

# Yoga Therapy: The Profession

PERSPECTIVES ON TWO KEY POLICY ISSUES

## What are the Differences Between Yoga Teacher Training and Yoga Therapist Training? *and*

## What are the Differences Between Yoga Teaching and Yoga Therapy?

**John Kepner, MA, MBA, CYTh**

*International Association of Yoga Therapists*

The standards effort is a long, arduous, and transformative process for any professional field, and that includes yoga therapy. Agreeing on pragmatic definitions of terms that are inherently difficult to define or have multiple different definitions can be a major challenge. But it's an inherent part of the professional growth of a field.

The title of this piece reflects two of the current questions in our own standards process. As a first step in finding common ground on these issues, I invited four leading yoga therapist trainers to respond to these questions. All have served as members of IAYT's Advisory Council for many years. Their perspectives appear on the following pages.

### The IAYT Context

The IAYT Accreditation Committee is charged with evaluating yoga therapist training programs and accrediting those that meet the IAYT Educational Standards for the Training of Yoga Therapists.<sup>1</sup> Programs must teach the competencies in the standards, although they can do this in ways that are consistent with their lineages. Not surprisingly, questions about the accreditation process have emerged, the most common being, "What are the differences between yoga teacher training and yoga therapist training?"

IAYT also intends to offer certification to individuals who meet IAYT standards. So far, three groups of yoga therapists qualify to apply:

- Graduates of IAYT-accredited yoga therapist training programs
- Graduates of 300-hour yoga therapist training programs that include a 200-hour yoga teacher training program as a minimum admission requirement, plus at least 150 hours of mentored practicum and/or yoga therapy experience<sup>2</sup>

- "Seasoned" yoga therapists, who may not have graduated from a 300-hour program, or indeed any formal training program, but who have been practicing as yoga therapists for a long time. Although general grandparenting guidelines for this avenue have not been published yet on IAYT's website, such decisions are usually based on the training, education, and actual experience of the yoga therapist.

The last two categories raise the important credentialing question, "What exactly is experience in yoga therapy, as opposed to experience in yoga teaching?"

I hope the following perspectives help us all to appreciate the questions that we, as a field, must address in order to develop as a profession.

*John Kepner has been the executive director of IAYT since 2003. As such, he has been an ex officio member of both the Standards Committee and the Accreditation Committee. At the time of this writing, IAYT is establishing a new Certification Committee. Developing educational standards, accrediting programs, and certifying individuals are the classic steps of the standards process for an emerging professional field.*

<sup>1</sup> See the IAYT Educational Standards for the Training of Yoga Therapists on the IAYT website. <http://www.iayt.org/?page=AccredStds>

<sup>2</sup> See *Emerging Guidelines for Grandparenting Yoga Therapists - Updated January 15, 2014* [http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.iayt.org/resource/resmgr/accreditationmaterials/guidelines-grandparenting\\_rv.pdf](http://c.ymcdn.com/sites/www.iayt.org/resource/resmgr/accreditationmaterials/guidelines-grandparenting_rv.pdf)



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# Yoga Therapy: The Profession

## PERSPECTIVE

### Yoga Teaching or Yoga Therapy

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We all know the great transformational benefits of yoga practice, because we continually witness them in both our students and in ourselves.

What, then, is all this talk about standards, competencies, and training requirements?

As someone who has served in both the Western medical community and the yoga community for many years, I believe that we must respect both approaches as we attempt to weave the two together. Ideally, our aim is to cultivate mutual respect with medical professionals while being true to the yogic principles.

We have a myriad of wonderful practices in yoga, but do we have the skills to adapt the 5000-year-old tradition to interface with modern medicine? Yoga highlights the importance of the healing relationship (including our relationships with our higher selves, the client, and the client's medical team and family). The healing energy that emerges between therapist and client transforms the ancient teachings into a healing practice.

In advising some of the yoga therapy schools on including the new standards in their training curricula, I noticed that the healing relationship was a missing piece. The healing relationship, when present, enhances any therapeutic modality. Understanding the client's needs and circumstances, the therapist listens with heart as well as mind. When the intuitive process partners with the intellect, it sparks a particular healing energy. This relationship is a vital part of the therapist–client interview process, whether it involves a yoga therapist, a massage therapist, an acupuncturist, or some other kind of healer; it is not only the strokes or needles that help us heal, but also the compatibility of energies.

How then does this healing relationship highlight the difference between a yoga class and a yoga therapy session? What is the key distinction that we are looking for? Does the term *yoga therapy* imply that the session be one-on-one? Is that the best way to establish a therapeutic relationship? The answer is not a simple “yes” or “no,” because each student needs different relationships at different times. As in most therapeutic modalities, yoga therapy will yield benefits either individually or in a small group.

When teaching one-on-one, we focus attention on the individual's needs. Particular consideration is given to adapting practices and scheduling convenient times and changing frequency of visits. With this type of intervention, it is not unusual for the client and/or the therapist to become “attached” and even to create a dependency on each other, and the yoga therapist should be aware of this tendency. In addition, if the therapist visits the client at her/his home, caution must be taken to provide privacy for the session while avoiding intimacy.

In a small-group session, the clients still receive individualized attention, with the added advantage of developing relationships with peers living with the same disease or ailment. The learning then comes dually, both from the therapist and from the other clients in the session. The size is critical, ideally between 8 and 12 clients in a class. The class size will vary according to the degree of physical and mental ability of the clients. Bonding within the group inevitably happens, allowing the therapist to distance herself slightly and become more of a guide.

Yoga therapy often combines both group and private sessions. We may start the series of therapy classes with a required one-on-one, in which we engage all the assessment tools and offer a set of simple practices. After the initial private session, the therapist may then decide whether a group class is appropriate or that exclusively one-on-one sessions should continue. Even once the group session is underway, the client may choose to come for an occasional private session or the therapist might suggest it.

To further distinguish the role of a yoga therapist from that of a yoga teacher, let's imagine that we are offering a specialized class called “Yoga for people living with cancer.” After we've made all our publicity and recruitment efforts, we find ourselves in a classroom addressing the needs of people with various types and in various stages of cancer. They have come to us seeking guidance on how to heal. This type of class is a wonderful gift to the students, helping them to learn simple modified poses, breathing practices, deep relaxation, and meditation. They will often leave feeling relaxed and happy. And that is a noble intention for any yoga class. As yoga teachers, we teach, inspire, and gently cajole students to practice the myriad teachings of yoga.

If they do not return to class or continue their practice at home, we often do not know the reason, as we are usually not involved in their lives outside of the classroom.

One of the definitive aspects of yoga therapy that distinguishes it from teaching yoga to the general population is the four-fold process of evaluation, assessment, instructional practices, and follow-up. This process is of vital importance. Once we begin to offer yoga therapy, the relationship changes and becomes distinct from general teaching, due to the nature of the word *therapy*. This transforms yoga into the realm of intentional healing. The class time is the time for learning and refining the practices, while the home practice becomes a primary aspect of healing.

Before we offer a yoga therapy class or session (rather than a yoga class) for people with cancer, for example, we must evaluate and assess each person's capacities and limitations. We must modify the session, whether for the group or for the individual, based on the presence of pain, bone involvement, recent surgery, ports, lines, implants, and so on; vital information that can, if not addressed and understood, cause discomfort or even actual harm.

To properly establish a healing relationship, the therapist must compassionately address the clients' needs so that they understand the practices and healing benefits. If clients are not at ease, the assessment will proceed with nervousness and discomfort, interfering with the true analysis. When the assessment and evaluation is done accurately and intuitively, followed by instructional practices and follow-up, the subsequent sessions will flow with ease. Then healing becomes a viable possibility.

The evaluation and assessment process allows us to take into account the Western medical perspective, that is, the diagnosis, recommended treatment process, lifestyle and physical aspects, and prognosis given to the client by their medical practitioner. It becomes our job as yoga therapists to translate that information into a holistic language that is compatible with the yogic understanding. Only then are we able to present a recommendation that is commensurate with our knowledge and skill in yoga practice and which complements the Western medical perspective. As yoga therapists, we are equipped with multiple practices that encourage us to stay within our scope of practice. We base our specific recommendations on our assessment of the client's physical and emotional status, rather than the suggested home practice proposed by a yoga teacher in a more general yoga class. As with other professional therapists, we should take an accurate case history and lend a compassionate ear while the physical and emotional aspects are revealed. Records and charts become the recorded proof of progress.

It is vital, for the sake of the client and for how we are viewed by the medical community and government regulators, that we stay within our scope of practice. For yoga therapists, that scope of practice includes *yoga practices only*. No matter how much we have read or been advised by others, yoga therapists are not trained in medicine, psychology, exercise, diet, or herbs. If people come to us in good faith for yoga therapy, they trust that yoga therapy is what we will give them: yoga practices that can help them ease the pain or discomfort of their physical or emotional imbalance. If we prescribe or even suggest they take medicines or herbs, eat a specific diet, or do yoga practice instead of a medical treatment, we are stepping out of our scope of practice. According to the laws in most states, by doing so, we would be practicing medicine without a license, which is illegal. Yoga therapy is a new field in the healing realm, and it is especially imperative when paving new ground that we respect the established parameters as to what we can and cannot do as yoga therapists. We are not trained to diagnosis or treat a disease or illness. By suggesting a practice, we are not treating disease; rather, we are offering a natural way to activate the body's own healing potential. Within our specific understanding and training, the symptoms our clients are exhibiting might be masking a disease beyond what stretching or herbs can heal. How do we know that we are not doing more harm than good? The answer is, we don't! That is why it is vitally important to stay within what we are trained to do. That is our scope of practice. When you reach its boundary, go no further. The clients and students trust what you say. Do not betray their trust.

Knowledge of basic counseling skills and scope of practice are necessary components of a yoga therapist's education. It is as important to know what not to say as it is to know the correct words that convey a concept or practice. We must understand the importance of confidentiality and creating a safe environment. These practices earn us the privilege of our clients' confidence.

Whether we are yoga teachers or yoga therapists, we are blessed to be able to transmit these ancient and powerful practices to others. We have trained for many hours to attain a certain level of skill. Our ongoing commitment to the highest skill level demands that we honor and continue deepening our intuition and understanding through the yogic practices. Only then are we able to remain open hearted and compassionate, responding appropriately in healing service to our clients.

# Yoga Therapy: The Profession

## PERSPECTIVE

### Qualities Of A Yoga Therapist

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Yoga therapy can be likened to a bird whose two wings must move in synchrony. One wing is a thorough understanding of the tools, techniques, and methodologies of yoga. The other wing is the vision of yoga therapy as a lifelong journey of healing both for the therapist and for the care receiver. An in-depth yoga therapist training curriculum supports the unfolding of the wing of techniques and methodology. The second wing is supported by essential qualities of the yoga therapist, such as careful listening. It is the integration of these qualities, along with an in-depth knowledge of the tools and techniques, that allows the yoga therapist to practice authentically. Here are some of the essential qualities of a yoga therapist.

#### 1. Selfless Service: *seva*

The yoga therapist receives fair compensation for professional services, but also cultivates an attitude of selfless service, a vision of healing larger than the therapist's own personal goals, wants, and needs. Through this expanded vision, the therapist recognizes his or her contribution to the healing of other beings as well as to the community and all of humanity.

#### 2. Grounding: *drdha bhumih*

The yoga therapist cultivates grounding and stability at all levels of being. This begins with the physical body, where the yoga therapist develops the strength and stability to confidently assist the care receiver in the practice of yoga poses and other physical practices. Grounding extends to the psycho-emotional level, allowing the therapist to meet challenges presented by care receivers from a place of stability and centeredness.

#### 3. Self-healing: *svacikitsa*

The yoga therapist upholds faith in the inherent capacity of all care receivers for self-healing. This begins with the therapists themselves as they experience their own healing through yoga. The therapist can then inspire the care receivers to trust in the power of inner healing.

#### 4. Conscious Presence: *upasthiti*

Conscious presence is living in the present moment. The yoga therapist is aware of the care receiver's history, as well as his or her goals for healing. Yoga therapy, however, takes place in the present moment, with the therapists remaining fully conscious of all that is happening both within themselves and within the receiver at all levels of being.

#### 5. Careful Listening: *sravanam*

In effective yoga therapy, the therapist seldom offers advice or opinions; rather, the yoga therapist listens carefully and sensitively to what his or her care receivers are communicating, in order to respond optimally.

#### 6. Skillful Speech: *vaca kausalam*

Individuals in the process of healing may be highly sensitive. This is helpful in that they are often more open to new ways of seeing and being. This sensitivity and openness requires the yoga therapist to exercise skillful communication that is carefully attuned to the receiver's needs.

#### 7. Skillful Means: *upakarana kausalam*

The yoga therapist utilizes a wide range of tools and techniques and understands the principles that underlie them. The yoga therapist has the ability to apply these techniques at all levels of being—physical, energetic, psycho-emotional, and spiritual. Most importantly, the yoga therapist adapts and simplifies techniques to meet the needs of the individual.

#### 8. Patience: *sabana*

The healing process is unique for each individual. It cannot be rushed and, like the butterfly's wings, must unfold as part of a process in which all of the stages of healing occur naturally. The yoga therapist must be mindful of allowing this process to unfold, never rushing forward in the name of achieving short-term goals.

**9. Enthusiasm: *utsaha***

The yoga therapist is familiar with all aspects of yoga as a healing modality. Yoga therapists who cultivate their strengths and areas of interest are passionate about their particular area of concentration, whether it is the physical body, the subtle body, or the psycho-emotional body, and they are better able to inspire healing in the receiver.

**10. Committed Personal Practice: *sadhana***

A practice designed for the needs of the individual generally provides optimal healing. The most effective way for the therapist to create a personal practice for others is to develop his or her own consistent individual practice and to assess carefully how it meets his or her needs.

**11. Study of Self and Scriptures: *svadhyaya***

Yoga therapists are engaged in an ongoing process of self-exploration based on the traditional texts of yoga in which they explore areas of limitation, pain, and suffering in their own lives. This process enables them to facilitate care receivers in widening their perspectives of themselves and of life as whole, which is one of the most important dimensions of healing.

**12. Simplicity: *saralata***

When yoga therapists begin to practice yoga therapy, there may be a tendency to offer too many tools and techniques in order to provide “the most healing.” For effective yoga therapy, however, less is usually more, and offering a few tools and techniques fully and authentically is generally most helpful.

**13. Generosity: *dana***

The yoga therapist maintains appropriate boundaries of time and energy. At the same time, he or she offers yoga generously by showing care receivers that knowledge of yoga is universal and belongs to all of humanity, to be shared freely.

**14. Compassion: *karuna***

Compassion is seeing clearly that everyone, including us as yoga therapists, is on a journey of healing. For some, suffering is physical, while for others it is emotional or spiritual. Rather than perceiving care receivers as “ill” and therapists as “well,” the quality of compassion allows us to recognize that we are all on a unique healing journey.

**15. Witness Consciousness: *saksitvam***

In yoga therapy, a full range of feelings, emotions, and sensations may arise in the care receiver. The yoga therapist learns to witness these feelings in the receiver, as well as to witness and manage reactions to these feelings within his or her own self.

**16. Equanimity: *samatva***

Equanimity is resting in the calm depths of our inner being regardless of what is happening at the surface level of sensations, thoughts, and feelings. Through equanimity the yoga therapist must never lose the connection to his or her deeper being, no matter what challenges arise in the practice of yoga therapy.

**17. Integrity: *arjava***

The essence of integrity in yoga therapy is providing optimal yoga practices for healing at all levels of being, rather than prescribing specific yoga techniques to cure disease. Integrity also requires that the yoga therapist recognize when he or she is able to work with a receiver effectively and when it is appropriate to refer the person to another care provider.

**18. Multidimensional Awareness: *panca kosa darsana***

The yoga therapist holds a vision of the whole person, so that even if he or she is focusing on the care receiver's physical body, he or she is also seeing, sensing, and responding at the energetic, psycho-emotional, and spiritual levels. This multidimensional perspective respects the care receiver's cultural and religious framework, while cultivating greater holistic awareness within.

**19. Intuition: *nidhyana***

The yoga therapist develops a wide range of tools and techniques for assessing and meeting the receiver's needs. Intuition plays an important role in knowing how and when to employ these tools and techniques. Intuitive skills are developed through an approach to training yoga therapists that places equal emphasis on developing cognitive and intuitive learning skills, with a focus on the physical, subtle, psycho-emotional, and spiritual dimensions of being.

**20. Creativity: *pratibha***

Yoga therapy is an art and a science, and with each group or individual, the yoga therapist both learns and teaches something in a completely new way. Openness to yoga therapy as a field of infinite possibilities allows for tremendous creativity and keeps the teaching fresh.

**21. Self-nourishment: *svaposana***

Yoga therapists nourish themselves by maintaining their own regular practice, receiving healing therapies, and setting aside time for playing and exploring life's mysteries. As therapists bring balance into their own lives, they naturally cultivate self-care in their receivers.

**22. Gratitude: *krtajna***

Gratitude is embracing all of life, including its challenges, as a journey of appreciation and learning. The ability to accept and embrace life as it presents itself contributes to healing at all levels of being.

**23. Inner Freedom: *kaivalya***

Through integrating the essential qualities of yoga therapy, yoga therapists live and work with a sense of inner freedom, reflected as lightness and ease in all of their activities, even those they find most challenging. This inner freedom is the essence of healing.

**24. Surrender: *pranidhana***

Surrender is the recognition that there is an all-encompassing intelligence at the heart of creation that guides our life journey. As the yoga therapist aligns with this source energy, he or she is naturally guided to healing.

**25. Faith: *shraddha***


Faith is an unshakable knowing that yoga is a process of transformation that heals at all levels of being. The effective yoga therapist also has faith that he or she will be guided to offer optimal techniques for healing to each care receiver.

These 25 qualities unfold gradually through a training program that places equal emphasis on both wings of yoga therapy—understanding of the tools, techniques, and methodologies, as well as awakening the vision of yoga therapy as a lifelong journey of healing.

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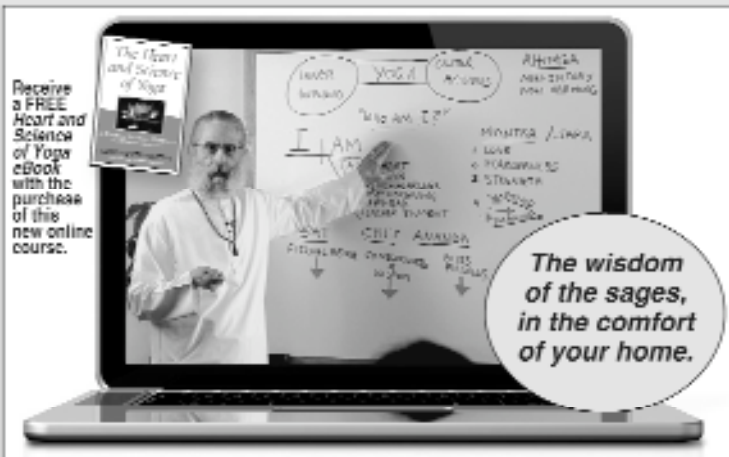
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# Yoga Therapy: The Profession

PERSPECTIVE

## The Differences Between Yoga Teacher Training Programs and Yoga Therapist Training Programs

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A yoga teacher training program differs from a yoga therapist training program. We present an overview of the essential contents of each type of program in order to illustrate the differences. We also describe how a yoga teacher training program provides the foundation for a yoga therapist training program.

In a yoga teacher training program, students learn the art and science of yoga, as well as the art and science of teaching. Although programs vary, the general curriculum for a yoga teacher training program should include

- the history and philosophy of yoga
- basic anatomy and physiology
- an in-depth study of the methods of practice
- how to develop and maintain a consistent personal practice that utilizes these methods
- the ability to ascertain the needs of the students
- the principles of adapting, sequencing, and applying these various methods to meet those needs in different teaching contexts.

These teaching contexts should include group drop-in classes, class series, private classes, workshops, and retreats.

Although programs vary, the methods of practice taught in advanced programs should include

1. asana,
2. pranayama,
3. chanting,
4. mantra,
5. meditation,
6. relaxation, and
7. aspects of *tantra* (to include an understanding of ritual and the methods of *bandha*, *kriya*, *mudra*, *nyasa*, and *sankalpa*).

Prospective trainees in a yoga therapist training program should have completed an advanced yoga teacher training program, as described above, and should have integrated those teachings into their personal practices, as well as having applied them in different teaching contexts. These are the essential steps required prior to being trained as a yoga therapist, for two main reasons:

1. In yoga teacher training, teachers gain proficiency in the tools of yoga, which are then adapted and applied to individuals or groups with clinical conditions when working as a yoga therapist.
2. In yoga teacher training, teachers gain the skill of teaching the tools of yoga to their students, which is an essential skill when transmitting the intervention to yoga therapy clients.

Thus, IAYT has established the minimum entry requirement into a yoga therapist training program to be the completion of a 200-hour yoga teacher training program.

As described in the following paragraphs, yoga therapists require further education and different skill sets than yoga teachers.

In a yoga therapist training program, trainees learn about the art and science of yoga therapy, as well as the art and science of being a therapist. The overall curriculum should include

1. models of health and a healthy lifestyle;
2. a broad spectrum of symptoms, conditions, and pathologies that we collectively understand as illness or disease;
3. core principles of Ayurveda;
4. basic anatomy and physiology;
5. basic psychology and pathology;

6. the principles and practices of yoga therapy and how they relate to both symptoms and conditions;
7. how to develop and apply a personal therapeutic practice that addresses the trainee's needs;
8. therapist/client relationship skills, including the methods of assessing a client's condition, setting appropriate goals, developing provisional therapeutic strategies, implementing those strategies, training clients to apply them for themselves, and doing client follow-up and revisions of the therapy.

Yoga therapy trainees learn how to determine appropriate goals, adapt suitable practices, and apply them to each particular clinical context.

Although programs vary, the general curriculum with regard to illness and disease should include

1. a range of structural conditions, from common aches and pains to more serious and debilitating conditions;
2. a spectrum of common physiological symptoms that manifests in many different types of illnesses;
3. a broad range of physiological conditions that affect the human system; and
4. psycho-emotional and psychosocial conditions that affect clients at the level of emotion, cognition, social interaction, and behavior.

Again, although programs vary, students should learn the yoga therapy principles for helping their clients reduce

or manage their symptoms, improve their function, and shift their perspectives about themselves in relation to their health conditions. In addition, trainees learn how to understand the diagnoses that come from their clients' health care practitioners and the prescribed treatments; how to develop condition- or symptom-specific complementary strategies; and how to navigate in the realm of professional health care systems.

Trainees learn how to work with individuals in different settings: in private practice, in an integrative clinic, and in a hospital. In addition, trainees learn how to develop and offer group therapies that are either symptom- or condition-specific.

This review of a comprehensive yoga teacher training program and a comprehensive yoga therapist training program shows that the contents and curriculum for each program and the intended skill sets of prospective graduates of each program are different. A yoga teacher training program trains its prospective graduates in the principles and practices of yoga and the art and science of teaching them in different teaching contexts. A yoga therapist training program trains its prospective graduates in a broad spectrum of health conditions and symptoms of imbalance, dysfunction, illness, and disease; the principles and practices of therapeutic yoga application; and the art and science of the clinical application of therapeutic yoga. Though a comprehensive yoga teacher training program may include competencies that extend beyond the needs of a yoga therapist, the basic skills of a yoga teacher are essential prerequisites to be a competent yoga therapist.

# Yoga Therapy: The Profession

## PERSPECTIVE

### The Distinction Between a Yoga Class and a Yoga Therapy Session

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Although yoga as a practice is therapeutic, there are significant differences between a yoga teacher and a yoga therapist and between a yoga class and a yoga therapy session. Clarity about these differences is helpful for the teacher/therapist, as well as for the student/client. We will look at this distinction from the perspectives of the yoga student, the yoga therapy client, the yoga teacher, the yoga therapist, the yoga class, and the yoga therapy session.

*The yoga student* There are many reasons why students go to a yoga class or seek out private yoga instruction. To make a sound decision, students would do well to look deeply at their intentions for seeking out yoga education, yoga instruction, or yoga therapy. Yoga provides the tools for a process of self-investigation and self-development that ultimately guides practitioners toward self-realization. However, the general public still sees yoga as a system of exercise. Students most often go to a yoga class to exercise in a venue with a like-minded community. Those who come to understand that yoga is more than exercise may look for instruction to explore its other aspects, such as pranayama or meditation. Regardless of the intention, they will gain some benefit by learning and practicing yoga.

*The yoga therapy client* When clients seek out a yoga therapist or a therapeutic group, they are usually not coming to learn yoga, but to get help with or relief from some symptom or health condition that is troubling them. In most cases, the instruction focuses on their condition and how the yoga techniques can help them feel better or improve their function, rather than on the techniques or methods of yoga practice.

*The yoga teacher* There are substantial differences between yoga teaching styles. Some teachers focus primarily on instruction, guiding students through their practices and helping them to practice correctly. The scope of instruction can range from asana to pranayama to meditation, but fundamentally, instructors using this style will guide the students in their practice. Other teachers seek to educate their

students in how to practice, rather than—or in the midst of—guiding the practice itself. This teaching style empowers students to guide their own experience, whether they are practicing alone or in a group setting. In either case, good teachers are able to choose appropriate practices that meet the interests and abilities of their students. Whether their style is instructional or educational, yoga teachers focus on teaching the various yoga methods in a correct and appropriate way.

*The yoga therapist* Rather than focusing on yoga methods and practices, yoga therapists fundamentally focus on their clients' needs. Their job is to understand why their clients have come to see them and determine what they can do to support them. To help them in their work, therapists are trained to assess clients through listening, questioning, observing, and appropriately touching. Therapists look for ways to help their clients reduce or manage their symptoms, improve their function, and help them with their attitude in relation to their health conditions. After assessing clients, therapists establish appropriate goals, develop a practice intervention, and then teach clients to practice that intervention. In this sense, therapists choose yoga techniques in relation to how they will specifically benefit individual clients.


*The yoga class* Yoga teachers may offer a variety of yoga classes, including classes for individuals or groups of people with specific conditions. Common examples include yoga for pregnant women, yoga for heart patients, and yoga for cancer survivors. In these classes, good yoga teachers must learn the contraindications for working with people that have these conditions and respect those contraindications while teaching the students appropriate yoga. The intention in these types of classes is to teach these students how to practice yoga while respecting their health conditions.

*The yoga therapy session* The intention changes in yoga therapy sessions for individuals or groups with specific conditions. After an appropriate intake and assessment, therapists

will often focus on the specific symptoms that trouble their clients and identify methods to help them manage those symptoms. Examples include helping clients with pain management, fatigue, or sleeplessness. In addition, the therapist's role is to empower clients to take a more active role in their self-care. The therapist's job is less about teaching yogic techniques and more about helping clients to overcome their challenges and gain independence. Hence, the job of the therapist represents a different focus, a different type of education, and a different skill set.

Commonly, students report great and even therapeutic benefits from their yoga classes, no matter which type of class they are attending. This occurs because of the inherent therapeutic potential of yoga, but it should not obscure the distinction between a yoga class and a yoga therapy session.

Although the distinctions may seem subtle, it is important for the yoga student and the yoga therapy client to be clear about their intentions when seeking out yoga professionals. It is also extremely important for yoga professionals—whether teachers or therapists—to be clear about the intention and orientation of their work, honest about their level of training and understanding, and realistic about their skill sets. Although both yoga teaching and yoga therapy are valid and valuable professions, they are different. It is important that we as a yoga community become clear about these distinctions.




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# Yoga Therapy: The Profession

PERSPECTIVE

## Yoga Therapist Education and Yoga Teacher Training: Intention Fuels Action

Michael Lee, MA

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Intention fuels action, and action produces results. I believe this to be true in most forms of human endeavor, and it is particularly relevant in the field of education.

What are our “intentions” in yoga therapist training, and what educational input is required to meet those intentions? How do intentions in yoga therapist training differ from those in yoga teacher training, and where is there overlap? The broad intentions underlying what we do as yoga therapists and what informs our training programs are spelled out clearly in the very definition of yoga therapy as currently defined by IAYT: “Yoga therapy is the process of empowering individuals to progress toward improved health and well being through the application of the philosophy and practice of yoga.”

In looking at this definition to uncover the intentions of yoga therapy, we see three important elements. First, there is the “process of empowering.” Second, there is an intent of movement and/or change, as implied by the term “progress toward improved health and well being,” and, finally, there is information on how the intentions are to be manifested: “through the application and practice of yoga.”

I’ll address the last element first. It is clear that both yoga therapy and yoga teaching are activities of human endeavor that seek to apply in some way the philosophy and practice of yoga. So this part of our definition is not much help in drawing distinctions between them; it simply indicates the foundation from which both draw knowledge and information.

The other two elements in the definition, when taken together, get to the crux of the distinctions between the two professions. They describe a “process” that I believe is unique to yoga therapy—a process involving both “empowerment” and change of some significance in a particular direction—“toward improved health and well being.”

While a yoga teacher may incidentally contribute to meaningful change in peoples’ lives, the yoga therapist deliberately focuses on creating that meaningful change. Furthermore, given a yoga therapist’s focus on creating meaningful change, the training required to deliver this ele-

ment professionally demands different curricula and learning experiences from what is found in most yoga teacher training programs.

One critical difference is the need for a yoga therapist to have the capacity to guide individual clients from where they are in their lives to a state of “improved health and well being.” In this capacity, a yoga therapist is more an “educator” than an “instructor.” The word “educator” derives from the Latin *e* (meaning “out of”) and *duco* (meaning “to draw out” or “to lead”). An educator, then, is someone who engages in the act of drawing things out of people. The underlying assumption that there is already something there to be drawn out is consistent with the yogic concepts of the “inner guru”—the development of self-knowledge and the capacity of the yoga experience to support one in accessing one’s internal guidance. As a yoga therapist, one of the most powerful gifts we offer to our clients is our capacity to enhance their ability to embrace change from within—to “empower” them. To empower someone requires strict focus on delivering an educational experience grounded in offering opportunities for internal awareness and insight, which strengthens self-reliance, rather than simply delivering instructions. In general, yoga teachers spend more time instructing than educating.

The Latin roots of *instruct* point to the act of “structuring in” or “giving input.” For the purpose of teaching people how to move their bodies, to engage in asana, and to practice pranayama, instruction is very important—just as it is in learning how to do anything with proficiency. Instructors direct, they tell, and they inform. They get their students to follow a particular form by being specifically directive. Effective instruction is most appropriate for activities that require consistent adherence to established practices. Yoga teachers need to be good instructors.

Teaching a yoga therapist the capacity to adapt the yoga therapy experience to each individual client cannot be reduced to a checklist of instructions. Yoga therapist training requires more complex and carefully designed learning experiences that engage the yoga therapy client from within

in a process of self-awareness and self-mentoring. In order to help people change their lives and become empowered to embrace change and progress in healing, yoga therapists must offer an experience beyond that offered by yoga instruction, and their education must help them learn how to facilitate yoga experiences based on this intention.

Education for a yoga therapist requires the student to learn how to provide empowering, therapeutic experiences rather than merely learning how to instruct in technique. That therapeutic intention alone informs choices in educational methodology and program design for yoga therapist training. For example, yoga therapists must relate to each individual's specific experience of the therapeutic process. They need to be comfortable in working with the emotional aspects of life. A deeper level of availability to each client as a unique being is required, and yoga therapists need to know what will provide that presence and how to engage it. Education for a yoga therapist must teach different language skills and dialog processes, how to be fully present to a client no matter what is happening, and the capacity to respond without getting in the way of the therapeutic process.

Teaching a yoga class with deliberate therapeutic intent is the exception rather than the rule. Could yoga teachers offer their students therapeutic intent along the lines of empowerment and progress in healing in a class setting? I believe so, but this is not what one would encounter in the vast majority of yoga classes today.

But therapeutic intention *can* inform a yoga class experience, especially when it overlaps with the particular skills, knowledge, and personal presence required of yoga therapists. In fact, such a class can be a very effective way of offering yoga therapy to a larger group. In our Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy Training (PRYT), practitioners learn how to deliver the yoga therapy experience one-on-one, in small yoga therapy groups, and within the context of an even larger therapeutic yoga class. Again, intention is the guide in determining whether any yoga experience is considered therapeutic.

One of our yoga therapists specializes in working with pregnant women. She came to the PRYT program from a background as a marriage and family therapist and saw how the emotional responses to being pregnant varied greatly among her pregnant clients. She also became aware that for many first-time mothers there can be substantial and unspoken fear and anxiety around the experience of childbirth and motherhood. Moreover, these feelings have what PRYT calls an “embodied” aspect that, when engaged, is powerfully effective in helping the women succeed in the self-management of fear and anxiety.

In one-on-one sessions, this yoga therapist adjusts her approach to the specific needs and issues of the individual,

even though the basic process she employs is essentially the same from one client to another. She guides her clients through a PRYT process that engages clients in an experience which emphasizes present awareness of the whole experience—body, mind, emotions, and spirit—through gentle hands-on assisted postures, breath, and guided meditation. This frees the clients to be present to whatever is happening for them at both a physical and emotional level. As a result, they are able to integrate what is happening in their bodies with what is present in their lives. They often move to a deeper level of acceptance, fear becomes less overwhelming, and their overall states of mental well-being improve, along with their physical presence to themselves.

The most significant skills in the work the therapist does (skills that are essential in PRYT's yoga therapy education) are her capacities to be fully present to the client and to listen and respond in meaning, content, and feeling as the process is delivered. The deep level of presence empowers her clients to be fully present to what is happening in the moment and to engage their own unique process of healing.

The same yoga therapist leads small yoga therapy groups and therapeutic yoga classes for her pregnant clients. Both activities have the same therapeutic intent, but the process is more generic and not tailored to individual needs. In leading classes and group experiences, she draws upon other learned skills and knowledge—her skill as a facilitator in leading small-group discussions as part of the yoga therapy group experiences, as well as her skill as a yoga teacher in guiding the dual process of self-inquiry and a physical asana experience for a specific population at various stages of pregnancy.

Camille Llewellyn, a yoga therapist in Pennsylvania, does much the same thing in her work with cancer patients. Her work is directed toward supporting people through the traumatic effects of treatment and life adjustment. Working with several hospitals in her area, she works one-on-one with individuals, and she facilitates yoga therapy groups, which she limits to around ten participants per group. Her training is basically the same as our pregnancy specialist's. She delivers a therapeutic process in much the same way. She undertook additional training in working with cancer patients, mostly to support her understanding of her clientele from an empathetic perspective and to become aware of their physical limitations, the challenges they experience, and the various stages of emotional change common to people with cancer. However, this knowledge is not directly applied as part of the yoga therapy process, but rather supports her approach to yoga therapy. In my view, it is important for yoga therapists to have an empathetic understanding of the people they serve and to have some basic medical knowledge about the condition of any specific population they serve. At the same time, they are clearly working in



support of the medical professionals offering specific treatment and are not offering a replacement therapy or trying to “fix” their client’s particular health condition.

In summary, I believe there is some overlap in the methods for educating yoga therapists and training yoga teachers, but there are also clear distinctions. Much depends on the underlying therapeutic intention behind either pursuit. Instructing a general yoga class at any level on a prescribed model without therapeutic intent will generally not fit the definition of what we understand to be yoga therapy. With a trained instructor, any yoga practice will no doubt benefit those attending and will contribute to their overall well-being. Yoga classes are an important and very popular part of the yoga landscape, and yoga teaching is an important and essential profession.

But for many people, there is a clear need to move beyond yoga classes. Facilitating a small group yoga class, with clear therapeutic intent (including the facilitation of empowerment for life change and providing a container for a wide range of individual experiences), is, in my view, within the realm of yoga therapy. Teaching others to lead this kind of experience is thereby within the realm of yoga therapist education and an appropriate objective for yoga therapist training programs. In fact, being able to deliver the therapeutic yoga experience to a larger and more diverse population should be an essential part of the skills, knowledge, and awareness of all yoga therapists. So here's the question we should ask ourselves: will the learning objectives we establish for our students equip them to deliver the kinds of experiences to their clients that have therapeutic intent, and will these experiences have the potential to empower clients for making change in their lives? Only a “yes” answer will satisfy our definition of yoga therapy.

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