

# The Intersection of Yoga & Psychotherapy

**YOGA PRACTICE AND PSYCHOTHERAPY SHARE MANY OF THE SAME AIMS, SUCH AS PROMOTING HEALTH AND CREATING COGNITIVE, BEHAVIORAL, AND EMOTIONAL CHANGE.** They promote introspection, self-awareness, self-acceptance, and connection, and can help individuals cope with difficult experiences and mental states. However, there are important differences in the two approaches, the most fundamental of which is their respective frameworks.

Because the frameworks for yoga and psychotherapy 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.

Yoga is based in promoting 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). In contrast, psychotherapy is centered on promoting health (whether of the individual or of relationships), relieving symptoms and difficulties, and increasing self-understanding. A “side effect” of therapy may include greater connection (i.e., reduced alienation from self, others, and nature).

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. Western psychological theory posits that our troubles stem from a combination of genetic/biological predispositions, stress, harmful experiences, and negative cognitive and behavioral habits.

The following discussion draws attention to a few theoretical aspects of Eastern yoga-based and Western psychological thought

that set the stage for a productive and therapeutic integration, and also points out important ways in which psychotherapy and yoga therapy differ. Specifically, 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.

The discussion below attempts to make general statements about psychotherapeutic approaches, without distinguishing between the different orientations, schools of thought, or their emphases. Similarly, there are distinctions between different types and schools of yoga practice that are not addressed below.

## Self-Awareness & 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 and insight 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) enhance awareness of body, breath, mind, and their interrelation. 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 (Rama, Ballentine, & Ajaya, 1976).

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 critique of Western perspectives by yoga practitioners is that Western psychology has limited its exploration and theorizing about levels of consciousness to only 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 (Rama et al., 1976). 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 clients' 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 con-

text 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/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 skill building, such as communication skills, social skills, and parenting skills training. 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 (Rama et al., 1976). Relaxation itself may be restorative and counter symptoms such as anxiety. Given his use of the psychoanalytic couch

## Experience Past Life Regression with Carol Bowman

“Carol, my past life session with you was one of the most fun, helpful things I’ve ever done. It’s one thing to have a medium tell you about a past life, but entirely different to see and feel it for yourself. WOW!” —T.H., Bryn Mawr

“Thanks for guiding me though the experience in such a thoughtful, pleasant way. It was the BEST” —G.J., Ambler

“I’m still reeling wonderfully from the adventure we took through space and time. It’s had a profound effect on my inner being. All my gratitude to you for being the instrument that got me there.” —S. B., Cherry Hill, N.J



**Carol Bowman, MS, past life regression therapist for fifteen years, is the internationally-known lecturer and author of *Children's Past Lives* and *Return From Heaven*.**

Carol has been featured on national TV and radio including *Oprah*, *Good Morning America*, *The Art Bell Show*, *Unsolved Mysteries*, *ABC Primetime* and as reincarnation expert on A&E and The Discovery Channel.

**610-566-3870 (Media, PA)  
www.CarolBowman.com**

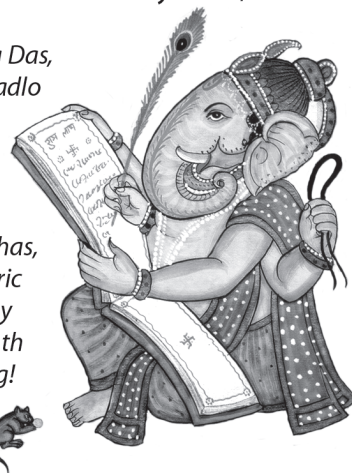
## YOGA-ON-MAIN

### 200 Hour Yoga Teacher Certification Training

September 7th, 2007 - January 26th, 2008

Join senior teachers Shiva Das, David Newman and Ed Zadlo for a comprehensive and well-established teacher training program.

It includes the study of asana, pranayama, bandhas, kriyas, physical and esoteric anatomy, yoga philosophy and ayurveda. This 5 month immersion is life changing!



4363 Main Street, Phila., PA 19127 • 215.482.7877  
www.yogaonmain.com • info@yogaonmain.com

**“A Yoga Alliance Certified School”**

**Y**ou are unique.  
Your healthcare should be, too.

**Do you:**

- ☐ tire easily?
- ☐ crave chocolate, bread or sugar?
- ☐ have no sex drive?
- ☐ find it impossible to lose weight?
- ☐ suffer with dry vagina?
- ☐ feel moody?

**Call to discuss effective options  
for restoring your unique balance.**

**Ann McCloud Sneath, MSN, CRNP**

Certified Nurse Practitioner  
Healthcare for Women  
West Chester, PA

**610-692-7126**

and hypnosis, Freud, interestingly, recognized that relaxation can promote healing by encouraging introspection and ultimately behavioral change. These methods are compatible with yoga because both seek to produce deep relaxation and its concomitant benefits.

### *Yoga*

Yoga psychology also recognizes that positive and negative habits, be they mental, physical, or energetic (e.g., tension), 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 (i.e., 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 & 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.

Donation Yoga on The Main Line!

**THE EXOTIC WAY™**

**Yoga and Dance Studio**


222 W. Lancaster Ave Paoli PA 19301

1-610-296-5580 [www.theexoticway.com](http://www.theexoticway.com)

Partner  
Yoga  
Workshops  
Monthly!

Donation  
Yoga  
Classes  
Daily!

Pilates!



Dance  
Classes!

Featuring  
"The Art of  
Exotic  
Dancing for  
Everyday  
Women®  
Workshops!"

Daily Classes & Workshops

Private Instruction Meditation Gift Cards

Studio Rentals Instructor and Business Opportunities

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 and/or necessary to 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," (Winnicott, 1960) in which clients can work on their issues, developing insight and promoting change while remaining compassionate toward themselves.

### *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.

*continued on page 49*



Yoga is based in 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 aims to help 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 dis-identify 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 traditional 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. The degree and manner in which this is addressed in therapy may vary greatly however.

### ***Yoga***

Yoga, as a practice and experience of “union,” can be seen as a philosophy and practice of connection, as an individual develops his/her sense of internal relatedness and relationship to other

people, other beings, the environment, and the universe. An individual develops a sense of connection to himself 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 our relationships. Yoga not only promotes the experience that all beings are all inter-related, but the ultimate experience of direct realization of the Self, the reunion of the individual self (*jiva*) with the Absolute or pure consciousness (*Brahman*) (Sivananda Yoga Center, 2000). 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” (Cope, 1999, p. 311). 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.

On the other hand, 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 and psychiatric care when this is needed. Traditional psychotherapeutic means may first be needed to stabilize and alleviate some clients’ distress and/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 therapy deepens the yoga practice, promoting greater insight and integration. ▲

### **REFERENCES**

- Cope, S. (1999). *Yoga and the quest for the true self*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Prochaska, Redding, and Evers, 1997.
- Rama, S., Ballentine, R., & Ajaya, S. (1976). *Yoga and psychotherapy: The evolution of consciousness*. Honesdale, PA: Himalayan International Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy.
- Sivananda Yoga Center. (2000). *The Sivananda companion to yoga*. New York: Fireside.
- Winnicott, D. (1960). The theory of the parent-child relationship. *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 41:585-595.