

# **A perspective on the Yoga Alliance policy on Yoga Therapy**

## **by Joseph Le Page**

Yoga Alliance recently adopted a new policy stating that the use of the word "therapy" is not based on approval by their Registry. The Yoga Alliance asks schools to specify what their therapy is based on so that the public can make an informed decision. In addition, registrants who market themselves externally using both their Registry credential and "yoga therapy"-type terms will need to state the non-Registry basis for their "yoga therapy" qualifications.

My perspective is that this new policy is recognition that the Yoga Alliance is not specialized in the area and can't say which therapies would be effective. The motivation is to protect themselves from possible liability.

Integrative Yoga Therapy (IYT) will maintain its Yoga Alliance Registry following YA guidelines. The new policy can actually be seen as favorable to established schools like IYT that have a strong background in the practice and teaching of Yoga Therapy. In the area where institutions describe the basis of their Yoga Therapy, IYT presents the following:

- Accredited as a competency-based yoga therapist training program by the IAYT with a minimum of 800 hours.
- A pioneer of Yoga Therapy training programs in the United States with over 20 years of experience.
- Over 20 years of successfully designing and implementing Yoga Therapy programs in mainstream medical settings.
- In-depth understanding of the Yoga Therapy tradition in India as presented in the Yoga Therapy in India Video Project ([www.yogatherapy-india.org](http://www.yogatherapy-india.org)).

This language will be available for IYT students to use on their YA Registry.

The new Yoga Alliance policy highlights the importance of the work being done by IAYT. While the IAYT Standards are still in process to some degree, they serve an essential function in terms of defining scope of practice, who can practice Yoga Therapy, and in accrediting schools to offer the 800-hour program. This accreditation is based on over 10 years of experience examining standards for Yoga Therapy training programs.

The best measure for evaluating the success of IAYT is its broad acceptance in the field, with over 25 accredited Yoga Therapy training programs since 2014. Through these programs, hundreds of students have been participating safely and successfully. When an appropriate Scope of Practice and extensive training form the foundation of an organization, the word "therapy" can be used safely and effectively as is done, for example by the American Massage Therapy Association (AMTA), which has been supporting their members since the 1940s.

Yoga Alliance's new policy is part of the evolution of Yoga Therapy becoming a profession in its own right. It is also an opportunity for us to reflect on topics relevant to the development of Yoga Therapy as a whole:

### **1. Is teaching Yoga Therapy inherently more risky than any other kind of Yoga instruction?**

In over 25 years of practice and teaching Yoga Therapy, IYT has never had a serious injury among students in the program or in healthcare settings. From my experience, Yoga Therapy is one of the safest Yoga practices because it usually employs gentle, adaptive Yoga and because the Yoga Therapist has training in how to meet each student's unique needs. Additionally, the use of the word "therapy" is carefully defined by each Yoga Therapy school to avoid confusing it with medical treatment. It is essential to remember that all of the additional training the Yoga Therapist receives is first and foremost about creating safety.

### **2. Can we distinguish clearly between the role of the Yoga Teacher and the role of the Yoga Therapist?**

The Yoga Therapist uses many of the same tools and techniques as the Yoga Teacher, but with additional training and skills that foster a safe environment for the client, including:

- The ability to adapt and modify the practices to individual needs and specific health conditions, along with an understanding of the contraindications.
- An in-depth understanding of anatomy and physiology, including stress and its effects of each of the systems of the body.
- How to work with medical professionals, understanding the role of each and how the Yoga Therapist supports, but never replaces, a healthcare provider.
- An in-depth understanding of the vision of Yoga beyond tools and techniques, and how this change in perspective is the key to the process of healing.

### **3. To what extent can we separate Yoga Therapy from the Hatha Yoga tradition as a whole?**

Yoga Therapy is an integral part of the Hatha Yoga tradition. Different from many other spiritual traditions of India, the texts of Hatha Yoga are, in part, treatises on the therapeutic application of Yoga. Yoga Therapy is a key foundation of the vast majority of Indian lineages that brought Yoga to the West. It is part of the authentic Yoga we received from India, which has been traditionally divided into Yoga Teaching for the general public and Yoga Therapy for groups or individuals with special needs. The Yoga tradition has been modified significantly in the West, both in its form and intention because of cultural, economic and legal reasons, but to what extent can we modify it and still continue to call it Yoga?

### **4. Can Yoga Therapy become a profession within the current healthcare system?**

Yoga Therapy is in the very first stages of this process. It is important to remember that physical therapy began as a certificate program and gradually evolved into a profession. What we see in India today is a tendency for Yoga in general, and Yoga Therapy in particular, to move into the university system, and this is a likely direction for the United States. For this to occur successfully, it will require unity of purpose on the part of all Yoga Therapy schools and a further strengthening of the important work already accomplished by IAYT, especially in the area of research.

## **5. Can Yoga Therapy enter the mainstream and still maintain its character as authentic Yoga?**

The current medical model favors allopathic remedies to such an extent that everything coming in contact with it tends to take on this character. From the allopathic perspective, you can give a Yoga protocol for a certain condition and then test the result. If the result is consistently positive, you have one of the factors needed for an effective protocol. The Yoga Therapy perspective is, of course, much wider. In the ultimate sense, disease is separation from our true Self. The whole of life is a journey of healing as a return to union with our authentic being. Physical and psychological health is a reflection of our growing union with our true Self. Yoga is the vehicle for this journey as a philosophy, a technique, and a methodology. Yoga Therapy is the specialized application of Yoga for those who are out of balance and require individualized or small group therapy for their specific needs.

The good news is that attitudes toward healthcare are gradually shifting both within society and within the medical community to embrace a more whole person view of healing. Schools such as IYT that focus on the educational component of Yoga Therapy are essential in maintaining its authentic character. Although scientific study is an important component of Yoga Therapy, the real heart of the profession is the art of educating human beings, especially those who are suffering, on how to reunite with the true Self.

~Joseph Le Page