Yoga Therapy: The Profession

PERSPECTIVE

Yoga Therapist Education and Yoga Teacher Training: Intention Fuels Action

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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 element 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 therapy 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.