

The Five-Step Process of Yoga Therapy

by Joseph Le Page

The journey of yoga therapy is a homecoming to a place of inner balance, awareness, and wholeness, that is our true being. The yoga therapist serves as a guide or mentor along that journey, creating a safe learning environment where the student can remember their own innate healing resources.

The skill and practice of the yoga therapist comes through an in-depth understanding of all the facets of yoga. There are five steps in the process of creating a yoga therapy program for a specific group or individual.

Step One: Assess at the level of each of the five koshas

The yoga therapist begins working with a group or individual by gaining a global picture of what is happening at each level of being. These levels include:

- Annamaya kosha - the physical body, physiological systems, five elements and three doshas
- Pranamaya kosha - breath, chakras, prana vayus and nadis
- Manomaya kosha - mind and emotions at the level of the personality
- Vijnyanamaya kosha - ability to witness and learn from what is occurring in the mind and body
- Anadamaya kosha - the ability to access our inherent positive qualities and integrate them into daily living

This assessment is made through specific tools and techniques for each level of being. It is an interactive process in which both the therapist and the participant(s) gain insight and clarity. This assessment includes an understanding of health conditions which are present, but these are seen as a reflection or symptom of an overall imbalance at all levels of being. All that occurs in Yoga Therapy is actually a deepening of the process of gaining clarity because, from the yoga perspective, this heightening of awareness is the ultimate vehicle for achieving optimal health.

Step Two: Explore the Role of Separation

From the Yoga perspective, imbalance occurs because we are disconnected from our true inner being. Within the Yoga Sutras, this disconnection takes the form of the five kleshas. All of the kleshas are reflections of avidya, a lack of understanding of who we are:

Avidya - confusing the limited personality with our limitless true being.

Asmita - seeing life through the lens of “I” and “me”, the self-centered needs of the personality.

Raga - desires become binding and occupy all of our attention and energy in an attempt to find happiness at the level of the personality.

Dvesha - living separate from our true being, we create a world of conflict and competition filled with enemies of our own making.

Abhinivesha - the fear that comes from believing that we are the personality characterized by loneliness, lack of meaning and fear of death.

From the perspective of the Yoga Sutras, ignorance of the truth of our true being, called Avidya, is the source of all forms of dis-ease. In order to see the relationship between separation from our true being and imbalance, we explore it at the level of each of the koshas. We also evaluate which tools and techniques of Yoga could recreate integration and harmony.

- **How separation affects the physical body:** In relation to the physical body, separation is experienced as a lack of awareness of and communication with the body. Increasing body awareness is an essential part of the healing process. As we become more aware of the messages from the body, including areas of stress and tension, a foundation is created for activating the relaxation response, allowing the body to return to a state of balance. Asana plays an important role in this process.
- **How separation affects the energy body:** At this level separation manifests as a lack of awareness of the breath and of the flow of energy in the body. It also manifests as specific imbalances within the chakras and other aspects of subtle anatomy. Pranyama and Mudras are essential tools for reestablishing balance at this level.
- **How separation affects the mind and emotions:** The belief that we are our thoughts and feelings leaves us at their mercy. Relaxation and Yoga Nidra are primary tool for creating space within our psycho-emotional being. Meditation then allows us to cultivate greater understanding.
- **How separation affects the wisdom body:** The wisdom body is the part of ourselves that has the ability to see separation at the various levels of being, thereby allowing for a process of change and transformation. This process occurs through insights gained in meditation and in daily living. Study of the scriptures such as the Yoga Sutras and bhagavad Gita, play an important role in awakening the wisdom body.
- **How separation affects the bliss body:** Separation from the bliss body is a failure to recognize and cultivate all of our inherent positive qualities. Without the recognition of these qualities, the mind tends to gravitate toward what is undesirable and negative. Affirmation supported by Mudra is an important means of awakening the bliss body.

Step Three: Understanding the Stress Response

The kleshas not only affect us at the level of the mind but also affect the physical body, especially through the activity of stress. Negative emotions such as anger and fear are hallmarks of the stress response. As short-term defense mechanisms, they defend our survival. But when stress becomes chronic, a whole series of stress-related health issues can result. Let's examine the effect of stress within each of the 5 Koshas:

- **How stress affects the physical body:** Stress has a dramatic effect of every system of the body. Take the circulatory system as an example. One aspect of the stress response is to increase blood pressure and heart rate. In an emergency situation, this ensures a rapid supply of energy for survival. When the stress response is activated continually, the body adapts by maintaining elevated blood pressure. This subjects the arteries, as well as other tissues and organs to damage, including hardening of the arteries, potential for stroke and heart disease.
- **How stress affects the energy body:** In stress, the breath becomes shallow, fast and centered in the upper chest. This is helpful in developing energy in a short term

emergency but inhibits restorative functions and ultimately affects the health of all other systems. The absence of a full deep breath, also affects the flow of prana, the life force energy, leading to blockages throughout the entire subtle anatomy.

- **How stress affects the psycho-emotional body:** Negative emotions including fear and anger are hallmarks of the stress response, whose intention is to ensure our survival. When stress becomes chronic, these emotions tend to become the lens through which we see ourselves in the world. This leads to chronic contraction, both in the mind, the energy body and the physical body.
- **How stress affects the wisdom body:** The stress response initiates rapid reactions in order to respond to an emergency. This is exactly the opposite of the wisdom body, which is our ability to take a wider view of situations; to step back without reacting and assess a situation from a variety of perspectives. When stress becomes chronic, we lose this essential capacity and live in the continual reactivity.
- **How stress affects the bliss body:** The cultivation and integration of positive and intrinsic qualities requires relaxation and the ability to witness negative traits, recognize that they serve a role within evolutionary survival, but do not reflect our true being. Chronic stress keeps us in survival mode and inhibits the awakening of these positive qualities.

Step Four: Approaches to Wellness

This is our plan of action, using the koshas as a framework. It is an elaboration of principles and practices that would best support the overall wellness of an individual or group. The science of yoga is a tool box of resources that support and facilitate wellness.

- **Approaches to Wellness for the Physical Body:** The first three of the Eight Limbs - yama, niyama, and asana - relate to the health of the physical body, in terms of lifestyle, diet, and physical yoga practice.
- **Approaches to Wellness for the Energy Body:** Yogic techniques focus on the next limb of the Eight Limbs, pranayama - breathing exercises to enhance the flow of energy in the body and reestablish a natural balance in the flow of prana and apana.
- **Approaches to Wellness for the Psycho-emotional Body:** At the level of the mind and emotions, the yogic techniques draw from all the areas utilized up to this point and also focus on the next of the Eight Limbs, pratyahara, bringing our focus inside and reducing external stimulus. A main resource here is yoga nidra, a 10-step process for exploration and integration of all the koshas.
- **Approaches to Wellness for the Wisdom Body:** At this level, we encourage the development of the witness, the part of ourselves that has the ability to stand back and take a wider view of our situation in life. The yogic techniques focus on the next of the Eight Limbs, dharana, which refers to all the ways we cultivate conscious awareness. An example of this is Tratak, in which the mind is focused on a particular point, such as the flame of a candle.
- **Approaches to Wellness for the Bliss Body:** We facilitate the recognition of the inherent positive qualities of our own being. These emerge naturally through the experience of meditation, dhyana.

Step Five: Designing a Program for the Individual

The final step of the yoga therapy process is to create a specific program based on all of the understandings and principles gained up to this point. This will ultimately be a practice for the overall wellness of the individual or group and not for the treatment of a specific health condition. However, our knowledge of the condition as understood within this model of yoga therapy, is an essential foundation for developing an appropriate approach. The practice that we develop is, of course, not static and will change along with the changing needs of the individual.

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