Yoga As Medicine
THE ART AND SCIENCE OF YOGA THERAPY

Assessing Your (or Your Students') Progress in Yoga

When I first came to yoga, I was incredibly stiff and had great difficulty doing most of the poses. When I first set the intention to commit to a daily practice, I envisioned that doing so would result in marked improvements in my asana skills. While I did make some progress, the results after one solid year of a 90-minute daily practice weren't even close to what I'd hoped for.

But what did happen was in many ways much better than I had imagined. The biggest difference was in equanimity. Little things didn't seem to get to me as much. If I couldn't find my keys or spilled a tray of ice cubes all over the floor, I wasn't getting bent out of shape as I once had. This made an enormous difference in my quality of life.

Students often come to yoga or yoga therapy looking for a specific result, such as being relieved of back pain or losing weight. But while yoga can often result in these outcomes, other factors could intervene to thwart progress, so that results can never be guaranteed. Rather than promising a specific outcome, yoga advises us to do the practice and see what happens. And most people discover, as I did, that even if what they wanted (or thought they wanted) doesn't happen, the practice is still worthwhile.

Yoga Is Strong but Slow Medicine

Even if you can't guarantee a specific result, it's absolutely appropriate to design a practice for your students that you hope will be effective for the health problems that bring them to you. What you are doing is trying to set up the conditions that allow healing to occur. But whether it happens or not—or how quickly it happens—depends on factors that may be beyond your or your students' ability to control.

In the modern I-need-it-now world, you are likely to encounter students who are impatient for results. They may be accustomed to visiting doctors who give them pills that start to work almost immediately. (Of course, one of the reasons patients come to yoga therapists is that drugs often don't provide lasting solutions, or they cause intolerable side effects.) Remind your students that yoga is a powerful modality, but that it works in a different manner than conventional medicine.

Rather than simply treat a specific complaint, yoga seeks to improve, in a holistic manner, the functioning of various systems of the body: lowering stress, improving immunity, relaxing muscle tension, improving posture, boosting mood. Do all these things (and more) through a yoga practice, and the body is able to correct many problems on its own.

Though gentle holistic approaches such as yoga take more time to be effective than drug therapy, they tend to become more effective over time. One month of yoga is likely to work better than one week of yoga, one year better than one month, and five years better than one year. If you choose the yoga regimen wisely, avoid contraindicated practices, and don't get impatient and push too hard, almost all the side effects are positive. And most specific conditions will indeed improve.

Progress in Asana Does Not Necessarily Mean Progress in Life

Yoga and yoga therapy should be tools to help your students function better in their lives. Those of us who place a premium on good anatomical alignment in asana need to remember, however, that alignment is mostly a means to an end, not an end in itself. If you get too hung up on achieving "perfect" alignment, you may beat yourself up if you can't do poses that look a certain way, or you may subtly judge students who don't progress much, which may discourage them—even if they are finding the practice to be of value in their lives.

What good is being able to do an impressive-looking Eka Pada Rajakapotasana (One-Legged King Pigeon Pose) if the student has ongoing back pain that the pose may be contributing to? Another student's Utthita Trikonasana (Extended Triangle Pose) may not look much better than the first day they wandered into your studio, yet they may be breathing better, be less stressed, or seem less angry. So which student has actually developed the more skillful practice?

Sometimes, focusing too much on alignment can lead to negative consequences. In working with students struggling with anxiety or depression, for example, you're likely to have much more success asking them to flow gently through practices, feeling the energetic effects of the breath. If you slow down and focus on the minutiae of the poses, they may find themselves brooding or becoming anxious.

This isn't to say that you should forget about alignment. We know that better form in the poses does tend to translate into better results in the real world. When your bones are well aligned, there is less wear and tear on the joints, blood flows better, and nerve conduction improves. When posture is better, it's possible to breathe more deeply, slowly, and efficiently. Breathing in this manner improves oxygenation of the tissues and relaxes the nervous system, and in our stressed-out world, this alone can be therapeutic for a wide variety of conditions. But never lose sight of the fact that if a focus on alignment isn't serving these ends, or if it's leading to unfortunate consequences such as negative self-talk or low self-esteem, it may be counterproductive.

We are a results-oriented society, and students who come to yoga therapy will reflect this. But by focusing too heavily on results—or by narrowing their focus only to those results they're looking for—your students may be missing the bigger picture, and even undermining their chances of success. And in many ways, obsession with outcome is precisely what the ancient yogic texts teach us not to succumb to. The Bhagavad Gita advises us to do our work and dedicate the fruits of our efforts to God. In other words, give up the illusion that you are in control of what happens—even if, with skillful action, you may be able to affect it.

Focus on What You Can Control

Focusing on your ideas about what is supposed to happen as a result of your practice takes you out of the present moment and into an imagined future, which is the antithesis of yoga. It's natural to have hopes and aspirations, but what's most important is what you do now. On a practical basis, since we can influence but can't control what happens as a result of our efforts, insisting on results that may not happen is a setup for frustration. And anxiety or dissatisfaction over a perceived lack of results tends to keep the body's stress response system activated, undermining attempts at healing by lessening immune function, making sleep less restorative, shifting blood flow away from the internal organs, undermining wound healing, and so on.

In therapeutic yoga, rather than focus on results (as natural as that may seem), it's more useful to ask your students to focus on what they can control. And the biggest thing they can control in regard to yoga therapy is how much and how regularly they practice, which is, of course, the biggest predictor of long-term success in yoga. You can set your students up for success in this

regard by asking them to set realistic intentions for their practice. Then start them off slowly and gradually ratchet their practice up over time, as conditions permit.

Broader Measures of Success

While yoga therapy can be an effective approach to a wide variety of bodily conditions, yoga's traditional focus has been on the mind. Consider a student who comes to you hoping to lose weight but who, many months into her practice, has only dropped a few pounds. She may be frustrated at her perceived lack of progress, but you may be able to help her understand that other, beneficial things are happening to both her body and her mind, even if they may be more difficult to assess than her weight. This perspective may help her maintain the motivation to practice.

From the regular exercise of her asana practice, for example, she is likely to have changed the composition of her body, adding muscle and losing some fat, even if the number on the scale hasn't changed much. She may be becoming more graceful in her movements, have less joint pain, or feel less stressed-out. She may have gained a community or built individual friendships among her teachers and fellow students. She may be bringing more mindfulness to eating, and by studying herself may be starting to see emotional factors that are contributing to dysfunctional dietary habits (yoga teaches us that to change something, first you must see it clearly). Once she's experienced the joy and peace that yoga brings her, she may become more accepting of her body. When you give up the illusion of controlling what happens and learn to appreciate the gifts you've been given, you may discover than a lot of self-induced stress melts away. And the funny thing is that when that happens, the pounds may start to melt away, too.

In *the Yoga Sutra*, Patanjali talks about the signs of a successful yoga practice. Among those he lists are cheerfulness, friendliness, and greater equanimity in the face of life's inevitable ups and downs. Students who experience these results, even if they aren't cured of their medical problems, may find themselves with an improved quality of life and a better ability to cope with their symptoms. If such psychological changes aren't happening in long-term practitioners, however, think about suggesting a shift in the focus of their practice. Service is a useful tool in this regard. When you volunteer to help others, your own problems may seem small in comparison. You might also consider adding more meditation to the mix. Not all yoga students

are ready for a sitting practice, but if we are to believe the ancient texts, it is the yogic tool with the greatest power for personal transformation.

Perhaps the most reliable indicator that yoga is reaping benefits is the student's desire to keep practicing. In my travels around the yoga world, I've found that the reason that people first came to yoga is often not why they are still at it. So yes, practicing yoga can do all kinds of great things. It can lower stress, improve a wide variety of health conditions, help you drop weight, and make you more energetic. It may even bring you a gorgeous-looking Eka Pada Rajakapotasana. Just don't count on it.

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