

Features

Shared Foundations for Practice: The Language of Yoga Therapy

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As an international emerging profession, our yoga therapy community continues to refine how to communicate to others what we are and what we do as yoga therapists. The four of us struggle with this just as you do. Please join us in this exploration to “say it better” and give us your feedback as we all build this profession.

Developing common descriptions of what we do will help us

- integrate into healthcare settings and client populations.
- encourage referrals.
- increase consumer demand.
- explore alternative payment possibilities.
- clarify important dimensions for research decisions.

We acknowledge the challenge of exploring the underlying foundations of yoga therapy in a way that welcomes the diversity of the many wonderful lineages and traditions that make up our field. It is our intention that this imperfect discussion will be a foundation for continuing to make yoga a respected and recognized therapy, just as the IAYT’s earlier definitions evolved to support the training standards and scope of practice that are so critical today. Knowing that exploration will continue, we offer for now this unified, consistent explanation to our various audiences.

How Do We Describe What We Do?

So how do we help those outside of our field and unfamiliar with our practice understand what we do and its importance in client care? Our diversity naturally creates a tension as we must make some generalizations while trying to communicate effectively with novices to yoga. Nevertheless, it is essential to have this common language to present yoga therapy to those unacquainted with the field and to address any confusion that might be engendered from yoga’s esoteric terminology. If we begin from where audiences are in their understanding, using familiar and shared language, we will invite their follow-on questions.

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We begin with some shared language, then articulate how yoga and yoga therapy are related, and finish with differentiating yoga therapy from yogopathy. Let’s start building!

Definitions for Our Audiences

Several key biomedical terms can help to describe the role of our profession in current contexts. We need to understand these concepts, but we must also be sure to speak about them in ways our audiences understand. For instance, “Yoga therapy focuses on health promotion and well-being, not pathology,” versus, “Salutogenesis is the foundation of yoga therapy.”



Figure 1. Yoga therapy nests inside the larger yoga and is therefore neither separate from nor greater than yoga.

Salutogenesis is an emphasis on client care that identifies and addresses the causes of health/well-being with interventions focused on health promotion and optimizing well-being.¹ We will go into this more in the final section, but this shift in perspective is a key difference from the pathology-focused care in our culture.

Eudaimonia was first described by Aristotle as a “well-lived” life that fulfills a person’s ultimate purpose and gives that person meaning. Eudaimonic happiness is a steadfast, abiding contentment marked by flourishing rather than a short-term pleasure or comfort. Eudaimonia was taught through an exploration of, and alignment with, the virtue ethics—much like the *yamas* and *niyamas*. Related terms that may be more familiar to healthcare audiences include self-actualization and meaning/purpose, both of which are linked in research to many positive physical and mental health outcomes.

Yogopathy is the application of yogic tools for symptom management of a diagnosis made by another healthcare provider.² The suffix “pathy” implies a focus on disease and pathogenesis with a segmented approach as opposed to an integrated one.

Neurophysiological explanations about how yoga supports various populations and conditions include regulation of the nervous and endocrine systems, mood, and emotions.³

A review of our scope of practice and definition reveals that yoga therapy is a practice that focuses on salutogenesis and eudaimonic well-being.

How Are Yoga and Yoga Therapy Related?

This relationship (Fig. 1) can be seen in the IAYT’s definition of yoga therapy⁴:

Yoga therapy is the process of empowering individuals to progress toward improved health and well-being through the application of the teachings and practices of yoga.

Our motivation as yoga therapists is to share the art and science of yoga with its many possibilities for providing answers to many health problems troubling humankind. We cherish that yoga is first and foremost a *moksha shastra* (science of liberation) meant to facilitate individual attainment of the final freedom or emancipation. As the definition’s *process* reminds us, these are brought about by right use of the body, emotions, and mind with awareness and consciousness. Yoga also helps sustain this dynamic state of health after it has been attained through ongoing disciplined self-effort.

Table 1 distinguishes between what is often sold or understood as yoga in the United States from what we are aspiring to establish as yoga therapy. The chart in no way means to disparage this broad spectrum of yoga and its sincere teachers. We acknowledge that we are offering incomplete generalizations here, and that there are differences in terminology such as “client” in the United States and “patient” or “participant” in India.

Table 1. Yoga and Yoga Therapy

Quality	Yoga	Yoga Therapy (<i>Chikitsa</i>)
Population	Individuals or general audiences	Individual or small, focused audiences
Focus	On the teacher and the teacher’s perfection of postures or practice, acquiring new postures, presentation of a “nice” branded experience, and keeping the studio full	On client and source of suffering, surrender to never being perfect; improvement across koshas vs. an external visible correctness; the client identifies her or his <i>swadharma</i> (purpose) and advances toward independence
Student engagement	Often passive and dependent on the teacher’s instruction	Self-empowered, moving away from dependence on the teacher’s guidance
Transmission of knowledge	Often passive and aimed at fixing a problem/pathology	Co-active engagement, reflection, and discovery/learning toward salutogenesis
Provider scope of practice	Broad and loosely defined, with provider often a technician, limited depth	A defined scope of practice and clinical mastery developed through continuous learning
Student lifestyle modification	Not necessary, minimal accountability for behavior change	Expected, as is an understanding of self-responsibility for lifestyle choices
Yogic techniques	Provider uses/replicates them as taught	Provider knows their effect and varies use with clients’ needs or circumstances

Table 1 reflects the integrative nature of yoga therapy and health and well-being as both ancient wisdom and current biomedical/scientific knowledge. Two other distinctions in discussing the contrast are (1) our strong, aspirational emphasis on providers’ responsibility to arrive having done their own practice; and (2) the role larger environmental systems play in the encounters. Much like the supports of a three-legged stool, three mutually dependent factors are crucial for offering yoga therapy as a well-being practice: clients, providers, and systems. Failure to address any one leg affects the foundation and quality of yoga therapy.

As providers, and one leg of the stool, we co-facilitate the process of healing through our knowledge base, our set of skills, and our ability to see the bigger picture or the “yoga” of our clients’ life circumstances. The development and maintenance of these three aspects of our profession generate the stability illustrated in Figure 2.

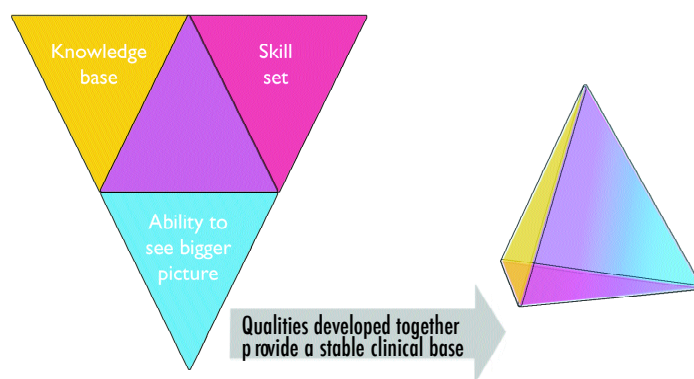


Figure 2. Yoga therapists co-facilitate healing by drawing equally on key aspects of professional development.

We might understand the client and provider legs of the stool, but what is the systems leg? The systems are of key importance, as they require care and management of not just the relationship system between clients and providers, but wider influences of relationships, such as social structures, power dynamics, environmental health, vocation, and spiritual support, which support or thwart eudaimonia and salutogenesis for both the providers and the clients.⁵

It is also critical we communicate that yoga therapy is adjunctive/complementary to other kinds of client care, not a stand-alone solution. This can include both allopathic “Western” modalities as well as other cultural models of medicine. Working together by building a better health foundation, yoga therapists can add strength as vital members of an integrative, person-centered health team.

Consider the following sound bites to use in communication about who we are and what we offer.

Yoga therapists . . .

- are skilled at and assist in discovering what is keeping someone in a state of imbalance and can teach specific techniques to bring the person back to balance on any given layer.
- join clients on *their* personal journeys—not our ideas of what their journeys should be. Yoga therapy is a co-facilitative process between providers and clients.
- create a safe container for clients to do their own work in and around their challenges.

- provide a scaffold, through study and practices, to what can otherwise feel overwhelming or structureless.
- foster self-actualization, meaning/purpose, and the flourishing of individuals within their unique sense of themselves through prescribed practices and study.
- monitor themselves too, asking, “Do we (provider and client) each have the wisdom to see when change is needed in the dynamic dance across time?”

So is using yoga to treat medical conditions yoga therapy?

Yoga Therapy and Yogopathy

Yoga therapy focuses primarily on salutogenesis. The heart of salutogenesis is the sense of coherence that was defined by sociologist Aaron Antonovsky as “a pervasive, long-lasting and dynamic feeling of confidence that one’s internal and external environments are predictable and that there is a high probability that things will work out as well as can be expected.”¹ This idea of living life to one’s fullest potential is familiar across cultures and time.

Such coherence correlates in research to cognition, coping skills, and motivation. Yoga therapy improves cognition, allows a clearer perception of life that enhances the ability to cope with the increasing demands of society, and sustains motivation even during challenging times. Yoga therapy therefore goes beyond treating aches and pains, taking clients into the deepest recesses of the mind and heart and asking them to consider life’s important questions. In other words, it is a mental, emotional, and spiritual self-discovery system.

Yogopathy, with the suffix “pathy,” implies a focus on disease and pathogenesis. The same root word is used in allopathic medicine, which also tends to concentrate on making a diagnosis and then treating the symptoms (as opposed to finding and uprooting the cause). Yes, it is true that yoga therapists sometimes assess the client’s acute symptoms and even develop a therapeutic plan that pacifies the symptoms of the illness or disease, but this is only the first step in the journey of yoga therapy. We imply no judgment of anyone who practices yogopathy, as this is an excellent way to establish trust with clients by helping them to feel better quickly so that they will come back again.

The ultimate goal, though, is for the therapists and the clients to develop lifestyle management routines that allow for improved well-being for the clients, or salutogenesis. The progression then is from pain or anxiety to a neutral level of existence, and then this ideally continues onward to support clients to be the best version of themselves. This is the beauty of the art of yoga therapy.

As yoga therapists, unless *we aim to correct the manifest psycho-*

somatic disassociation as well as the underlying distorted perception of reality in the individual, we are not practicing yoga therapy. This bears repetition, and the distinction is important. We need to be clear about where we aim to take the client in the long term. We are not just attempting to pacify the symptoms of dis-ease. In our symptoms-based culture, it is fortunate that this process also often brings the side-effects of decreased pain, anxiety, depression, and many other symptoms. The heart of the matter is that we support the clients to see their lives from new perspectives, gain clarity, and cultivate the sense of new possibilities in life. In summary, the REAL work is to thrive instead of just survive.

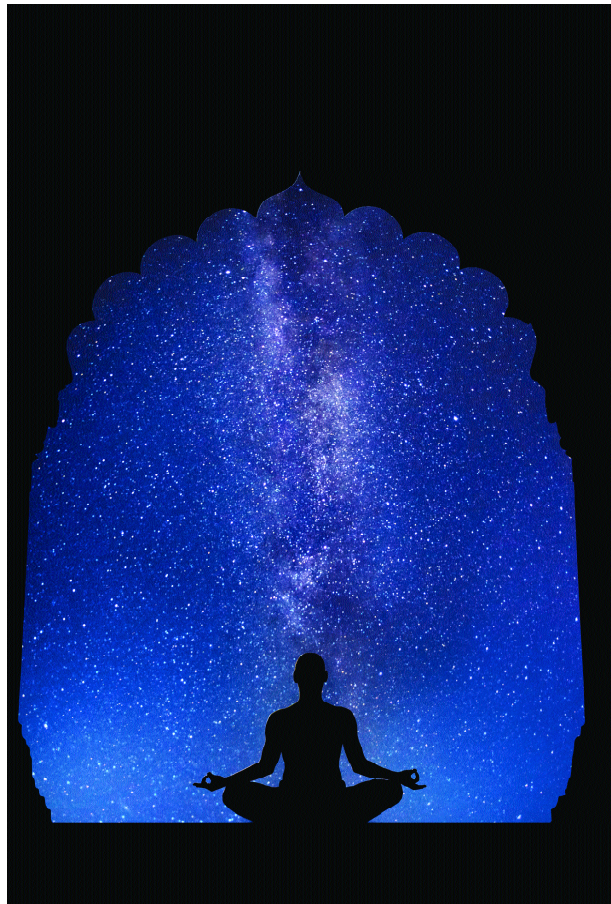
Co-Creative Assessment

The yoga therapy assessment is a co-creative, collaborative process between therapist and client. This is quite different from an assessment that is the yoga therapist’s unilateral perspective. To assist someone out of their suffering, it is critical that the client’s point of view and perspectives are taken into consideration. The whole person needs to be understood to help transform the client’s suffering and not merely treat a diagnosis or suppress manifest symptoms.

In relationship to healthcare, this assessment changes dramatically in the yoga therapy approach because we are facilitating healthy living beyond diagnosis. Additionally, in yoga therapy we are creating space for something bigger to also manifest in the clients’ lives. This manifestation is facilitated by enabling clients to understand their patterns and consciously move away from the tendencies that cause suffering. Yoga therapy then is an ongoing process of transformation in the ever-evolving life journey vs. the end point in yogopathy, which is mere symptom relief.

Generalized Protocols vs. Individualized Treatment Plans

Yogopathy’s interventions become modifications in the practices that are usually limited and generalized and seek protocols and formulas to manage the condition, for example, a “one size fits all” yoga therapy protocol for diabetes or cardiovascular conditions. On the other hand, in yoga therapy there are truly no generalized protocols; rather, the modifications are based on a deep understanding of the individual clients, their circumstances, and their response to the therapeutic practices. In addition, the protocol and treatment plans are constantly modified to meet the emerging needs of the clients as they shift and change with each new step of the process.



In yoga therapy, the clients are given the tools and the support to heal themselves. Each individual must adopt appropriate and healthy attitudes, remedial dietary measures, and conscious physical and mental practices. Conversely, in yogopathy the healing process is dependent on the healthcare providers and fosters a tendency toward dependence. This dynamic difference in the source of healing fosters empowerment of the clients as they take charge of their own lives. Furthermore, the role of the providers in yoga therapy transforms from one of being the healers, or the experts, with the source of healing (as in yogopathy), to being facilitators of self-healing, with the source of healing being the clients' own healing potential. The emphasis then is on self-healing rather than on "being healed." Consequently, adherence to the new daily routine by the client is critical to successful health and wellness outcomes in yoga therapy.

Table 2 summarizes these differences and has the same limitations as Table 1 regarding generalizations and cultural variance in terminology.

Table 2. Yogopathy and Yoga Therapy

Quality	Yogopathy	Yoga Therapy
Focus	Pathogenesis and the diagnosis	Salutogenesis and cultivating well-being
Who and what heals?	The healer-provider, fostering paternalism and dependence	The clients themselves, through the culture of active health
Empowerment	To the provider	To the clients taking charge of their own lives
Assessment	Linked to someone else's diagnosis	Toward the source of suffering/promoting health through co-determined, collaborative assessment
Who assesses	The therapist	Therapist and client through a co-facilitated process
Relationship to healthcare	Practitioner is one of many providers who address the diagnoses	Facilitates healthy living beyond diagnoses, natural intrinsic healing potential, and eudaimonic wellbeing
Process	Reactive; doing to	Proactive; being with
Emphasis	Symptom suppression	Source of <i>duhkha</i> (suffering), dissociation from inherent tendencies, and facilitation of <i>sukha</i> (ease)
Modifications	Limited, generalized	Deep understanding of the individual and the person's responses to practices
Protocols	Seeking protocols/formulas	No protocols
Endpoint	Symptom relief	The ongoing process of an ever-evolving life journey

Conclusion

This common language is intended to clarify our own and our many audiences' understanding of what yoga therapy is and why it is important. We hope that yoga therapists will incorporate this language into their communications. We acknowledge this article is but a stepping stone in our common mission to make yoga a respected and recognized therapy. Please join us in this evolving conversation with your feedback and questions. Contact the authors directly or by email through ytteditor@iyt.org.

Finally, when we remember to engage the philosophy, principles, and holistic lifestyle of yoga in our everyday practice and help our clients to understand them, thereby assimilating the practices in their own lives, we are practicing yoga as yoga therapy. **YTT**

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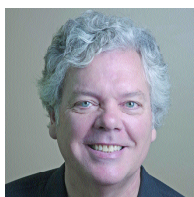
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