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Greetings from the Editor and Reflections on Yoga Therapy

I feel privileged and honored to assume the position of editor of the *IAYT Journal*. I am indebted to Richard Miller, the founding editor of the *Journal*, for his help and guidance in preparing this issue and for his untiring efforts over the past six years in establishing the high professional standard of the *Journal*. It was his vision to combine in one publication articles about yoga's physiological, health restoring, and psychoemotional benefits as well as the spiritual and creative aspects of yoga practice. This balanced approach clearly demonstrates how yoga extends beyond and embraces more than any of these individual subject areas. I hope and pray that I can bring the same inspiration and vision to this and subsequent issues of the *IAYT Journal*. Thank you, Richard!

As the International Association of Yoga Therapists and the *Journal* enter their seventh year, it seems pertinent to explore fundamental questions about the definition of yoga therapy. Since yoga itself is about self-development, what distinguishes yoga therapy from yoga and a yoga therapist from a yoga teacher or a practitioner? There are no simple answer to these questions; each yoga practitioner needs to clarify the issue for himself or herself. However, as yoga becomes more widely recognized as a valid mode of therapy, it becomes increasingly important to formulate definitions that are acceptable to most people and to society's institutions, such as medical insurance companies. To this end, the panel discussion on yoga therapy in this issue represents a starting point for this dialogue. I'd like to add some personal thoughts on this topic.

I believe that a yoga therapist in contemporary western society is someone who helps to facilitate a client's self-healing using the techniques and philosophy of yoga. To be consistent with the principles of yoga, the yoga

therapist must be a facilitator or enabler, not simply a doer or manipulator (although some degree of directing and positioning of the body may be part of the therapeutic approach). Is the yoga therapist someone who helps to rehabilitate a physical injury to a muscle, joint, or bone (as might a physical therapist), someone who provides the techniques to improve a systemic health problem such as multiple sclerosis or chronic fatigue syndrome (as do many complementary and some allopathic medical practitioners), or someone who helps a person through psychological or emotional difficulties (as would a psychotherapist)? Since yoga bridges the physical, energetic, psycho-emotional, and spiritual, it could be argued that the yoga therapist should not be bound by any of these arbitrary classifications and, therefore, would be able to help his or her client with any of these interrelated manifestations of their presenting condition. Yet, while this is ideal, how many yoga teachers or therapists have done all the necessary self-development work and acquired the appropriate skills (and training) to function in this all-inclusive capacity? In reality, a particular yoga therapist may narrow the definition of yoga therapy to reflect his or her own skills and approaches.

How does a yoga therapist differ from a yoga teacher? Undoubtedly, many yoga teachers introduce elements of therapy into their teaching, often providing special instructions for students with limitations or injuries. Some yoga therapists seek out clients with particular types of self-identified problems (these may be physical or psychological) and in this way differentiate themselves from a yoga teacher who may teach a set of established techniques (such as asanas) to whomever chooses to participate in a group class. I believe that the term therapist has certain implications in western society, which can be observed when applied in other contexts, such as physical therapist,

psychotherapist, or even art or dance therapist. It implies a type of relationship between the two involved individuals that differs from that of student and teacher. It also implies an acceptance of responsibility by the therapist for the therapeutic process being conducted and a certain level of education or qualification. These societal and legal issues deserve serious consideration by all engaged in any aspect of yoga therapy.

For the serious yoga student, the intent of yoga practice is to remove the obstacles that separate us from our true selves. Yoga uses a variety of techniques (the eight limbs of classical ashtanga yoga) to help us achieve this aim. The process of removing obstacles requires individuals to observe themselves carefully and honestly and often will bring to the surface old conditioned patterns that do not serve the individual; these need to be eradicated or dissolved in order to open new possibilities for growth and realization. In therapy, the removal of obstacles will initially be directed toward a specific focus, such as an acute or chronic physical injury (disrupted or habituated energy pattern), a health condition (which may be due to disrupted psychophysical energy), or a psychological/emotional problem (such as distorted and habituated patterns of ego definition, boundary setting, self-esteem, and so on). The difference between yoga and therapeutic yoga may, therefore, be more about immediate focus rather than ultimate intent. The individual who is seeking therapy has usually identified a particular problem which is experienced as painful and for which no solution is apparent. This yoga novice may seek out a yoga teacher or therapist because they are either unaware of or are unable to apply yogic techniques to their problem without help. In contrast, the person on the yogic path may not have a particular problem that needs immediate fixing, but nonetheless has recognized that the fullest

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