

Perspective

A Case for Collaboration

Robin Rothenberg

Essential Yoga Therapy Therapist Training Program, Seattle, WA

For me, one of the highlights of the 2009 Symposium on Yoga Therapy and Research was the demonstration of “As a Yoga Therapist, This Is What I Do.” Three highly skilled therapists presented their work from distinctly different lineages of Yoga while a panel of their peers watched and offered commentary. Although the differences among approaches were significant, each teacher demonstrated the heart of Yoga therapy: compassionate listening, skillful means, and adaptation of practice to meet the client’s needs. As I observed this exchange, it occurred to me that this may in fact be the first time many of these famous Yoga teachers had actually witnessed their colleagues in action. It warmed my heart and gave me hope for the future of our profession.

I must admit, I have an investment in this kind of cross-pollination of ideas. Although for the past 13 years I have been identified as a student and teacher of Viniyoga, my original Yoga training was in the Iyengar tradition. For ten years prior to being introduced to Viniyoga, I studied diligently with many of the senior Iyengar teachers and received my Iyengar certification in 1992.

There were some years of major confusion for me as I tried to weave and merge these two approaches and find my home between them. I’d often tease my Viniyoga teacher that he had to accept the fact that I was a half-breed. I was not willing to relinquish some of the valuable tools of alignment and use of props for adaptation that I had learned through the Iyengar tradition. More recently, I have opened myself to study with other prominent teachers in the field of Yoga therapy. From each I have gleaned valuable gems that have supported my personal practice and added dimension to my work as a therapist.

I am currently working on a Yoga protocol for a National Institutes of Health (NIH)-funded grant targeting the reduction of hot flashes in menopausal women. I found myself with a bit of a conundrum as to how to ap-

proach this project. I spent time studying the work that has already been done in this arena, which has primarily used an Iyengar style of restorative practice. I have a great appreciation for the calming and rejuvenating effect of these poses, and through my Viniyoga training, I have gained an understanding of how to safely prepare the body for those long, supported stays and how to counter-pose for them afterwards. Additionally, through the use of specific *pranayama* techniques and my training in Yoga *nidra*, I’ve learned useful ways to cool and soothe the nervous system and transform the mind. In the end, the protocol is an amalgam of various therapeutic techniques.

Interestingly, when the study team sought feedback on this protocol from prominent Yoga teachers in the field, most reviewers could only see value in the portions of the program that were in line with their own tradition. They each suggested we eliminate the aspects that were unfamiliar to them. The Iyengar folks assumed the Viniyoga use of repetition in movement would be too agitating. Others didn’t understand the *pranayama* and thought it too complex to use. A few admitted that they had no idea about Yoga *nidra* and therefore couldn’t assess its value. It was quite challenging to find a teacher objective enough to base a response on her actual experience of the practices rather than standing on theoretical and territorial principle. Her feedback was that they were soothing, calming, and relaxing—great news for our study.

There is a wealth of information and healing tools available within our community. We have much to share and much to gain by sharing it. As Yoga therapists, we need to develop the self-confidence to be able to reach across the aisle and become curious about each other’s approaches. This will require an open mind and the willingness to put aside attachments to our own perspectives. The more we learn from one another, the stronger we’ll be as a healing profession.

I'm not suggesting we create dilettantes, dabbling in multiple traditions and mastering none. However, I do see the value in becoming educated in more than one tradition to widen the lens through which we view a particular client and his or her condition.

The authentic lineages of Yoga are as vast as the country that birthed them. There are many respectable and reliable authorities on Yoga. As we move toward collaborating as a professional body, I encourage even those who are strongly aligned with one lineage to soften their criticism of other modalities, particularly if they haven't opened themselves to experience the practices directly. We may even discover that, for certain conditions, other therapists might have more appropriate tools to support the healing process. In this way, we can become a referral network for one another in the best interests of the client.

It's up to us how we shape ourselves as a profession and how we represent ourselves to the community at large. We

encourage our students and clients to become aware of how the *kleshas* (ignorance) create *dukkha* (suffering) in their own lives. We too may want to pause and examine how our own ignorance, ego, attachments, aversions, and fears might impede the formulation of professional standards and progress in the field of Yoga therapy. A little *pratipaksha bhavana* (cultivation of a different mindset) could go a long way toward ensuring that we move gracefully through this process and more readily share our combined gifts with those in need.

Robin Rothenberg is an American Viniyoga Institute (AVI) Certified Yoga Therapist, a Certified Iyengar Yoga Teacher, and the director of the Essential Yoga Therapy Therapist Training Program. She serves on the International Association of Yoga Therapist's advisory council and is the author of The Essential Low Back Program: Relieve Pain & Restore Health. Direct correspondence to: 4030 356th Dr SE, Fall City, WA 98024. Tel: 425-222-6350. www.essentialyogatherapy.com.