

Holding Space for the Yoga and Yoga Therapy Discussion to Begin

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Reflections on the New Yoga Alliance Changes Regarding Yoga Therapy

I have been reflecting since early February 2016 about the news that Yoga Alliance requests members remove all language from their profiles pertaining to Yoga Therapy, healing, therapeutics and several other “blackout” words. According to Yoga Alliance we needed to remove this language because it might suggest that by claiming to be a Yoga Therapist, we are not working within a clear Scope of Practice and thus we are practicing medicine and opening ourselves up to lawsuits.

My immediate reaction was excitement to see the field of Yoga Therapy defined more clearly. I am keenly interested in this topic as I am a Board Member of the International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT) & a Director of Yoga and Yoga Therapy Training Programs at the 200/300/500 and 800+ hour levels.

After the news, it did not take long for me to feel quite irritated that I might need to do some major revamping of my curriculum, website and profiles to accommodate the new Yoga Alliance rules. And soon enough, I felt angry at Yoga Alliance for what I perceived to be the misrepresentation of the definition of Yoga Therapy, for using an outdated Scope of Practice in their arguments and their general lack of communication with their own members. I felt it was very heavy-handed to be locked out of my own profile (unexpectedly) until I agreed to their new terms. With several phone calls to Yoga Alliance, I realized there was no discussion to be had. Take it or leave it.

And now, several months later I am still thinking about this clarification of the language surrounding Yoga and Yoga Therapy and wondering what the implications of this unilateral decision by Yoga Alliance will be for the future of both Yoga and Yoga Therapy. As the Yoga Sutra of Patanjali says, we will only know the outcome of our choices at a later time when we look back at the past and see how it unfolded. I wonder what seeds have now been planted and are waiting under the ground for fertile soil, sunshine and water to assist in the sprouting of these seeds. Will these seeds have positive or negative consequences for all involved? Only time will tell.

Visualizing the End Game

Now that I have had some time to digest all my initial feelings, I can look forward with a more positive mindset. If I were to *bhavanize*, or visualize, the highest good for the most people in our Yoga and Yoga Therapy communities, this is what I would see for the future. I can see Yoga Alliance (YA) and the International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT) coming together in conversation. We would serve our members and the public in a way that honors the highest teachings of both Yoga and Yoga Therapy. We would attempt to understand the other party needs, fears and desires going forward. We would attempt to hear each other and provide solutions that meet our needs for the long-term. I do believe this is possible and the

conversation between YA and IAYT is in its infancy. This is not the end; it is an opportunity for a new beginning and an opportunity to gain more clarity and unity in the larger fields of Yoga and Yoga Therapy. And may I point out that there is no time limit for this discussion. It could be 3 weeks or 3 years. We may need to wait for emotions to settle, leadership to change or for our communities to demand it. The bottom line is that the conversation needs to open up and include more voices. Important decisions cannot be made behind closed doors by a small number of people. These decisions influence all of us profoundly and we should get to be a part of the discussion too.

What are the Underlying Needs?

My understanding, after listening to several people very close to the situation, is that Yoga Alliance is clearly against regulation and licensing in the field of Yoga. The main driver of the recent Yoga Alliance decision comes down to doing smart, low risk business and protecting what Yoga Alliance has developed over almost two decades. Yoga Alliance never claimed to train and regulate the field of Yoga Therapy. I can understand and appreciate the practicality of this. I do appreciate their honesty and recognition of the added level of training needed to become a Yoga Therapist.

It is also my understanding that the IAYT is open to this discussion with Yoga Alliance. The two organizations have many goals in common. For example, IAYT would also prefer non-regulation of Yoga and Yoga Therapy from government and state officials. In fact, the IAYT organization has been following a precise system of self-governance for the past several years to combat state and federal regulation of our field. This system of self-governance involves taking responsibility for our actions and safeguarding our members so that the government does not feel the need to step in. It is clear that IAYT is being very responsible with self-regulation and this is a normal course of action in an emerging field. IAYT has created excellent standards for practice, has accredited schools based on these standards, begun a grand-parenting process for individuals to become credentialed, created a Code of Ethics with a system to regulate infractions, and developed a sound Scope of Practice in just a few short years. So, ironically, both YA and IAYT wish for the same outcome and we have just chosen different strategies to get there. And hence, it should not be a stretch to think that we could work together in the future, towards our mutual goals.

Opening Lines of Communication

Opening the lines of communication would require that YA and IAYT come together with open minds and hearts, instead of fearing that we might lose something we hold dear. We would actually have to walk our talk as yogis. As we all know, this is not an easy path for individuals, organizations or governments. Working from fear, instead of a spacious heart, is why we end up hurting one another, consciously and unconsciously.

The Yoga Alliance and IAYT would need to come to an understanding about how are Yoga and Yoga Therapy are different, and how are they are similar. What parts of Yoga and Yoga Therapy overlap, and where do the two fields diverge.

First, we need to be clear that Yoga Therapy, as a professional modality of healing, is a very recent invention. For thousands of years, the ancient yogic texts outlined for us how to live a life that brings balance to our minds and bodies. Yoga and Yoga Therapy are not separate. They both seek to bring supreme balance to the individual and hence society as a whole. Yoga Therapy was simply one of the expressions of the larger field of Yoga. Yoga Therapy is like one branch on the tree of Yoga. Similarly, Bhakti Yoga as a form of devotion is another branch. Kriya Yoga, Raja Yoga and Hatha Yoga are also branches of the tree of Yoga. So why do we suddenly want to cut the *cikitsa* (therapy) branch of the tree off from the rest of the tree? Perhaps because our modern world revolves around money, power, the reality of lawsuits. Sad, but true, modern times require that we balance the philosophical idealism of our hearts with the reality of the world we live in. So how can we best minimize the risk and still allow the Yoga tree to keep all of her gorgeous branches intact?

In my opinion, the entire discussion of why Yoga Therapy must be a separate field from Yoga revolves around one main misunderstanding. That is, what does it mean to assess vs. diagnose in the context of Yoga and Yoga Therapy? If we could come to an agreement on this point, most of our fears and linguistic issues would subside and we could work together for the greater good.

The Crux of the Problem

It is important to understand that when we practice Yoga Therapy, we are not practicing medicine. We are not even using the lens of the western medical model. We are using yogic models to observe the client. We are not “treating disease”. We are self-empowering the individual client to heal themselves at the different layers of the human system. We call this the Panca Maya (5 layers) Model. The five layers are: 1) physical, 2) prana/ breath, 3) intellect, 4) life experience/personality, and 5) deepest emotions.

The crux of the issue between a Yoga vs. Yoga Therapy session is that an individual assessment and personalized practice plan is required to be considered a Yoga Therapy session. And by assessment, I do not mean diagnosis of a disease as defined by the western medical system. A Yoga Therapy assessment means that we look at the whole person, on all 5 layers of the human system. We help to determine where the person is out of balance and thus suffering is being experienced. A good Yoga Therapist will guide the client towards a new perspective, a new self-understanding that comes directly from inside the heart of the client. And then a personal action plan is created to move towards a more balanced life for that individual. The personal plan will be developed via a negotiation between therapist and client about what is possible in his or her life at this time. We use Yoga tools like postures, breath-work, meditation, chanting and lifestyle modification to help

the client come into balance. Each tool is specifically chosen to assist the individual in their personal self-healing journey. The client must go home and be self-empowered to begin the self-healing process. And when the client is able to follow-through with a daily practice, specifically designed to bring balance to his or her individual system, healing happens from the inside out. This is quite a different experience than a group Yoga class designed for exercise with a spiritual lift at the end of class. This type of Yoga class, by the way, is wonderful and lovely and makes the world a better place to exist.

In an attempt to tease Yoga and Yoga Therapy apart a bit more, it should also be noted that a seasoned Yoga Therapist could teach Yoga Therapy in a small group setting. This group Yoga Therapy class is also different than the Yoga class described above. In a group Yoga Therapy class the Yoga Therapists would give an individual pre-class assessment to each person. This pre-assessment would be required to join the group. The students would practice together, under the guidance of the Yoga Therapists, who would be watching and helping students individually during the hour they spend together. This type of group Yoga Therapy is more affordable and gives added benefits, rather than practicing alone. This type of class experience promotes a sense of community, or sangha. The potential for deep heart connection, created by practicing in a group setting, is a powerful healing tool in and of itself. And while regular Yoga classes also have this healing power of community, most do not have an individual pre-class assessment of each individual's 5 layers; or an ongoing assessment and daily practice plan designed specifically for each individual.

To summarize, a major difference between Yoga and Yoga Therapy comes down to individual pre-class assessment, ongoing assessment and personal practice plan for each student/client based on the *panca maya* model, and not a diagnosis from a western medical model. Additionally, the student or client is engaging in self-healing activities; they are not being "healed" by the Yoga Therapist. This point alone should take away any fears about practicing medicine without a license and consequently being sued. We as Yoga Therapists are not "diagnosing disease or treating the client." We are holding space for them and gently guiding them as they progress on their own self-journey towards health and healing.

The Road Towards Consensus

It follows that if YA and IAYT and our communities can simply agree on the fact that in Yoga Therapy we assess from a yogic model, and that we do not diagnose and treat from a western medical perspective, then we are most of the way towards our goal of more unity and understanding. We can let go of the fear and move towards what is best for our communities. How can YA and IAYT work together and be a role model of higher consciousness for our yoga communities and the world at large? We can begin a conversation together. We can hold space for one another to be seen and heard. We can work from a spacious place in the heart instead of a constricted place of fear. We can come to the table together and break bread. We can discuss where the two fields overlap and where we need differentiation to

promote clarity and safety. It all begins with the willingness to have a difficult conversation and trust the process. As a wise mentor of mine once said, "Going through the difficulty of conflict IS the process. This is how we get to the other side!" - Quote from Eleanor Criswell

It requires that we actually take our Yoga off the Yoga mat. And this is my wish for the future of Yoga and Yoga Therapy, YA and IAYT and our communities. I hope that we can do our best to come together and practice what we preach. We need to be leaders in the world. And we cannot create healing in the world, until we work towards healing from the inside out (individually, on an organizational level and beyond).

The Beginning, Not the End

Let us use this recent separation of the fields of Yoga and Yoga Therapy to initiate a new beginning and a fruitful conversation that will eventually bring clarity and unity. Let us not make this the end of the story. Let us continue to watch the seeds that we (as yogis) have planted. For our current actions will extend far and wide and impact yogis for many years to come. And as Yoga Sutra 2.15 says, let our actions today prevent future suffering that could be avoided.

*Please note that this article represents the individual views of Amy Wheeler, Ph.D. It does not necessarily represent the view of any of the organizations that she works for, or the International Association of Yoga Therapists. Please write to yoga@amywheeler.com with comments, questions or thoughts.

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