



Yoga and Trauma

The intellectual and practical activity encompassing the systematic study of the structure and behavior of the physical and natural world through observation and experiment.

—OXFORD DICTIONARY DEFINITION OF “SCIENCE”

The remarkable similarities between Western-based science and yogic wisdom have always fascinated me. The definition of science quoted above could easily be offered as a definition for yoga. Western science provides one framework through which we can perceive ourselves and the world. The science of yoga offers another. Both are systems for understanding and making sense of what is. What I find really exciting is that there are many areas where the two disciplines seem to converge. Trauma is one such area.

We have learned that trauma can result in an altered state of mind-body that negatively affects a person's thinking, behavior, psychological, and physiological well-being. We have also learned that leading behavioral and neuroscientists are coming to understand that the trauma condition can be addressed through the physical doorway of the mind-body continuum. A short comparison of classical yogic wisdom with science-based trauma fundamentals will help us understand why yoga is so naturally suited to promote recovery from trauma, and will set the foundation for the development of a trauma-sensitive style of yoga.

PATANJALI'S PERSPECTIVE

There are so many different styles and systems of yoga in existence that one could very easily become lost in the different perspectives and nuances of each. Of all the figures who have taught yoga over the millennia of its existence, the most widely recognized is Patanjali. In the Yoga Sutras, Patanjali teaches that yoga can bring about a state of mind that is free of turbulence and ultimately results in union with all that is. Yogic wisdom holds that states of mental turbulence happen when *chitta* (mind) is clouded by *avidya* (incorrect comprehension).¹ *Avidya* arises as a result of the *kleshas*, which include *asmita* (ego), *raga* (attachment), *devisah* (aversion), and *abhinivesah* (fear). Over time, *avidya* creates *samskaras* (mental and emotional patterns).

If we consider this in terms of what we have learned about trauma, it would seem that homeostasis can be construed as union, and trauma is very much like *samskara*. But rather than grooves of conditioned thought created over time, trauma happens suddenly and unexpectedly, like a flash flood cutting a deep chasm across the landscape of mind-body. We can become trapped in this chasm. Every event that happens from this point forward is perceived from within its shadowy landscape and is influenced by the thoughts, feelings, and emotions that accompanied the original event. *Avidya* and the *kleshas* sound a lot like "reactions to experiences." These reactions can lead to one of the main symptoms of trauma: negative alterations in cognition and mood. It is not a big stretch to conclude that these negative alterations lead to dysregulation, or in yogic parlance, *chitta vritti* (mind turbulence). *Samskara* or trauma evokes conditioned responses to triggers that manifest in terms of the remaining major trauma symptoms of intrusion, avoidance, and arousal.

KOSHAS: MIND, BODY, AND MORE

Some yogic texts describe the body in terms of layers called *koshas*. Starting from the outside in the layers are *anamaya kosha*, the physical body; *pranamaya kosha*, the energetic body; *manomaya kosha*, the cognitive and emotional body; *vijnanamaya kosha*, the rational body; and *anandamaya kosha*, consciousness or the seat of awareness.

The *koshas* offer a good model for conceptualizing how TSY can work on mind and body. The concept of approaching the mind-body through *anamaya kosha* (the physical layer) is consistent with the bottom-up approach we have already discussed. We know that breath exists within the realm of *pranamaya kosha*, our energetic body. The practice of *pranayama* helps us to regulate the flow of *prana* (life force) within. When *prana* is balanced, we feel balanced.² From the Western perspective, when we regulate breath, we regulate the autonomic nervous system, which leads to coherence, which in yoga we could consider to be union. *Manomaya kosha* is the layer at which thoughts and emotions are managed. When it is clouded by illusion, deeper wisdom or rational thought is clouded as well. In terms of our previous description of the mind-body continuum, *manomaya* resembles the interaction between the cognitive brain and the limbic system (the emotional brain) that is so central to the trauma mechanism. The role of *vijnanamaya kosha* is almost exactly the same as that of the rational part of the mind. It knows, decides, judges, and discriminates between this and that, between useful and not useful. When it gets comingled with memories and is clouded over by the *manas*, it loses its positive strength. *Anandamaya kosha* is the center of consciousness. It is a state of simply being. It represents what we have termed calm abiding, or being in a state of present-moment awareness.

It is reasonable to suggest that yoga offers a framework for perceiving the interaction between trauma and the mind-body that is consistent with that described by behavioral science and neuroscience. Yoga recognizes that our reactions to our experiences (*kleshas*) are influenced by conditioned thought (*samskara*) and cause misperception of what is really happening in the present moment (*avidya*). This results in mind turbulence or trauma (*chitta vritti*). We can influence state of mind (*chitta*) through the mind-body (*koshas*) starting from the bottom (*anamaya kosha*) up. We can do so by using yogic techniques and practices (*asana*, *pranayama*, and *pratyahara*, among others) for finding our center (*anandamaya kosha*) and some degree of calm abiding (*samadhi*).

Patanjali summarized this whole process of finding freedom from mind turbulence in an eight-step process. The first two steps, *yama* and *niyama*, are essentially a set of moral precepts that assist us in practicing kindness

and compassion to ourselves and others. Steps 3 and 4 address breath and mindful movement. Steps 5 to 7 describe a meditative process that creates a state of pure awareness, a state from where it is possible to take the final step to self-realization; where all aspects of mind-body are working together in a state of union; where we learn who and what we are and how we are connected to all that is.

WHY YOGA WORKS: A PLAUSIBLE EXPLANATION

Having reviewed the interaction of yoga and trauma from a classical perspective, what follows is a plausible contemporary explanation for why yoga works. Yoga helps with trauma in three main ways. It grounds us in the present moment, it broadens our window of tolerance to regulate mind-body, and it fosters a sense of internal and external connection.

First, it gets us grounded in present-moment awareness. It moves our awareness away from where it is stuck in a past event experience into the experience of an event that is happening in the present moment. By paying attention to the sensations associated with our present-moment experience, whether they are generated by breath or movement, we free ourselves from the imprint of the trauma experience, from the *samskara* of something that happened in the past. When we stop reliving the trauma experience, we restart the natural process of healing. We overcome dysregulation to experience a degree of safety and stability.

Second, it teaches us how to expand our window of tolerance to regulate physical, emotional, and cognitive sensation. We use asana to stress the mind-body in a healthy and controlled way, and we use *pranayama* (breath) to bridge body and mind to regulate the stress response. As our practice deepens, we broaden our window of tolerance for "autonomic dysregulation."³ We become familiar with our boundaries and understand how to live comfortably and contentedly within. We find the capacity to come to terms with and accept reality. We learn that while the trauma experience has become part of what we are, it does not define who we are. We are able to remember it without reliving it.

Third, the ultimate end of yoga is union, or a sense of connection. The entire process supports this end. This means feeling part of something. It

means reconnecting to family, friends, and society at large. For some, it may mean developing and practicing a concept of spirituality.

LET'S TALK ABOUT GANESH

Ganesh is an elephant, and many times when we practice yoga, there is an elephant in the room. That is spirituality. For many, the word *spirituality* is a loaded term. It comes with connotations of religion and all sorts of different concepts of god. I like to think of spirituality as the essence of connection. It is the force that draws us closer together, that makes us feel like we are part of something larger than ourselves. I hope that a basic, inclusive definition such as this does not preclude any other systems of belief. I think spirituality is very relevant to trauma, because as we have seen, stage 3 of trauma recovery is finding a way to reintegrate into the whole. In this regard, spirituality is key.

More and more clinicians, and even medical doctors, are advocating some form of spiritual practice as a path to holistic health. For some people, spirituality is an intensely personal matter, so it may not be advisable to point out the elephant the very first day. It might be better to talk about connection in general terms and allow people to sense it for themselves. The language we use, and the concepts we present, can set the conditions for people to notice Ganesh on their own. Phrases like "inner essence" and "life force" seem palatable to most. As we come to know the people we are working with better, we will get an appreciation for what it is that offers them a sense of connection. Maybe it's nature, maybe it's church, maybe it's a puppy, or maybe it's just being in the same room as someone else. What it is, exactly, isn't that important. The point is to set the conditions for them to find and follow their own spiritual path, to experience the awe, delight, and contentment that comes with seeing the elephant along the way.

WHAT KIND OF YOGA IS RIGHT FOR TRAUMA?

It is often said that all yoga is good yoga and, in general, this is true. It is also true, however, that some types of yoga are not suitable for all people. This is probably why there are so many schools and styles of yoga in existence today.

Which of these is the best for trauma? There are also many mainstream yoga derivatives being presented as effective methods for addressing trauma and trauma-related conditions. The more well-known include methods such as MBSR, somatic experiencing, iRest Yoga Nidra, and HeartMath. Which of these works the best?

This may be an oversimplification, but perhaps the different systems of yoga and mainstream derivatives are just that: methods that are all underpinned by the same basic precepts and core elements of yoga. Although they are often presented as unique or innovative, more than representing new ideas they represent different views on the same theme, different applications of the same fundamental elements and principles.

The best yoga is the yoga that yields results and is understandable and acceptable to the people we are working with. So rather than taking a cookie-cutter approach, we should be willing to adapt whatever styles, methods, and techniques are available to meet the needs of the traumatized person.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- ❖ Yoga's main role in addressing trauma is to help with the stabilization stage, where the client learns to self-regulate. The practice of acceptance, and emphasis on connection, is also useful for stages 2 and 3 of trauma recovery, which involve coming to terms with the trauma experience and reintegrating it into life. Some concept of spirituality can greatly facilitate stages 2 and 3.
- ❖ Yoga helps with trauma in three main ways. First, it takes our awareness away from a past event experience and into an experience of an event that is happening in the present moment. Second, it teaches us how to expand our window of tolerance to regulate physical, emotional, and cognitive sensation. Third, it encourages us to explore the concept that we are connected to something greater than ourselves.
- ❖ The best kind of yoga for trauma is the one that works. It needs to meet the needs of the person living with trauma and be conveyed to them in a way that is understandable and acceptable. Our role as TSY practitioners is to help the person with trauma find a practice that works best for them.

are a responsible party in a trauma relationship. Accepting the inevitability of some degree of vicarious trauma can be helpful, as can accepting personal and professional limitations. Appropriate boundary management is important and includes remembering your role, treating the person living through trauma with respect, and separating your role as a caregiver from other aspects of your life. At the same time, when we are acting as caregiver, it is essential to participate authentically while keeping the welfare and needs of the individual with trauma in focus.

Caregivers must listen with respect and an open mind and heart, and engage empathically while respecting boundaries. This means letting the traumatized person know through words and actions that we care deeply about the harm they have experienced and their struggle to recover.⁴² In addition to the self-care ideas provided above, caregivers are advised to consider the importance of maintaining a strong base of social support, to access professional consultation when appropriate, and to engage in activities that promote spiritual renewal.⁴³ It is especially important to remember that personal effort toward self-care is just as important to those they are caring for as it is to themselves.

STAGES OF TRAUMA RECOVERY

Recovery from trauma begins the moment the traumatic event ends. The human organism's natural response to any injury is to heal itself. That response begins almost immediately after the injury is sustained. In the case of trauma, this recovery can stall. The main role of trauma therapy is to help the traumatized individual restart the recovery process by setting the conditions for healing to take place. Setting the conditions involves helping them find perspective, empowering them with concepts and tools they can use to advance their recovery, and helping them foster the attitude and commitment to do so.

There are several different models that break the process of healing from trauma into stages. Some have three stages, some have five, some have more. The model presented below is an adaptation from the seminal work of Judith Herman.⁴⁴

Stage 1: Safety and Stabilization: Overcoming Dysregulation

Stage 1 involves understanding what is happening and finding safety and stability.

Understand. Individuals are educated to comprehend the effects of trauma and to recognize its common symptoms. They become familiar with and understand the meaning of overwhelming body sensations, intrusive emotions, and distorted thought patterns.

Find safety. Individuals establish a sense of bodily safety and are able to abstain from self-injury and establish a safe environment. This could include a secure living situation, nonabusive relationships, regular income, and other adequate supports.

Find stability. Individuals find emotional stability. They have the ability to calm the body, regulate impulses, self-soothe, and manage post-traumatic symptoms triggered by mundane events. The goal of this stage is to create a safe and stable life in the here-and-now. This sets the conditions to facilitate the safe remembrance of the trauma without reliving it.

Yoga is particularly helpful during this stage, as it can teach individuals the self-regulation skills they need to find safety and stability in the present moment.

Stage 2: Coming to Terms with Traumatic Memories

The focus is to overcome the fear of traumatic memories so they can be integrated. The individual comes to accept that they may not be the same person as a result of the trauma. Effort is made to ensure individuals don't become "stuck" in avoidance or overwhelmed by memories and flashbacks. Since remembering is not necessarily recovering, the goal is to come to terms with the traumatic past.

This stage is primarily the domain of clinical therapy, however. An integral part of the yoga practice is acceptance. Fostering the capacity for acceptance is essential in coming to terms with the traumatic memory.

Stage 3: Reconnection, Integration, and Moving On

In this stage, work begins on decreasing shame and alienation, developing a greater capacity for healthy attachment, and taking up personal and

professional goals that reflect post-traumatic meaning-making. Overcoming fears of normal life, healthy challenge, change, and intimacy become the focus. As life becomes reconsolidated around a healthy present and a healed self, the trauma feels farther away. It becomes part of an integrated understanding of self and no longer a daily focus.

Once again, yoga can assist the individual during this stage of recovery by providing a safe venue to practice connecting to the external world.

Trauma Treatment: The Middle Path

From the days of Freud, cognitive based approaches, or “talk therapy” have represented the main approach to dealing with psychological illness. For a time, medicine seemed to have drawn a line and focused all efforts to resolve psychological conditions such as trauma by working “above the neck.” Fortunately this paradigm is shifting. There is compelling evidence that traumatic memory is stored in the emotional brain and can therefore be accessed through the body.⁴⁵

Consequently, traditional cognitive approaches that aim to access trauma memories through the rational brain may not always be effective because the trauma memory may not be there. To complicate matters, the connection between the rational and emotional brain may very well be impaired. As a result, the concept of employing somatic-based therapies to access the emotional brain through the medium of the body is becoming more accepted. This approach forms the heart of Bessel van der Kolk’s message in *The Body Keeps the Score* and is the central thrust of David Emerson’s *Trauma-Sensitive Yoga in Therapy*.

Accepting that it is possible to access trauma through the body validates the use of somatic-based approaches in trauma treatment. In light of this, the implications of using yoga as clinical intervention to address trauma appear even more striking, since yoga permits trauma to be simultaneously approached from the top down and the bottom up. This approach may provide a more comprehensive and holistic strategy for addressing trauma than either stand-alone cognitive or somatic based modalities.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- ☑ Trauma is a subjective experience precipitated by life-threatening or life-altering events. It overwhelms the individual and is characterized by a loss of control. Even when the event is over, the trauma experience can continue, producing an altered state of mind that negatively affects a person’s thinking, behavior, and psychological and physiological well-being.
- ☑ A trauma condition develops when the mind-body is unable to return to a normal range of nervous system regulation. Trauma can be acute or chronic. The four main symptoms of a trauma condition are negative alterations in cognitions and mood, avoidance, reexperiencing, and arousal and reactivity. People with trauma may be functionally symptomatic, or severely symptomatic.
- ☑ The three stages of trauma recovery are safety and stabilization, coming to terms with traumatic memories, and reconnection and integration. Trauma memories may be stored in the limbic system, which, in the traumatized brain, may not be accessible through the rational brain. This validates the concept that a “bottom-up” somatic approach may be a valid strategy for addressing trauma conditions.