

SYTAR 2008: “THIS IS WHAT I DO AS A YOGA THERAPIST”

REPORTED BY KELLY MCGONIGAL, PHD



Gary Kraftsow and his student, Ellen, shared the Yoga therapy practice they developed for her.

Yoga therapy meets the individual where he or she is—and one of the highlights of SYTAR 2008 was meeting those individuals who have benefited from Yoga therapy with leaders in our field. During the first main session, we heard case presentations by Gary Kraftsow, founder of the American Viniyoga Institute, and Jnani Chapman, RN, former executive director of IAYT and Yoga therapist for the Commonweal Cancer Help Program in Bolinas, CA. Each co-presented with their students, who described what the process of Yoga therapy was like from their own experience.

Gary Kraftsow’s student was Ellen, a clinical social worker who had been diagnosed with leukemia recently after her husband died of cancer. The intense treatment for leukemia included stem cell transplant, and as a result, her body developed graft host syndrome (GVH). This meant that her “new” immune system was attacking her own body.

Ellen worked with Kraftsow to develop a personal Yoga therapy practice that, according to Kraftsow, “integrates every level of who she is, every level of her being.” Ellen referred to the practice as her “ritual,” finding the structure of the practice

amazingly comforting and nourishing. “I was surprised by the meaning of the ritual. The *asana* mattered less and less, and the breathing practice became incredibly powerful.”

The entire ritual takes Ellen between 20 and 45 minutes. According to Kraftsow, “Shorter is better, because people are more likely to stick with it.”

Kraftsow described the process he uses to develop a practice for individuals. “I’ve learned not to rely on what I’ve learned, but to relax and be present with people. The *panchamaya* model from the *Upanishads* is a grid I use to understand who I’m working with and their causes of suffering, rooted in an understanding that they are not their symptoms and not their condition.” He shared a set of questions he used to consider Ellen’s needs:

- 1) How is she in her structure?
- 2) How is her energy?
- 3) How is her cognitive functioning?
- 4) How is her emotional experience?

Some of the concerns specific to Ellen when they began were joint issues in the hands (structure), quality of sleep (energy), and memory difficulty (cognitive). Kraftsow said, “I knew that she



Jnani Chapman, RN, and her student Karen discuss the process and benefits of Yoga therapy.

needed to do something to move energy in the body.” He gave Ellen 10 postures that moved the spine in every direction. Each posture was adapted to her functioning, and he included detailed hand movements to address her joint issues.

Kraftsow said, “I also wanted to work via the senses. I had her look at something, feel something, smell something—these can be elements of the ritual that make you feel more connected to the world you live in.” To this end, Karen’s ritual included an earth element, a water element, a fire element, oil, and sound.

Together, they added many personal dimensions to the practice. For example, Kraftsow noticed an infinity symbol necklace that Ellen wore, and he gave her a *mantra* that related to the idea of infinity. Kraftsow also taught Ellen a meditation related specifically to her condition, as well as to the human condition.

Ellen described her motivation and the benefits of her practice. “It’s difficult to live in a body that’s uncomfortable and unpredictable. I did the same practice every day for about 15 months, with some adjustments to the *asanas*. This was comforting. This gave me a deep sense of being in my body, but also my heart—taking in energy from the universe and really feeling it.”

Jnani Chapman’s student Karen began her story with a statement familiar to many in the audience: “What brought me to Yoga was a broken heart.” However, it was an illness that brought Karen to Chapman for Yoga therapy. Karen had been a practicing

yogini for 3 years when she was diagnosed with a cancer that was destroying her own red blood cells. Karen described the harrowing treatments she endured, including a bone marrow transplant and a splenectomy. She became dependent on platelet transfusions and suffered a hip fracture and a new lymphoma.

Although she had been practicing vigorous Power Yoga, the realities of her illness made Karen realize that she needed to leave that practice and discover another way to practice Yoga.

As Karen shared her story, Chapman reminded the audience how important it is—how healing it is—to just listen to a person’s story. Chapman said her process of developing a Yoga therapy practice always begins with the same intention. “I need to design a practice that meets them where they are. The practice should immediately help someone feel better and connect to themselves.” An excellent place to start is the breath, and Chapman’s practices always include *pranayama*, usually slow deep breathing.

As a Yoga therapist, Chapman relies on a few key principles. First, establish the context of the relationship. Chapman told the audience, “The relationship is the primary treatment.” She aims to create a sense of safety and security that will help the student become aware of how they are unconsciously harming themselves in daily actions. This is crucial because, as Chapman put it, “The practice session is 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.”

Second, Chapman stays flexible and responsive to the

student's present needs and condition. She described her Yoga therapy process as: "Assess, assess, and re-assess. Adapt, adapt, and re-assess."

Finally, Chapman includes the student in the process of developing the practice. "I don't give her a prescription of what she should do. I lay out the possibilities and let her choose what she wants to do. Our relationship is student-teacher both. I want Karen, from her own autonomy, to allow that body-wisdom to communicate to the rest of her being."

A third presentation in the series "This is What I Do as a Yoga Therapist" came from Richard Miller, PhD, co-founder of IAYT and director of the Center of Timeless Being in Sebastopol, CA. Miller offers *Yoga nidra* through the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, and he presented his approach to Yoga therapy for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). He calls his program "Integrative Rest" because the military isn't comfortable with the word Yoga. Nevertheless, his teaching is pure Yoga.

His approach to Yoga therapy is non-prescriptive, and it begins with the Yoga philosophy that the cause of suffering is "non-welcoming." Miller described many ways that non-welcoming can lead to suffering, including beliefs about imperfection or lack, the belief that there is something we need to know that we don't know, and feeling powerless. For Miller, Yoga therapy is the process of "welcoming what is." He describes his approach as:

- 1) Empowering individuals to realize innate freedom from suffering and realization of true nature.
- 2) Offering an educational process that focuses on wellness at all levels of a person's life.
- 3) Providing a non-dogmatic, secular approach that respects a person's age, culture, and religion.

Miller talked the audience through a brief experience of "pure being." This is the first thing Richard introduces his students to, whether they are veterans, the homeless, or children, Miller wants them to understand that "there's nothing they to know, read, do, or get to experience timelessness."

Miller also talked the audience through an example of how he talked Frederick, a veteran of the Iraq war with PTSD, through *Yoga nidra*: "What are you feeling? Welcome it. Welcome sensations, welcome emotions." When Frederick described the emotion and sensations of terror, Miller asked questions to invoke the opposite. "What would be here if [terror] were not present? Describe this. Remember a time when you felt this way. Describe it."

Each of these presentations, as well as presentations by other leaders in the field, including Larry Payne, PhD, and Nischala Joy Devi, gave SYTAR attendees a glimpse into the process of Yoga therapy as it is lived and breathed by therapists and students.

Throughout each presentation, one theme emerged: the importance of truly meeting and honoring the individual. Gary Kraftsow framed it this way: "Our work is not medicine. We're not fundamentally about working with conditions or diseases, but working with people who are suffering with those conditions."

But the theme may have been best summarized by Judith Lasater, PhD, PT, who spoke in a panel discussion following the case presentations. She shared a quote from philosopher Martin Buber in conversation with psychologist Carl Rogers: "People get healed by having an authentic connection with an authentic human being." □



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