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by

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2014

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**Personalizing the Experience:
The Emergence of Yoga Therapy**

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**Personalizing the Experience:
The Emergence of Yoga Therapy**

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin

May 2014

Dedication

For my family, my light that never goes out.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Renita Coleman and Iris Chyi for their advice and suggestions and all of my professors for helping me learn new skills and ideas. I also owe my gratitude to everyone who took the time to talk to me for this project.

Abstract

Personalizing the Experience: The Emergence of Yoga Therapy

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2014

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Yoga has recently been a subject of some media attention, both positive and negative. Some people advocate it for its mental and physical benefits, but others are also concerned that it might cause or lead to injury, particularly in the Western world where it's commonly seen primarily as a form of exercise.

Yoga therapy emerged in part because of such concerns. Though people have used yoga to aid in health and wellness for as long as the practice has existed, the idea of yoga therapy being its own specialized field is relatively new. Yoga therapists hope to personalize the experience of yoga by working with people with various mental and physical conditions and giving them customized programs.

Using quotes from professionals and people with personal yoga experience, this article explores the roots of yoga therapy, yoga itself: its praises, criticisms, science and a small sample of its plentiful history. It also addresses the definition of yoga therapy, specialties in the field, its professional organization and possibilities for the future.

The question of whether yoga therapy can gain credibility and become a reliable healthcare resource has not yet been answered, though there are those who say their own personal experiences are enough to convince them one way or the other. In any case, yoga and all its various forms of practice likely won't disappear anytime soon.

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Yoga: Praises

Yoga is a practice often lauded for its therapeutic benefits. Many yogis say that yoga is a form of healing for them—mentally, emotionally and physically.

Kristina Allen, who lives in Prince Edward Island in Canada, even credits yoga with saving her life.

“I struggled for a long time with bulimia, and it was only once I found yoga that everything seemed to kind of click into place for me,” Allen says, “Not that I don’t still struggle every day, I think I’ll always live with that struggle, but yoga helps me see clearly, process my life and help me make the right decisions. If I hadn’t found yoga, I can honestly say that I would have continued down the totally self-harming and self-destructive road I was on until I ended up in the hospital or dead.”

Allen says Moksha yoga, a type of hot yoga, also helps her manage her GERD (gastroesophageal reflux disease) symptoms.

Others, like Jamie Ebert, used yoga to recover from a physical injury. She began practicing in high school after sustaining an injury while horseback riding. The incident resulted in inflamed discs in her spine and compression whiplash from falling on her head. When she was able to return to physical activity, she enrolled in a yoga class at her school, which proved to be extremely helpful in her recovery.

“I attribute my ability to be active and move through daily life without pain to yoga,” Ebert says, “It has led me on a journey that changed my body and my life.”

Ebert eventually became a yoga teacher and now manages a studio in Squaw Valley, Calif. She believes yoga can be therapeutic for almost anyone.

“I find that the common thread with all of the styles of yoga and the practice being therapeutic is breath,” she says. “The practice of different ways of breathing is called pranayama in Sanskrit, and that is a part of the practice that almost every person in the

world is capable of, no matter their physical or mental abilities. It is also the element that yields the most change because it helps people tune into the most basic function and can help them get through every challenge in life.”

In addition, some say yoga can serve as injury prevention. Taylor Donovan, a chiropractor based in Reno, Nev., recommends yoga to some of his patients and also practices himself.

“I believe yoga asana provides a well-defined and understood sequence of physical postures that challenge and strengthen every structure in the body,” Donovan says. “This known challenge can discover imbalances and weaknesses of the neuromusculoskeletal system early on before there is pathology or damage to an area. So it works great for early detection as well as fixing physical imbalances.”

Donovan also adds that he thinks yoga “does a great job helping to integrate challenging tissues and areas into the body working as a whole.”

He says he practices to offset any imbalance his body might develop playing ultimate frisbee.

The American Osteopathic Association lists protection from injury as one of the benefits, among others, of yoga on its website.

Some yoga teachers, though not designated as yoga therapists, nevertheless try to ensure that their students get a therapeutic experience, even in styles of yoga that are known for being more vigorous and challenging.

“I approach my teaching [my yoga classes] as first and foremost therapy,” says Selena Pang, an Ashtanga yoga instructor. “Second, it’s meditation and movement. It’s a place to get quiet. People learn how to be patient, work hard, work more carefully, work with a flow — without trying too hard. [It’s about] coming to the mat consistently and learning something about themselves.”

Pang prefers to teach “Mysore style,” a traditional method that involves students practicing their own portion of the Ashtanga sequence at their own pace in a class setting. She believes this style might leave practitioners less susceptible to injury since there’s no pressure to keep up with any led instruction.

Yoga: Criticisms

Even as much as yoga teacher and practitioner Jamie Ebert advocates the practice of yoga, she cautions that not all of her experiences in classes have been positive.

“Many teachers believe in being creative and often create sequences of poses that may have negative impacts on the muscles and ligaments,” Ebert says. “If a teacher decides to focus on forward folding, for instance, it’s important to warm up the hamstrings first because if I try to stretch muscles that are cold, it just hurts. And it’s led to me popping a hamstring out one time.”

Ebert believes teachers need better training to prevent such occurrences.

“The teachers who train new teachers should spend a great deal more time teaching them proper sequencing techniques for balancing the body,” she says.

Ebert is not an isolated case. Others, like Kristie Burkett and Laura Presley, have also had negative experiences in yoga.

Burkett, who lives in Edmonton, Canada, enjoys non-heated classes, but when she tried hot yoga, she says she found the style of the class to be almost militant.

“We were only allowed to take water breaks between poses, and if people left the room, they were not allowed to return until the end of the class,” she says.

She also adds that she thinks the heat—Bikram classes are usually held in 105-degree rooms—could potentially be dangerous for some people.

“[The potential] for over-stretching with the heat and dehydration could cause problems for some,” she says.

Laura Presley can also relate to having an unpleasant yoga experience—but for her, she says, it happened five times.

“I have never had a yoga experience I haven’t gritted my teeth through, wanted to cry and have it be over,” she says.

In one of her classes, Presley says the room was uncomfortably crowded, leading her to feel distracted and anxious.

“I felt I had no idea what I was doing and in a crowd that big, it was horribly unpleasant,” she says.

After her initial experience, she says she tried several more classes but had similar outcomes from each of them.

In recent years, yoga has faced increased scrutiny—and not just because of crowded classes. William Broad, a senior science writer at the New York Times, has written articles and a book, “The Science of Yoga: The Risks and the Rewards,” that explore yoga through a critical lens and warn of potential dangers in yoga that go well beyond a twisted ankle.

“Yoga has produced waves of injuries. Take strokes, which arise when clogged vessels divert blood from the brain. Doctors have found that certain poses can result in brain damage that turns practitioners into cripples with drooping eyelids and unresponsive limbs,” Broad writes in “The Science of Yoga.”

One of his articles, “Women’s Flexibility is a Liability (in Yoga),” also addresses hip injuries that some women develop after practicing yoga for an extended period of time.

Some yoga teachers acknowledge that injuries in yoga do occur but say that they’re normally the result of a practitioner’s lack of attention or mindfulness.

“The yoga doesn’t cause the injury, the practitioner causes the injury,” says Selena Pang. “There’s a huge difference. Practice with awareness. You need to be armed with information, the most important thing about your practice is that you are really in the present.”

Rhianna Sanford, a yoga therapist and teacher, adds that sometimes people can even make yoga into an addiction, and practice to the point of injuring themselves.

“Yoga is not a perfect practice because humans are doing it, and humans are not perfect,” she says, “Anything that’s good can be made bad. [We need] the idea of all things in moderation.”

Muncrief, a physical therapist, yoga therapist, and member of the International Association of Yoga Therapists, thinks that yoga can harbor potential dangers if the instructor is inexperienced, particularly when working with injuries—hence, she says, the need for yoga therapy, a field focused on using yoga for healing and developing regulations to ensure safety.

“Yoga teachers themselves are not highly regulated,” Muncrief says, “So yoga therapists have chosen to try to nip this in the bud and try to regulate ourselves a little bit to have some quality control.”

Sanford says the yoga industry in general seems to be shifting toward stricter regulations as a response to increased reports of injuries.

“This is why the industry of yoga is tightening its reins on unleashing teachers by the boat load onto the general public without related degrees/training around anatomy, physiology and kinesiology,” she says. “It’s just unsafe in any setting to have a newbie teaching something they don’t fully understand for themselves.”

Yoga: Science and History

Yoga and meditation have long lacked a strong scientific backing, at least in the Western world. As the practice of yoga grows in the US and yoga therapy grows as a field, however, more studies are beginning to arise. A 2011 study published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine*, for example, found that yoga was effective for adults with chronic low back pain and “led to greater improvements in back function than did usual care.”

Though there are many studies available that claim that yoga is beneficial for physical and mental health, not all of them may be reliable. A report published in *Evidence-Based Complementary Alternative Medicine* in 2012 found that some studies had methodological limitations and cautions that further research must be conducted before concluding that yoga is a proven method for alleviating various ailments and conditions.

Scientific yoga research is still in its relatively early stages, but there has been recent progress. A review published in *JAMA Internal Medicine* in March 2014 found moderate evidence that mindfulness meditation programs can improve anxiety, depression and pain—a conclusion that some attest to according to their personal experiences.

Though this type of scientific study on yoga may be young, the practice itself is not.

Yoga, according to Edwin F. Bryant in his book “*The Yoga Sutras of Patañjali: A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary*,” can actually refer to “a number of different spiritual systems,” though when the word is used by itself it usually refers to “the path of meditation.”

According to Bryant, the practice was developed in ancient India as a means of experiencing one’s true self or achieving permanent peace of mind. It’s unclear when exactly it began, but Bryant writes that evidence suggests that it has been practiced for over 4,000 years. “*The Yoga Sutras*” serves as the foundational text for yoga, and according to Bryant, is one of the most important texts in Hinduism, though it does not

promote any specific deity or kind of worship, making it adaptable in a variety of contexts.

However, yoga did not reach the western world until later in its existence, and even when it did, Westerners were interested in observing and studying rather than practicing it, according to Elizabeth De Michelis in “History of Modern Yoga.”

De Michelis writes that Henry David Thoreau provided the first written affirmation of a Westerner practicing yoga when he suggested that he was a yogi in a letter to a friend in 1849.

Since then, yoga has come to be thought of in the Western world more as a form of exercise than a spiritual path or means of healing. Though there are many different styles of yoga, those that pay most attention to physical movement are more well-known and more widely practiced.

“If you think of the way yoga was introduced to us here in America,” yoga therapist Rhianna Sanford says, “We think of it as poses only, a gymnastics approach to moving your body. But really there are eight branches—the Ashtanga eight-limb yoga concept. And asana, the postures, is just one limb.”

Bryant confirms this idea in his book and writes that although yoga focuses on physical movements in its “exported manifestation,” early practitioners of yoga placed more emphasis on other aspects.

“Patañjali himself, however, pays minimal attention to the asanas, which are the third stage of the eight stages, or limbs, of yoga, and focuses primarily on meditation and various stages of concentration of the mind,” Bryant writes.

Some yoga therapists hope that their field will shift some attention back to aspects of yoga that have received less attention than the physical postures and incorporate them into programs for their clients.

Yoga Therapy: One Woman's Story

Struggling to recover from an addiction and overcome an anxiety disorder, Kristina Pullen resorted to trying something she never thought would work—yoga.

She began with videos at home and, after a few years, ventured into the realm of studios and classes, which are numerous especially in the Austin area. However, Pullen felt her initial experience was lacking.

“Regular mainstream classes were kind of a struggle for me,” Pullen says. “They do a lot of touching and assists, so I was not very comfortable.”

The touching and assists Pullen refers to are meant to help students correct their alignment, but for her, they triggered anxiety. She says she often left classes feeling more anxious than she had when she had arrived.

After Pullen's struggle with trying to adjust to classes, a friend recommended yoga therapy. Pullen decided to try a class—and it was then she says she found what she needed. She liked that the class focused on self-care that incorporated breathing exercises called pranayama, props and teachings about yoga philosophy that she felt added depth beyond just the physical poses or asanas in yoga, on which she felt “mainstream” classes were singularly focused.

Pullen says she left yoga therapy feeling calm and grounded. And she kept coming back.

“It empowered me,” Pullen says. “I felt like I could handle more, like I could face the challenges that came up. Every time I left a yoga therapy session I felt better.”

Pullen continued attending classes and eventually decided to enroll in a teacher training course. Also a social work student at Texas State University, she hopes to help people overcome mental health obstacles using yoga among more traditional methods.

“[Yoga therapy] helps you get in touch with yourself. You’re more insightful,” Pullen says. “Being more mindful encourages a lot of things a counselor would encourage you to do anyway, and it gives you a safe place to do it in.”

What Is Yoga Therapy?

Yoga therapy, an emerging field just beginning to solidify its defining characteristics and standards, uses yoga to alleviate various conditions, both mental, as in Pullen’s case, and physical—such as recovery from surgery or back problems.

The International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT) defines yoga therapy as “the process of empowering individuals to progress toward improved health and wellbeing through the application of the teachings and practices of yoga.”

Empowering the individual is a key idea that, according to yoga therapists, differentiates yoga therapy from “mainstream” yoga.

“The biggest difference is really that yoga therapy is individual-oriented,” says Vanessa Muncrief, an orthopedic physical therapist, yoga therapist and active member of IAYT. “I do a whole evaluation on a patient, look at strengths and weaknesses and design an individual program for them.”

Rhianna Sanford, one of Pullen’s yoga therapy teachers, agrees that it involves tailoring the practice to the individual—and says it also encourages more exploration of parts of yoga that are lesser known to people in the US.

“Yoga therapy is really personalizing the experience of yoga,” Sanford says. “It brings all of the branches [the eight limbs of yoga] into practice in a way that supports the individual.”

In Sanford’s experience, often the people who come to yoga therapy have tried various other methods to help their condition but haven’t found anything that works for them yet.

“I think people often choose yoga therapy because they’re looking for something different,” she says, “They’re curious to know if it works.”

Sanford believes that diseases, chronic conditions and discomfort can lead people to become separated from their sense of self and aims to help clients feel more connected with themselves through breath work, gentle movement and any other tools she feels are appropriate for a particular client. For example, she has some clients work on body mapping, in which they create a visual illustration of their bodily sensations.

Specialties and Types of Yoga Therapy

Rhianna Sanford, who is also a massage therapist, specializes in functional and structural yoga therapy, while other yoga therapists focus on mental health problems like anxiety, depression and trauma. Genevieve Yellin, who has taught both Sanford and Pullen, uses what is termed “integrative yoga therapy,” an approach that aims to use yogic techniques to complement other methods of healthcare, to help clients relieve mental distress and disorders.

One of Yellin’s classes, the third session of a clinic called “Overcoming Anxiety,” took place at Sundara Yoga Therapy in north Austin. Two rows of yoga mats lined the walls, with props such as blankets and bolsters and handouts on practices to alleviate anxiety, and unlike any usual yoga class, many of the mats had dividers between them to create the feeling that students were in their own spaces.

Yellin opened the class by speaking about her own experience with anxiety and yoga. “I was completely debilitated,” she said. “I couldn’t come out of the house.”

Though yoga and meditation may not be the answer for everyone with such a condition, Yellin said she became anxiety free after practicing yoga and meditation extensively.

The class included lectures about unconscious triggers, things that may provoke someone’s anxiety because they’ve been associated with traumatic events in that person’s

mind; core beliefs and nutrition. Yellin also led the class through meditations using candles and malas, a set of beads commonly used by Hindus and Buddhists, though Yellin assured the class that they could use rosaries or another variation; breathing exercises and simple yoga postures. The class concluded with yoga nidra, which involves a body relaxation meditation while lying in the posture known as “savasana” or corpse pose.

According to Yellin, these practices led her out of a panic-ridden life and into a more peaceful existence.

Caroline McCarter, a yoga therapist and another member of IAYT, specializes in both mental health disorders and structural issues. McCarter credits yoga with helping her overcome an eating disorder, which led to her desire to become a teacher and subsequently a yoga therapist.

“Sometime inside of my asana practice, I started to notice that this thing [my body] wasn’t for other people,” McCarter says. “My arms are for me, they’re for lifting, and they’re there to feel and experience the world with. They’re not there to be molded into a doll. Then how am I going to enjoy life? That was one of the ways it [the relationship between my body and my mind] started to shift.”

IAYT and Regulations

Although taking advantage of yoga’s therapeutic application is fairly common, yoga therapy as its own distinguished entity is relatively new. IAYT was founded in 1989, and the association approved standards for yoga therapy training program accreditation in 2012 and launched the application process in 2013. Before then, it was unclear who could call herself or himself a yoga therapist.

“It hasn’t really been a profession that’s been regulated,” Muncrief says. “So that’s what’s happening in this organization. They’re trying to come up with the bare minimum

requirements that training programs would offer students in order to then say that they are trained yoga therapists.”

According to the requirements listed on IAYT’s website, yoga therapy training programs must be a minimum of 800 hours, taught over the course of at least two years. Program applicants also must have completed a 200-hour yoga teacher training to ensure they already have a basic teaching foundation.

Practitioners like Muncrief, who hasn’t participated in formal yoga therapy training but has extensive experience teaching as well as a master’s and doctorate in physical therapy, will be grandfathered in, she says.

The Future of Yoga Therapy

Now that yoga therapy is attempting to increase quality control and implement standards, its practitioners and advocates hope to see more support from the medical community and the government to offset the high cost. Anyone wanting to utilize yoga therapy must be willing and able to pay for it, and even “mainstream” yoga classes often come at a fairly hefty price, usually between \$10-20 per class.

“It’s become so incredibly expensive to access it,” Sanford says.

However, some options are beginning to emerge for people who may have trouble affording yoga or yoga therapy. Donation studios, which offer classes at whatever price students can afford, are becoming more popular, and there are some organizations that want to improve access to yoga.

The Give Back Yoga Foundation, for example, is a non-profit whose mission is to bring yoga to underserved communities with projects like “Yoga for Veterans” and the “Prison Yoga Project.” Another example is La Via Sana, a religious nonprofit in Austin that offers to help those in need finance yoga therapy sessions.

“It’s very new,” says Sanford, “But it’s great to see that happening.”

Further Information

An additional part of this project was the design of a website with photographs and other visual aids. It can be found at the following URL: <http://jeanabertoldi.com/yogatherapy>.

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