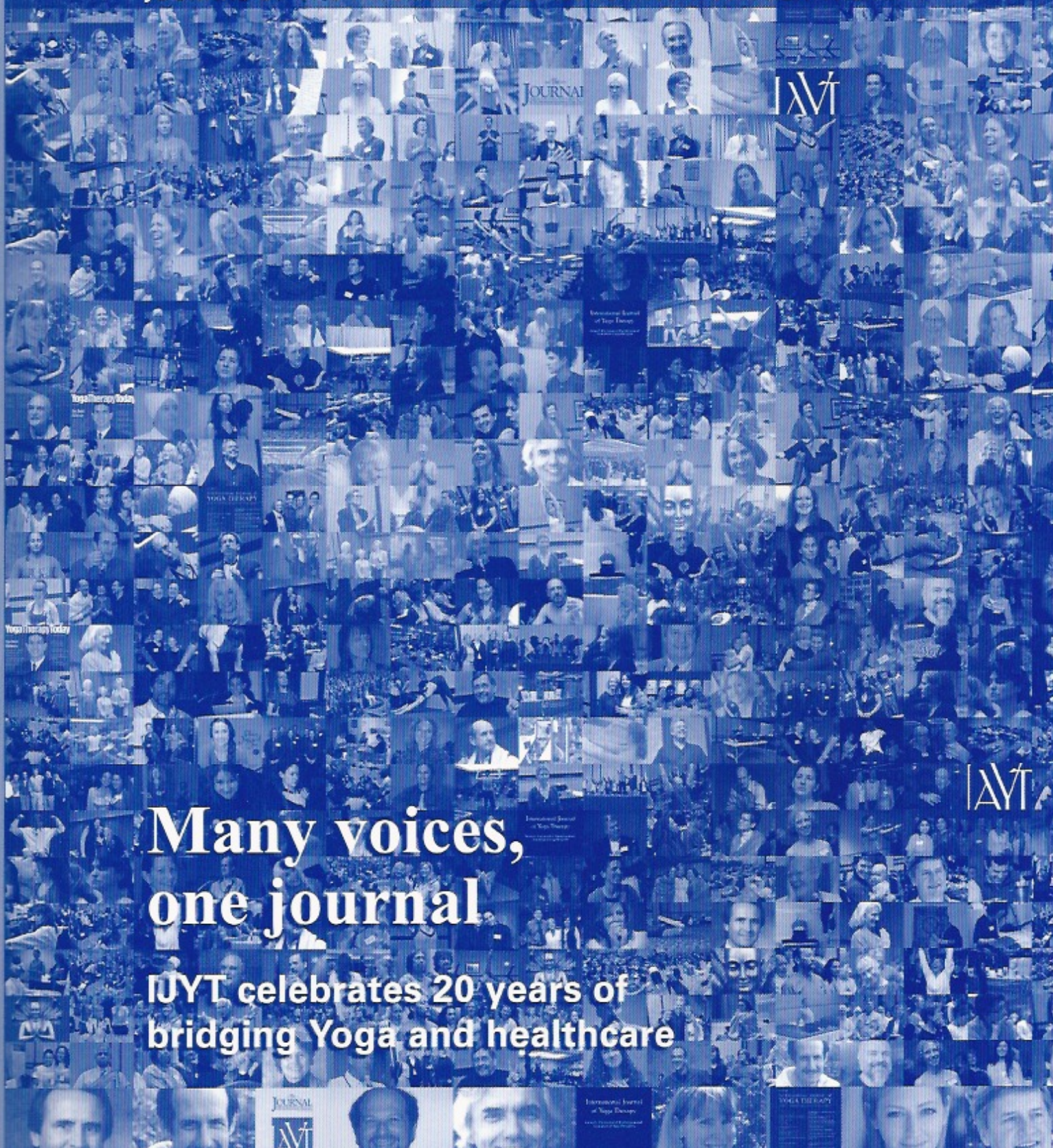


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Yoga Therapy in Practice

Perspective

Yoga Therapy: East-West Synthesis

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In the early 1990s, I found myself among a small group of Yoga educators discussing the parameters of “Yoga therapy.” These formative discussions were the beginning of what we have all come to know as the International Association of Yoga Therapists. At the time, I was working on my PhD dissertation, “A Comprehensive Yoga Lifestyle Program for People Living with HIV/AIDS.” What began as a personal and educational journey has developed into a career dedicated to helping others discover the magnitude and importance of a Yogic lifestyle.

Since receiving one-to-one intensive Yoga training with Dr. Jayadeva Yogendra of the Yoga Institute in Mumbai, India, I have felt it a mission to share Yoga’s comprehensive philosophy and lifestyle with others in the West. If performing *asanas* alone gives tremendous benefits to 18 million Americans, imagine the impact on society if those 18 million people adopted a lifestyle based on the profound teachings of Yoga.

Yoga and Western Healthcare: A Difference in Perspective

Yoga offers a perspective on holistic health that exceeds the limitations of the current Western healthcare system. The Western approach emphasizes treating diseases to alleviate symptoms and rarely looks at the underlying root causes of the imbalance. The Yogic model of healthcare considers the whole person and helps him or her to cultivate higher states of consciousness to restore *pranic* balance.

This holistic approach is exemplified by Patanjali’s definition of Yoga: *Yoga citta vrtti nirodha*. The term *citta*—commonly translated as “mind-body complex,” “personal-ity complex,” or “state of mind”—has multiple translations because the concept does not readily exist in the English

language. *Citta* reflects the integrated relationship of mind, body, and spirit. From this Yogic view, you become aware of how food affects your mind, how your mind affects your digestion, and how the way you think about your neighbor, job, or spouse influences your physical health. In each facet of life, the teachings of Yoga show that complete health equals complete harmony with one’s life, mind, body, and spirit. In the West, we tend to compartmentalize the human experience into psychological, physical, or spiritual, and treat symptoms as they directly relate to those different compartments.

The first challenge for the Yoga therapist is maintaining a personal practice of Yoga that includes awareness on all levels of his or her life, while recognizing that this is a lifelong practice. The second, tougher, challenge is educating the Western person, who wants to be the patient that the Yoga therapists fixes, to become a lifelong student of Yoga that the Yoga Therapist guides.

East to West: What Gets Lost in Translation

Bringing the terms *Yoga* and *therapy* together is like a sports match: the home team’s culture dictates an advantage. In the United States, doctors are sued. In India, being able to afford a doctor is a privilege. In the United States, Yoga is a health and fitness trend, with a lot of people making money off Yoga “lifestyle”-related products. In India, Yoga rests in the shadows of the Himalayas and is promoted by *swamis* and *sadhus* who have given up their earthly possessions. In the United States, Yoga is presented as the perfect exercise, stress manager, and spiritual pursuit wrapped up into one efficient session. In India, enlightenment is perceived as being a few lifetimes from now!

Yoga in India: A Strong Foundation

Everyone in India has read, watched, and heard throughout their lives stories from the epic *Mahabharata*. Contained within its pages is Arjuna's Yogic journey, the *Bhagavad Gita*. These long-term associations mean that even those who have never practiced Yoga understand that it has many branches. On Arjuna's home turf, people know that Yoga is more than just poses; it includes devotion, service, meditation, and wisdom, along with the physical health practices. The ordinary Indian image of a Yogi is the ascetic or monk performing rigorous practices in the Himalayas, or simply one who has transcended worldly affairs. Therefore, the Indian person knows that to engage in Yoga means a commitment to a life-long practice. This doesn't mean that Indian people are more apt to practice Yoga; it just demonstrates that they will have a basic understanding of Yoga as a path to enlightenment. The Indian arrives at Yoga therapy prepared to practice an entire lifestyle.

Yoga in the West: Still Evolving

Twenty years ago, if you asked an American to share his or her image of a Yogi, you would have probably gotten a vision of a skinny vegetarian contorting his body like a pretzel or swathed in white, sitting in meditation. The 2010 image is one of a health-conscious woman in form-fitting clothing, her designer mat bag slung over her shoulder on her way to the fitness club or Yoga studio. Essentially, when someone says that they do Yoga in the West, they mean Yoga postures. Hence, the Yoga therapy student expects to do *asana*. Unlike in India, there is no dominant cultural context in the Western world that references the original purpose of Yoga as a comprehensive path toward higher consciousness.

The good news is that as Yoga in the West matures, we are seeing a burgeoning interest in meditation and Yoga as spiritual practices. As the demand for deeper levels of understanding continues to develop, Yoga trainings with an emphasis on Yoga philosophy will continue to grow, and more teachers trained in this perspective will spread Yoga's comprehensive message of enlightenment to the general public.

“Therapist” Added to “Yoga” Compounds Western Confusion of Yoga

In the West, therapists are trained at best to heal or cure their patients and at least to treat a condition and improve the comfort of the patient. Therapists use specific techniques in the healing process: a physical therapist has a set of prescribed and approved protocols for specific conditions, and

a psychiatrist has diagnostic tests to identify mental imbalances, along with the drugs that are meant to treat them. The Western Yoga therapist who grows up interacting with these healing professionals will typically apply the same methodology: assess the source of the pain, apply a specific regimen of postures, and hope that relief occurs. The people who are coming to a Yoga therapist have also grown up in this system and have the unspoken Western expectation that the therapist fixes the patient. This patient has a clear agenda and goes into the process believing that the therapist will give him or her what he or she wants/needs. With these cultural expectations on the part of both therapist and patient, the Yoga therapist is turned into a Yoga technician.

Because the healthy-living behaviors that Yoga teaches work only when practiced daily, the Yoga therapist must not only apply the relevant aspects of Yoga practice to the person in need, but they must also motivate this person to move from the “patient” mentality to the “student of Yoga” mentality. The inactive or dependent approach of the patient attitude is in large part a root of the sickness in the privileged First World countries like the United States. Without proper adherence to a home practice that includes diet, exercise, meditation, attitude of life, and spiritual life, it is hard for Yoga therapy to be effective.

Tips to Overcome East/West Misunderstandings

There are some things you can do to better integrate East and West in your own practice. As you glean some insights from this list, consider your own list of tips to overcome the limitations of practicing Yoga therapy in the West. As each Yoga therapist educates a different population, the challenges will be different.

Teach students that pain is neither good nor bad.

Educate “patients” that they can transform into “students of health,” and that pain is their teacher. Pain only becomes suffering when a person identifies the pain as a negative state. Yoga psychology asserts that the changing nature of reality includes some degree of pain. Feeling hungry or thirsty is a low degree of pain. Injuries and emotional distress are more intense types of pain. The student and therapist can best address pain by attempting to learn what causes it, versus immediately (and only) trying to relieve it.

Assess students using Yogic diagnostics.

When you use a Western diagnostic framework, you will arrive at a Western solution. A Yogic solution requires

using a Yogic framework, such as the five *koshas* (the physical, energetic, emotional, intellectual and spiritual aspects of a human being) or the *chakra* system to examine all levels of a person's consciousness when attempting to understand a person's pain. Treat the pain with a comprehensive Yogic program that utilizes the appropriate combination of physical, psychological, and spiritual practices.

Know your individual biases.

Every individual needs a different combination of Yoga practices for optimal health. These practices are usually related to their personality type and stage of life. Without this awareness, Yoga therapists are likely to prescribe their personal type of Yoga practice to others because of their own success and positive experiences with the practices. Being consciously aware of personal bias allows the Yoga therapist to be a more objective guide in the student's healing process.

Know your bias professionally.

If you are previously trained in a physical healing modality, be careful not to reduce Yoga to a set of techniques. If you are a psychologically trained person, be mindful of not teaching your particular form of training in the guise of Yoga psychology. If your training is solely within the field of Yoga, notice what bias that brings in terms of being rigid about or overly affiliated with your tradition's approach to practice.

Encourage each student to find the inner teacher.

In the East, the Guru prescribes a practice plan and the student will follow it out of respect to the Guru. In healthy

Guru dynamics, from the tremendous rapport with the Guru, the student learns how to find his or her inner Guru. In the West, student-teacher relationships have an all-or-nothing tendency. The teacher is either considered a revered figure or a peer/friend. Aim to strike a balance between guiding the student and fostering the student's self-reliance. Encourage students to participate in developing a practice program. In this way, the Yoga program serves as the Guru, and the therapist acts as coach who helps the student of Yoga stay dedicated to following it.

Cover each aspect of life in a Yoga therapy program.

Discuss interventions that cover a person's life purpose or personal intention. Then, express that intention in each area of the student's life, including Yoga practices, meditation, relationships, work, spiritual life, nutrition, and other applicable aspects of an individual's lifestyle.

Looking Forward

When we join the holistic wisdom of the East with the specific solutions of the West, we end up using health issues as a path to enlightenment. In the end, Yoga therapy may transform the healthcare system into a system for maximum human potential. May the next twenty years of the International Association of Yoga Therapists see the transformation of healthcare from the disease-based model into a whole-person model of health and wellness!

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