

YOGA AS THERAPY: REMEMBERING WHOLENESS

The Sanskrit word yoga, usually translated as 'oneness', also expresses what we might call 'wholeness'. In the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, the concept of yoga as a practice for remembering wholeness begins the teaching.

Sutra I.1. *atha yoga nausanam* (In this moment, in the now, yoga, oneness; wholeness is present.) And

I.2. *yoga citta vritti nirodhah* (We experience this Oneness, or remember wholeness, when we let the thoughts arise and subside, when we quietly notice even the way we observe· just noticing it All.)

The words 'healing' and 'wholeness' come from the same root. My yoga practice has brought me to an understanding of intrinsic wholeness. This has required a new definition of healing, not as a journey to wholeness, but rather as wholeness-in-action, or the unfolding of wholeness (which, as Patanjali wrote, is always present). If wholeness is intrinsic, then healing must happen from the inside out. Therapy, in this case, becomes a practice of supporting the healing process. After thirty years of practising and teaching yoga, my passion is now centered on the healing power of yoga and the practice of yoga as therapy.

One of my teachers, A.G. Mohan, was a long-time student of Sri Krishnamacharya during the last decades of his life when this renowned teacher's focus was on yoga as therapy· making yoga fit the individual. In Mohan's book, *Yoga for Body, Breath, and Mind* (Rudra Press), Mohan advises the yoga teacher or therapist to establish a good rapport with the student. This [he says] is perhaps the single most helpful aspect in the treatment of any student with any kind of problem.

The Remembering Wholeness approach to yoga as therapy has been strongly influenced by all my yoga teachers, and by the Hakomi Method of Psychotherapy created by master therapist Ron Kurtz. Here, too, the healing relationship, and the state of mind of the therapist, are considered to be the key ingredients to successful therapy. As Kurtz has said, "If we are calm, if we lower the internal noise, we become more sensitive. Being in a calm, clear, and loving state of mind creates a sacred space in which both client and therapist are nourished, a space which is the ground for healing." "Being calm" and "lowering the internal noise" is the intent of yoga practice (*yoga citta vritti nirodhah*). Whether we want to support our own healing with our yoga practice, or be helpful to someone else, it is our state of mind that most influences what we do. Yoga as therapy invites us into a conscious and sacred co-creative process that recognizes and honours the intrinsic wisdom of self-healing. Rather than focusing on a problem to be fixed or a disease to be treated, yoga as

therapy understands that "symptoms" may be indicators of the healing in progress, wholeness-in-action. Our role, our yoga practice, is to become a more conscious participant in the healing that is unfolding.

In the practice of yoga, each moment invites us into the oneness, or wholeness, that is the essence of Life. As the breath rises and falls, as thoughts arise and subside, as we move into and out of the asana, we can rediscover wholeness, and our essential self, in that place of pure being that transcends all the fluctuations occurring in our awareness. Mindfulness is a state of mind that involves the ability to be fully present, aware of whatever is happening, receptive to any subtle nuances and changes that occur. It requires an openness to what is, an absence of any agenda or attachment to outcome. An experienced yoga practitioner will reach a stage in her practice where she becomes aware, not just of her body and thoughts, but even of the quality of her attention. She begins to observe the difference between her habitual ways of paying attention, (with the attitudes, preconceived ideas, judgements, beliefs, rules, and expectations that influence her practice), and the pure witness, that aspect of consciousness that is simply aware. At this stage, the practice is to continually notice how we do things, not just what we do. Practising mindfulness in standing, for example, we notice the habitual and automatic patterns that organize the way we stand, without moving to "correct" them. We become fascinated with what we notice: a tightness in the chest or belly, perhaps, or an uneven distribution of weight. We study it a little, perhaps even slightly exaggerating it to become even more aware.

There is a way that our habits resist a correction that results in a layering of tension patterns. If the habit is to round the shoulders, there is a systematic tightening of certain muscles at work. Simply to bring the shoulders back, without addressing the habitual holding patterns, merely adds another layer of tension. When the correcting stops, there is a return to the habitual pattern. If the original pattern that rolls the shoulders still has unconscious meaning, for example, as a way to make oneself smaller, or to protect the heart, any attempt to correct or change the posture will set up even more unconscious resistance.

Yoga as therapy addresses such an issue differently, using mindfulness and appreciation. Working with a student, the yoga teacher appreciates the importance of cultivating awareness of what is, not in terms of right or wrong, but rather as a way of feeling the body as a whole and as an embodiment of the person. Any postures or movements that invite the shoulder position to change are offered as experiments. What happens as you do this? How does it feel? Where does the body resist? How does it change the way your body relates to the ground? How do you feel different in your standing body after this?

It has been demonstrated to me over and over again that when we are ready to change, and when we are fully aware of an alternative that feels more nourishing, the change happens easily. If we are pressured, even by another part of ourselves, and feel forced, we resist. And just because a more nourishing option is offered, such as a more natural alignment, does not mean we can accept it, any more than just because someone tells us we are beautiful we can always take it in. Most of the habitual ways we limit ourselves started out as a form of protection. We need to feel absolutely safe to be vulnerable and defenseless if we are to give up such habits. This is fundamental to therapy and the healing process.

The state of mind that offers this kind of safety is mindfulness: nonjudgemental awareness of what is. A full appreciation that nothing is separate from wholeness· nothing is "wrong".

Patanjali II.48. *tato dvanda nabhighatah*: In this place of awareness in the practice we move beyond the illusion of duality, separateness, either/or experiences, right/wrong, good/bad, pain/pleasure, correct/incorrect, success/failure· these no longer have any validity.

Patanjali IV.34. *purusartha sunyanam gnanam prati prasavah kaivalyam svarupa pratistha va citisakttir iti*: practising yoga in this way is not based on goal-seeking, nor is it motivated by a need to change anything. There is a return to the Source of our created responses to Life, which in turn permits a kind of freedom, or creative independence. Consciousness, pure Being-ness, which is the essence of who we are, is revealed.

This is remembering wholeness, the practice of yoga as therapy.