



## AANP Member Spotlight: Dr. Ryan Phillips, ND, MPH, BCB, CHES



### What started your pathway in naturopathic medicine?

It seems like almost every ND has a unique “origin story”. Despite this, I always joke that I am the least likely Naturopathic Doctor and an even less likely advocate for psychedelic assisted therapy. I grew up on a popcorn farm in rural Indiana in a politically and religiously conservative environment. A quarter of my high school class never graduated, only a quarter went to college, and few ever left our hometown. I had no interest in becoming a doctor and had no idea that Naturopathic Medicine even existed.

It was a long, convoluted, adventurous, and unexpected journey from my small town to Bastyr University. I moved to Colorado for college and eventually went to study abroad in Sikkim, a Himalayan state in northeast India. During this time, I fell in love with the geography, culture, languages, and people of the Himalayas. Three days after graduating with a degree in Global Studies, my wife and I left America behind and began living and working in remote Himalayan villages. We spent over a decade carrying out community development and public health projects. During this time a few unexpected events set me on the long path to becoming an ND.

First, I had the rare opportunity to live for years in a natural environment without the “comforts” of the modern world. After a few months, I woke up and thought one day, “I’ve never been healthy before... this is what healthy actually feels like.” My analytical Western mind started to search for the reason why I felt so good. Was it going to bed with sunset and waking with the sunrise? Was it walking every where I needed to go? Was it eating a mostly vegetarian, seasonal, simple, organic, diet? Was it the lack of electronic devices? Was it being surrounded by nature? Was it the satisfaction of meaningful work and living according to my values? Eventually, I realized that it was any of the “parts” but the “whole”. I realized that health is a system not a state.

Second, the realities of Himalayan life thrust me into healthcare. The students I taught were dying of preventable diseases. My neighbors were dying in childbirth. My friends’ simple injuries were becoming infected and threatening their lives. I trained as an EMT and earned a diploma in primary care for the developing world. I did not have many pharmaceuticals, diagnostics, or modern equipment at my disposal. What I did have access to was nature. Hygiene, sanitation, nutrition, and medicinal plants were the only



tools available. When people from the cities started traveling to the village to see me for treatment, I realized that I'd stumbled onto something. Even though I understood it, I didn't know what it was called.

Third, a midwife from the USA came to our village to attend my third son's birth. After seeing our work, she asked, "Have you ever thought about becoming a doctor?" I replied that I had considered it, but then described everything I'd learned from my time in India. She responded, "Have you ever heard of Naturopathic Medicine? They believe in everything you just described to me. You should look into it."

She probably didn't know the Pandora's Box she opened in my mind, body, and spirit. Over the next ten years I earned a degree in science, a Masters in Public Health, a Doctorate in Naturopathic Medicine, board certification in Biofeedback Therapy, and my certification in Psychedelic Assisted Therapy. I've now been in practice 3 years and have found my niche specializing in Integrative Mental Health.

### **What do you like most about being a naturopathic doctor and what are some of your challenges?**

There was a very specific moment that I realized that healthcare was my true vocation. I was working in my village in India and one day got invited to a party. It was celebrating the life of a child for whom I'd assisted with the birth. Suddenly, I realized that healthcare had brought me deeply into lives of this family. Over the course of several weeks, I had declared the death of their great grandmother, attended her funeral, helped deliver a baby, given the honor of naming that child, and treated a sibling with pneumonia. I love medicine, because I love the way it brings me into the lives of those I otherwise wouldn't have had to privilege of knowing.

I love being a Naturopathic Doctor because of the time I get to spend with my patients. I am not forced to diagnose and treat one part or one problem 15 minutes at a time. I get an hour or more to know an individual and treat them as a whole person. My favorite feedback is hearing, "I've never felt so seen before. No doctor has ever taken the time to get to know me as a person."

Along with these blessings, come many challenges. I work in Colorado as a "Registered Doctor" with a limited scope of practice. In this state, I do not have access to prescriptive rights, or the structures and financial mechanisms which make medicine so profitable for conventional providers. Being a doctor, a husband, a small business owner, and father of four all at the same time is... challenging. Despite having multiple degrees and extensive life experience, there are few ready-made positions out there for



me. I'm used to working on the edges, fighting the underdog fight, and being a pioneer... but it is tiring and stressful at times.

### **What makes your membership with AANP valuable as a naturopathic doctor?**

One of the valuable things I learned in India is that there is no such thing as a “self-made man”. Everyone needs a community to thrive. While independence and autonomy offer freedom and flexibility in the short term, it often leads to burn out and cynicism in the long term. The AANP is a community which offers opportunities to foster interdependence. Many ND's are solo providers in independent clinics. Without community, our profession can be isolating, discouraging, and stagnant. We all need colleagues to learn from and grow with. This is why the AANP and our local associations are so important.

### **Anything else we've missed that is important? What are some things you see for the profession on the horizon, what should the profession be aware of ?**

Although practicing in Colorado has its limitations, it currently offers a rare opportunity. In Nov. of 2022, our state passed Prop. 122 or the “Natural Medicines Health Act”. This established the legal framework for the use of natural psychedelic compounds to treat mental health conditions. While the personal use portions of the law came into effect in January of 2023, the clinical framework will be in place by the end of this year. After completing a year long certification program with the Integrative Psychiatry Institute, I am in a good position to be one of the first licensed Psychedelic Clinical Facilitators in the State. I recently started a private practice, Transcendent Integrative Health, with the hopes of becoming one of the first licensed “healing centers” in Colorado.

**Private Practice:** <https://transcendent.health/>

**Group Practice:** [www.neurogrove.com](http://www.neurogrove.com)

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