

# Issues In Yoga Therapy

## Perspective

### Defining Yoga Therapy: A Call to Action

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Congratulations to everyone at IAYT and IJYT who make the journal happen and who have shepherded it along these past twenty years, making it such a valuable resource to our emerging profession of Yoga therapy. The work of IAYT and the service IJYT provides illustrate the kind of inclusive, collaborative, reaching-across-lineages spirit that our profession needs as it engages in the important dialogue necessary to shape how Yoga therapy moves forward into modern Western healthcare, not only in this generation, but for many generations to come.

I am deeply committed to the work of furthering Yoga therapy. I have been involved with the study and practice of Yoga since the early 1970s. At 19, I journeyed to Madras, now Chennai, India, to study Saiva Siddhanta, the Saivite Tantra of south India, with the respected mystic/scholar V.A. Devasenapathi and Yoga with T.K.V. Desikachar, son and student of T. Krishnamacharya. I had the rare opportunity while studying in Madras to combine insights gained from the mystical teaching and practices of Saivite Tantra with the practical science of Yoga. Krishnamacharya was not only a Yoga master and a master Yoga therapist but he was also well versed in Ayurveda, Jyotish, and the various religious traditions of India as well. Desikachar, also a master therapist, added to these fields of knowledge an education in Western science and a deep understanding of Western healthcare models. The deep knowledge and experience of my teachers shaped my orientation to the study, practice, and teaching of Yoga.

Yoga therapy's roots reach back thousands of years into Vedic teachings and science. According to that ancient tradition, Yoga therapy was an adaptation of Yoga that synthesized Yoga and Ayurveda and often included Jyotish and aspects of ritualized practices that stem from various sec-

tarian faiths. The application of Yogic technologies in this therapeutic model was called Yoga *cikitsa*.

My own evolution as a Yoga practitioner, Yoga teacher, Yoga therapist, and trainer of both Yoga teachers and Yoga therapists has been shaped by the way I was taught and what I was encouraged to do by my teacher. I've been practicing Yoga therapy, according to the way I was trained, since the early 1980s, when I opened Maui Yoga Therapy, a primarily one-on-one private "Yoga clinic." In those years, most of my students were either injured Yoga practitioners or other non-Yoga-practicing injured individuals who were referred to me by a variety of healthcare practitioners who were also my students. Only after many years of one-on-one client care, and the continued prompting from my teacher, did I become actively involved in training Yoga teachers and Yoga therapists.

The profession of Yoga therapy has come a long way since then. When IAYT was established in 1990, there were very few people in the West who had been specifically trained in Yoga therapy and who were active in the United States. Many Yoga teachers appreciated the therapeutic value of Yoga, but few were formally trained as Yoga therapists. As we have seen, the Yoga business has exploded in the United States. Yoga schools are practically everywhere, and now Yoga teacher training programs can be found in most Yoga schools!

Many experienced Yoga practitioners and teachers recognize the therapeutic value of Yoga. As the market for teacher training programs becomes saturated, many are looking at Yoga therapy as the next business opportunity to be exploited. Numerous new Yoga therapy programs are appearing in the market. Some of these programs are rooted in the ancient tradition and others are a hybrid of Yoga and other ideas, techniques, and practices. While programs in

this second category may be creative, innovative, and truly helpful to many, they do not authentically represent the teachings, methods, and tradition of Yoga therapy.

There is an authentic tradition of Yoga therapy, rooted in ancient teachings, that has a vital role to play in redressing the modern Western healthcare crisis. That role, in part, is helping with the paradigm shift from illness-based and health-practitioner-based care to wellness-based and self-based care. As a community of Yoga therapists, we have a tremendous opportunity and even responsibility to bring forward these teachings in a credible and legitimate way.

Many of us are working on this by participating in IAYT's Educational Standards Committee, which is focused on developing entry-level standards for the training of Yoga therapists. As I see it, our work requires us to step out of the perspective of our individual programs and think in terms of the bigger picture. We need to go back to being students and come to a deeper understanding of what this ancient tradition of Yoga therapy is and what it has to offer. Our definition should neither be framed in terms of what is most expedient from a business perspective nor what serves the self-interest of our particular schools.

We don't have to make up Yoga therapy, it already exists. We just need to learn it! And then, as we deepen our understanding, we can adapt and creatively apply it in our modern context. As I see it, for Yoga therapy to have a legitimate and credible role in the future of Western healthcare, we must take several core steps:

**Create a clear, functional definition of Yoga therapy.** Our definition should be linked to the true knowledge base of the tradition. Although many great minds evolved many great methods that address the universally human issues of suffering and freedom throughout human history, they are not all part of the Yoga tradition. That tradition exists and is rooted in identifiable texts and practices that have been transmitted through various lineages. Our definition must begin here, with the true knowledge base and methods that this great tradition refined and preserved through its divergent history.

Our efforts at self-definition should comprise a consensus on what authentically constitutes the source teachings, methods, and practices of Yoga and Yoga therapy. I am confident that the base is wide enough and that the spectrum is broad enough that we do not have to fear a lack of student interest! Our standards can and should accurately reflect a living tradition that continues to innovate, evolve, and adapt itself to the cultural and historical context, while at the same time be recognizable across different schools by certain fundamental views and practices that make the Yoga therapy.

Our definition should also differentiate a Yoga therapist from a Yoga teacher. I strongly believe that, although Yoga therapy is a subset of Yoga, it represents a very different skill set. Our definition must clearly differentiate these two roles. It must also differentiate Yoga therapy from Western therapeutic modalities that integrate aspects of Yoga practice, often just *asana*, with their own professional modalities. Our definition should represent, authentically, a living tradition, rooted in ancient insights and practices adapted to the modern context that can be expressed clearly to the public so that they are neither confused nor misled in their efforts to find a qualified Yoga therapist.

**Outline the scope of practice and the core competencies of a Yoga therapist.** There has been a reduction, in the minds of the general public, of Yoga to *asana*. We should be careful to avoid a similar reduction of Yoga therapy to structural therapy. A Yoga therapist should be able to work effectively to help a client manage a broad range of conditions, including structural, physiological, psycho-emotional, psychosocial, and spiritual.

**Develop high level educational standards.** Part of my vision for the future also includes university master's degree programs in Yoga therapy.

**Conduct more research to investigate and document the effectiveness of Yoga therapy.** My organization—the American Viniyoga Institute (AVI)—participated in a National Institutes of Health (NIH) study to look at the effectiveness of Yoga therapy for treating generalized low-back pain. This was the first NIH-funded clinical trial on Yoga for chronic low back pain. The study was published in the *Annals of Internal Medicine* in 2005. Subsequently, AVI has become involved in many more studies with the NIH, universities, and an international insurance company for other conditions, including generalized anxiety disorder, lung cancer, chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, and management of workplace stress.

Other research along these lines has been done and is underway. Much more is needed, especially as Yoga therapy draws increasing attention from both traditional Western healthcare providers and health insurance companies. IAYT's research conference this year is a recognition of the need for this level of serious, evidence-based research.

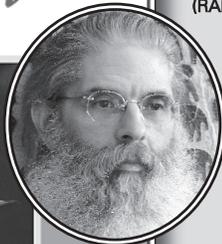
**Increase public recognition of Yoga therapy and the work of a Yoga therapist.** Increased awareness of Yoga therapy and the work of a Yoga therapist is needed amongst the general public, the Yoga public, and the Western healthcare community at large. This is already starting to happen as more Western healthcare professionals become actively involved with Yoga and Yoga therapy and as more Yoga therapy organizations become more actively engaged in Western-style research.

**Work with health insurance companies to develop fee schedules for Yoga therapy.** This is a highly controversial issue within the Yoga and Yoga therapist communities. Yet, recognition by health insurance companies and the development of fee schedules for Yoga therapy services carries the potential to contribute to a higher level of professionalism for Yoga therapy. Done mindfully, this could help provide the economic incentive for those drawn to the profession to obtain the level of training that's needed to do the job seriously and well. And our acceptance by insurance companies will help them in their current efforts to shift from incentivizing illness to incentivizing wellness!

We have a rare opportunity to shape how Yoga therapy moves forward in this generation and perhaps even for many more generations to come. The ancient tradition of Yoga therapy has stood the test of time for thousands of years. It is a system that speaks deeply to the human condition, reflecting a profound understanding of the sources of suffering, and that empowers individuals to manage, reduce, and sometimes eliminate that suffering. Our job should be to work together to bring this great tradition forward with authenticity and integrity, making it available to serve the broader public.

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