

The Yoga Tradition

Perspective

When Did Yoga Therapy Become a “Field?”

Shanti Shanti Kaur Khalsa, PhD

IAYT Advisory Council; Guru Ram Das Center for Medicine & Humanology, Espanola, NM

The day before I started to write this article I sat with eleven other Yoga teachers, each representing a member school of the International Association of Yoga Therapists, each a steward of their Yogic lineage and tradition, each a pioneer in bringing Yoga as a therapy into Western medicine. We met as a standards committee intended to create minimum requirements for Yoga therapist training. Under the skillful facilitation of Dan Seitz and John Kepner, we sorted through such concepts as scope of practice, knowledge base, clinical experience requirements, and core competencies—areas few of us considered when our first Yoga student with a health condition came to class. What a difference twenty years makes!

When I was trained as a Kundalini Yoga teacher in 1971, the focus was on teaching healthy people. Sure, people came to class to increase their flexibility and energy, to reduce stress or improve sleep, but these were not considered people with health conditions. Fifteen years later, students came to my class on La Cienega Boulevard in Los Angeles with fevers that had no known cause. Many had orange fungus growing in the creases of their skin or long white filaments growing from their tongue. They were in late-stage HIV disease. This was out of my realm; I had no medical background and had no idea how or even what to teach these students. Fortunately, my spiritual teacher Yogi Bhajan lived in the same city and was available to train me to teach Kundalini Yoga to people with health conditions. Though I did not recognize it at the time, nor label it so, it was under his direct guidance that I moved from being a “Yoga teacher” to becoming a “Yoga therapist.”

Yogi Bhajan did not use the terms “Yoga therapy” or “Yoga therapist” and encouraged us not to use this language. We call what we do “bringing Kundalini Yoga into

the healthcare field” or “teaching Kundalini Yoga to people with... (name the condition).” He felt that until there is adequate research on the application of Yoga practice to support health outcomes, it is not appropriate to call what we do “therapy” or “therapeutic.”

Other Yoga teachers were in a similar situation, with students who had identifiable conditions and for whom a regular Yoga class did not serve. We found each other. Larry Payne knew Richard Miller; I knew Larry, who introduced me to Sherry Brouman, who influenced my work with the lymphatic system. Lisa Walford was teaching people with HIV; so was I. Eric Small was down the road from me, teaching Yoga to people with MS. Most of us taught specialty populations: just people with cardiovascular conditions, just people with back pain, just women with breast cancer, just people with depression.

Through the centuries Yoga has been taught and practiced as a way for healthy people to reach their excellence. Even though there are Yogic texts on the therapeutic applications of Yoga, it is not historically a therapeutic method or intervention. Fortunately, most of us had a lineage, a Yogic tradition we followed with a living teacher who guided our work.

We helped each other connect with physicians and allied health professionals, supported each other with marketing and outreach, made connections to participate in professional conferences. We formed a tribe of sorts.

Defining what Yoga therapy is and what a Yoga therapist does? Who had time for that? I don't recall that we even used these terms in 1986. For many of us, it was more than enough to address what was in front of us. In my own situation, new medical information about HIV and the immune system came out almost daily, requiring me to constantly learn more and modify how, what, and even where (hos-

pital, hospice, home) I taught. Students died almost every week. It was messy, chaotic, enormously demanding, and changing fast. This is a field?

After a few years of this, it started to dawn on us that something bigger was happening than just us teaching Yoga to people with a health condition. Larry hosted a training by A.G. Mohan at Meadowlark. From this we got a glimpse of our range and impact and began to put language to what we were doing: We were pioneers in the West for the therapeutic application of Yoga.

Larry and Richard got reflective, and one day in 1989, Larry called to tell me they were forming the International Association of Yoga Therapists. Would I like to be a charter member? Absolutely. Now our tribe had a name and a home. Were we a field yet? Probably, or at least getting close.

We started training other Yoga teachers to do whatever it is we did, and we began to expand what we offered. My work with the immune system and HIV disease led to courses on the practice of Yoga for people with cancer, for chronic pain, for grief recovery, for support during major life change. This led to work with people with depression, anxiety, heart disease, diabetes, and metabolic conditions. By 2004, we knew we had to offer training not in specialty conditions, but in —dare I say it—the field of Yoga therapy. We need to train Yoga therapists, not just Yoga teachers who can teach to specialty populations.

From this evolution, neither Yoga therapy nor Western medicine is the same. Over the past twenty years, Western medicine has influenced the delivery of our Yoga therapy programs and how we work with clients. In turn, we are influencing Western medicine. There is more widespread acknowledgement of the contribution the practice of Yoga brings to health, and the ability of the body/mind/spirit to restore health. In addition, popular books such as *Yoga as Medicine* by Timothy McCall, MD, and *Meditation as Medicine* by Dharma Singh Khalsa, MD, have brought the practice of Yoga and the Yogic way of living as a therapy to a broader audience.

Today, the International Association of Yoga Therapists holds conferences to bring together Yoga therapy practitioners and researchers. We are working to create a unified professional identity. We are creating standards and guidelines for the training of a safe, effective practitioner of Yoga therapy. Faculty qualifications, regulation of the field? Areas we did not dream of twenty years ago are now essential elements of the conversation.

The conversation continues and expands. What do you want to contribute toward the future in the next twenty years?

Direct correspondence to drshantishanti@grdcenter.org.