

Yoga Therapy Beyond the Koshas: Examining Unearned Privilege and Oppression

By Laura Humpf

Yoga therapy is a transformative practice, and as yoga therapists part of our job is supporting people to transform conditioning. We look at how bodies are conditioned through observing shoulder rotation or the mobility of the spine. We observe the conditioning of energy through how the body moves or does not move with the breath. We assess the conditioning of the mind through inquiring into the repetitive thoughts that plague a client struggling with insomnia or learning about the depression that sits heavy on someone's heart. We support clients tuning into their intuition and hold them with a sense of wholeness and divinity amidst their struggles and conditioned patterns.

There can be a tendency to focus strongly on the individual in yoga therapy, but what about the ways in which we've been conditioned through society and dominant culture? If part of our job as yoga therapists is to support people transforming and healing their *samskaras* (deeply held conditions or patterns that cause pain and suffering), shouldn't yoga therapists look at not just individual *samskaras* but also at societal, systemic, and transgenerational *samskaras*? Pandit Rajmani Tigunait, PhD and spiritual head of the Himalayan Institute, defines *samskara* as a "subtle karmic impression. Every action we perform—mental, verbal, or physical—makes an impression in the mind, which is stored in the form of memory. The deeper the impression, the more strongly it influences our current thoughts, speech and actions."

Systems of unearned power and oppression condition bodies, energies, and minds just like the unique individual conditioning we may see in the *koshas* (sheaths) with each client. These systems are also extremely deep—not only do the impressions they create operate in the present, but they are also inherited from previous generations. Transgenerational conditioning has mostly been studied through the transmission of trauma symptoms from one generation to second and further generations. The transmission of transgenerational trauma has been studied with Native Americans,¹ African Americans,^{2,3} and Holocaust survivors and their descendants.⁴ (It is important to note that this article is U.S.-centric; although there may be similarities in other countries, I cannot speak to how the systems discussed may or may not present elsewhere.)

Layers of Conditioning: From Individual to Systems

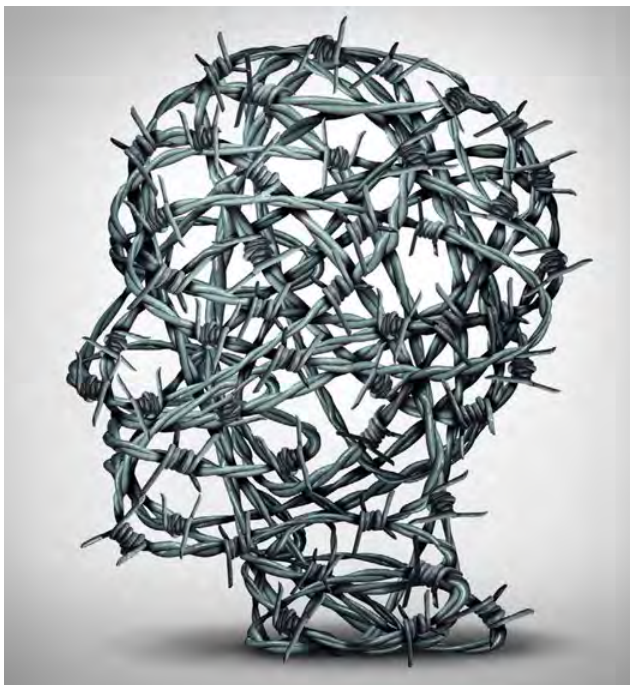
We can look at systemic conditioning through multiple lenses. The first way to approach it is through the individual *samskaras*. As a woman, I experience the internalized conditioning of sexism. This means I may experience not feeling good enough, believing I have to do everything, not feeling smart or qualified enough to do the work I am doing in the world, or being hyperfocused on the physical body. As a White person, I also have internalized conditioning of racial superiority. The conditioning of internalized superiority can include ignorance, arrogance, confusion, defensiveness, and dehumanization, and this can powerfully affect clients with identities that differ from those of the yoga therapists with whom they work.⁵ This means I may believe, consciously or unconsciously, that I am

smarter than a person of color, causing me to be more directive in a yoga therapy session. It can mean I feel an urge to help people of color and go into their communities to offer yoga therapy. This mindset of the "White savior" can feel to me like I am doing good work in the world—and it can also feel condescending, patronizing, and racist to the people in those communities. This is especially true if I come in with an agenda and do not listen when I make inevitable mistakes working in communities that are not my own. This brings us to the next layer of systemic conditioning: interpersonal.

Interpersonal oppression can be seen through racist, transphobic, or sexist acts between individuals. Interpersonal oppression can happen consciously or unconsciously, and can include

when a yoga therapist misgenders a client's partner because the therapist assumes the client is straight. It can include a younger yoga therapist talking slower and louder to an older client. It can be a Christian yoga therapist not acknowledging the high holidays of the Jewish client and/or saying "Merry Christmas" in December.

The next level of oppression is institutional, and this includes the ways in which institutions (i.e., yoga studios, clinics, etc.) enact power and oppression, and it can also include an institution's policies that perpetuate harm. This can be the yoga studio that uses incense and essential oils that constitute a barrier to the person with multiple chemical sensitivities. This can include studios and clinics



that have gender-specific bathrooms, which do not create a welcoming place for trans or gender-nonconforming clients, or it can include using gendered language (e.g., addressing a class as “ladies” when the students may not identify as such). This type of oppression can originate in fee structures for yoga therapy that make the work inaccessible to a wide range of incomes.

Finally, we come to the layer of systemic conditioning, which is when multiple institutions work together to continue these systems of power and oppression. This can look like the media perpetuating ableism, racism, ageism, and sizeism by primarily having young, able- and smaller-bodied White cisgender (i.e., gender matches the sex one was given at birth) women on the covers of their magazines. How many yoga teachers and therapists hear people’s perception of not being able to do yoga because they are not flexible? This is the dominant culture telling society what yoga is, and it impacts who believes they can do yoga.

Systemic conditioning can strip yoga down to what is profitable and consumable, reducing an expansive and complex Indian practice to a focus on the physical, a misguided approach to stress relief, and defining who has access to the practice and who does not. When most yoga studios are located in wealthier White neighborhoods, this defines who gets access and who does not. When the yoga therapy field wants to be more involved with the healthcare institution, which has huge racial disparities caused by who is adequately insured and who is not, these institutions work together to define who gets access, as pointed out in Heeju Sohn’s 2017 paper “Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Health Insurance Coverage: Dynamics of Gaining and Losing Coverage over the Life-Course,” published in the journal *Populations Research Policy Review*. I am not saying that yoga therapists should not take health insurance, just that systemic effects come with a primary focus on insurance-paying clients.

Systemic conditioning looks at who has the power, who does not, and who makes the standards, policies, and procedures. *Yoga Journal’s* editorial director is a White woman. Yoga Alliance’s most recent president is a White man. IAYT’s executive director is a White man. The accreditation committee for IAYT appears to include only White women. The IAYT management team appears to be all White men and women. The vast majority of yoga therapy schools in the United States are run by White men and women. People in leadership determine the direction of yoga and yoga therapy in this country, who the practice is for, and how that practice will be implemented, and these samskaras of unearned privilege and oppression, especially when not acknowledged and addressed, will continue to perpetuate harm.

Acknowledging and investigating these systems can be a step toward the transformation of the collective and transgenerational samskaras we hold individually and collectively. Avidya, ignorance, of these systems of oppression can affect the way we practice yoga therapy. Although these systems put people in false boxes and binaries, the constructs are nevertheless real. Yes, we are divine and whole, and we are also human beings who suffer and feel broken at times. I can sense in myself sometimes the desire to focus on the “truth” of that Self beyond my race, gender, age, etc., and yet my race, gender, age, and other identities affect my lived experience and the clients I work with.

When I willfully ignore these identities because I want to focus on my and another’s divinity and our shared human experience, I am experiencing another aspect of avidya, spiritual bypass. Spiritual bypassing, a term created by John Welwood, PhD, is the tendency to use spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks.

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Identities of Unearned Privilege and Oppression

How do we explore these systems of power and oppression within ourselves as yoga therapists as well as with our clients? As we identify the conditioning of the individual experiences our clients go through physically, energetically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually, we can also explore the conditioning of identities that come with unearned privilege and with oppression. Pamela Hays, author of *Addressing Cultural Complexities in Practice: Assessment, Diagnosis, and Therapy*, created a model called ADDRESSING that includes nine areas of marginalization and unearned privilege: age, disability, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, indigenous heritage, national origin, and gender. I include a tenth identity: size, as people living in larger/fat bodies also experience oppression. Learn more about sizeism through Linda Bacon’s book *Health at Every Size. Svadhyaya*, self-study, is a necessity before bringing these ideas into yoga therapy sessions, and I offer svadhyaya of my own identities and samskaras as a stepping stone for other yoga therapists to begin or continue their own explorations.

Age: I am 39, which means I hold unearned privilege. Children and older adults experience oppression, but at my current age I do not typically feel invisible or pushed out of the work force, and I am generally seen as competent. I am not infantilized or perceived as cute, and the activities I do in daily living are not perceived as inspirational or extraordinary. These are some of the privileges I can, for the time being, take for granted. If you work with children or older adults, do you explore how their age affects their experience in the world? How might *your* age impact the clients you work with?

Disability: Some identities can shift and change. I am, for instance, currently able-bodied, but this could change at any moment. At present, I can easily get into my home, which has stairs. I can generally follow the instructions in a yoga class because I have full developmental and cognitive functioning. My body does not experience chronic health conditions that make it difficult, if not impossible, to attend a general yoga class. I can be in loud and crowded spaces because I am not easily overwhelmed by sensory input or sensitive to scents. Disability can also include the sometimes-invisible experiences of mental health challenges. I can go to

a yoga class where physical adjustments happen because PTSD will not be triggered if I experience unexpected touch. When I am unaware of these unearned privileges, I do not realize how inaccessible my services can be, or I may consider a client “too sensitive.” Many yoga therapy clients come to us because of some challenge they may or may not label as a disability. Do you explore how ability and disability affects clients’ lived experiences? How might your own experience being able-bodied or differently abled affect the work you are doing?

Religion: I grew up Catholic, which, again, gives me unearned privilege. Christianity is the dominant religion in the United States, and we usually have Christian holidays off. There is a lot of media representation around the Christian holidays, and I do not have to know about any other religion’s holy days to navigate my daily life. Do you know the spiritual or religious beliefs of the clients you work with and how these beliefs affect their lives? How might your own beliefs impact the clients with whom you work?

Ethnicity: I am White and have unearned privilege because of this. If I want to work with a yoga therapist who looks like me, several practice nearby. If I pick up a yoga magazine, most likely the cover model will be someone who looks like me. It is important to acknowledge that I am a White person teaching and practicing something outside of my culture, and as much as I want to honor the roots and integrity of this practice, I am looking at yoga through the lens of Whiteness as well as all the other identities I hold. How does this affect the client of color who wants to work with a therapist of color but can’t find one in her area? How comfortable does a client of color feel working with a White therapist? Have you talked about race and ethnicity with your clients? Why or why not? How does your race and ethnicity affect the work you are doing?

Sexual orientation: I identify as straight, which means I do not have to think twice about whether I hold my partner’s hand in public, whether a heteronormative couple will be represented in the next romantic comedy, or if I have to come out to my yoga therapist. How do lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, or queer folks come out to you? How does your sexuality shape who you are? How might this affect the work you do with clients?

Socioeconomic status: I grew up middle class and was supported in many ways financially to obtain my master’s degree in marriage and family therapy and my certification in yoga therapy. This access to both wealth and education gives me still more unearned privileges. I do not worry each day about whether I will have shelter, clothing, or food. I have yearly vacations and time for yoga and self-care. My education opens doors for me in hospitals, nursing homes, and community mental health centers because I am seen as more legitimate due to the letters after my name. How do you make your yoga therapy financially accessible? Do you talk about finances and how the conditioning of class affects your sessions and/or your client’s lives? How does your own socioeconomic status affect the work you do?

Indigenous background: As a person ethnically indigenous to what is now called Germany, my ancestors played a role in taking land from, colonizing, and committing genocide upon Native Americans. This is a painful truth for me to sit with, but without grappling with it how can I can truly serve a Native person coming to me for yoga therapy? Can I realistically hold space for Native folks if I have not looked at the ways in which Whiteness and coloniza-

tion affect the ways I perceive Native Americans and the ways I may continue that colonization and cultural appropriation through using sage in my studio or having a dream catcher as decor? If you are in the United States, do you know who were or are the people indigenous to the land on which you live and work? Why or why not? How does your background affect the work you do? How does a client’s background impact the work you do together?

National origin: I am a U.S. citizen, a status that comes with many unearned privileges. I am unaware most of the time of how much ease comes with my citizenship. I can leave and return to this country easily. As a White U.S. citizen, I do not fear my relatives will be detained and/or deported. I do not worry about being pulled over and asked for my documents, or taken out of line for additional scrutiny when boarding a plane. As a citizen I am also conditioned to dehumanize immigrants and to forget my own family’s immigration story. Many undocumented immigrants and refugees are fleeing war and trauma, often wars the United States started or is directly involved in perpetuating. Yet when immigrants and refugees come to this country, they are seen as terrorists, criminals, or financial burdens. How does your citizenship or status affect your yoga therapy practice? How might it impact someone who holds a different status?

Gender: As a female-identified person I experience both oppression and unearned privilege. As a woman I get marginalized when I am talked down to by a man or when my body is seen as an object. These instances of oppression have consequences in my mind, body, and heart in that I silence or second-guess myself at times. As a cisgender woman I also have unearned privilege too. I do not have to worry whether the bathroom I choose matches my gender or that I might be misgendered when I introduce myself. Do you ask for people’s pronouns when you start working with them? Why or why not? How does your gender impact the work you do?

Size: As a size 14, I am of average size in my daily life. When I enter a yoga space, I am seen as fat. I once went to an “advanced” class where the receptionist made sure to point out I was at the advanced class. I wonder if she would have done that if I was in a smaller body. I notice when I shop for clothes at a yoga studio there are times no sizes will fit my body. Yet, in my daily life I can typically find clothes that fit, and I do not worry whether my body will be comfortable in most chairs. How has sizeism impacted you? I am conditioned to see people living in larger bodies as unhealthy or lazy. Without acknowledging that conditioning, I may unintentionally harm larger-bodied clients. What happens for you when working with larger-bodied clients? Do you talk about the experience clients have living in their body in regard to size?

Begin Within

I invite you to start with yourself. Practice svadhyaya through a lens of unearned power and oppression. The more I do it for myself the more I can support clients with their individual conditioning and the conditioning of living within these systems of dehumanization. See the sidebar for a case composite that brings these ideas into practice.

As yoga therapists we are in positions of power. I am as transparent as possible about where I hold privilege and where I experience oppression. I acknowledge the inherent power imbalance of the

Case Example

worked with a straight, able-bodied, cisgender, multiracial (Filipina, Black, and White) woman in her 40s who had a new job at a nonprofit organization serving primarily families of color. “Julie’s” coworkers were mostly White women, and she felt invalidated and isolated at work. If I had only focused on her individual *samskaras* I may have invalidated her as well, but we choose to look at the ways in which the system of Whiteness impacted her.

The organizational culture was individualistically focused, hierarchical, and did not look at the ways systems of privilege and oppression affected the organization or the families with whom they worked. Julie preferred to approach her work from a collective mindset, focusing on breaking down hierarchies and looking at the ways that systems of dehumanization impacted the organization as well as families. When she challenged the organization, she was shut down and told her ideas were too “out there” and unworkable.

Our therapeutic work focused on resiliency instead of trying to get her to adapt to a system that was dehumanizing her. We found a posture that represented her values, strength, and power that she practiced daily. We focused on connecting to her community who understood her, and she looked at letters from friends when she doubted herself. We focused on both supporting her to challenge the organization when she wanted to and soothing her nervous system when she felt overwhelmed. We did this through tuning into her body to know when she had capacity to say something in a meeting and when she did not. She knew she had capacity when she felt looser in her body, particularly her shoulders. When her jaw and shoulders clenched as if to brace against an attack, she connected to herself instead through diaphragmatic breathing and feeling her feet on the ground. We worked to settle her nervous system through orientation of the senses; gentle, repetitive, and rhythmic movement; and yoga nidra. We also focused on releasing anything that got lodged in her through body awareness, meditation, and shaking. Julie eventually found a job that was in alignment with her values and where she could speak her truth. She now feels connected, supported, and more engaged in work she is passionate about.

In her previous position, power and oppression lived in her body in myriad ways.

Annamayakosha, food sheath. Her appetite all but disappeared, and she lost 20 pounds. She began to experience chronic tension in her jaw and bouts of nausea after particularly stressful workdays.

Pranamayakosha, energetic sheath. She began to have a hard time falling asleep. Due to her insomnia, she was tired throughout the day and experienced exhaustion and fatigue. She reported feeling as if she was panting at times, and her breath would be shallow, fast, and located more in her chest.

Manomayakosha, mind sheath. She experienced depression and anxiety and at times reported feeling “crazy.” Julie felt isolated, unheard, and disconnected. She also had compassion for herself, her coworkers, and the families with whom she worked.

Vijnanamayakosha, wisdom sheath. When Julie felt connected to herself and her community she was able to easily access her intuition. When she felt isolated she had more difficulty tuning into her inner wisdom. Her pose that connected her to her values helped reconnect to this aspect of herself.

Anandamayakosha, bliss sheath. Music was one of the ways she felt completely connected, and as her work environment became more painful she dropped this source of solace without even knowing she had done so. When we realized this in a session, she chose an album she missed and started listening to it on her commute to and from work.

relationship in which we are engaged, and my job is to hold that power with the utmost care while also being accountable for it. Being accountable means I tell clients that I will probably make mistakes, and I am grateful if they share when I do. I tell clients I will not ask them to educate me, and I will do work outside of our sessions to increase my awareness.

My hope is that we yoga therapists can expand our view to hold both the individual and the systemic ways we and our clients are conditioned. If yoga is about wholeness and union, we have to look beyond only the individual to hold the collective. My hope is that by looking at all these forms of conditioning, yoga therapists and their clients will experience deeper levels of healing and transformation. **YTT**



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