

| YOGA AND MENTAL HEALTH

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Yoga is an integrative, holistic approach to mind/ body wellness that takes into account, posture, breath, movement, and “the optimal functioning of every system in the body”(Iyengar, 1995) including the mind, emotions, and senses. The spiritual intention of yoga is “freedom from suffering”—not by removal from life, but by a full engagement of an individual’s capacities. The beginner may approach yoga from a physical interest only, but will quickly realize the multiple benefits of practice.

Yoga is both a practice and a philosophy tracing its origins back thousands of years, with over 11 million practitioners in the United States (Roper Poll, 1999). “Yoga” means “union” or “discipline” and refers to the union with the true self—a concept which may be as vast or personal as one chooses, and fundamentally underlies the pursuits and theories of psychology. The practice of yoga develops the awareness and skills highlighted by many current theoretical models and approaches—including affect regulation, self-soothing, focus and mindfulness, and the redirection of habitual responses and behaviors.

Though there are different forms of yoga, Hatha Yoga refers to *asanas* or physical poses that condition and center the mind and body. (Hatha Yoga includes Iyengar Yoga, Anusara, Bikram, Ashtanga and other forms of popular yoga.) What begins as a physical practice has broad applications for psychological health with sustained and focused practice, though not all forms of hatha yoga emphasize or address this. For the purpose of this article, the focus will be on the work of BKS Iyengar (www.iyanaus.org) who is the primary influence for most contemporary hatha yoga teachers and is responsible for bringing yoga to the West.

Iyengar has codified over two hundred yoga poses and through the sequencing of poses and the use of props makes yoga accessible to everyone no matter what age, level of fitness, or physical and psychological condition. Though the origins and development of the modern practice of yoga are fascinating and extensive, what is most pertinent for this discussion is the wide-range of disorders that can be alleviated and treated with yoga. Yoga offers a benefit and mode of primary or adjunctive treatment for depression, anxiety, eating disorders, PTSD (www.traumacenter.org), insomnia, and many other psychological issues (www.psychology.suite; www.mbmi.org).

A person with depression, for example, often has a compressed posture highlighted by an upper chest concavity, shoulders held forward, shallow breathing and the eyes are cast downward. In a basic yoga pose like *Tadasana* (Mountain Pose) the student stands upright with the feet firmly grounded, the spine and upper chest lifted and the eyes straight ahead—not with militaristic rigidity but in the attempt to find a natural posture that allows free movement of the breath and a sense of balance. It is a simple pose, but not easy as habitual bodily stances are counteracted.

Powerful emotions can result from minor shifts of the body, resulting from the holographic nature of our physical bodies in reflecting life story and personality. In *Tadasana*, for example, the metaphorical nature of the pose suggests “taking a stand” and asserts the right to occupy space or life. The shift of the habitual gaze from downward to straight ahead declares or encourages a willingness to engage in life. *Asanas* contain a metaphoric impact—sometimes very clearly in the names of the poses themselves—but simply in the physical forms of the poses which encourage the student to occupy space in a new manner. Eventually, there is an internal

and external correspondence between the action or the stance of the pose and the resulting mood or physiological state encouraged by the pose. It may be the stability of the mountain touching both heaven and earth, or the warrior with his focused, skillful use of energy and balance.

Students may resist certain poses for psychological reasons. For a person with depression or trust issues, a back-bending posture which opens up the chest and heart area may initially generate a sense of panic and fear as the physiological and psychological stimulation challenges the usual body habit of defending against certain emotions and awareness. But the body armor of muscles does not usually allow one to fully engage in an *asana* without working through different stages of both physical and psychological resistance over time. Even a person who is highly flexible expresses other aspects of psychological habit: The lunge into a posture may not be stable and may express the student's tendencies to egoic extremes of force or display(shouldn't be a space here.....). The amazing variety of yoga poses stimulates and vitalizes nerves centers, organs, and muscles in such a way that the bound movements of trauma or psychological disorders are encouraged to release and occupy a new form through the action and holding of the pose.

Restorative poses can be practiced like more active poses to highlight different areas of the body and emotional states. Surrender to the muscular effort of the physical practice encourages practitioners to understand the nature and feeling of relaxation—something that many people either resist or do not fully experience in daily life. The skill of recognition and understanding of states of tension becomes developed and increases the ability to monitor stress, and regulate emotion and mood.

From the Iyengar perspective, poses are not practiced casually because of the potential impact to the emotional and physiological homeostasis. This is in contrast to practices that use

yoga solely as an aerobic pursuit. For the seasoned practitioner, yoga can be practiced *in response to* psychological and physical needs with poses specifically chosen to modulate emotions or physical conditions. The sustained practice of yoga encourages a sensitive awareness of bodily and psychic states, and creates an mental equilibrium and focus that permeates other aspects of life.

In Iyengar yoga, awareness is brought to the breath, but breathing is not addressed as a specific practice (*pranayama*) until *asana* practice has provided a stable container to the physical body. Breath is respected as a subtle but powerful force that also allows manipulation of physiological and psychological states, and must be approached with understanding and caution. Clients with panic disorder or depression, for example, may find that it takes a long time before there is an ability to release hyper-vigilant, reactive tendencies that interfere with the ability to approach controlled breathing or deep relaxation. But once the practice is understood and developed, breath can be used to induce restful sleep, restore energy, and balance the nervous system. (The remarkable physiological control of yogis was studied at the Menninger Clinic in the 1970s. See McCall, 2007).

Focus and mindfulness are necessary to the practice of *asana* as awareness is cultivated throughout the body with attention to both minute and gross movements of musculature. The necessary engagement with the practice becomes a training in attention as it is impossible to maintain poses if the mind is distracted. Meditation, chanting, and other spiritual practices may be incorporated in a yoga session, but are not the means of primary engagement in beginning classes. [There is substantial research into the physical and mental health benefits of meditation, and chanting has also been shown to modulate emotions and breath (www.vyasa.org)].

Change is experienced through the practice and the poses. Though language is important in the teaching of the poses, it is not the main mode of communication to the student, nor the vehicle of transformation. Personal insights arise through the practice, invariably deepening over time as both personal and physical potential are expanded. The muscles (poses) retrain the brain: physical form influences psychological state. As habitual moods or behaviors shift—even briefly in a pose—so does the posture, the gaze, and the breath, emphasizing the inseparable link between mind and body.

In summary of this brief overview to the power of yoga and its use in mental health, here are some of the primary benefits:

- Yoga *asanas* not only direct or redirect physical action and behaviors, but stimulate various glands, muscles and parts of the body related to emotional reactivity or states of mind. The nervous system can be activated or soothed through *asana*, breath, and the metaphors of the poses.
- Yoga is not intrusive. The practitioner develops at her or her own pace as physical and psychological barriers are moved through.
- Anyone can practice yoga. BKS Iyengar’s development of *asanas* includes the use of props and sequences for physical and mental conditions.
- Participants gain knowledge through practice of how different poses address different mood states and are able to self-soothe and manage affect without dependency upon outside interventions.
- *Asana* practice cultivates will, balance, focus, and emotional stamina—important factors in self-help and mood management.
- Yoga practitioners may be able to reduce medication, become more sensitive to intake of unhealthy food and substances as the nervous system is positively sensitized and the body becomes enlivened rather than suppressed. Yoga increases helpful sensitivity which may modify other behaviors and overall health.
- Yoga creates a structure and a context for constructive action to replace self-destructive behaviors.
- Yoga practice provides on-going engagement and challenge. Overcoming obstacles and fears through the work on challenging poses models the ability to step outside the emotional comfort zone in other aspects of life and maintain a sense of awareness and equanimity.
- Yoga develops an awareness of how emotional and physical energy is directed or deflected by observing reactions in poses and habitual postures of the body.

- An indirect gain is the practice of yoga in group. Many people with psychological disorders are socially isolated. Group provides structure, interaction, and community.
- Yoga is not a religion. Yogic philosophy is compatible with other spiritual practices, and psychological frameworks. However, the study of Yogic philosophy can create a supportive base of universal meaning and spiritual practice in the absence of or in addition to other such connections.

In addition to BKS Iyengar's texts which provide the fundamentals of yogic practice and philosophy there are a number of other books that are excellent resources:

- Cope, Stephen. *Yoga and the Quest for the True Self*. (New York: Bantam, 1999)
- Iyengar, BKS. *Light on Yoga* (New York: Schocken, 1966).
- _____. *Light on Pranayama* (New York: Crossroads, 1995).
- _____. *Yoga: the path to holistic health*. (London: Dorling Kindersley, 2001).
- McCall, Tim. *Yoga as Medicine*. (New York: Bantam, 2007).
- Radha, Swami Sivananda. *Hatha Yoga: the hidden language*. Spokane, WA: Timeless Books, 2007).
- Walden, Patricia. *The Woman's Book of Yoga and Health*. (Boston: Shambala, 2002).
- Weintraub, Amy. *Yoga and Depression*. (New York: Broadway Books, 2004).

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