

PERSPECTIVE ON PSYCHOLOGY THROUGH THE PRACTICE OF YOGA

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INTRODUCTION

I studied yoga first, then psychology. After four years of practicing yoga intensively at a yoga ashram (traditional yoga school) in India, I discovered *Games People Play*, by Transactional Analysis founder Eric Berne. Berne spoke to a part of me that yoga didn't address: emotions and relationships with people. Thereafter, I continued to study and apply to my life both disciplines, yoga and psychology. After sixteen years, I still find them both essential.

As I began my journey with psychology in 1975, I felt something was missing in everything I read: bodies. The books made no mention of feeling one's body, or of doing anything with it; it was as if one didn't exist below the neck. The body didn't matter, the books implied, when one was concerned with healing emotional pain. I did find much of what I read relevant to me, yet this view of the human psyche didn't seem complete.

Although yoga methods and traditions are varied, the yoga system I learned and practice views the body as the *foundation* within and upon which to build a clearer understanding of, and sense of, oneself. It seemed obvious to me, as a result of my experience with yoga, that the state of my body was linked intimately with my emotions, thoughts, and even spiritual insights. Moreover, the body seemed to me a logical place to start the search for self-understanding: the body is immediately accessible and uncomplicated; it gives nearly immediate benefit in that work with the body quickly starts to feel good; the "inner forces" or "inner energies" that one engages through yoga practices are potent so that one can usually feel that "something is changing." For example, increasing the depth and rate of breath causes numerous well-documented

physiological changes—oxygenation of the blood is one—as well as subjective changes such as an increase in bodily sensations.

I soon discovered the writings of body-centered psychotherapists who at least brought the body into the picture. But generally they overlook the potential benefit to their patients (and to themselves) of developing the ability to maintain moment-to-moment contact with their bodies, their sensations, not just in therapy sessions, but all the time.

My experience with clients using yoga's body sensing methods, and my own work with yoga, have led me to this conclusion: our ability to feel our bodily sensations, to "sense," can be developed like any skill; and sensing is an effective way for us to contact feelings, memories, hurts, and yearnings that are within us, but have become lost to us. Sensing also develops other skills and qualities of being: relaxation, awareness of our minds, tolerance of feeling, and kindness to ourselves. These qualities aid us in any psychotherapeutic or other healing journey.

Yoga is one of the six ancient Indian systems (*darshanas* in sanskrit) of understanding which examine the human condition and human suffering (Iyengar, 1985). The *darshanas* are: *samkhya*, *yoga*, *nyaya*, *vaisesika*, *purva mimamsa* and *uttara mimamsa*. All six systems purport to instruct and guide an individual student to the realization of the true nature of existence. In *yoga* and *samkhya* this state of realization is called *moksha*, or freedom, liberation from suffering. The individual self (*jivatma*) merges with the universal Self (*paratma*). As such, all six *darshanas* contain practical, "how to" methodologies, as well as theory and philosophy. Some, like *nyaya* and *vaisesika*, are much more philosophical than practical.

All six *darshanas* incorporate contemplative practices. *Yoga* is unique among the six *darshanas* in that it contains the most extensive "how to" system. As a theory to complement *yoga's* practicality, many *yoga* lineages draw heavily on *samkhya* philosophy.

THE BODY

Many hundreds of *yoga* practices work with and within one's body. The *yoga* student works with breath, musculoskeletal func-

tion, coordination, balance, cardiovascular stimulation, deep relaxation, purification and strengthening of organ systems and the nervous system, and influencing subtle energy flows. The student also works with the mental functions through such means as visualization, observation, focusing attention, etc., and with the awareness that occurs when mental functions cease.

Many of the goals of yoga are similar to the highest goals of psychotherapy: lessening of pain and suffering; greater access to personal resources, such as strength, equanimity, compassion, joy, love; a more realistic and autonomous outlook. But yoga's means for reaching these goals are quite different from those of psychotherapy. The yoga student explores the mind in the process of working within the body. At least initially, the body is the student's main focus.

How can yoga, a body-focused system, accomplish goals that are similar to those of a mind/emotion-focused system like psychology? Because, yoga teaches, there are fewer boundaries between body, emotions, and mind than Western psychology assumes. Yoga sees these three as one and inseparable. It makes no sense to a yogi (one who has mastered yoga) to address the mind or emotions independent of the body.

Alexander Lowen, M.D., founder of Bioenergetics and a major pioneer in the body-centered psychotherapy movement, writes in *Narcissism: Denial of the True Self* (Macmillan, 1985), that

therapy is a process of extending self-awareness, increasing self-expression, and achieving self-possession, which is the ability to contain and sustain strong feelings. Bodily tensions and rigidity have to be gradually reduced so that the body can tolerate the higher level of excitation associated with strong feelings. I believe the best approach to this objective is one that combines analysis with intensive body work. (p. 61)

In yoga, awareness is recognized as the link between mind and body. The practice of yoga helps one cultivate and explore awareness.

Body/mind awareness

Sit on the ground with your legs crossed, eyes closed. If you are in a chair, sit with your back upright, not leaning on anything, feet

flat on the floor. Sense your body from the ground up. Pay attention to your sensations as you do the following: take five slow, even deep breaths. Then continue breathing deeply and bend forward slowly with your exhalation, starting with your head, rounding your back vertebrae by vertebrae, gently going as far forward as you want. With your inhalation, rise up to the erect position in which you started. Repeat this for awhile in a continuous movement, with a continuous awareness of breath. End with several more breaths in the stable upright sitting position. Then stop all effort, letting your breath be automatic, sitting however you want, and continue to sense yourself for a few minutes.

Do you notice your mind's tendency to wander, drawing your awareness away from your body? Perhaps you notice that this happens right at the point of pain. You might also notice that when you are thinking about something, you are not feeling your sensations; then when you become aware that you are thinking, you can bring your attention back to your body. Thoughts intrude yet again. If you do not notice any of this, try the exercise, bringing your attention to this relationship between thinking and sensing. The deep breathing and movement amplify bodily feelings, making it easier to transfer your attention from thoughts to sensations.

Sensing the body provides a vantage point from which you become more able to see the workings of the mind, like an anchor point, or the magnetic poles of the earth which orient a compass needle so you can tell which direction you are going. Sensing enables one to notice when awareness is consumed with thinking.

Relaxation

Awareness of mind is one result of body-awareness. Relaxation is another.

Let us return to the same exercise of rolling down. When you do the exercise, find out which moments feel more alive—when you are thinking or when you are feeling your body? Do you automatically start to relax when you sense your body? When you are sensing your

body, you will feel your tension, and you will naturally tend to relax it, as much as you are able, because tension feels uncomfortable.

When you are thinking and are unaware of your body, your tension remains unchanged, perhaps even increasing depending on the content of your thoughts.

Tension is numbing. When muscles stay contracted, circulation is reduced, and so is sensation. In fact tension exists for that very purpose—to block certain feelings. When you relax, you can feel more deeply.

When your conscious attention settles on the body, you become aware of tension, and are naturally inclined to relax and relieve it, because it's uncomfortable. Then, relaxation reveals feelings and sensations that the tension covered. This may be pleasant or unpleasant. As long as the person's attention includes contact with body sensations and feelings (at least some of the time), the process continues: tension, relaxation, deeper tension revealed, more relaxation, yet deeper tension, etc.

This process is not rapid, nor easy, because the tension exists to block feelings that are painful, frightening or unpleasant. We mistakenly come to believe that living with the tension, and its drain on our vitality, is preferable to experiencing the underlying feelings.

The point of this exercise is to reveal the relationship between mind and body by developing the skill of sensing. This skill of sensing allows one to have direct experience of whatever occurs in the moment and to accept that experience.

Self-rejection

Developing the skill of sensing is usually not easy, because a part of our mind is continually judging. We carry an ideal picture of ourselves; the judging part of our mind seeks to turn us into that "ideal person" and therefore resists accepting our actual experience.

Your own experience may offer an example of the judgmental mind. In the rolling up and down exercise, you may have bent

further forward than was truly comfortable for you because you wanted to remedy your stiffness, or you wished to touch your head to the floor. Maintaining awareness of body sensations can reveal our judging mind and its effects.

Do the bending forward exercise again as though you want to *make* your back more limber and increase your flexibility. Feel the sensations in your spine as you do it. Now do the exercise as before, without any motive, just to feel it. Let the movement come from inside your spine. Is there a difference? In which mode can you feel your spine the most? Which way feels more mechanical, which more sensuous? Which way of moving feels kinder to your tissues?

When you approach yourself with an agenda of wanting to fix something or achieve something new, you reject yourself as you are. In order to do that, you have to reject your sensations. Typically, this is done by evaluating your sensations (if they are felt at all) along a scale of good-bad, or improving-regressing. You may try to ignore them, or imagine them fitting your ideal of what they should be, such as feeling strong to confirm a belief of "I am a strong person." You focus on *accomplishing something* with your sensations and movement instead of accepting and feeling them, as in the case of pushing past your natural limit in a stretch position to become more limber. This rejection of sense experience affects not only the body, but also the mind. Yogi Amrit Desai, an eminent yoga teacher and yoga scholar, says, "Yoga practice is a process of becoming increasingly conscious so that we first of all recognize how many ways we enter into internal conflict, self-judgment or self-rejection....(Desai, 1988, p. 11).

We reject our emotions in the same way that we reject sensations. Exploring this process in the realm of body sensations makes it easier to see this rejection of emotions. In fact, awareness of sensations uncovers the rigid stance that we maintain in order to avoid certain emotions.

Try the "achieving" style of the exercise again and see if you can feel the rejection in it. You may need to contrast it to how it feels when you do the "just-sensing" style of the exercise. Most of us live

so completely in this rejecting, judging mode (usually unconsciously) that it is hard to feel the truth about it; it feels “normal.” That is why it is so helpful for us to increase our capacity to be with ourselves in a kinder way. A feeling of gentleness arises when we experience our senses directly without the overlay of the mind’s criticism and rejection. The discipline of yoga reveals this contrast and enables us to see that this struggle is constantly going on. When we stay with this awareness, instead of once again trying to change ourselves, we will naturally seek a kinder way of being. (Similarly, it is natural to relax tension when we become aware of it, as we explored above.)

One yoga student writes of her own discovery of this:

As in other disciplines, so in yoga: I often catch myself wanting to push and not be gentle with myself. Over time I have come to appreciate that my mind state and my basic attitude are far more important than whether my head reaches my knee on a particular day, or whether it does not. Putting too much effort into the practice is literally counter-productive.

We tend to identify with the rejecting thoughts in our minds. The student quoted above reflects this when she writes, “I often catch myself wanting to push....” She identifies with the one who pushes. The body-sensing processes of yoga sharpen one’s awareness of this identification process, and bring a momentary freedom from it.

The “self” or “I” that judges clings to an ideal image of who we would like to be. At the same time, feelings and sensations are rejected if they don’t seem to fit in with the projected self-image. Through the body-sensing techniques of yoga, this “judging, rejecting self” begins to *feel* less real than one’s body. Our immediate experience in our bodies lures us away from the belief, “I *am* a judging, rejecting, demanding person.” It draws us toward a more open and immediate approach to the question of who we are. Curiosity is kindled. As this gradual shift of identity occurs, the “judging self” loosens its grip over our muscles and over our lives.

The second line of “*Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras*,” the ancient clas-

sical raja yoga text, says this: “*Yogas chitta-vrtti-nirodhah*,” which means, “yoga is the stilling of the modifications of the mind.” And line number three says, “*Tada drastuhu svarupe ‘vasthanam;*,” which means, “then the Self is revealed” (Aranya, 1983). The “stilling of the mind” (nirodhah) is accomplished in yoga, at least in the beginning stages of one’s practice, by amplifying and focusing on one’s sensations. The “realness” of the body is contrasted to the insubstantiality of the “modifications of the mind,” or more literally translated, the “mental whirlpool” (chitta-vrtti). This breaks the identification with the mental whirlpool, allowing the “self” (svarupe) to be revealed.

If we can tolerate staying with the feeling of inner criticism and rejection, the demanding hardness, and explore it by keeping contact with body sensations, an intrinsic compassion and creativity will arise, and with them, more energy and feeling. These qualities—compassion, creativity, and energy—are components of the “self” (svarupe). Direct continuous experience of this “self” represents complete “health” in yoga.

Sense your body again, eyes closed. Feel your weight against the chair or floor for a minute.

Is there any judgment in these feelings? Keep sensing your weight. Are these sensations wanting to be something other than what they are? Are they critical and demanding?

No, they just are. If you continued long enough, judgments would likely arise. But with practice you would be able to see that they do not come from your body and its sensations, but from your mind. The contact with your body gives you a vantage point from which to *disidentify* with the critical thoughts.

SKILL OF SENSING

We have been exploring a capacity in each of us that I call “the skill of sensing.” In yoga therapy the student develops this skill through the regular practice of yoga techniques. Through practicing the skill of sensing the student can develop the following: con-

centration; patience; sensitivity to subtlety; a capacity for intense feeling, including discomfort; an attitude of non-grasping; an attitude of kindness, without judgment; greater awareness of energy and feelings; and awareness that one avoids sensing. With further exploration, awareness expands to precisely how one avoids sensing.

Obstacles to sensing

We have seen that our tendency to reject and judge our sensations and feelings disables us; it cuts us off from our own compassion, creativity and vitality. As we develop the skill of sensing, we start to see this process in the moment, in action. Unfortunately this new awareness may also unleash its own undoing. We actually can create obstacles to sensing. One needs to understand the nature of these obstacles and how to use one's skill of sensing to overcome them, or else the journey of self-discovery would likely end.

I believe the same obstacles to sensing that confront a yoga practitioner also impede progress for clients in psychotherapy. Likewise for a psychotherapist, these are impediments to one's effectiveness as a therapist. Psychotherapists need to be able to contact their own feelings in order to help clients with the same discovery.

The barriers to awareness one confronts when working with sensing are: distractions of the mind or mental wandering; numbness; boredom; self-criticism, which brings rejection of feelings; sleepiness; discomfort; discontent with one's progress, one's level of confusion, one's abilities, or with the system of yoga itself.

Yoga therapy's methods of developing sensing skills both reveals these obstacles to the student and provides a means to work with and through them. And once the obstacles are largely out of the way, yoga sensing provides a means to explore yet deeper into one's consciousness and being.

One person in yoga therapy writes of her experience with sensing after a weekend of yoga practice under my direction:

One predominant experience of myself this weekend is noticing how strong an aversion to sensing and feeling there is within me. The programming that there is something so unforgivably wrong, not to mention hideous, with me seems so ingrained that the feeling seems to stay with me even when I consciously resist it. This weekend I saw that wrongness and ugliness as just another mechanism, albeit a powerful one, to keep me from true feeling and perceiving. In effect, it says, "it is not a good idea to be with yourself because it would only bring disappointment, your being so inadequate and all." This workshop gave me the opportunity to stop running so much from myself.

We see that sensing reveals obstacles, things in us that get in the way of our sensing. Sensing makes us aware of the ways we attempt to resist feeling. Yogi Desai describes it this way: "The whole purpose of yoga is to recognize the many different ways we are acting as a block to our inborn spirituality" (Dykema, 1988). Once these obstacles have risen into consciousness, one's whole being has an opportunity to work toward a more healthy and alive state.

Conversely, when one retreats from the resistance or "block," sensing stops. The mental "whirlpool" (*chitta-vrtti*) seems to swell to occupy more of one's sense of self and one's world. One will likely identify with this mental whirlpool and lose perspective, as Patanjali points out. One then feels harder, and more burdened with inner or outer "shoulds." One is cut off from an inner source of help—one's own inner creativity and energy. Inner resources are unavailable because they have been pushed away along with the *experience* of the resistance or obstacle, which includes the *sensations* that accompany the resistance. The student's quote above illustrates this. By developing and exercising her sensing skill over a weekend, she discovered that she had an "aversion to sensing." By exploring that aversion (through continuing to sense), she saw something about its source—ideas about herself that had been unconscious. She saw that her suppression of these ideas about herself created her aversion to sensing. She could see that she had been "kept from true feeling and perceiving" by this unconscious avoidance.

I have attempted to show that our human capacity to feel our bodies, to sense, can be developed like any skill and that it is an effective means for one to confront and overcome obstacles to feel-

ing. Sensing furthermore releases intrinsic qualities of being that aid one in any psychotherapeutic journey: relaxation, awareness of one's mind (and disidentification), allowance of feeling, and kindness to oneself. These qualities are essential to one's basic healthiness.

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