



YOGA THERAPY TOOLS: YIN YOGA & THAI-SHIATSU BODYWORK by Ken Nelson

Happiness is not what we get—it's who we are —

Swami Satchitananda

Discovering Yin Yoga was a homecoming. It led me back to the innocence of movement, the primacy of breath, the delight of sensation, and the permission to explore body, mind and spirit. In this article, I would like to focus on the way Yin Yoga intersects with Thai and Shiatsu massage to complement the practice of yoga therapy.

Yin Yoga is modern energy medicine that harkens back to the roots of yoga. It engages Traditional Chinese Medicine's meridian theory in a full-circle dialog of Indo-Chinese healing traditions. Professionally, Yin fits into my yoga therapy tool box, along with my Kripalu yoga and massage heritage, and my Shiatsu and Thai massage traditions.

Yin-Yang and the Theory of Exercise

Use it or lose it. Stress it and rest it. In all areas of life, health means a balance of effort and grace, of will and surrender. Physically, yang-style yoga targets yang tissues—muscles. Muscles are elastic and love to be moved rhythmically and repetitively. Muscular (yang) styles of yoga emphasize movement, with brief holding poses, that produce internal heat and the lengthening and contracting of our muscles to build strength and endurance. We tighten our muscles to protect our joints.

But to exercise our joints, we must relax our muscles. Yin Yoga complements the yang-style by primarily targeting the denser, more plastic, connective tissues (fascia, ligaments, bones and joints) of the hips, thighs, pelvis and lower spine (and, to a lesser degree, the neck and shoulders), normally not exercised in an active asana practice. If we don't use our full range of motion in the joints, we gradually lose mobility due to fixation and adhesion.

Fascia: the Fabric of Life

Yin Yoga restores range of motion in synovial and cartilaginous joints. Postures are held from one to twenty minutes, aimed at relieving pain and chronic tension by rehabilitating connective tissue and countering contracture, the shortening and stiffening effects of aging, injuries and neglect.

Fascia is the fabric of life, the body's structural and energetic support system, binding and protecting all the other tissues in the body and offering a medium of conductivity. Long-held floor postures enhance the meridian and organ systems by targeting attention along the direction of stress in the fascia to the various psycho-spiritual-emotional-energetic pathways. Fascia is a matrix of matter and energy, a living crystalline web of Prana/Qi, through which the bio-electric signals weave their vital life force.

Deepening Self-Awareness: the Key to Transformation

The point of yoga is to enter a meditative state in which we realize our essential nature. When the mind is still, meditation arises. But, our cultural norm today is to be outwardly distracted, and so

we are often unaware of our mechanical actions. In trying to achieve wellness, we often repeat the same conditioned habits of mind and body that led us into dis-ease in the first place through external focus.

As Gary Kraftsow explains, the twin processes of physiological and sociological conditioning continue to act upon us by reinforcing patterns over time. The consequence of unconscious conditioning leads to imbalance through the accumulation of unhealthy stress. Introducing new patterns of thought and behavior helps to replace the old ones and to regain control of the direction of change in our lives.

Not surprisingly, people coming to yoga through fascination with the physical postures may end up disappointed. Daily repetition of the superficial aspects of the practice—the preconceived details of positioning—are simply conditioning the mind toward external standards of perfection.

Function and Form: Introducing "Healthy Tension"

External alignment is a modern aspect of yoga. The original postures were yin-like and internal in nature. The ancient Vedas do not describe asana at all, while the Yoga Sutra (around 200 C.E.) speaks only of sitting with comfort and stability. Around 1350 C.E., the Hatha Yoga Pradipika mentions 16 postures. Later texts, the Gheranda Samhita (32) and the Shiva Samhita (84), describe more postures, more yang-like, standing, athletic poses. In the last two hundred years, especially during in the 19th century, when British gymnastics and wrestling were cross-fertilizing asana practice, this practice has expanded.

Like Kripalu Yoga, Yin Yoga emphasizes the functional definition of the posture, rather than the aesthetics of form. To sit in meditation requires a strong and open body. For those who are in ill health or weak, a more active, yang-style practice will build strength. A yin-style practice opens the hips and lower back, allowing a relaxed and easy alertness in the posture. Both yang and yin practices can create the kind of healthy relationship to stress that will challenge the various tissues of the body.

Developing a Personal Practice

In developing a personal practice, each posture is worked out based on the individual's actual condition. In massage as in yoga, a one-size-fits-all approach can't stand up to current research. For example, Paul Grilley (www.paulgrilley.com) illustrates how each individual's bones are unique in proportion and orientation and can consequently limit one's ability to do certain movements and postures. Hiroshi Motoyama's research sheds light into unifying Chakras and Meridians into one fluid energy-conducting system.

Thai-Shiatsu Intersects with Yin

Yoga therapists apply both a view and a practice, from treating common aches and pains to working with chronic conditions, emotional health and spiritual understanding. Traditionally, there are at least three approaches to Thai massage: Ayurveda, Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and Yoga Therapy. While studying in Thailand, I interviewed the directors of the only two government-sponsored Thai massage schools. About the origins of Thai, they said, "Thai massage is an Indo-Chinese and local Thailand healing art,"

Yin Yoga lends support for TCM as an ally in the yoga therapy field. James Oschman's research in massage and yoga reveals how toxins are released in the body by loosening the bonds that trap

particles in tissue fibers. In fact, surveys of the most popular health modalities, according to their effectiveness, list massage, yoga and acupuncture in the top three places.

Yoga Therapy: A Guide on the Side

Yoga therapists can help clients with Shiatsu and Thai methods: passive stretching, acupressure, twisting, range-of-motion joint mobilization, energy balancing, breathing techniques, meditation, and gentle rocking. When putting a client through a Thai-Shiatsu session, I am using assisted-Yin-Yoga postures that become the basis of the client's personal yoga practice. I point out which stretches will support their physical structure, as well as recommend postures, in terms of the five Taoist transforming energies and the 14 meridians, that would support their unique psycho-emotional conditions.

Yin Yoga is often the take-home piece of a therapy session, helping people "come home to" freedom of movement in their bodies. Joint mobility and flexibility offer support for healing and wholeness. People often feel lighter in spirit when they enjoy the ordinary magic of stretching.

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Ken is a gifted teacher whose course created genuine community, laughter, satisfaction of learning, pleasure of receiving massage and the unexpected fulfillment of giving bodywork. - Jane S., teacher, Boston, MA