

Psoma Yoga and Psoma Yoga Therapy

The practice of yoga has become for me, over the years, one of deep self reflection. What began as an enjoyable way to move my body and relax tense muscles has evolved steadily into an increasingly profound and liberating meditation practice which helps me to cultivate more and more capacity for self awareness, and for a more conscious appreciation of others.

Tibetan teacher Dzigar Kongtrul Rinpoche, in It's Up to You: the Practice of Self-Reflection on the Buddhist Path, describes self-reflection this way:

"Self-reflection is the spirit and practice of honestly looking at whatever arises in our experience, without judgment... Looking without bias brings both the great potential of mind and our confusion into the light of our innate intelligence. Doing so alters the historical struggle we have with our mind, transforming it into the very basis of the path of enlightenment."

"When we practice self-reflection, we take liberation into our own hands. This uncompromising path demands true courage and fearlessness. Going beyond the ordinary notion of self leads directly to the truth of our buddha essence, our true face, and to freedom from suffering."

"The point of the practice of self-reflection is to experience things clearly, without muddying the waters by trying to change or control them... Self-reflection is the gateway to freedom. It also brings much greater appreciation and enjoyment." (Dzigar Kongtrul)

Another Tibetan teacher, Tarthang Tulku (Kum Nye), put it this way:

When we are relaxed, calm and open like a pool in a glade, the quality of our inner nature stands out clearly. We have a keen and direct perception of ourselves, and our interaction with everything that is going on around us."

Eckhart Tolle (The Power of Now) urges: *"Make it a habit to go back and forth... between thinking and an inner kind of listening, an inner stillness... Be at least as interested in what goes on inside you as what happens outside. If you get the inside right, the outside will fall into place."*

This is the practice of psoma yoga, or yoga for self awareness: a mindfulness-based way of integrating body, mind, and spirit. This integration, or what I call "remembering wholeness", is the traditional point of yoga practice. Soma refers to the body, ps (as in psyche) refers to mind and spirit... hence the term I coined: psoma yoga. It is this integrative approach to yoga, practiced in mindful awareness for self understanding, healing, compassion, and liberation.

*...self-study, as it's practiced even in the East,
is about reducing the unnecessary suffering that comes
from not knowing who you really are... Ron Kurtz*

Psoma Yoga Therapy

Psoma yoga therapy is not the same as therapeutic or restorative yoga, which offers specific asanas for health issues and physical ailments. What psoma yoga therapy offers is a journey of awakening and discovery. It uses the practice of mindfulness-based yoga for self awareness along with elements of the Hakomi method as taught to me by its creator, Ron Kurtz.

Hakomi is an approach to body-centered psychotherapy that uses little experiments done in mindfulness for self study, to bring unconscious habits and beliefs into consciousness. In recent years, Kurtz began to call it "assisted self discovery". The word Hakomi, in the Hopi language, is a kind of "who are you?" question. As Kurtz has said, unnecessary suffering is linked directly with lack of self awareness. Bringing mindful awareness to our intentions and actions allows us to be less reactive and more creatively responsive to life. According to Daniel Siegel MD, *mindfulness in its most general sense is about waking up from a life on automatic, and being sensitive to novelty in our everyday experiences.... Instead of being on automatic and mindless, mindfulness helps us awaken, and by reflecting on the mind we are enabled to make choices and thus change becomes possible.* He goes on to point out in the Mindful Brain that mindfulness creates *documented improvements in immune function, an inner sense of well-being, and an increase in our capacity for rewarding interpersonal relationships.*

The latest research in neuroscience, as reported by Siegel and others, supports the ancient wisdom of yoga which says that wellness comes from integration (yoga=union). In his books (the Mindful Brain, Mindsight, the Mindful Therapist) Siegel talks about the importance of integration, which is a state that is neither rigid nor chaotic.

Practicing mindful awareness, he says, *cultivates well-being by creating an integrated state of brain function, one that fosters an array of benefits from emotional balance and improved cardiac and immune functions to an enhanced sense of empathy and self-understanding. Developing these traits allows us to face the challenges of life with a new sense of equilibrium and clarity.*

This is exactly the point of both Hakomi (as taught by Ron Kurtz) and what I call psoma yoga therapy, which is essentially Hakomi in a yoga context.

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So how does it look? In a typical psoma yoga therapy session, the therapist might begin by hearing the client talk just a little about an issue causing stress or suffering. As she listens, the therapist is observing the client for postural and other nonverbal indicators of some of the habitual patterns that might reveal beliefs that are distorting perception, clouding judgement, organizing reactions, and unconsciously contributing to stress/suffering.

The next phase of the session moves into a collaborative exploration of one or more of these nonverbal indicators, such as postural habits, tension patterns, gestures, mannerisms etc. This is done by using what I call "applied mindfulness" (the Hakomi way) for self study and perhaps yoga asanas or movement or postural changes combined with attention to meaning... something experimental that might reveal underlying core material relevant to the client's issues. This exploration is collaborative, experimental, nonjudgemental, at times playful, sometimes emotional, always respectful, can be quite subtle and frequently surprising in a positive way. There is no pathologizing, even of traits that seem harmful. Everything we do is understood as part of our wholeness, with strengths and resources hidden in what we might think of as weaknesses, deficiencies, or faults.

This exploration phase may include some attention to chakras and the subtle energy body. Chakras are the energy centers that inform our energy system and are sometimes over or underactive, causing physical and/or emotional problems. More about the chakras and healing in another article.

We all have innate body wisdom which is accessible through psoma yoga and which provides the insights and discoveries that lead beyond some of our limiting behaviours to more freedom and creative responding to Life. Psoma yoga is an approach which trusts this innate wisdom of the client and supports the unfolding of the client's own insights and answers. The exploring phase of the psoma yoga therapy session leads directly to a discovery of new possibilities, of something nourishing that's been missing because of old habits and beliefs, patterning that came about as adaptations to past experiences. Old patterning keeps us from being totally present in life and is the cause of unnecessary suffering. Finding new possibilities for emotional nourishment, physical wellness, relational fulfillment, and personal freedom is the point of this assisted self discovery.

The final phase of the psoma yoga therapy session is also collaborative. It is the therapist and client together finding creative ways to integrate the insights and discoveries in both mind and body and having an embodied experience of the new possibilities. It will include and complete with a plan for ongoing yoga practice and Life practices to support continued integration and well-being. The client feels calmer, freer, more confident and inspired.