

Yoga Therapy: On the Path to Professionalism

In this section, we have two companion articles. In the first, Jnani Chapman offers wisdom on what we need to pay attention to as we integrate Yoga therapy into mainstream healthcare. Accompanying it is a piece by Rachel Ramen, chosen by Jnani, which was originally published in 1995 and is reprinted here because of its thoughtful meditation on the distinction between helping, fixing, and service.

What does it mean to be a professional? The term *professional* does imply that a living is being earned and that it is earned in a field that required specialized education and training. Because of that training, it is assumed the professional has a higher degree of competence than someone who did not work to develop that particular expertise. But a professional is much more than an expert. Professionals adopt codes of conduct and behavior as guiding principles in their interactions within the domain of their employment contracts and the scope of practice of their profession. Any extreme of variance from standards and scopes of practice can mean censure or loss of professional licensure (being defrocked, disbarred, and so on).

We, as a *sangha* of Yogis committed to using Yoga as a therapeutic modality, are learning by trial and error in developing the profession of Yoga therapy. Yes, there is a lineage handed down over thousands of years of experience along with precepts and principles that are vast, extensive, and sometimes distinctly contradictory (but that is another story). Yet, every professional discipline grows itself by trial and error; it is how we as a species learn. Swami Satchidananda used to say, "Just don't make the same mistakes over and over again." Often, when speaking about professional development, I say that even a physician calls what she does her "practice." When people come to seek our professional advice or our personal opinions, they are our "guinea pigs." We grow and learn through each interaction. As professionals, this requires us to uphold particular standards in our interactions, and those standards must enable clients to maintain their integrity and wholeness.

The curriculum I developed for training experienced Yoga teachers to work safely with clients who have cancer and chronic illness (YCat Yoga therapy) is based in the nursing process because I am a registered nurse (although I was a Yoga teacher for seventeen years before I attended nursing school). It could equally have been based in another professional discipline such as physical therapy, allopathic medicine, or perhaps even pastoral care. When we invite Yoga into medicine to support physical and mental health while people are dealing with challenges to their continued survival, we must elevate our discipline to the same standards used in other professions. Yoga therapy as a profession is still in the womb and a lot of us are on call as midwives to its birthing process. Our efforts and our failures are guiding us and growing us in this endeavor as Yoga continues to be introduced into more hospitals, nursing homes, and medical clinics nationally and internationally. Yoga as a discipline was handed down for centuries from parent to child and teacher to student with infinite variations accepted and embraced in the same way that its sister/parent Hinduism also embraced and incorporated new thoughts and ideas. To develop a professional voice, the Yoga therapist has to stand in the power of those centuries and millennia, claiming that inheritance and passing it through him or her. Simultaneously, that therapist has to stand in the mores of current professional standards for conduct and behavior.

Here are some of my thoughts about what constitutes professional behavior in a Yoga teacher.

At the outset of meeting a new or potential client the therapist has to establish a *therapeutic relationship*. All therapeutic relationships have beginnings, middles, and ends. The beginning happens when the client accepts and trusts the practitioner: that trust is the ground of being of the relationship; that trust enables the relationship to be



accomplished. Before that trust is built and evidenced, the "work" can't happen. The middle of the therapeutic relationship is when client and therapist are engaged in the actual work—things are moving, shifting, and, hopefully, improving. The end of a therapeutic relationship is when closure happens between the therapist and the client. It can come because the work is complete; it can come because someone is relocating; it can come because the client is no longer able to drive or because the client is dying. I use an expression from the Freemasons, who may have originated in the carpentry guilds of old, that perhaps is referring to the tools of their trade: "Straight, square, great!" We must be straightforward, up front, and upright in our interactions. Being square with someone means you are equal—no one owes anyone anything, things are even handed. Such actions and behaviors lead to greatness.

Therapeutic relationships have other guidelines in my book: the therapist has to be present and be a presence for the client. This means being focused on the client's needs, actively and attentively listening, assessing, discerning, and supporting clients in realizing their goals. Please read the accompanying article from Rachel Remen, MD, author of *Kitchen Table Wisdom* and *My Grandfather's Blessing*, originally reprinted with permission in IAYT's Summer 1998 IAY newsletter. Dr. Remen eloquently distinguishes between helping, fixing, and serving—the actions and their consequences to us and to our clients. There are many other essentials in developing and maintaining a therapeutic relationship on the path to professionalism. For example, a whole article could be dedicated to discussing the ramifications of confidentiality and the protection of private health information. But meanwhile, may whatever expertise we have accumulated through trial and error or wisdom be used in service of healing while developing Yoga therapy as a respected profession. **YTT**



Jnani Chapman, RN, CYT, founded and directs YCat Yoga Therapy to train Yoga and other health professionals in adaptive Yoga in cancer and chronic illness. She was a founding clinical specialist at UCSF Cancer Center and Osher Center for Integrative Medicine and is senior staff at Commonweal and Smith Farm Center cancer help programs in California and WDC. Jnani was executive director of IAYT from 1994–1988; she currently teaches Yoga for Dean Ornish MD's prostate cancer research group and their spouses and for St. Mary's Medical Center Elder Services Dept. in San Francisco.