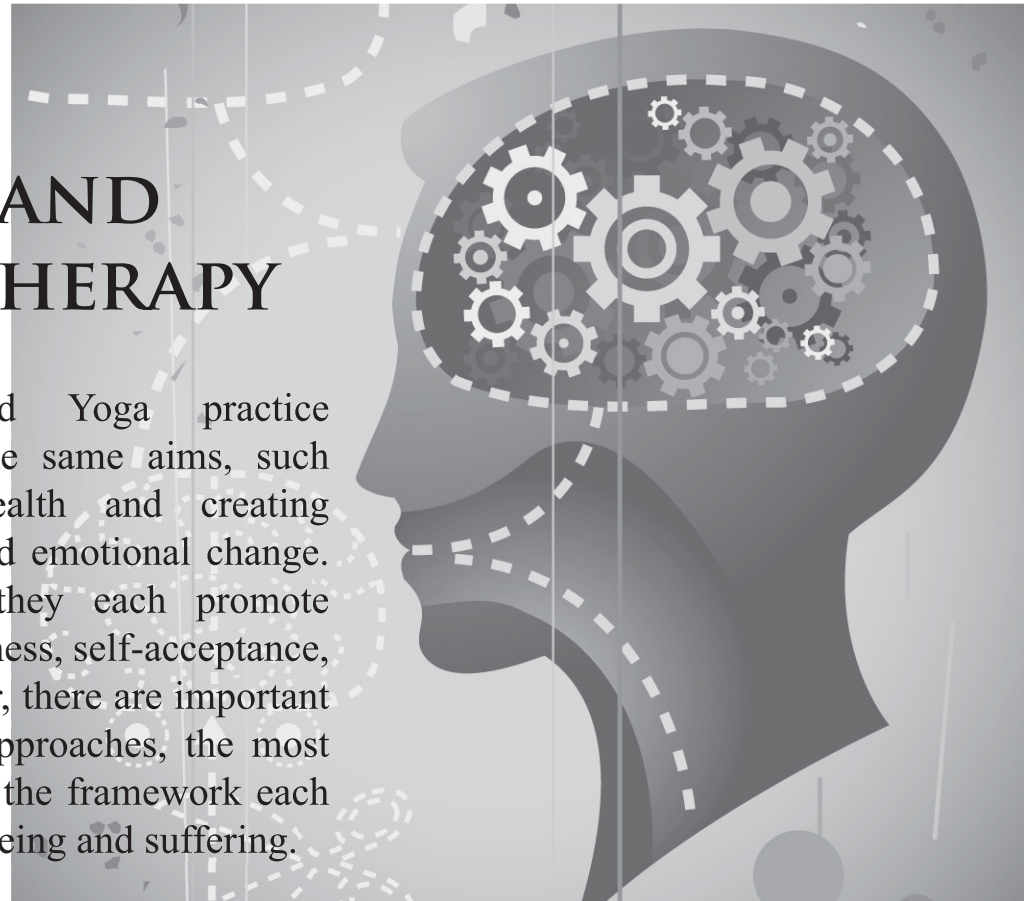


YOGA AND PSYCHOTHERAPY

Psychotherapy and Yoga practice share many of the same aims, such as promoting health and creating cognitive, behavioral, and emotional change. To meet these aims, they each promote introspection, self-awareness, self-acceptance, and connection. However, there are important differences in the two approaches, the most fundamental of which is the framework each uses to understand well-being and suffering.

By Christine (Citrini) Jeuland Ware, PhD



Because the frameworks for psychotherapy and Yoga are different, the emphases, techniques, and practices also differ. The convergence of many of the aims and outcomes—most notably the promotion of health—is, therefore, quite remarkable. This article focuses on how psychotherapy and Yoga each facilitate (1) self-awareness and introspection, (2) behavioral change, (3) cognitive change and self-acceptance, and (4) connection.

ASSUMPTIONS OF EACH FRAMEWORK

Psychotherapy focuses on promoting health, relieving symptoms and difficulties, and increasing self-understanding. A “side effect” of therapy may include greater connection to self, others, and nature. In contrast, Yoga practice promotes the experience of union and the realization of universal, nondualistic consciousness (*samadhi*). “Side effects” of the practice include healthy change and the experience of bliss (*ananda*).

Western psychological theory proposes that our troubles stem from a combination of genetic predispositions, life experience, stress, and cognitive and behavioral habits. In contrast, Yoga philosophy proposes that our difficulties are rooted in separation (which causes dissatisfaction and suffering), ignorance of our true nature, and our false identification with what we experience.

SELF-AWARENESS AND INTROSPECTION

Psychotherapy

Psychotherapy develops introspection and self-awareness through the process of reflecting on, verbally identifying, and exploring one’s feelings, thoughts, and behavior. Psychotherapy may focus

on a client’s present feelings/thoughts (e.g., “What are you feeling now?”), and ways in which awareness appears to be limited or restricted. Therapy may encourage a client to reflect on what is healthy, on the client’s goals, and on what impedes healthy choices and behaviors. It is assumed that such enhanced awareness will lead to healthy self-integration and change.

Yoga

Each of the eight limbs of Yoga leads to enhanced awareness. Through the *yamas* (restraints promoting ethical behavior) and *niyamas* (observances of healthy attitudes), practitioners have the opportunity to reflect on their intentions, choices, actions, and greater purpose. The integration of *asana* (postures), *pranayama* (breathing practices), and *dharana* (concentration) enhances awareness of body, breath, mind, and their connections. The development of one-pointed focus through *pratyahara* (sense withdrawal) and *dharana* flows into *dhyana* (meditation). Through practices such as *asana* and meditation, Yoga teaches practitioners to be present to immediate experience. *Dhyana*, in turn, leads to the experience of higher states of consciousness and to the experience of “witness consciousness.” Ultimately, practitioners experience universal awareness, in which the distinction between subject and object (or knower and known) dissolves.

Are there limits to awareness?

Like modern Western research psychologists, Yoga practitioners recognize that the ordinary (i.e., untrained) mind is unable to accurately study itself. The untrained mind remains too much a part of what is being studied; it is swayed, overwhelmed, or caught

up in its own thoughts. According to Yoga practitioners, however, meditation techniques gradually extend the mind's capacity for observing itself objectively, overcoming the limitations of untrained introspection.¹

As we have seen, psychotherapeutic practices count on introspection and self-reflection to develop awareness and promote healthy change. On the other hand, Western psychology postulates that there will always exist an indeterminate amount of unconscious material unavailable for introspection, making it difficult—if not impossible—for human beings to achieve a consciousness of the self. A frequent criticism of Western perspectives by Yoga practitioners is that Western psychology has limited its exploration and theorizing about levels of consciousness to a limited range of “I-ness” (*ahankara*), referring only to personal identity and failing to involve transcendence of the ego.

In contrast, practitioners of Yoga believe that Yoga deals with levels of consciousness beyond the ego level, outlining a path for further development.¹ Transcending “average” awareness is, thus, an important goal in Yoga practice. To the extent that Western-based psychotherapy encourages self-actualization and the exploration of one's potential (most often seen in existential, humanistic, and transpersonal theories), such goals may also be promoted in psychotherapeutic treatment.

Such approaches may consider a client's search for meaning and purpose in the midst of apparent meaninglessness, isolation, helplessness, and hopelessness. They may recognize and acknowledge the varied levels of human experience, including the spiritual level and our connection to that which is beyond the individual self. Such therapeutic approaches may also take into account the context and relativity of experience, the integration of body-mind, the difficulties that arise when there are discrepancies between clients' ideal and true selves, and the healing experience of union of different aspects of self and consciousness.

BEHAVIORAL CHANGE

Psychotherapy

Behavioral change is one of the central goals of psychotherapy. Many clients seek therapy in order to change behaviors that are not working for them. When a client is engaged in life-threatening self-injurious behavior, treatment must initially focus on decreasing the behavior and promoting safety. When a client is not a danger to self or others, therapy will, at some point, help the client to examine why he or she behaves in unhealthy or unsatisfying ways.

Behavior theory specializes in explaining how both problematic behaviors and new healthy behaviors are learned and maintained. Therapy may involve reflection on the origins, meaning, or function of a behavior, and the thoughts, emotions, and environmental factors that contribute to the behavior.

Certain psychotherapeutic methods emphasize skills-building, such as communication skills, social skills, and parenting skills. Other orientations encourage “experiments”—getting clients to try different things, particularly when what they have been doing has not been working or has stopped working. Psychotherapists have also appreciated the therapeutic benefits of relaxation for behavior change, developing techniques such as progressive relaxation, autogenic training, and biofeedback.¹

Yoga

Yoga psychology also recognizes that positive or negative habits, be they mental, physical, or energetic, are learned over

time. For example, Yoga philosophy includes discussion of *samskaras* (impressions derived from past experiences in previous incarnations and/or in this lifetime that influence future responses and behavior). Yoga uses the tools of *asana*, *pranayama*, and meditation to reshape habits of the body and mind. Such reshaping may occur via practices that target the physical body, releasing tension and calming the body, through breathing and concentration practices that affect body and mind, and through practices that increase focus and promote meditation (e.g., *mantra* repetition, visualization, mindfulness).

Behavior change is also encouraged through the *yamas* (restraints), which promote a commitment to ethical behavior (e.g., refraining from lying, stealing, violence toward self or others) and moderation (e.g., eating until you are satisfied, eating in a way that is healthy for one's body), and through *karma* Yoga, which encourages service to others.

COGNITIVE CHANGE AND SELF-ACCEPTANCE

Psychotherapy

Many psychotherapeutic approaches focus on creating cognitive change—in other words, helping people think differently. This includes how clients think about themselves.

Some approaches actively challenge “faulty” cognitions through “cognitive restructuring,” or through problem-solving or coping skills training. Some types of therapy may focus on unresolved issues, including automatic ways of negatively perceiving, interpreting, or reacting to events.

Therapy may also highlight the emotional impact of one's thought patterns. Clients may be encouraged to see how a pattern of thinking developed and became generalized as a response to a given situation or as a creative adaptation to a past situation. This cognitive pattern from the past, although adaptive or necessary for the client's survival at the time, may be problematic or maladaptive in current environments. Therapy, through cognitive change, seeks to alter these patterns of thinking to allow clients to experience, react to, and adjust to present circumstances.

The psychotherapeutic relationship, via the acceptance and understanding of the therapist, also becomes a model for self-understanding and kindness toward oneself. The therapist, through empathy, often aims to create a safe “holding environment,” in which clients can work on their issues, develop insight, and promote change while remaining compassionate toward themselves.²

Yoga

Yoga instructors also aim to create environments in which practitioners can compassionately and non-judgmentally observe thoughts and emotions that surface during the practice. While Yoga and meditation can be seen as more passive or organic—perhaps less forceful—ways to support cognitive change than certain psychotherapeutic techniques, both psychotherapy and Yoga encourage self-reflection, self-acceptance, and transformation.

Yoga is based on a number of principles that support self-acceptance. For example, Yoga philosophy maintains that we are just right as we are, and that we have forgotten this over time. While promoting the experience of union as our natural state, Yoga helps practitioners question false, illusory identifications with our perceptions, beliefs, and patterns.

Yoga also helps practitioners learn to be present to and cope with anxiety, tension, anger, negative memories, and conflicts. The practices of *asana*, *pranayama*, concentration, and meditation

often assist practitioners in becoming aware of distractions, strengthening focus and mental clarity, and, ultimately, reducing distractions. Through the *niyamas* (observances), Yoga helps practitioners cultivate and strengthen other healthy attitudes such as mindfulness, generosity, equanimity, simplicity, calm, and joy.

There is also a Yogic assumption that we are different from our thoughts. The mind is filled with continually changing thoughts, images, internal commentary, and fantasies. Yogis believe that it is possible to observe thoughts, if one cultivates the ability to disidentify from them. Although practitioners often initially experience their identity as a stream of thoughts, emotions, and urges, one eventually witnesses the stream of consciousness. Such observation of and separation from the cognitive process naturally leads to cognitive transformation.

Integrating Approaches to Cognitive Change

The combination of Yoga and psychotherapeutic practices may be particularly potent for clients who have more difficulty expressing themselves—and healing—through talk therapy. We are beings with bodies and experiences that are sometimes difficult to describe through language. Emotions and sensations may also be embodied in physical experiences. Clients may be blocked or struggling with powerful physical reactions and memories, such as those evoked by trauma, eating disorders, anxiety, or medical concerns. Physical, Yoga-based work may assist specific therapeutic goals, such as helping clients feel more comfortable in and accepting of their bodies, as well as helping clients who have problematic reactions to their bodies and bodily functions.

CONNECTION

Psychotherapy

The various psychotherapeutic orientations place different degrees of emphasis and importance on connection. At some level, however, all psychotherapies recognize connection and the role this plays in treatment.

All psychotherapeutic orientations acknowledge that we are social, that we are affected by our environment and culture, and that we affect and are affected by others. All psychotherapies also recognize the central importance of the client-therapist relationship and its effect on treatment. In fact, the therapeutic relationship has been identified as a key, perhaps the key, factor in healing. Therapists are trained to consider the interpersonal dynamics of therapy. For example, therapists are often aware of the effect of their “expert” role and knowledge on clients.

Furthermore, most modern psychotherapeutic approaches acknowledge the link between mind and body, as well as the connection between thoughts, emotions, and behavior.

Yoga

Yoga, as a practice and experience of union, can be seen as a philosophy and practice of connection, as an individual develops a sense of internal relatedness and relationship to other people, other beings, the environment, and the universe. An individual develops a sense of connection to him- or herself through Yoga, becoming aware of the links between mind, body, breath, feelings, memories, experiences, health, and states of consciousness. In observing these internal connections, one develops greater understanding of the self, others, and relationships. Yoga not only promotes the experience that all beings are interrelated, but the ultimate experience of direct realization of the Self, the reunion of

the individual self (*jiva*) with the Absolute or pure consciousness (*Brahman*).³ Yoga refers to “any method by which an individual human being is brought into union with God, with reality, with the ground of being, or with source.”⁴ The techniques of Yoga aim to uncover and highlight these connections.

CONCLUSIONS

Psychotherapy and Yoga practice can be seen as complementary practices. Because both promote introspection and self-awareness in different ways, the combination of both practices may enhance inner work. Both practices attempt to resolve splits (e.g., the mind-body split) in order to promote a healthy, integrated self. As we have seen above, both approaches also promote behavioral, cognitive, and emotional change. Both aim to help clients more clearly experience the present. Yoga and psychotherapy both focus on promoting a sense and experience of connection.

However, the differences between Yoga and psychotherapy also suggest that each approach has distinct assets and limitations. Psychotherapy, for example, tends to encompass a more historical focus, using the past to reflect on the present, whereas Yoga tends to focus more on the here-and-now of immediate experience. In certain cases, psychotherapy may advance cognitive change more quickly than Yoga through its direct challenge to long-standing, automatic, or unchallenged patterns of thinking.

On the other hand, reflection on the past may, from a Yogic perspective, be viewed as leading to continued misidentification with *samskaras* and illusions if it mistakenly encourages dwelling on the past rather than more clearly seeing and experiencing reality. Furthermore, one could argue that Yoga places greater emphasis than many psychotherapeutic orientations on both intrapsychic connection and universal connection, and less emphasis on interpersonal connection and improving contact between people.

Yoga practice is not a substitute for professional psychological or psychiatric care, which may first be needed to stabilize and alleviate some clients’ distress or self-destructive patterns. Nonetheless, given the complementary and distinct benefits of each approach, an integrated therapy, adapted to an individual’s needs, has the potential to be uniquely effective. For some individuals, Yoga practices may enhance the benefits of traditional psychological interventions. Others may find that psychotherapy deepens the Yoga practice, promoting greater insight and integration. □

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FROM IAYT'S NEW PRESIDENT



IAYT President Janice Gates

As I step into my new role as President of IAYT, one central theme keeps coming to mind: relationships. Every aspect of IAYT, including this publication in your hands, creates opportunities to link with like-minded Yoga professionals, healthcare practitioners, students, educators, and researchers. The work of IAYT reflects a foundational Yoga principle—we are all connected.

Early on, as I was working as a Yoga therapist at a chiropractic office, there were no models for what I was doing; the various approaches to Yoga were isolated from one another, and a common language between Yoga professionals and healthcare practitioners was lacking. I often felt like I was making it up as I went along.

While we are in some ways still ‘making it up as we go along,’ adapting this ancient tradition to the needs of our contemporary culture, we are now doing it as a community. We are developing a common language and having the necessary conversations to grow the field as a whole. In the process, we will come to know ourselves more fully, bump up against our edges, and find what serves both the parts and the whole. I look forward to sharing the journey.

**In Service,
Janice Gates**

FROM THE EDITOR

Accountability and Soul. When I first read that title of this issue's interview with Pamela Snider, ND, I realized it captured the thoughts and feelings many of you have been writing to IAYT about. It seems to me that maintaining both accountability and soul is not about finding a single narrow path that excludes many, but about finding a practical way to “hold the opposites.”

In putting together an issue that focuses on that theme, it seemed important to hold the opposites, and you may notice articles and opinions that present very different ways of thinking about not just the profession of Yoga therapy, but the practice and purpose of Yoga itself. It is quite a privilege to be in this role of editor, presenting possibilities without having to figure everything out. There is a freedom I felt—a letting go—in allowing those opinions and articles to sit side by side.

One quote shared in Traci Childress's article in this issue sums up this mindset well: “It is imperative that teachers take seriously the idea that their present values are not the only or final ones.” With this attitude, I hope you enjoy this issue.

**Take care,
Kelly McGonigal, Editor in Chief**

