discomfort. This is what we call *tapas*, or fiery discipline. The first element of Kriya yoga, *tapas* drives the inner conflict that gets us moving in the new direction of a chosen lifestyle change.

In fact, Patanjali uses *tapas* to mean mental discipline in purifying ourselves of our old habits. Patanjali acknowledges that creating new patterns is hard work for the mind and requires several steps. We start by creating the mental change. We proceed by regularly reflecting on whether the change is positive and thereby keep ourselves moving in a positive direction. In any event, we must be willing to let go of the outcome. This might require surrendering to a higher power or simply acknowledging that we are not in control of everything and that the experience has value whatever the outcome.

Yoga therapy techniques can change samskaras on many levels. We often start on the physical level by changing samskaras in the body and expanding from there. The client I mentioned earlier is a great example of this. When he hobbles, his entire body contracts and he has physical pain, but he also gets short of breath. The beauty of yoga therapy is that, as you get deeper into developing your client's yoga practice, you can also start working on the breath samskara. When you address a person's breathing samskara, transforming his or her breath from short and choppy to long and smooth, he or she begins to change at a very fundamental level. My client now uses his deep, slow, long breaths whenever he wants to feel less pain.

As these positive new physical and breathing samskaras take hold, we often notice a shift in mental patterns. The negative thinking, the frenetic mind, the anxiety, and the depression start to diminish. My 65-year-old client worried less and less about his six children and their future.

As mental samskaras break down, we may also start to witness big changes at the personality level. People's relationships change. They start to develop more tolerance and compassion. Because they are more open to others' perspectives and try to see the world from different viewpoints, they become less judgmental and more tolerant. They become happier people and live richer lives because of it. Yoga therapy can also effect profound changes at the emotional level. Students start to find inner joy and connect with their deepest selves. They begin to experience bliss in their everyday lives. Life feels full of light; they feel lightness and freedom from the inside out.

Our physical, breath, mental, personality, and emotional layers are all interconnected, so the transformation of samskaras through yoga therapy may not follow a particular path. My client, for example, already had strong positive samskaras at the personality and emotional levels before he began yoga therapy. Almost every time I speak to him, I marvel at his deep belly laugh and reflect on what makes this man so happy in spite of his physical pain. The answer is that he is deeply connected in his heart to himself, his family, and his faith.

### **Vasanas—Residual Feelings**

*Vasana* describes a residual feeling that results from experiences that have made a deep impression on our lives. Vasanas are like the smell of garlic on the inside of a pot after making garlic soup and emptying the pot; the soup is gone, but the aroma of garlic remains. In the case of our emotions, after an incident is over, the feelings it created may stay with us. Like the aroma of garlic in the empty soup pot, they stick to our psyche. They can create positive or negative feelings.

The story of a 44-year-old woman I know illustrates how a vasana can affect the human psyche. When she was 9 and her brother 15, he got his hand caught in an insulation shredder. He lost two fingers and a thumb in the tragic accident and spent many months getting his hand reconstructed. The family had to travel to the Mayo Clinic weekend after weekend. Even now, 35 years later, the woman has a very strong negative vasana related to hospitals. When she smells hospitals, she gets sick to her stomach. This powerful feeling has stayed with her through all these years. In fact, as a result of this vasana, she failed to address important health issues for more than four years. She convinced herself that everything would work out fine if she ignored them. When yoga therapy led her to examine why she had allowed these health problems to go on for so long, she concluded, "This goes back to my vasana about hospitals that was created at the age of nine when I had to visit my brother in the hospital." Now that she is conscious of her vasana, she opts to go to the doctor whenever she needs a test or

advice on her health. Once the vasana was brought to the surface for her to examine, she was able to overcome it.

Modern science accords well with the concept of vasanas. Neuroscientists contend that most of our mental processes are completely unconscious. How we think, speak, make decisions, and act is largely outside of our awareness but influenced by earlier experiences and their residual effects—our vasanas. Or, to put it another way, except for the tiny proportion of our time that we are consciously thinking, we are largely on autopilot.

Our samskaras are often rooted in our vasanas. If we are unconscious of our vasanas, then we will obviously be equally unconscious of our samskaras. Everyone else may be able to see them clearly but, like spinach on our teeth, the samskaras that are highly visible to others are invisible to us!

Multiple factors prevent us from being conscious of our vasanas and samskaras, such as fear, attachment, or aversion. But the good news is that yoga therapy can help us to overcome these barriers to transformation. When yoga therapy leads us to examine the suffering that results from our vasanas and samskaras, we gain access to deeper layers of transformation. When clients start reflecting on why they can't get along with people or why they can't have a successful relationship with another person, they begin to examine and reflect on their vasanas at the personality level. With a daily yoga therapy practice that includes a meditation component, they begin to reflect more and more deeply on their samskaras and vasanas. They become more honest with themselves and begin to focus on how to be their best possible self.

### **Svabhava—Our Life Blueprint**

*Svabhava*, another fundamental concept from ancient yoga philosophy, describes the seed potential or predisposition of a person at birth. It preexists samskaras and vasanas. For example, we are born into a certain family, with a certain predisposition and certain gifts. We also have a particular constitution. In western culture, we might liken svabhava to DNA or nature, as opposed to nurture. Indian culture, which considers svabhava to be a fundamental aspect of who we are, warns against trying to become something that we are not conceived to be.

The overarching goal of yoga is to enable us to connect to our deepest self. As yoga therapists, we can help our clients to become more aware of their unique gifts, talents, and challenges and set them on a path of becoming the best version of themselves they can possibly be. Realistically, our clients are unlikely to attain full enlightenment (although each of us has the potential to do so in this life if we really want it). Some people may be damaged so deeply that they are left with a very small space from which to create the life they deeply desire. But sometimes clients surprise us. If we

guide them one small step at a time, they change in amazing ways that we would never have anticipated.

Once they become conscious of their vasanas and samskaras, clients also start to discover their svabhava. They discover a new life that they can shape just the way they want. They uncover gifts they didn't know they had and ask, "Where is this coming from?" The answer: these gifts were always there, but they remained hidden until yoga therapy provided the key for them to connect deeply to their heart.

I know people who suddenly began to sing and never even knew they had a singing voice. I know people who have suddenly become artistic. I know people who never wanted children and suddenly thought, "My God, I really want to be a mother, and that's why I am here in this life." All these amazing changes resulted from recognizing that there was something deep inside of them that wanted to express itself.

Few people have the persistence and stability to do a daily yoga practice, but it is only through consistent practice that we change our samskaras over time. Unfortunately, many people are afraid to unpeel their vasanas and samskaras, but as yoga therapists, we can help them examine themselves authentically and unearth the riches of their svabhava.

In summary, yoga therapy provides a holistic approach that helps people achieve health and well-being by addressing their physical, breathing, mental, and emotional suffering and their spiritual disconnect. As therapists, we provide clients with the tools to observe and change their samskaras and vasanas, identify their deepest needs, and reap the riches of their svabhava so they can lead fulfilling lives. It is not a linear process. Sometimes progress is slow, and sometimes it is amazingly rapid. Sometimes there are plateaus, and sometimes there are giant leaps. But daily practice will bring success!

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## PERSPECTIVE

# Call It Yoga Therapy

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The growing body of evidence and increased attention in mainstream media indicate that the field of yoga therapy has reached what Malcolm Gladwell refers to as a tipping point, when an idea suddenly takes hold and spreads like wildfire. A recent search in PubMed, using the specific term “yoga therapy,” generated 140 research papers in peer-reviewed journals. The majority of these papers have been published in the last five years, suggesting that both the discipline and the term “yoga therapy” are gaining traction. Recent articles in the *New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *O, The Oprah Magazine* have introduced yoga therapy to a broader audience.

With yoga therapy’s increasing visibility as both a term and a profession, it is critical for IAYT to be vigilant in educating the public and the health care community about what yoga therapy is and who is qualified to practice as a yoga therapist. We must be consistent in selecting language that establishes yoga therapy as a stand-alone form of therapy and positions individual practitioners as valued partners in the healthcare field. The recent launch of the new IAYT website and the announcement of accredited programs for the training of yoga therapists give IAYT the opportunity to use these platforms to broadly communicate a strong and consistent message about yoga therapy.

While yoga therapy is emerging as a respected profession, others have begun to use another, similar term: *medical yoga*. A PubMed search for “medical yoga” generated only two results, which suggests that medical yoga remains a less commonly used term. Given that yoga therapy itself is just now gaining traction, do we need a parallel term, and if so, what characteristics differentiate yoga therapy from medical yoga? Is medical yoga a distinction without a difference, or are these truly two separate concepts? We have to look beyond the research literature to address these questions.

Professionals with diverse backgrounds and interests spent years developing a set of competencies that were adopted by the IAYT Board of Directors in 2012 and are recognized as the Educational Standards for the Training of Yoga Therapists. Rooted in yoga philosophy and practice, these competencies include many hours of physiology, pathophysiology, biomedicine, and mind-body science. Careful attention was given to ensuring that curricula first

and foremost included the traditional yoga model for health and well-being. Students can only be admitted to these programs if they are seasoned yoga practitioners who have prior training and experience teaching yoga. Thus, yoga therapists bring to the practice a strong foundation in all aspects of yoga. So far, there are no standards that define the training needed to gain certification in medical yoga.

The programs accredited by IAYT will represent the gold standard in the field for educating practitioners that will identify themselves as certified or professional yoga therapists. Depending on their practicum experience, graduates of these programs will be fully qualified to represent the profession as partners on integrative health teams in hospital settings, as providers in community-based clinics, and as private practitioners. As pioneers in a newly emerging clinical field, graduates will face both opportunities and challenges in their new careers. Making “yoga therapy” synonymous with “medical yoga” would only lead to more confusion and compound the challenges faced by yoga therapists.

At this point in the evolution of the profession, it is critical that we adopt a common language in communicating to the public that yoga therapists are highly skilled professionals that have successfully completed academically rigorous and comprehensive training programs that prepare them to work in this field. We can do this by educating the public about the difference between yoga and yoga therapy, the role of yoga therapy in improving health outcomes for patients, and the positive impact these integrative practices can have in the field of health care.

We have an opportunity as members of the International Association of Yoga Therapists to engage in a coordinated effort to educate the public and health care professionals about yoga therapy. Those members of IAYT who are trained physicians, nurses, and other medical providers can speak brilliantly to the tangible benefits afforded their patients through the integration of yoga therapy.

In order to truly advance the field we have to agree on common language, professional standards, codes of ethics, and a scope of practice. If yoga therapy and medical yoga are the same thing, then the first step in this process is to adopt yoga therapy exclusively as the name of our profession.