



Teacher Spotlight: Timothy McCall

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by **Timothy McCall, M.D.**

In 1997 I decided to leave my medical practice, just two years after I started to practice yoga, and not that long after I'd begun a steady home practice. So you can already see how much good yoga has done me. Seriously, though, I'd already been writing part-time for a number of years, but I was finding medicine increasingly unsatisfying. At that time, profit-driven managed care was taking over. One of the consequences of cost-cutting was a speed-up in the conveyor belt of medical care, allowing doctors and patients less time together. This made medicine way more stressful, and made me feel like I couldn't do as good a job - especially since I was always the kind of doctor who spent a lot of time getting to know patients, explaining things and answering questions. And with personal connections to patients diminished, one of my favorite parts of practicing was slipping away.

To be fair, I wouldn't say that yoga led me to leave my medical practice exactly, but it certainly put me in touch with an inner voice that told me that this isn't working anymore. My writing career was going well-enough at that point that I could contemplate the jump, though I knew I'd have a major drop in income. I thought it through then jumped without hesitation, and I have never regretted it. There was one unexpected consequence though. Since the major topic of my writing was health care, I found myself missing having one foot in the real world of medical practice. I'd always valued the cross-fertilization between doctoring and writing: Each made the other better. Without that real world grounding, I worried that what I wrote was losing something.

Then one day around 1998, I got an idea: What if I took this hobby and new love of mine, yoga, and made it my foot in the real world. I began to examine the yogic approach to health. All the stories I'd heard from fellow students about how yoga had helped their backs, or eased their transition into menopause, plus the few studies I'd read, made me want to learn more. I didn't find it easy to find information at first, but I kept plugging away. By the year 2000 (after a brief stint back in health care activism) I decided to devote myself full time to researching the scientific basis of yoga and yoga therapy.



The last day of 2001, I flew off for my first trip to India. Even though this was shortly after 9/11 - and several friends and family members were advising me to cancel or postpone my trip - my intuition told me it was time to go, and again I listened to the inner wisdom. I had an absolutely fabulous trip, visiting a number of yoga therapy centers and research institutions, learned a ton and managed to stay healthy.

Two weeks before I left I called up Kathryn Arnold, then the Editor in Chief of Yoga Journal, to see if she might be interested in an article. She said yes, and soon after reading that article she and YJ's then owner John Abbott asked me to become the magazine's medical editor. Later that year, they asked me write a book on yoga therapy as well, and I got cracking way more than full-time on Yoga as Medicine almost immediately. That was four and a half years ago, and I've pretty much worked without interruption since then. So now I am really excited to finally not be writing a book for a while and enjoy my new home of Oakland California, in a nice neighborhood not far from Berkeley.

My research has brought me back to India twice more since 2002, and I'm planning to head back in 2008. Most recently, I've been studying Sanskrit, Vedic philosophy, Tantra, and Ayurveda there, and I've been blessed to work with some amazing teachers. The picture that accompanies this article was taken at an Ayurvedic clinic in Kerala, the birthplace of Ayurveda, just a few months ago. There I worked with an amazing traditional Ayurvedic doctor, Chandukkuty Vaidhyar. At one point, in response to a question I asked him about the lack of a soft spot on my skull's anterior fontanelle, he prescribed a thick and fragrant gee-based herbal preparation that was spooned onto the top of my head each night before bed. A large fresh leaf was placed on top to keep the goo in place, and a cotton bandage looped around my chin kept the whole thing in place (which is what you see in the picture) while I slept each night.

I'm guessing that my fontanelle may have ossified as the result of a head injury I suffered when hit by a car as a small child (and yes I was already a little eccentric before that accident). Chandukkuty believes that when the fontanelle is closed that it's hard for heat (and pitta) to escape from the head, and that headaches and other conditions could result and before yoga I did have headaches. Even though I've come to believe in the healing power of Ayurveda, I must admit I was pretty floored when after three days of treatment, the soft spot returned, and, I've just confirmed, has remained. (And for all I know it may have softened sooner -- day three was the just first time I bothered to check.) And so far so good on the headaches.



Someone might say I wasted seven years of training in medical school and in residency training in primary care internal medicine, when what I've ended up doing is researching and writing about yoga. But I feel like I'm using my medical training and what I learned in all my years of practice every day. And I suspect if it weren't for my medical degree, I never would have had all the opportunities I've had to explore therapeutic yoga and to try to reconcile what I learned as a doctor with what my yoga practice has taught me.

To me this work is endlessly fascinating, challenging, and intellectually stimulating, and best of all, the practice of yoga has touched me in a way nothing before has. Sure I earn less money than if I were practicing medicine, but my life is so much richer. I feel happier, healthier, more relaxed, and more grateful than ever.

I'm particularly grateful that I no longer have to wear a tie to work. My intuition had been telling me ties weren't for me all along. It just took me a bunch of years to act on the information. These days a yoga strap is about as close as I come, and I can't tell you how much better that feels.



Timothy McCall, MD teaches yoga therapy seminars worldwide. He is a board-certified internist, the medical editor of *Yoga Journal* and the best selling author of [Yoga as Medicine](#). This article originally appeared in Yoga Journal's Conference Connection Newsletter. You can download a PDF of this article and other articles and view his teaching schedule at [DrMcCall.com](#).