

How Yoga Therapy Heals

By Joseph Le Page

December 15, 2010 marked the completion of the latest ten-week class series in our Healthy Heart Program, and also marks eight years of Yoga Therapy programs offered in our community in Santa Catarina, Brazil. The Healthy Heart program is for individuals with hypertension who have not responded adequately to standard medical treatment. Each weekly class lasts approximately two hours, including time to take blood pressure readings at the beginning and end of class. Participants receive a twenty-minute relaxation CD that they are encouraged to listen to daily.



The classes are taught by Lilian and Joseph Le Page, supported by two assistants and a nurse who represents the Family Health Program of the Brazilian government. We were all encouraged by the results of this latest series in the program. By the fifth week, all of the participants' blood pressure levels were within normal range. There was also a sense of personal transformation that went well beyond the reduction in blood pressure and included greater awareness of body, breath and mind, new perspectives on life, and openness to lifestyle changes.

Because of these encouraging results, the Healthy Heart Program will be expanded to all six clinics in our community, and has also been approved for research in 2011.



In the following article, we have explored some of the principal factors that contribute to making this and other Yoga Therapy programs successful. We offer these ideas as part of a larger conversation on just how it is that Yoga Therapy heals.

These factors include:

- **Integration within the Medical Environment**
- **The Application of the Five Kosha Model**
- **Integration of the Ten Weekly Themes**
- **The Unique Ten-Step Class Structure**
- **The 25 Essential Healing Principles**
- **Enlightened Living as the Context for Yoga Therapy**



Each of these factors is discussed briefly below.

- Integration within the Medical Environment

The medical personnel we have worked with over the years have always been sympathetic to the Yoga cause. Normally, they were nurses or doctors who had developed an interest in alternative healing outside their profession. We now find that the clinic supervisors and nurses we work with have received orientation to alternative healing within their professional training. For this reason, their attitude toward our program is evolving. Instead of seeing us as a useful activity outside the boundaries of traditional health care, they now see our program as an integral part of the health care objectives of the community.

- The Integrative Application of the Five Kosha Model

The Five Kosha Model describes the various levels of being that comprise the individual, including the physical, energetic, psycho-emotional, wisdom, and bliss bodies. Balance within each body and integration of the bodies as a whole cultivate health. Imbalance within the bodies and a lack of integration among them result in dis-ease. Using the model of the Koshas as the overall structure for IYT Yoga Therapy Programs helps cultivate wellness at all levels of the person. The model of the Koshas also describes the journey from physical toward spiritual. This journey of transformation is the essence of health at all levels of the person.

- Integration of the Ten Weekly Themes

Each class within the ten-week program focuses on a specific theme related to mind-body-spirit health, with a special focus on hypertension and the cardiovascular system. Each theme is introduced in a short lecture format, brought to life through an experiential exercise. The theme is then woven throughout the class, and reinforced by a home study assignment to integrate the theme into daily life. Each theme builds on information from previous weeks and forms a progression following the model of the Five Koshas. The intention of the weekly themes is to integrate the 25 Essential Healing Principles that underlie the program. The Yoga techniques serve as a vehicle, the Yoga Therapist as a guide, and the changes in health parameters are a reflection of the extent to which these Healing Principles are successfully integrated.

- Unique Ten-Step Class Structure

In 1994, Integrative Yoga Therapy's first program with a focus on cardiovascular conditions was a basic Hatha Yoga class modified for the needs of participants. Over the years, the program has evolved into a unique ten-step process much broader in scope than the original Hatha Yoga class. Each step of the process plays a vital role in integrating the 25 Essential Healing Principles. The Ten-Step Class Structure is outlined below:

I. Check-in - After blood pressure is taken, there is a review of the tools and methods introduced in the previous week to tie the weekly themes together.

II. Healing Theme Presentation - A fifteen-minute presentation on some facet of mind-body-spirit health in relation to hypertension is offered to expand knowledge of self-healing.

III. Body Awareness Exercise - This is an experiential exercise that brings the healing theme to life, offering the participants an opportunity to transform theory into practice.

IV. Sharing - Participants share their experience in pairs and/or as a group, both verbally and artistically, allowing for emotional expression and shared personal growth.

V. Breathing Exercises - Basic breathing exercises and traditional pranayamas, selected for hypertension, cultivate physiological benefits and awaken awareness of the subtle body.

VI. Mudras and Affirmations - Hand gestures related to the weekly theme are introduced together with specific healing affirmations to integrate the 25 Essential Healing Principles.

VII. Warm-ups and Yoga Postures (Asana) - Seated warm-ups, followed by standing, kneeling, and supported postures are woven together with the

mudras and affirmations, integrating the physiological benefits of the asanas with the overall theme of the class.

VIII. Yoga Nidra - A specific Yoga Nidra is given to support the weekly theme in order to integrate learning at conscious and subconscious levels.

IX. Meditation - Meditation is based on the weekly theme and supported by mudras and affirmations that allow even those individuals new to meditation to experience deep serenity.

X. Final Sharing - Sharing a single word completes the journey. After this, participants remain seated to have their blood pressure re-checked while home study assignments are given and the mudras and affirmations are reviewed.

. The 25 Essential Healing Principles

Over the years, we have observed certain essential elements whose cultivation is essential to the success of Yoga Therapy Programs. These 25 Essential Healing Principles are organized within the model of the Five Koshas. The Healing Principles are integrated throughout the program; however, certain steps within the class structure are especially important for cultivating these principles.

Healing Principles at the level of Annamaya kosha - the physical body

1. Experiential Body Knowledge - Body Awareness (III) and Asana (VII) cultivate deeper listening to the body's messages, giving participants a sense of which areas of the body are out of balance.

2. Understanding Hypertension and the Cardiovascular System - Each weekly Healing Theme (II) offers information on hypertension in relation to mind-body-spirit healing. The Body Awareness Exercise (III) transforms this knowledge into awareness that can be integrated into daily life.

3. Release of Chronic Muscular Contraction - Asana (VII), Breathing (V), Mudra (VI), and Yoga Nidra (VIII) play an important role in reducing chronic muscular contraction, facilitating overall ease of movement, and thereby reducing stress.

4. Restoration of Optimal Physiological Functioning - Asana (VII), Yoga Nidra (VIII), and Meditation (IX) are key practices that promote optimal functioning of all body systems.

5. Five Element Balance - Ayurvedic balance is cultivated through Healing Theme Presentations (II), Body Awareness Exercises (III), and Meditations (IX), using visualizations that relate the elements to aspects of nature, including the earth, ocean, sun, sky, and stars.

Healing Principles at the level of Pranamaya kosha - the energetic body

6. Experiential Knowledge of the Breath - The Breathing Exercises (V) and synchronization of breath and movement during Asana (VII) help participants identify thoracic breathing as part of the stress response and reestablish healthy breathing patterns. It gives them a sense of mastery and serves as a bridge to the subtle body.

7. Balance of the Pranavayus - The Breathing (V) and Mudra (VI) segments of class awaken and balance each of the pranavayus with an emphasis on apana vayu for lowering blood pressure.

8. Balance in the Chakras - The Healing Themes (II) and Asana (VII) practices introduce the chakras as seven main breathing areas related to the colors of the rainbow.

9. Integration of Body and Mind through the Breath - Breathing (V) and Asana (VII) combined brings increased awareness to how the mind influences body movement and quality of breath. Continued practice cultivates integration of body-breath-mind, promoting overall wellbeing.

10. Pranic Healing - Slow motion movement is used during Asana (VII) to expand awareness of prana and its healing potential. The presence and voice of the Yoga Therapist during Yoga Nidra (VIII) is also an important factor in awakening the healing energy of prana.

Healing Principles at the level of Manomaya kosha - the psycho-emotional body

11. Sense of Community - Check-in (I), Sharing (IV), and Final Sharing (X), where a single word is shared, support the cultivation of a healing community.

12. Heightened Mood - Sharing (IV), Mudras and Affirmation (VI), Yoga Nidra (VIII), along with Meditation (IX) and Final Sharing (X), are key aspects of the class structure that cultivate a positive, optimistic attitude among participants.

13. Expression of Feelings - Sharing (IV) gives participants an opportunity to connect with their feelings and share with others in a safe context.

14. Increased Self-Confidence - The week-to-week practices of Sharing (IV), Meditation (IX), and Final Sharing (X) serve to cultivate self-confidence and raise self-esteem.

15. Deeper Levels of Relaxation - All aspects of the program are important in this regard, with Yoga Nidra (VIII) and Meditation (IX) being key.

Healing Principles at the level of Vijnanamaya kosha - the wisdom body

16. Importance of Self-Care - Healing Themes (II) introduce the importance of self-care and self-healing. The results of the program prove to each participant that it works.

17. Clearly Defined Healing Goals - Through the program, participants develop a clear and hopeful path for healing. Group Sharing (IV), Mudras and Affirmation (VI), and Yoga Nidra (VIII) are vital steps toward identifying that path.

18. Opening to New Perspectives - Healing Themes (II) and Sharing (IV) are especially important class elements that open participants to new perspectives about themselves, their health condition, their relationships, and the environment in which they live.

19. Redefining Challenges - The practices of Sharing (IV), Meditation (IX), and Final Sharing (X) are especially important in redefining one's relationship with the world and its challenges.

20. Subconscious Learning - Many of the belief patterns that block healing exist at subconscious levels. Through Yoga Nidra (VIII), relaxation and de-programming of beliefs take place at both conscious and subconscious levels.

Healing Principles at the level of Anandamaya kosha - the bliss body

21. Integrating Yogic Values - The Healing Themes (II) and Mudras and Affirmation (VI) are especially important for cultivating and integrating the Yamas and Niyamas as well as other Yogic values.

22. Experience of Innate Positive Qualities - The Asana (VII), Yoga Nidra (VIII), and Meditation (IX) segments are especially important in awakening positive sensations, including self-nourishment, wellbeing, and even bliss within body and mind.

23. Living in the Present Moment - Body Awareness (III), Healing Themes (II), and Yoga Nidra (VIII) are fundamental to a Yoga Therapy program for cultivating greater appreciation of living in the present moment.

24. Integration of all Facets of Being - The overall structure of the ten-step, ten-week program - beginning with the physical body and moving toward the bliss body - cultivates the experience of integration of the whole person.

25. Connection to the Spiritual Self - Over the course of the program, participants experience a direct connection to spirituality. Yoga Nidra (VII) and Meditation (VIII) are particularly important in developing this connection.

· Enlightened Living as the Context for Yoga Therapy



All of the main texts of the Yoga tradition focus on enlightenment as the culmination of the yogic path. Oftentimes, Yoga Therapy is taught as if it were a preliminary step to the spiritual journey that comes later. Our perspective is that each step in the healing process is a reflection and expression of awakening our own enlightened nature, the essence of Yoga. The integration of the healing principles at the level of each kosha is the essence of this journey of awakening and healing.