



The Magic & Mystery of Yoga Therapy

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Welcome Stephanie to this talk tonight. I'd like to acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation whose land we are on tonight and give respect to their elders, past, present, and future. And now I'll hand everything over to Steph. Thank you.

Thank you and thank you all for coming. So, we've got a talk here tonight. I just want to say that it's, I'm not going to give a speech. It's going to be something more like wandering around a subject and the subject is yoga therapy and probably sort of makes sense because I think a lot of people and especially those who come to the centre here know I work in yoga therapy, in the therapy classes as well as teaching the teachers.

And that's because, why would, why should I. That's because I've done, I've spent twenty years living in India and working and studying in the institute there and because of that is there is no way of avoiding the therapy class where everyone gets to be part of the therapy class.

It was only recently I managed to pick up that I worked out, I had a lot of experience of many different things over those twenty years in Poona but it's taken a little bit of sort of standing back to reflect on different things that happened in Poona and one of those is that I (tweaked) that their whole teacher training or education starts in the therapy class. It starts with the teachers coming in and basically just being helpless, standing around, bringing bolsters, bringing blankets. And that's where their learning to be a teacher begins. We've got a completely different criteria in the west where there's a certain limitation as to who can assist in therapy classes. So, it's quite interesting that that's where they consider a teacher should start or begin, is in the therapy class even though at that time and I just got to say when I first I got to Poona myself, 20 odd years ago. Even though we knew nothing, absolutely nothing. I had a background myself in Visual arts and in psychiatric nursing but to go into that therapy class and to stand in that therapy class and to be involved in that whole room and everything that happens in that room was to stand right in the middle of a very awkward



and uncomfortable experience of not knowing. And it took years of basically join dots together to begin to realise what it is that goes on and what happens.

So, a little bit and what I'm going to talk about in terms of yoga therapy is what I see as the reason why we get involved in yoga therapy, why we might want to, what draws us towards that and I'm going to try and illuminate a contrast with how I see it being viewed and approached in the west. And this is purely because I happen to have that rather perverse kind of experience of sitting in another place to see yoga therapy. I'm now in the west and seeing the way things are approached and thought about and it is quite alien to me, I've got to say. It's quite different to what I had done over the last 20 years.

Even within the same context of the same yoga system, the whole approach is quite different. So, this is a lot of what the talk is about. It's the contrast and how I see that there are some things that perhaps come from my own learning that if we can spot what the essential thing is, we could begin to sort of pick that thing and use it and by this become far more effective and creative in the whole yoga therapy process.

So, I'm going to begin yoga and yoga therapy for the person who is having therapy is a doorway to liberation. Bang. Yeah. It's a huge statement to make, a doorway to liberation. Basically, for and this is for the person who might be guiding and teaching as well as for the person who may come and position themselves in the therapy class as a patient. I don't really like that term, but they come as what we would recognize as a patient and they come, and it is a doorway and mostly unknown to them, it is a doorway that leads them towards liberation. This is the effect that yoga has for us, especially here in western society. And that is that without entering a form of religion, it is often for so many people, the first step towards a pathway of liberation, or a spiritual pathway. For many people it is the opening window to that.

One of the things that there is about liberation, there is a term, I'm not going to use too many Sanskrit terms but one term that has a sort of a personal pertinence for me and that is the word upaya kaushalam. Now, the word kaushalam, if anyone has studied of yoga, you come across it in the Bhagwad Gita and they talk about karmasu kaushalam,



auspicious action, skilfulness in action. Upaya kaushalam means skilfulness in liberative technique. As a yoga therapist, this is what you are handling. Whether it is that you are handling the distress and liberating them from distress or releasing them from pain, releasing them from the various discomforts that perhaps they have, it is a form of releasing them from those obstructions, from those things that grip them. So, it is a form of upaya kaushalam.

Now for me personally, it was this aspect that had me fascinated. It was the catching sight because until I went to Poona, I wasn't necessarily interested in yoga therapy. Yeah. But it was catching sight of Geeta and Guruji and their skilfulness and I became fascinated by this skilfulness. I wanted to be that skilful. It became like a thirst. I couldn't drop it. All I wanted to do after my first visit to Poona was to get back to Pune because of that quality of skill that they held. They seemed to have a personal level of skill and understanding of humanity, a form of it that spoke directly to me.

I'm not saying that other people in the west don't have their way of understanding humanity. And I'm not saying there aren't disciplines in the west that is full of that purpose of understanding humanity and helping humanity with their illness. It was the way that the Iyengar's managed people that I found fascinating, and I felt very drawn towards that. So, this fascination with skilfulness is a thing that I find many teachers in the west, like me, get very involved in. They want to know more. And they here in the west, we inevitably get highly attracted towards perhaps knowing more about anatomy or more about physiology because our understanding of yoga therapy is that it seems, it looks like, feels like something very close to physiotherapy. Something very close to a form of medicine. What happens for us often and what has happened a lot, here in the west to the whole area of yoga therapy is it has started to take that colouration of what I would call, the medical model. Yeah.

And there is almost like a pull of people to want to learn more anatomy or to learn more setups. I see on the internet, there are many, many pictures of people finding some further adaptation of what they can do with a Dwipada Viparita Dandasana bench. And it's like, it's really nothing. Often people show or get involved in these different setups and they get fascinated, and they think that yoga therapy is these things.



That they think that yoga therapy is these setups or these adjustments that are done on people or these adaptations that are done to people. There is even sometimes a call for does anyone know a good sequence for --- and they will name a particular problem or disease.



And I've got to tell you a little bit about a thing that happened in the past. And that is in Poona, somebody from, I think it was the States. Somebody compiled all the letters that B.K.S. Iyengar had once written to all the teachers or as many teachers throughout the States and he had written to them advice for their student. They had written to him, and he had replied. And in that reply was a letter form and because one is writing a letter form, it tends to be line by line by line. So you get this sequence almost like a prescription and what happened was the association or members of that country were doing the Iyengar's, they felt a good deed by compiling them together so that these sequences could be offered to the Iyengar's as a manual of yoga therapy. And upon receiving this, Mr. Iyengar, picked it up and said rubbish, you know, rubbish. They were all his letters. So, his reply or his response to having his letters, his sequences given back to him, offered to him, gathered up, gathered up from his students and brought all the way across the ocean and given to him in a spiral bound form as a kind of a compilation of yoga therapy was all rubbish you know. He was irritated with it. "Don't you see anything? Don't you understand anything?" In other words, he expected, he did not expect his teachers



who many of them had already been studying with him for over 20 years. This was when I was only there for 4 or 5 years, I guess at that stage. They'd already been studying with him for quite several years and his response to that was rubbish. I think that spiral bound book kind of lay like hanging around, behind Pandu's desk or dusty shelf for several years. It didn't get picked up again.

So, we got this idea of sequences. Yes, sequences are important if you know and you understand what is in them. If you are able to study what is in them and sometimes more importantly what is not in them. You can get a better idea about what is being applied to a person if you see what's not there. It gives you a better clue about what to be done. The thing is that in Poona when I first turned up and at that stage there were at least 2 therapy classes and later expanded to at least 3, there were no slips of paper in the room. Geeta and Guruji at that stage, this was after Prashant had injured his arm, though I believe that he also used to work in the therapy classes. They knew all the patients' work to be done, they had it recorded in their experience, in their mind, they knew what was to be done. And I tell you often, for several weeks in a row, somebody's work to be done would be the same. In other words, twenty thirty people in the room and the Iyengar's could remember all of them. And everything that needed to happen to them. There were no slips of paper.

They guided us, the assistants, telling us what had to be done, what was the next pose then leave us to kind of sort that out, then they would come along and fix it and then they would go away. And then in the right time, obviously keeping an eye on the time, they would come back and tell them what the next pose was to be done. There were no slips of paper when I was there first.

The slips of paper came along when there was more interest on behalf of the assistants and more of the local assistants, or local teachers, the people, the Indian people who lived locally and became more interested in yoga and yoga therapy and started to become, started to grow their numbers, their interest increased. Otherwise. they catered to the population of very willing, keen westerners who knew nothing. But as the interest grew, it was necessary for the Iyengar's to write down the programme of the students so that they could be left at least with some of the less experienced assistants to get on with it. That's why it started. They were not there when I first started.



So, we have this thing that has sort of developed within a system called sequences and it's a list that goes one way after another. Having said that, I don't want to rubbish sequences because one of the things that I have, did also become aware of was that Mr. Iyengar who was very skilled at seeing the nature of a problem and knowing almost immediately what was required for the nature of that problem, would often the next week would track back, and he would start through with the student, the first four or five poses would be the same. Often it would be only towards the end of the session that he would change one thing. So, one, Mr. Iyengar's phenomenal memory but two it's not that, it's not that without that sequence that this kind of like anything can be done. So, I'm not saying that anything can be done at any day. It's very clear what the programme was, and the Iyengar's process was as much to do with allowing that student to become acclimatized to the process not just to have a dose of medicine but the student just like any absolute beginner must be, their body, their mind. their intelligence must be able to accept the poses, to begin with. It is only later after several weeks that you look back on the student and you realize that Mr. Iyengar is now really targeting the point, the problem of that student. So, the whole process of allowing the student to become accustomed to the pose, to be able to accept and absorb the pose, to not just inject the pose into them. But, let them learn and inhabit that pose.

Another big statement. Mr. Iyengar's learning and teaching is entirely heuristic. It's a word that I must have come across when somebody was writing about Mr. Iyengar, they made a comment about his medical knowledge being heuristic and the way that they wrote it made me, gave me the impression that it was a bit sketchy perhaps or a bit hit and miss. And to some degree this is the connotation of heuristic, and I don't know if anyone else here has come across such an odd word as heuristic, but I'll just give you a few lines that I found in google as to the definition of heuristic. So, heuristic is derived from a Greek word that means to discover. It enables a person to discover or learn something for themselves. It is a hands on or interactive approach to learning. This is heuristic. In other words, it is not by investigation and dissection and analysis. OK. So, any approach or problem solving or self-discovery that employs a practical method, not necessarily optimal or perfect or even rational but instead sufficient to attain that goal is heuristic.



As a form of teaching, Mr. Iyengar was also heuristic and is very clear, that this is the method by which he himself had learned, not only from his own guru, T. Krishnamacharya but also from himself. Because he only had himself once he left Mysore. He was his own teacher but as a method of teaching, it is heuristic is a way by which one allows a student to learn by discovering things themselves and learning from their own experiences rather than telling them things. My experience in the therapy class has come up entirely through that heuristic process. I literally stood holding on to a blanket not even being sure did they want it under their head or somewhere else because we weren't told. One was assessed as a student, here you go through exams and assessments. One was assessed according to whether you had the sensibility to know where the blanket went. Had you developed that through your own practice? Could you see the student and know where the need was.

Now this took me 20 years and we are rather fond of a much faster process. We tend to tend to want to get up and qualify in 5-6 years.

I'll talk a little bit further on about what might be missing and what might be useful out of the way that we do it. Yeah. So, being heuristic wasn't entirely the only influence of BKS Iyengar in terms of yoga therapy. His guru did yoga therapy. His guru was an Ayurveda practitioner and had a lot of skill and a lot of knowledge of this. Not only that but Mr. Iyengar also, not only through Ayurveda, through his own guru as well as yoga therapy because Mr. Krishnamacharya was working with the staff of the Mysore palace, working with the royal family as well as working with the staff.

This is prior to the loss of the maharajas. But he also was as a young man invited by the Surgeon General of India to travel with him, Mr. V V Gokhale, to travel with him to present asanas whilst Mr. V V Gokhale presented in medical terms what was happening in these asanas. Mr. Iyengar is an incredibly quick study. He always had a very smart things to say. He once said, I am a learner, I am very much a learner, but I am not a beginner. He always had a quick wit.

He did this travelling with Mr. Gokhale for some time and he would have at least I don't know how much he learned in terms of the medical



approach or the medical model. But he certainly would have fathomed the idea that there would be a relationship, a relationship to be had, there was an interaction to be had between yoga and medicine.



And Mr. Iyengar, his whole life was very interested that there be this conversation between the two. What has happened, Mr. Iyengar has wanted to converse with modern medicine for years. About yoga, about the benefits of yoga but in trying to speak, in trying to get heard, it is inevitable that he ends up needing to speak the language that modern medicine or medicine even then understood. He had to frame it in medical terminology at times. He obviously knew a lot.

He was well read. He does know, he did know the names of all those muscles and ligaments and the nerves. Which one came from where. He did know all those things. He studied them. He had anatomy books in his library. Any book that came into his library, he read it. So, he did know a lot of medical terminology and reference. But he was always keen somehow rather that there be a dialogue between the two, but it was always frustrating that it had to be on the terms of the medical model. They didn't have the ability to perhaps see it in yoga terms. However, this was very much an influence of Mr. Iyengar. So, we had this situation where the medical model is very much influenced and infiltrating into our system of yoga therapy. It's not such a



bad thing. There are some places, I can remember, whoa, this is now 25-27 years ago. My first ever teaching assignment was at a health promotions centre attached to a Marrickville hospital. Now, I don't know if Marrickville Hospital is still open. No, it isn't. They used to have this health promotion centre. It was a lot to do with running programs like giving up smoking, STD awareness, various health things which they developed programmes to reach the public with. And they offered in their rooms, yoga classes. Yeah. They put on these yoga classes and that was my very first experience at being a teacher, was standing up in the middle of a room going – because I had never done any formal course of teacher training. It was just a, my teacher gave me a phone number and said, I think you should teach, ring these people up.

So, that's how I started. So, I went off and started to learn to teach by having to surmount the problem of trying to teach those people. This is very much like what happened for Mr. Iyengar when he arrived up in Pune. He taught himself yoga therapy by dealing with those people who came to him. He just had to surmount that problem. He just had to find a way I think I would have said it already. He was entirely heuristic.

So, we've got this situation now where what has really infiltrated a lot into yoga therapy is the medical model and a little bit a desire to get something that sounds like that. There's a lot of research that goes on. I know recently someone was asking about if I knew of any recent research that gave evidence of the efficacy of Iyengar yoga for various conditions. So, I referred them to somebody who has a huge compilation of pdf files but this is a little bit of the problem we face and that is the necessity for there to be evidence for a lot of medicine is evidence based and the process of yoga is process based. It's not evidence based. You can, you can arrive at some evidence from the process of yoga but that's not actually a picture of yoga or yoga therapy.

It's just the bits you can look at that were evidenced, however how the person would describe their own experience and how they would describe the change that it has brought to them can't be evidenced in a pdf file and it is this aspect which is really the key to the whole of yoga, let alone of yoga therapy. Is whether in fact there is an actual transformation whether is a change that comes because this is what happens for everybody not just for yoga therapy students but generally for yoga students. They get the experience through the practice of yoga of finding that their life has changed, that essential aspects of even their



emotional life, their relationships with people, the way that they handle stress all starts to undergo change. But one of the problems of research into yoga therapy is that they're looking into things like heart rate variability, and they want to see that mapped out on a graph.

So, it's going to sometime before the two languages can cross. Yeah. Now I don't want to kind of rubbish medical sciences. Right now, I'm wearing a boot and some of you might have seen me walking around with crutches. I am right now; I am a subject of medical sciences as I'm dealing with a very ancient injury that must get fixed up and I am going to require the skill of the medical fraternity to do that. I've worked with it for 30 years through yoga and I've got a situation with a joint so arthritic that they're collapsing. So, we're going to do something about that.

I've already given you a couple of words. One of them is kaushalam, yeah, skilfulness. And that skilfulness is a highly attractive thing. We all have some idea of somebody being highly skilled, a virtuoso violin player, such as Yehudi Menuhin.

Mr. Iyengar in some of these advanced poses, the quality when watching him practice, the virtuosity. The virtuosity many people find when they witness that has a quality that is very attractive and like I said, this is, this was my first fascination and then catching hold of how Mr. Iyengar worked.

Mr. Iyengar in many ways is quite well known for his, especially when he was presenting on stage or teaching in a large public situation, his personality occupied the entire room, every single space of it. He occupied that room, he held people in that room. Often, when I was in the position of assisting one of his patients, one of the patients he was working with, I became aware when working near him that often what he would do is he would hum to himself. He wasn't projecting a big persona, he was, he was humming to himself, he would have some tune going on inside and he was in touch with that as he worked with the patients. He was in touch with who knows what tune it was, I remember once when he had cataract surgery and he was walking around with dark glasses on and he could only practice a few poses. You know the day after the cataract surgery and he came up with a music player and it was Carnatic religious Carnatic music, and it was oh Lordy me it was blasted, full volume in the practice room.



It is a different style of music to what we're used to. We're used to harmonies and rhythms. Religious Carnatic music, whoa. Okay but he was very much obviously into music, he loved music. He loved the religious chants and mantras. He was sometimes chanting under his breath when he was practicing. Very quietly. It wasn't anything to do with the great personality that we get to hear of. One of the things I witnessed, I encountered was that when working near him, he hummed. He hummed to himself, quietly It wasn't loud.

He worked with an inner sensibility. That's where that tune, whatever that was came from. He would sort of sing along to something he was in touch with inside of himself as he was working with the student.



He wasn't technically reading the list; he wasn't talking so much about shifting this limb here or adjusting that limb there. He worked often silently, without words, and he would hum until he had to say something like 'Get a plank'. And always whenever he gave an instruction like that, when he was working as a therapist, it was not even get a plank. He would say plank. That was it. You would have to go, you would have to know what he, what kind of plank he probably wanted now and if you got, if you were working with him, it was expected that you would have that sensibility as to which plank because there is a variety of planks that



one can choose from. So, he had this inner quality that he would work with the whole time.

I'm going to give you this other word that is, there is a large aspect of working in yoga therapy that is liminal, not subliminal. I'm not talking about hearing an inner voice coming up from the consciousness but liminal and the word liminal means, I'll read it out. The word liminal means relating to a transitional stage of process or even starting a process of or occupying a position at or on both sides of a boundary or a threshold. Yeah. So, liminal is this quality where we are working the whole time with boundaries or working with thresholds. And in delivering or handing an asana or an adaptation of an asana to a student, we are taking them, hopefully across that threshold. Across that threshold where they stand, where they get the experience in the accumulation of the experience of their wellness. They start to feel a change. They start to feel perhaps, an airway is freshened and more open.

These changes and transformations are happening the whole time in yoga and are vital when it comes to yoga therapy. I can remember recognizing for myself once when coming down from Sirsasana that I, and this was an afternoon practice where we held these poses for longer than in the general class and that is, I noticed that I regularly came out of that pose and would walk towards the window and just stood and looked out the window.

It took me years; it took me years to recognize that after Sirsasana that I enjoyed the lucidity of my own sight and that gave me a huge insight as to what might be happening not only in my eyes. We do give cautions to some conditions but that Sirsasana would transform my eyes, would transform my ears and yet I got this sense of lucidity and yet at the same time I was completely still.

So, part of being a yoga teacher, part of being a yoga therapist is to deliver these changes to the student. Now obviously as you all know, a person will come to the therapy class and perhaps have when they come to the therapy class, A particular problem. Maybe it is somebody who suffers from diabetes or maybe it is somebody who has perhaps tore a ligament in their knee or maybe they even have a motor neuron disorder. Or a bad back. Necks and knees and shoulders. They often will



fill up a therapy class. Yeah. But it's almost as though it, the person needs to have their yoga delivered through to them in a way that they can accept at that time.

In other words, somebody with a condition of asthma, asthma needs to have the poses given to them in a way or chosen poses given to them that are more conducive for their condition. Yeah. More conducive for their condition so that they will first feel the alleviation of the discomfort of that, the feeling of satisfaction from that alleviation which opens to them the ability for them to experience in themselves in a changed state.

So, if you can do something like open the airway for somebody who is gasping because the airways are closing, because they're having a allergic reaction and it's not lying on the bolster and opening their chest by the way. If you know, if you have studied how your own airways open. If you lie back on a bolster and open chest, your intercostals can't move, you can't breathe easily, freely. Yeah.

So, giving them that experience of that freedom is to take them through that threshold so that they experience their own being. In other words, they experience the exertion and effort of their breathing to be much freer. Now, how somebody, It's not just a technical thing all that I breathe easier now, the emotional change that will come with that alleviation of that state is no small thing. Somebody who is suffering from perhaps who's turned up and is suffering from a migraine headache, somebody who perhaps is experiencing pain in the knees whenever they try and sit with their legs folded. When they get the confidence of seeing that there's a way of sitting with your legs folded, that if you follow the process, if you are guided in the right way, the student can get that experience and it gives them. I know it from myself.

When I solve a problem, when I'm having a problem and it might be a knee or a hip and I solve it, I get the right approach, the joy. Yeah. The joy, the possibilities there are once I am no longer gripped in pain. And this is what people are going to be experiencing.

And this is the real stuff of yoga therapy. Yoga therapy is not so much about becoming an elite physiotherapist. Physiotherapists are very well and very thoroughly trained. This I have no doubt, I have encountered



some of them when I came out of surgery for my right foot, I was worked on with a physiotherapist. It was very interesting, the techniques and the methods that they knew.

As a yoga therapist, I wouldn't be trying to be somehow, rather a physiotherapist or a psychologist. I have experienced a transformation that happens through the practice of asana and pranayama through dealing with my own physical problems to know that that feeling that that change that comes over when you feel the exchange that movement from suffering or from pain into relief. And the confidence, the possibilities that are open to you once you get there, that's a very real experience that people will have confidence in. You can't in any way talk them through that.



So again, these are the disciplines. I don't mean at all to put them down but there is a unique facility that is available through yoga therapy that is often missed, and it is often missed because we mistake the beauty of yoga therapy and we try and convert it into something like the medical model. As yoga therapists, we are meant to be doing the same as any yoga teacher. We are introducing them to their own body, their breath, their mind, their feeling. We're introducing them to the taste of themselves. We're introducing them to a change in their inner form, the sense of themselves that exists inside, we're introducing them to that.



We're getting rid of the obscuration or the obstacles to them being able to practice, to learn that. And the major obstacle that many people must overcome is disease, it's the first one. It's the major one, it gets in the way of people having that experience which is essentially on the threshold of their outer self and their inner self. When they feel that change of that sense of wellbeing inside, then they have experienced a change in the form of the self. And that is the unique attribute of yoga and as yoga therapists, that is the thing that we are becoming more and more skilful at. OK. I think this is just about all I want to say about this time. I could go on and on for another hour, but I won't.

I hope you followed what I was trying to get across as a message. OK.

Stephanie Quirk



** Photographic images used in the body of this document are of George Dovas from the Iyengar Yoga Centre of Hong Kong.*