

Yoga Therapy by by Tim Norworyta

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Tim Norworyta discusses his Viniyoga therapy workshop experience with yoga therapy pioneer Gary Kraftsow and examines how Viniyoga is uniquely suited to the practice of yoga therapy.

Yoga Therapy - Form Follows Function Gary Kraftsow's Viniyoga Therapy Workshop

What's your intention for doing yoga? Is it to develop strength and flexibility, get rid of pain and suffering or become a more fully realized being?

Or perhaps it's some combination of these and other intentions. Whatever it is, according to the Viniyoga tradition, your intention should determine what practice you do and how you do it.

This was a key message given by Gary Kraftsow in his workshop "Yoga for Wellness: Healing with the Timeless Teaching of Viniyoga" (also the title of his new book) held November 19-21 at Moksha Yoga.

For aspiring yogis, this concept means finding a practice that supports you where you are and where you're going. For teachers, it means adapting the practice to suit the student, respecting his or her needs, interests, age and physical condition.

For doing an asana, it means understanding the function of the pose and adapting the form to serve the function.

A Long Tradition: this latter point can be a "radical" idea for those who think achieving an ideal form in a pose is most important. But it is a main tenet of the Viniyoga tradition, whose central concept can be found in the writings of Patanjali.

Gary said this sage defines Viniyoga as "the process of personal evolution" or "the progressive ability to learn" Viniyoga therefore means the steps or sequence to follow for achieving one's intention.

Gary traced the roots of his tradition to Nathamuni a Ninth Century Indian sage from southern India. Gary's teacher, T.K.V. Desikachar, and Desikachar's father, the great yogi Krishnamacharya (the teacher of both Iyengar and Pattabhi Jois) are direct descendants of Nathamuni.

In his Secrets of Yoga, Nathamuni discussed the various stages of life in relation to practice. In the sunrise stage, which lasts approximately until the age of 30, the practice should promote balanced growth and development in the various physical systems.

In the midday phase, which lasts roughly to the age of 65-75, the practice should

support stability, giving and individual the strength to handle changes and stresses and affording protection against disease.

In the sunset stage, the practice should facilitate the withdrawal from worldly activity and the deepening of spiritual awareness.

Gary sees these stages as Metaphors for different intentions for practice: To develop strength and focus (siksana), to get rid of suffering or disease (cikitsa), or to discover the meaning of life and return to the heart (adhyatmika).

Yoga Therapy Instruction

Because the Viniyoga emphasis on adapting poses to the needs of the student is particularly suited to cikitsa, or yoga therapy, Gary's workshop focused on applying Viniyoga principles to treat suffering and disease.

Distinctive Approach

Gary noted four points of difference between Viniyoga and most other yogic systems:

How you do the asanas. In Viniyoga, you move into and out of a posture several times, co-ordinating the movement with the breath, then you hold and breathe in the asana.

Gary says repetition is best for both structural transformation and neuromuscular re-patterning, which is especially important in yoga therapy. Viniyoga also does a lot of poses asymmetrically to isolate work in particular areas.

How you adapt an asana to your needs. In Viniyoga, the function of the pose determines the way an individual will do the pose.

For example, for someone with hyper-flexible hips, seated wide-angle pose might be done with one or both knees bent, to fix the pelvis and encourage the back muscles to stretch. Rather than being able to lay her chest on the floor, the student doing the pose with bent knees may have trouble getting anywhere near it-but she will be stretching her lower back, which is the function of the pose.

How you sequence poses. This is perhaps the essence of Viniyoga, both in terms of therapy and in regular practice.

Gary gave the example of Krauncasana (heron pose). Because this asana requires flexibility in the hamstrings, hips, and back, the preparatory sequence would progress from poses like warrior 1 and downward facing dog to reclining hand-to-big toe pose, one-legged hero pose and then Krauncasana.

How you breathe. Unlike approaches that encourage breathing from bottom to top, Viniyoga calls for the reverse.

The general rule is to begin the inhale with the expansion of the upper chest, and then bring it down to the bottom of the rib cage. On the exhale, the abdominal muscles are contracted progressively from the pubic bone to the navel to push the breath up and out.

In Viniyoga, the main focus of the asana practice is the flow of the breath and the movement of the spine. The breath should initiate and guide all movement. Breath evokes a natural movement of the spine, and the movement into the asana is coordinated with it. This encourages integrated, conscious movement that maximizes the effectiveness of a pose.

Yoga for Wellness

When it comes to applying the Viniyoga principles to healing, Gary's approach is both very simple and very profound. "There are two main things to do in yoga therapy," he says. "First, identify what is causing or irritating the problem, and stop it. Second, identify what would help, and start it."

This approach is derived from the ancient tradition of yoga cikitsa, which combines the principles of Patanjali's yoga with those of the Ayurvedic system of health care. The core concept of this approach is that diseases are the result of imbalance in one's physiological, emotional, relational and activity systems. The goal of yoga therapy is therefore to restore balance by changing the attitudes and actions that inhibit the natural healing process.

Depending on the condition, balance can be achieved by viyoga (separation from what is unhealthy-"stopping" what's causing a problem) or by samyoga (linking together what is positive and productive-"starting" what helps). The way to achieve viyoga is through langhana (reduction or purification). Langhana techniques include emphasizing exhalation, holding the out-breath, forward bends, headstand, chanting and meditation. They are typically cooling.

The way to achieve samyoga is through brahmana (tonification or building). Brahmana techniques include emphasizing inhalation, holding the in-breath, backbends, and shoulderstand. Brahmana techniques are generally heating.

Yoga Therapy Training

Of course knowing how to identify what to stop doing and what to start doing is the hard part, where the knowledge and perceptiveness of the therapist (which could be you yourself) are most important. That's why in the Viniyoga tradition, yoga instruction is often one-on-one, so the unique condition of the individual can be determined and an appropriate practice or therapy designed.

Asana as a Teacher

Gary gave an interesting demonstration of how asanas are like mirrors that can help identify problem areas-especially when observed by a knowledgeable teacher. He asked four volunteers to line up and stand. He pointed out how different their spines were, some more kyphotic (rounded upper back), some more lordotic (sway backed).

He then had them simply raise their arms while standing, and he pointed out how that affected the spine. Then they did the same thing sitting on their heels, and finally sitting with straight legs in front. As we watched, he pointed out how fixing the pelvis in various degrees of immobility affected the way the spine reacted when the volunteers raised their arms. This, he said, would give clues as to what they should work on, and hence which poses would benefit their structural needs.

He used a similar exercise in standing forward bend (uttanasana) to demonstrate our habitual movement patterns and how difficult it is to change them-unless we consciously and repetitively work on them in our asana practice.

With another volunteer, Gary showed how the Viniyoga version of the front warrior (virabhadrasana 1) pose could be used to open the chest and stretch the psoas muscle. In this version (which Gary says is the more classical form- no warrior, he said, would go into battle with his head up in the sky) you lift the chest up and forward, bring the arms with elbows bent along the ribs, bring the shoulders in front of the hips, lift the pubic bone and belly up, and ground the back heel down as you look forward.

Quite powerful. He also showed how to do the pose asymmetrically, with one hand down on the thigh of the bent leg and the other lifted up, to isolate stretching into the psoas.

Physical Therapy And Yoga

In some cases, Gary says, the best way to heal an injury is to stop doing your asana practice and go hiking or exercise on a Nordic Track. He works with a lot of yoga teachers and practitioners from different approaches who have hurt themselves or developed chronic problems from the way they practice their yoga.

While stopping an asana practice might sound drastic, it's consistent with Viniyoga's focus on the intention of the practitioner. If the goal is to get well, and the asana practice is causing the problem it's clear what you have to do.

On a deeper level, healing involves working not just with the physical or outer body, but also with the emotions and the energetic systems of the subtle body-the mayas (dimensions or layers), vayus (airs or winds) and gunas (energies). Viniyoga applies the principles of langhana and brahmana to emotional disorder, too.

For example, anger is seen as an excess of pitta (fire) energy that requires langhana

(purification) techniques. Depression is seen as a toxic energy that needs brahmana (nourishing, strengthening) techniques. In treating both physical and psycho-emotional disorders, the approach is to treat the person, not the disease.

Integrative Yoga Therapy

So yoga therapy is intrinsically and profoundly holistic: diet, appropriate activities, moral behavior and spiritual practice are as much a part of the therapy as asana, pranayama and meditation.

Powerful Practice

We got to experience the Viniyoga approach in several guided practices, each of which focused on specific areas, such as lower back, hips, shoulders, or neck.

They reflected how in Viniyoga the poses are done differently to work different areas, or to accommodate different needs. For example, in triangle, we looked down at the front foot while we moved the top arm and shoulder back to stretch the neck and shoulders (I really felt that the next day).

Structural Yoga Therapy

Gary says his tradition sees each pose as a symphony of different notes, not a single one. In his view, reducing an asana to a single form limits the possibilities of the pose. Classically, he says, the postures were not fixed concepts. So in regular practice, Viniyogis play around a lot with the postures (this reminds me of Erich Schiffmann's approach).

The key is asking what the posture is about and finding out how the posture can be useful in achieving your intention. For example, a wider stance in triangle strengthens the legs, narrow stance allows you to work more on the lateral stretch.

The more than 50 people who attended the workshop at the beautiful new Moksha Yoga studio gave Gary their full attention through a lengthy workshop that devoted considerably more time to lecture and questions/answers than actual practice.

But Gary's presentation was very interesting and showed that there is indeed a very rich and deep lode of yoga to mine in the Viniyoga tradition.