

A Living Healing Tradition by Gary Kraftsow

By understanding yoga therapy's philosophical foundation, we can apply the tradition's practices to heal the whole person—addressing all nine dimensions of the human experience.

Although yoga therapy is a new and emerging profession in the modern world, its roots reach back thousands of years into Vedic teachings and science. From the depth of their own inner journey, the ancients brought forth profound insights into the nature of the human condition, as well as extensive teachings and powerful practices about understanding and transforming suffering at every level.

According to this tradition, yoga therapy was an adaptation of yoga that synthesized yoga and ayurveda, and often included *Jyotish* (Vedic astrology) and aspects of ritualized practices that stemmed from various sectarian faiths. The application of yogic technologies in this therapeutic model was called *yoga chikitsa*. As an emerging profession, *yoga chikitsa* is a remedial tradition, founded on a recognition that our physical condition, emotional states, attitudes, dietary and behavioral patterns, lifestyle and personal associations, and the environment in which we live and work are all intimately linked to each other and to the state of our health.

Yoga therapy has a vital role to play in redressing some of the challenges in modern Western health care. That role, in part, is helping to shift the paradigm from one based on illness and practitioner-oriented care to a paradigm based on wellness and holistic self-care. The yoga community has both a tremendous opportunity and a responsibility to bring forward these teachings in a credible and legitimate way. Our ability to meet that responsibility is, in part, dependent on our commitment to studying these teachings, reflecting on their insightful implications, and experiencing their transformational potential through practice. In order to elucidate the breadth and depth of yoga therapy and its intrinsic link to yoga philosophy, I offer a glimpse into some of the fundamental insights, core teachings, and root practices that form the basis for the authentic tradition of yoga therapy.

Yoga's Vedic Roots

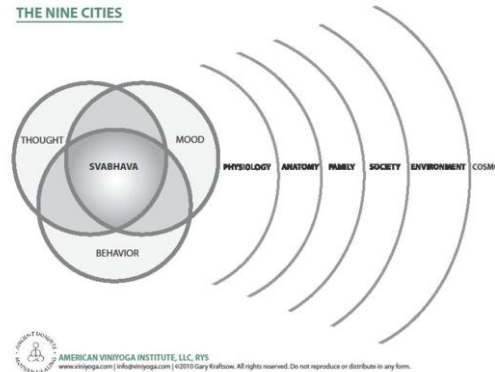
The origin of yoga is found in Vedic revelation, the literary testament of the ancient culture that emerged in the Indian subcontinent, collectively known as *shruti*, that which was heard. From Vedic revelation, a living stream of teachings evolved, considered to be eternally relevant for all of humanity, no matter what culture or context. These teachings offer profound insights and practices that cover all aspects of experience along the full spectrum of human life. The Vedic texts were not composed in a discursive philosophical style. They were poetic and nonlinear and, as such, complicated and difficult to understand. Commentaries by great masters emerged to explain them. These commentaries took the form of philosophical discourses and oral teachings collectively known as *smriti*, that which was remembered. The oldest of these systems is Sankhya, founded by the great sage Kapila. The Sankhya

system formed the metaphysical foundation for Patanjali's yoga philosophy recorded in his *Yoga Sutra*. In this sense, yoga can be thought of as applied Sankhya.

Some of the most foundational insights from Vedic revelation that inform the yoga perspective include the ideas of *atman* (pure consciousness) and *Brahman* (absolute reality); the reality of *duhkha* (suffering), and the quest for *vidya* (knowledge) that would take one beyond suffering; and several multidimensional models of the human system. In its philosophical explanation of the Vedic revelation, Sankhya offers a metaphysical cosmology that enumerates the fundamental constituent principles of existence. In this system, Kapila presents the dualism of *purusha*, the seer, and *prakriti*, the seen. The basic premise is that by discriminating between the seer and the seen, we can become free from suffering.

Building on this foundation, the yoga tradition affirms that who we are in essence is an unchanging source of pure awareness that dwells within a changing multidimensional universe. This locus of pure awareness is called *atman* in Vedic revelation and *purusha* in both the Sankhya and yoga systems. *Purusha*, literally "city dweller," lives within the manifest multidimensional universe, which includes aspects that we normally consider to be part of our self (with a lowercase s), such as our thoughts, feelings, and physical body, as well as those things that we normally consider external to our being, such as our family, social networks, and the natural world. According to this view, the entirety of this manifest existence—beyond our essential Self (with an uppercase S)—exists only as ephemeral convergences within a vast field of ongoing change. Fundamentally, yoga affirms that we are not these changing things, and that our suffering comes from our mistaken identification with and attachment to them. On a practical level, yoga teaches that through the application of intelligence, which comes from *purusha*, and appropriate methods, we can influence the direction of change in each of these dimensions. As we refine our relationship within each dimension, we begin to see with more and more clarity who we truly are, rather than remaining stuck in our misidentification, and thus in suffering.

THE NINE CITIES



The City Dweller and the Nine Cities

As the ancients recognized, human experience plays out on a vast multidimensional field characterized by change. These dimensions—thought, mood, behavior, the body's physiology, the physical body itself, family, society, the physical environment, and the surrounding

cosmos—can be thought of as "cities" and represented as spheres that overlap and interpenetrate one another. This nine-city model is my extrapolation and synthesis of teachings implicit in Upanishadic and Western models of the human system. Each sphere carries the potential to affect and be affected by each of the other spheres. The innermost essence of who we are—*purusha*, or pure undifferentiated awareness—dwells within and pervades each of these nine cities.

The first three overlapping cities constitute *svabhava*, our basic human character or personality, our sense of self. The ancients devised methods and a practice-based process, *sadhana*, to help us break our identification with changing experience, see things clearly as they are, and therefore gain the insight that leads to freedom. As our *sadhana* advances, *svabhava* becomes progressively purified and transparent until it becomes emptied, revealing *svarupa*, our true nature, the power of pure awareness.

Until then, our self-identity and our self-image is this interface, *svabhava*, formed by three interpenetrating aspects of our mind: thought, mood, and behavior. When an event triggers a reaction in one dimension, it can drive activity in another. This is understood clearly in Western psychotherapy. Looking at each dimension separately, the thought sphere represents our self-concept, our values, our priorities, and all of our cognition about the world in which we live, including our relationship with those ideas. Our goal in yoga practice is to attain clarity of thought, which requires wisdom and discrimination. Traditional yogic methods of cultivating wisdom and the ability to discriminate include *vichara* (inquiry), *svadhyaya* (self-reflection), and the study of sacred texts.

The mood sphere represents our changing emotional responses in relation to internal and external changes. Our moods are also profoundly influenced by our conscious memories and, even more significantly, by our unconscious conditioning. This sphere of our emotions is further influenced by our changing thoughts and behavior and can, in turn, influence each of these spheres as well. Traditional yogic methods of working within the mood sphere include meditation, chanting, *mantra japa* (repetition of mantra) with an emphasis on *artha* (meaning) and *bhava* (feeling or attitude), and prayer; *sanga* (right relationships); and *satsanga* (association with what is ultimately true). These methods help cultivate *prema* (love) and *ananda* (bliss).

The behavior sphere represents all of our habitual addictive patterns as well as intentional activity. As with the other spheres, our behavior is profoundly influenced by our conscious memories and unconscious conditioning. It is also influenced by our changing thoughts and moods and, in turn, influences our experience in each of these spheres. Intention and strength of will underlie behavior. *Sankalpa*, determination, implies the ability to strengthen our will and to set and activate an intention. *Sankalpa* is the foundation of all yogic practice. Determination is what helps us overcome our habits and develop our capacity for impulse control. Traditional methods of activating intention and strengthening the will involve practices that are done consciously through sustained effort with an emphasis on *tapas* (discipline) and self-restraint. This could involve, for example, giving something up that we are habituated to, such as

a particular type of food. These methods may also include mantra japa and ritual.

All three of these spheres interpenetrate and influence each other and each is profoundly affected and even driven by our conscious memories and unconscious conditioning. One of the fundamental goals in yoga and yoga therapy is to become free from the twisted journey of our thoughts, feelings, desires, conflicts, distractions, and habitual and dysfunctional behavioral patterns, all of which dissipate our energy. Toward this end, yoga places a great deal of importance on purifying our memory and elevating our unconscious conditioning to the level of the conscious mind. Making these unconscious impressions and impulses conscious is the first step toward freeing us from their influence. The integrated practice of linking breath, sound, meaning, and feeling through pranayama, meditation, and mantra japa powerfully helps us harness and direct the totality of our undissipated energy toward this deep transformation.

The dynamic interplay among the three internal spheres influences and is influenced by the next sphere: physiology. The physiological sphere represents the various bodily systems, including, and of particular importance to yoga, the sympathetic/parasympathetic function of the autonomic nervous system (ANS). The ANS, along with the endocrine system, regulates the other physiological functions of the body, such as digestion, respiration, and cardiovascular rhythms. The sympathetic function is the “fight or flight” response, activated when we perceive danger. The parasympathetic function is the “rest and repose” response activated when we are at rest. The yogic insight about the mind-body relationship coincides with the modern field of psychoneuroimmunology and shows how our ANS responds profoundly to the inner spheres, which represent our changing thoughts, emotions, and behavior, as well as the outer spheres beyond our physiology. The most potent traditional methods of working with the physiological sphere are controlled breath in asana and pranayama, and forms of relaxation, including *yoga nidra*. In the dimension of physiology, breath work can, among other things, help to increase respiratory fitness, balance cardiovascular rhythm, stimulate immune function, and promote sympathetic/parasympathetic regulation. In addition, there are teachings and practices about the conscious use of dietary restrictions, as well as the use of cleansing techniques and herbal preparations.

The next sphere comprises our anatomy and represents our physical structure, encompassing the musculoskeletal and neuromuscular systems. This includes the somatic nervous system, also called the voluntary nervous system, which enables us to react consciously to environmental changes. As with the physiological sphere, the condition of our anatomical sphere is profoundly influenced by all of the inner spheres as well as the outer spheres beyond our anatomy. Asana is the traditional primary yogic method of working with the anatomical sphere. Among other benefits, asana can help improve structural or skeletal alignment, increase structural stability, release chronic muscular contractions, strengthen what’s weak, and develop functional movement patterns.

The remaining four spheres represent increasingly external dimensions of human experience. These include:

- our most intimate family relationships;
 - our social circle, including colleagues at work and political and economic cultures;
 - the natural world, including the environment, climate, and changes in the weather; and
 - the larger cosmos, encompassing the influence of the stars and planets.
- Whereas the primary work in the inner spheres includes asana, pranayama, meditation, and mantra japa, work on the outer spheres includes:
- forms of *svadhyaya*, self-reflection, that help us understand *svadharma*, our deeper purpose in life;
 - sanga*, our right relationship to the people in our family and intimate society, as well as our relationship to the physical environment in which we live;
 - study and contemplation that helps us set a direction for our future;
 - personal and collective rituals to support our individual and collective intentions; and
 - study of our relationship to the greater cosmic environment through the science of Jyotish and the use of gems, mantra, and ritual to support benefic planetary influences and reduce malefic planetary influences.

There is an ocean of teachings that come from Vedic sources that address the outer cities. However, the full elaboration of these methods is far beyond the scope of this article. For most of us, the influences from these various spheres are all mixed together (*sankirna*), and we don’t realize their mutual influence on each other or how to separate them. The yoga tradition offers methods for helping us recognize and separate them, and understand and apply appropriate methods to influence the direction of change in each dimension.

Yoga Therapy and the Nine Cities

As a subset of yoga, yoga therapy works within the nine-city model. It is founded on the recognition of the nine interpenetrating dimensions of human experience and the manner in which the interaction among the dimensions can affect the state of our health. The ability to discriminate between each of the nine cities, understand and appropriately adapt yogic methods to address each dimension, and combine those methods together in an integrated holistic way to help an individual suffering from a singular or multiple coexisting health conditions is the art of yoga therapy. This involves tapping, harnessing, and directing the energy, *prana shakti*, deep within us.

The orientation of yoga therapy is to treat the whole person, seeking to change attitudes and actions that inhibit the natural healing process, and cultivate attitudes and actions that support it. The starting point in this approach is understanding and refining the inner spheres—thoughts, feelings, and behavior—from which place we can improve our relationship with the other spheres and hence the overall quality of our lives. There are two essential elements in this process: *viyoga* and *samyoga*. *Viyoga* literally means “separation.” In the context of yoga therapy, *viyoga* refers to the process of separating ourselves from whatever is undesirable in our lives. As an eliminative process, it involves purification of both mind and

body. It also involves letting go of unhealthy attachments, giving up self-destructive behavior, and breaking detrimental relationships. This is accomplished by working within the five inner spheres, utilizing specific methods to mitigate distortions of mood, thought, and behavior; balance sympathetic/parasympathetic function; and reduce or eliminate musculoskeletal or neuromuscular stress that may be contributing to ANS dysfunction.

Samyoga literally means “linking together.” In the context of yoga therapy, *samyoga* refers to the process of connecting to whatever is positive and productive in our lives. It involves the development of mental qualities such as kindness, courage, patience, compassion, self-restraint, endurance, one-pointedness, and tranquility. It also involves establishing appropriate priorities, practicing virtues, and cultivating positive relationships.

The Inner Art of Yoga Therapy

When we tune in to specific health conditions, the fundamental yoga teachings about cultivating *vidya* and *viveka* (knowledge and discrimination) help us separate the mix of influences from the nine spheres, which will, in turn, help us understand at an individual level what is going on and what we need to do to achieve our goals. In yoga therapy, this implies understanding the challenges in each sphere and their mutual influence on each other. The general long-term goals of yoga therapy include

- reducing the symptoms of suffering that can be reduced;
- managing the symptoms that cannot be reduced;
- rooting out causes wherever possible;
- improving life function; and
- shifting attitude and perspective in relationship to our condition.

The practitioner of yoga therapeutic methods, under the guidance of a yoga therapist, works to change what can be changed and to manage what cannot be changed. And when faced with terminal conditions, the practitioner must embrace that fact and use the energy liberated from that insight to help break identification and realize his or her true nature as *atman*.

In the second chapter of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* (2.16), he tells us that we can prepare for “that suffering which has not yet come.” Whether that preparation means that we can avoid it altogether, reduce its full impact, or create the conditions in our inner world that will allow us to embrace it depends on each unique situation for each one of us. That the conditions that normally lead to suffering are ahead is not in question. For example, our bodies will age, and though the conditions that surround that aging are variable, they do indeed exist. Yoga and yoga therapy offer us the means to develop the physical energy, mental clarity, emotional stability, and determination to respond to those variable conditions in the most appropriate and effective way. The road ahead for all of us is open, though we must all face its inevitable end. May yoga and yoga therapy serve each one of us on that journey to one’s Self.



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