

Yoga: A Catalyst for Health & Wellbeing

This ancient practice teaches life balance to facilitate peace, good health and harmony with the greater whole.

By Mandy Lubas, OTR/L, RYT

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[Editor's note: This column is part I in a two-part series on yoga. Part II will explore how occupational therapy practitioners can incorporate yoga into their practice; it is called "Yoga in Healthcare"]

The Emerging Field of Yoga Therapy

Yoga therapy is an emerging field. Yoga is one of the six orthodox systems of Indian philosophy. The system of yoga can be incorporated within the medical community in Western medicine for everlasting change in mind, body, and spirit. I want to share with my readers a personal experience that welcomed yoga into my life; how yoga is leading me to my dharma, or life purpose; how yoga can be used in occupational therapy treatment sessions; and what course of action an occupational therapist can take in order to get certified as a yoga teacher.

My Journey

My life journey began the first day I came out of my mother's womb. My parents provided me with the love and affection that gave me the tools I needed to blossom in the world. Growing up, I was intrigued by people--I loved learning from them, which led me to the medical field that I work in, occupational therapy. I knew I wanted to study this noble profession as it was a calling for me to do this type of work. As an occupational therapist I've worked in hospitals, schools, homes, outpatient clinics, and private practices serving the adult and pediatric population for eleven years. I have been blessed and fortunate to work with patients and clients of all ages with all their different qualities and attributes (physical, spiritual, emotional, and mental).

As a human being I've been a seeker my entire life, always wanting to know the truth about life and to follow the right path. Through external searching I knew I wanted to incorporate so much more than what I was doing as a practitioner in this holistic profession of OT. This external quest entailed interviewing other professionals in the scope of holistic medicine (life coaches, acupuncturists, craniosacral therapist, chiropractors, naturopathic doctors, holistic nutritionist) to receive some insight on what program, schooling, or classes I must enroll in to incorporate innovative treatment approaches within the places I work.

All of this external searching distracted me from going within, or "internal searching," to receive the gift of true healing. An illness was the segue that put me onto a new path of healing, which has led to my emergence as a holistic occupational therapist.

Losing a gallbladder, contracting a hook worm, which was debilitating, and confronting the truth of emotional trauma within my extended family, has allowed yoga to shine a new light into my life which has healed me on so many levels. Yoga was recommended, rather than prescription

medications, to get at the root cause of my physical and emotional pain. The last external search for me occurred in March 2011, when I met my yoga teacher and current mentor.

My intuition guided me to Kim Valeri, director of Yogaspiritstudios on the North Shore in Massachusetts. I enrolled in a 200-hour teacher-training program without ever having set foot on a yoga mat. The teachings through Yogaspiritstudios encompassed the eight limbs of yoga, along with four Sacred Life classes. What I learned in my training is that by using the breath and body I became more aware of myself as an individual connected to the unified whole of creation. Yoga is about learning life balance and creating equanimity so as to live in peace, good health, and harmony with the greater whole. Life has many ways of presenting itself for true healing and I'm doing just that at my "Safe Haven" at Janet Shapario's Ananda Shanti Yoga and Wellness Center in Manchester, Massachusetts.

Yoga as a Healing Art and Science

The practice of yoga is an art and science dedicated to creating union between body, mind, and spirit. This art was perfected and practiced in India thousands of years ago and the foundations of yoga philosophy were written down in The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali in approximately 200 A.D. This sacred text describes the inner workings of the mind and provides eight steps (eight limbs) or stages for controlling its restlessness for the purpose of creating harmony within the body. The core of Patanjali's Yoga Sutra is an eight-limbed path that forms the structural frame of reference for yoga practice. Upon practicing all eight limbs of the yogic path it became clear to me that no one stage is in a hierarchical order. Each stage is part of a holistic focus which eventually brings completeness to find my connection back to my purity when I arrived on this earth.

The eight limbs, or stages, of yoga, are:

1. **Yama:** Universal morality
2. **Niyama:** Personal observances
3. **Asanas:** Body postures
4. **Pranayama:** Breathing exercises, and control of prana
5. **Pratyahara:** Control of the senses
6. **Dharana:** Concentration and cultivating inner perceptual awareness
7. **Dhyana:** Devotion, meditation on the Divine
8. **Samadhi:** Union with the Divine

Study the Self (Svadyaya)

One of the eight limbs I want to focus on is niyama (personal observances). According to B.K.S. Iyengar in his book, Light on Yoga, "Niyama are rules of conduct that apply to individual discipline." There are five niyamas and the one I want to address is Svadyaya: "Sva" means self and "Adhyaya" means study or education. Therefore Svadyaya is the education of the self.

Studying the self has allowed me to stop looking outward for my life purpose (dharma) and connect with my "inner wisdom," my "Divine Self," to lead me from the untruth to the truth, from darkness to the light, and from death to immortality. The most important knowledge I have gained in my yoga trainings is that in order to discover "true life purpose," the study of the self is

what needs to occur. Peeling away the layers of the conditioned self has given me clarity on what to truly attract in my life and for the lives of others.

Through peeling away several layers of myself, I started to read my own book of life, rewriting it through my changed perceptions, and allowing myself to let go of unnecessary stories. Learning how to let go of the aversions and attachments in my life has started to create a solid foundation for further growth and development in my personal and professional life, and for what is the highest good for all concerned.

The definition of dharma in Webster's Dictionary is "a sense of duty to a degree of fulfillment; purpose; or mission." To find the meaning of this in your own life, you can ponder several questions:

- What brings fulfillment and purpose in my life?
- What are the experiences that nourish me?
- What is the job that I love?
- Who are the people in my life that make me grin from ear to ear?
- What situations in my life can I cherish and which are the ones I can release?

By living your dharma you will actually create abundance in your life by creating good karma for yourself. In Sanskrit this concept is captured in the phrase, "Shubham Karoti Kalyanam." Abundance usually does not come in the form of money but rather in attracting positive influences such as good friends, bosses, mentors, gurus, teachers, and other resources. I have been blessed with good karma as I've found those individuals in my life who have supported me and guided me through the blockages in my life that were creating a disease! When the gift of abundance is handed to you, embrace it and never take it for granted.

As I continue on my healing journey through my 500- and 1000-hour yoga training at Yogaspiritstudios with Kim Valeri, and my 500-hour Ayurveda Wellness Counselor program at Kerala Ayurveda Academy, I've been able to generalize the learned knowledge into my professional and personal life. All of my treatment sessions encompass a form of "holism," as I use tools and strategies that are specific toward my client's/patient's needs. These tools are also generalized in all the yoga classes I teach, so as to educate my students to enhance their overall well-being. My clients, patients, and students are able to sit and contemplate what is truly meaningful to them. They assist me in implementing their own treatment plans or yoga practice.

To connect with other OTs interested in and practicing holistic approaches and to learn more, join us once a month for our holistic OT phone conversation. Ask to join the e-mail list at emmy@emmyvadnais.com to receive updates on Holistic OT. Please 'like' our Holistic Occupational Therapy Facebook Page and join the conversation on-line at the Holistic Occupational Therapy Group page on Facebook. We look forward to connecting with you!

Mandy Lubas, OTR/L, has been in the field of medicine for 11 years working with pediatric, adult and geriatric populations. She is certified in sensory integration and as a beginner yoga teacher. Her training has involved biodynamic craniosacral therapy, sound therapies and nutrition. She works at Braintree Rehabilitation in Lynnfield, MA, and works as a consultant for a private school. She can be reached at atbonjourmm@yahoo.com or www.beyoga4life.com.

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