

30

YEARS

OF

SOCIAL

CHANGE

Edited by Stephen Jones

*Foreword by Jessica Kingsley*

# Yoga Therapy: A Pleasant Surprise

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Jessica Kingsley Publishers (JKP) began 30 years ago. Had a futurist then predicted that yoga would be leading a shift in health behavior around the world in 2017, they would have been laughed out of the room. Yoga, did you say “yogurt”? Remember that old response?

Well yoga, and yoga therapy in particular, is making a difference in health behavior today in what creativity researcher Jerome Bruner coined as an “effective surprise”<sup>1</sup> out of the complex human behavior. That is, initially the idea sounds surprising, but then fairly rapidly transitions to “Well of course!” in its acceptance level in society. That is exactly where we find ourselves today. Allow me to explain how we got here and why JKP has been an important participant in fostering the evolution of the future of yoga therapy.

My perspective is based on studying yoga therapy for 20 years, watching and participating in the research on it emerge, and having led the International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT; [www.iayt.org](http://www.iayt.org)). Yoga initially received some exposure in Europe and the States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, followed by a larger introduction as a part of the social changes in the 1960s, but then fell into dormancy, or what may better be termed a ‘gestation’ until the early 1990s. Quietly during that period schools in India and teachers in the West were developing in ways that would come to fill a need in modern society. The entry point for the average student was via a physical practice as a new form of exercise, but the core of teachers and leaders appreciated there was something much more that was available through a yoga

practice than just a physical fitness routine. This core group, and some fair number of their students, had experienced not just physical benefits, but the transformative psycho-spiritual benefits of yoga as well. These benefits were appreciated as being therapeutic and in 1989 a small group of northern Californian teachers founded IAYT; around the world smaller groups were beginning to organize around the shared idea about the therapeutic benefits of yoga. This delineation of yoga therapy as distinct from yoga is a late 20<sup>th</sup> century development. The reasons are many and complex, beyond the scope of this chapter. Generally speaking, yoga therapy includes a therapeutic relationship between the therapist and the student. This includes significantly more training beyond yoga, to include therapeutic ethics, interacting with the healthcare team of the student, an understanding of the related medical challenges, and defined limits of practice that aren't present in a standard yoga teaching relationship.

Fast-forward to today and you can probably buy a book or DVD on yoga to address most any ailment, from bunions to existential dread. Yoga is a mushrooming industry both as a service and as a marketplace for material goods. Executives do breathing exercises to start board meetings and yoga pants apparently make people go shopping and travel as every store and airplane is full of people wearing yoga gear. With this cultural immersion and acceptance, many of the purveyors of yoga have co-opted yoga into a commodity to be sold. In therapeutic application yoga is being taught as another mechanistic modality prescription: Do these 3 asana, a side of pranayama (breathing exercises) thrice daily and call me next week. And run if someone at a party declares to you they have achieved enlightenment in their yoga practice! [Hint: sure sign they haven't reached enlightenment if they have to declare it, and that includes your beloved teacher if they did so. True adepts don't need to do so.]

So what's happened to that "something much more" that the leaders had identified early on? It turns out that yoga practitioners are changing their health behaviors and consuming fewer sick-care services. They are also seeking services from unconventional sources, including yoga studios, "name-the-disease" support centers (i.e. Arthritis Support Group, The Lung Association, Cancer Support, etc.), halfway and safe houses, school gyms, homeless shelters, military bases, courthouses, craft brew pubs, and prison recreational centers. Why? This shift in venues is happening because practitioners are changing their lives and fostering new lifestyle habits.

And how do consumers and health professionals sort fact from fantasy from these observed behavioural changes in the yoga community listed above in this age of misinformation and hyper-marketing? One way is by contributing to the knowledge base of science, such as the International Association of Yoga Therapists' PubMed indexed research journal, the International Journal of Yoga Therapy. Finding are also being published by related research to include the work of Professor of Psychology and Psychiatry Richard Davidson, Founder and Chair of the Center for Healthy Minds where rigorous neuroscience has demonstrated four constituents for wellbeing in human contemplative practices, primarily meditation, a subset of yoga. <sup>2</sup> which would have been considered New Age science fiction 20 years ago. These markers are 1) that yoga-related practices create epigenetic changes (how your genes function); 2) that mind-body bi-directionality is real (mind changes body and body changes mind) in an expanding web of relationship between mind, body, microbiome and environment. Historically the mind was seen single operator of the machine-like body with the body not controlling the mind. The idea of the microbiome (the 90% of your cells that don't have your DNA) influencing both was pure heresy. Now all 3 are understood to have shared roles in wellbeing; 3) that neuroplastic change in the human nervous system is

possible to an increasingly greater level through contemplative and rehabilitation practices contrary to the historic perspective that there was no capacity for change in an adult human nervous system (i.e., what you had can't and won't change.); and, finally, 4) that the various contemplative practices increase the demonstrated human capacity and preference for pro-social behavior.

Are the big publishing houses first out to share this information? Hardly. However, browse the catalogues of Jessica Kingsley Publishers and its sister imprint Singing Dragon and you will find lists of publications that responsibly cover yoga as a health change agent. My colleague Rachel Krentzman, PT's *Scoliosis, Yoga Therapy and The Art of Letting Go* is about far more than straightening spines in the entangled Middle East<sup>3</sup>. She does offer solid instruction for stabilizing posture, but the real depth of her yoga therapy is “letting go” of habits of mind to nurture healthier relationships with our self and others, to include the deep twists of societal relationships such as those in her current home in Israel. The mind extends far beyond our skin and crooked spines, to include the interpersonal relationships that define our lives<sup>4</sup>. Likewise, my forthcoming book *Teaching from the Wisdom of Pain: Yoga Therapy as a Creative Response* addresses moving in the world with persistent pain, but in creative ways built on the emerging science noted above, as well as that of transformative learning theory and creativity research. I have watched the “miracles” of transformed lives by yoga therapy with patients suffering the most chronic, complex pain challenges, and more recently as veterans teach yoga to other veterans, healing both the teacher and the students. Yoga just keeps surprising!

This is how I think Jessica Kingsley Publishers fulfils its tagline of “Books That Make a Difference”. In this age of commodification and the search for quick profits, responsible publishing on health issues requires a publisher that:

- Takes risks with progressive authors because the “edge” is where change happens;
- Understands that to “make a difference”, they provide a voice to authors for audiences that often get overlooked;
- Invests in upfront vetting for efficacy and impact of potential authors; *and*
- sustains a high level of integrity instead of chasing the next shiny object.

In standing by integrity and pursuing flexibility over the past 30 years, I congratulate JKP on demonstrating clarity and steadiness of heart–mind, while moving with the world. A good yoga practitioner. [ Which in closing makes one wonder: what pleasant surprises are in store with yoga therapy and JKP in the next 30 years?

Stay tuned, none of us can even imagine! May we all work together for Heyam Dukham  
Anagatam:

*“Future Suffering Can Be Avoided”*

*Yoga Sutra II.16*

## References

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