

## YOGA AND PSYCHOTHERAPY an article for Yoga Outreach magazine by Donna Martin, M.A. (certified Hakomi therapist and trainer)

As a yoga teacher for over thirty years, I became aware that my students and I were making transformational changes in our emotional ways of being, as well as in our bodies, through the practice of yoga. It became apparent to me that one of the benefits of yoga practice was the ability to stay calm even in the midst of chaos and crisis. I discovered that there was a psychologically therapeutic benefit that was touching every aspect of my life. I started looking for an approach to psychotherapy based on the same principles and values as taught by Patanjali. I found it in the Hakomi Method of Body-Centered Psychotherapy, created by Ron Kurtz.

Hakomi is an experiential method of psychotherapy which is a synthesis of other methods including Gestalt, Bioenergetics, Feldenkrais, Reichian work, and NLP. Many years ago, Swami Rama told Ron Kurtz that his mission in life was to create a new method of psychotherapy. More recently, the method he created has been called "applied Buddhism." It is distinctive because of its use of mindfulness and an experimental attitude, as well as the five principles which imbue the work: unity, organicity, mindfulness, non-violence, and mind-body holism.

The word "hakomi" is a Hopi Indian word that means "how do you stand in relation to these many realms?" A simpler translation would be "who are you?" - a question which is the essence of the teachings of Ramana Maharshi and Nisargadatta Maharaj.

For the past ten years I have been practising psychotherapy based on a combination of yoga and the Hakomi Method. I have been training psychotherapists, social workers, massage therapists, bodyworkers and healers, as well as other helping professionals, and yoga teachers, in this gentle, empowering, and effective approach.

One of my yoga teachers was A.G. Mohan, author of *Yoga for Body, Breath, and Mind: a Guide to Personal Reintegration* (Rudra Press). Mohan was a long-time student of Sri Krishnamacharya and his specialty is yoga therapy. He writes in his book that "the broadest goal of a yoga practice is to reintegrate and clarify vision... learning to understand the nature of false perception, and the ways to remove the obstacles. It is thus a process of elimination, not acquisition. In aiming to bring about personal reintegration, yoga is also about the pursuit of real freedom."

Freedom is also the goal of psychotherapy. We explore the core beliefs and habits that unconsciously organize our experiences, many of which may have been based on inaccurate perceptions and wrong interpretations of significant events. Most of us move through life unconscious of our personal mythology, of such underlying assumptions as "the world is not safe", "I am not lovable", "people can't be trusted", "I have to do it all alone", or "no one will love me unless I ... (am successful... am a victim... take care of them... etc.) Yet these ideas imbue our actions, our relationships, our self-image, and are at the root of our addictions and delusions. They limit us and keep us trapped in one

kind of reality. Psychotherapy is a way to explore and make conscious the core beliefs around which we organize our views and behaviours.

"Body-centered" psychotherapy focuses not only on what the client says but on how present experience in the body and other nonverbal aspects of the person reveal underlying core material: beliefs and unconscious memories that create perceptions, feelings, impulses and reactions, and generally organize their experience of life.

Let me give you one simple example of yoga as therapy based on the Hakomi method. In a yoga class one day, I noticed that one of the students, herself a yoga teacher, was standing differently after a sequence of poses... more effortlessly tall and erect. She, too, noticed that it felt different. I asked her to study how this way of standing felt for a minute or so, and then, in mindfulness, to notice what happened when she turned to stand facing another person. Slowly her posture returned to its habitual way, which was to collapse in the chest and back slightly, bend one knee more than the other, round the shoulders and generally shrink.

After she noticed this change and became curious about it, we did a little experiment to learn more about what was happening. This woman was very tall and slender. It looked to me like she was trying to be as short as the person she was facing. Rather than make this guess out loud, we used a technique common in Hakomi... a little experiment done in mindfulness. She closed her eyes to become very aware of herself. Very slowly, still facing the other person, she reorganized herself into the more upright position. When it felt right, she slowly opened her eyes and studied what happened. Quietly I offered this suggestion as a "probe", just for her to see what it evoked: "It's okay to stand tall."

Instantly she recognized a belief that said she should not stand tall or she would be overbearing for others. She had organized her body and mind around this idea and no amount of yoga had changed her posture in relation to others. Now she understood the meaning of her postural habits and was ready to consider new possibilities. The two postures also changed how she felt, the tall way making her feel more confident.

In looking at how yoga and psychotherapy are connected, I like to look at the first four sutras of Patanjali: 1. *atha yoga nusasanam: Now - in the present moment – yoga (Oneness... Wholeness) appears...* 2. *yoga citta vritti nirodhah: We experience this Oneness when we can let the thoughts arise and subside... just noticing... creating in our awareness a spacious container – a Witness - for whatever is happening...* 3. *tada drastuh svarupe vasthanam: In that place where the witness resides, in that place of pure awareness, exists the true self...* 4. *vritti sarupyam itaratra: Otherwise the experiencer splits off from the self and creates false identities, whose distorted understandings are mistaken for the whole.* And Patanjali IV.34: *purusartha sunyanam gnanam prati prasavah kaivalyam svarupa pratistha va citisaktir iti: In practising yoga this way there is a return to the Source of our created responses to Life. This permits a new kind of freedom and consciousness.*

It may be that the most valuable result of the practice for clients - as for yoga students - comes from developing their ability for self-reflection, for simply noticing or witnessing themselves and their present bodymind experience. We are essentially cultivating a new source of freedom through greater levels of self-awareness and emotional intelligence.

Donna Martin has been teaching yoga for about thirty-five years. She trained with Rama Jyoti Vernon, Angela Farmer, Eleanor Leatham (toning) and A.G. Mohan (yoga therapy). She was a charter member of the International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT) and assistant editor of their journal for many years. Donna also created, with Paul Brenner M.D. a therapy process called Family Triangles which has been published in a book called Seeing Your Life Through New Eyes. Over the past ten years she has also been practising and teaching the Hakomi Method (Body-Centered Psychotherapy) with its creator Ron Kurtz. Donna has an approach to yoga as therapy based on the yoga sutras of Patanjali and her background in a wide variety of modalities related to self-understanding. It can be easily framed within the principles and techniques of the Hakomi Method. She has trained a number of yoga teachers from Alberta in this approach over the past four years, and has taught it to groups in Canada, the U.S., Asia, and Mexico. Donna also leads frequent retreats at Hollyhock in B.C. and Hui Ho'olana in Molokai, Hawaii.

**Remembering Wholeness** is an invitation to experience the profound healing power of yoga. We'll explore an approach to yoga as a set of practices based on mindfulness, on listening to inner wisdom as the voice of what's needed. Using movement, asana, breath, sound, touch, and energy work, yoga as therapy recognizes and responds to the unique needs of the individual and yet involves the fundamental experience of connectedness - body to heart to mind... emotions to energy to breath... person to person to group... personality to spirit to the divine. The approach is gentle, playful, respectful and nourishing. All levels of yoga practitioners are welcome. Beginners are asked to be patient and helpful with those who are encumbered by more experience.

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