

Practice Session #15
7:30 am Sunday, January 21st, 2007

Patanjali's Stages of Transformation in Treating HIV Infection
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People living with HIV have benefited greatly over the last decade from medical intervention strategies that can greatly prolong life. For the individual, what was once considered a death sentence has now become a plethora of choices and difficult decisions about medications, insurance, prejudice, and personal identity.

HIV is a viral infection that gradually depletes the immune system's ability to ward off opportunistic infections. People do not die from HIV itself. They die from viral, protozoan, and bacterial infections, along with HIV associated cancers. With proper medication and support, people can now live long, healthy, and fulfilling lives.

To support an individual living with HIV, life style choices, nutrition, and mental health are essential components that should be incorporated into a treatment strategy that will contribute directly to the health of the immune system as well as the individual's sense of empowerment and well being.

B.K.S. Iyengar tells us "yoga teaches us to cure what need not be endured and endure what cannot be cured"¹. Yoga can be a very practical science and a highly esoteric art. When applied to a condition as complex as HIV, both are necessary.

While many asanas will alleviate discomfort and enhance healing in target areas, the gift that yoga gives is solace, inner strength and equanimity, regardless of whether the disease is controlled or not.

The HIV virus can exist undetected in the body for many years, living in a dormant state. But once informed of his or her HIV status, with or without initial symptoms, a person may progress through the classic stages of grief; denial, anger, bargaining, depression and sadness. Now on a mental roller coaster, s/he may choose life affirming activities or self destructive ones. While it may be said that everyone faces these types of choices in their lives, the shadow of death makes these decisions that much more poignant.

Medicine can target the genetic coding of the HIV virus, but yoga can mitigate the effects of this mental turmoil along with many physical symptoms from the disease and side effects from the drugs. Through positive conditioning, yoga can provide the tools to overcome the fear and denial that a life threatening illness creates, and affect a powerful partnership with medicine to heal.

When addressing therapeutic cases, B.K.S. Iyengar says that “We must first build confidence in the student” by ameliorating symptoms and providing tools for daily health. The *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* continues with “These transformations of thought explain the transformations of nature’s properties, characteristics, and

conditions, which occur in material elements and sense organs”². The confidence born through experiencing some relief, physical or mental, will encourage the student to move toward the life affirming discipline that yoga and health require. By making rather simple lifestyle and attitudinal choices, one can instigate a powerful shift toward improving “nature’s properties, characteristics and conditions.”

Iyengar Yoga therapy varies depending on the condition, experience, and age of each individual. In the case of a student with HIV, a sequence will generally begin with supportive asanas to shift the person’s mind/mood into a receptive state and to replenish vital energy.

As the immune system struggles with the virus, various symptoms may surface at different stages in the life cycle of the illness. What is recommended to a person who is newly infected will be different than for one who is symptomatic. Hence, therapeutic applications will vary widely. In general, it is helpful to construct a balance between a normal and a restorative practice, depending, of course, on the individual. A too rigorous practice can deplete a person’s reservoir of health, while an overly gentle practice may be benign, but otherwise ineffective.

If the student is in good health, they will benefit from taking general classes with particular attention given to learning inversions and backbends. The backbends will give courage and stave off depression, while being a part of a general class will be

reassuring. It is imperative that the student take responsibility to monitor the effect that the practice has on their vital energy, and to work with the instructor to make adjustments when necessary.

The *Yoga Sutras* suggest that the qualities of nature - the *gunas* - manifest in various proportions to one another and in different sequential stages³, and that we can avoid the pain — *heyam duhkham anagatam*⁴ — of harmful, fully manifested qualities by changing our actions and our attitudes⁵. Again, what energizes a student one day may overexert them the next. And frustration or negative attitudes⁶ can trigger the fight-or-flight response. Cultivating benevolent thoughts (YS; I.33) and patience have a potent effect on physiology.

Current studies in Psychoneuroimmunology corroborate the depth to which thought influences biology, thus reinforcing Patanjali's theme. Quoting Dr. Sheldon Cohen on his research into the effect of psychological stress, social support, and social status on immunity; "These results indicate that positive emotions play a larger and more important role in disease risk and health complaints than previously believed"⁷.

Restorative postures are simple tools to enable this shift, as they target specific areas of the body to pacify and relieve symptoms, and thus encourage hope.

Sequences can be suggested for particular opportunistic infections or

conditions. Restorative postures also have a powerful effect, once a person is relaxed, to replenish a depleted body and nourish a weary mind. As with medicine, dosage and side effects vary with each individual.

B.K.S. Iyengar summarizes: "The rays of the Sun, if focused on the skin through a magnifying glass, burn the skin. Similarly, the asanas have to be done in such a way that the energy gets focused or concentrated in the affected area. It is not the process of simply doing the asanas, such as *Paschimottanasana* or *Salamba Sarvangasana*. Therefore, if I give just the sequence of asana and the patient performs them mechanically; it is not going to work. One needs to see whether the expected effect is coming or not.

To do the asanas effectively one needs to build up the defensive energy. And to build up the defensive energy one needs to do the asanas which are soothing. One cannot spend the little amount of energy that is left in the body. It is a kind of balance in practice where one has to see how to keep the offensive energy in check, which is affecting the defensive energy."⁸

In yoga, asanas are intended to regulate life force. As the HIV virus does battle with the body's natural defenses, the immune system, the practice must support what Iyengar refers to as "building up the defensive energy". The immune system is integrally related with every other system in the psycho/physical matrix. An

adjustment in blood chemistry can shift this generally robust and adaptive matrix from health to fatigue and back again. Quoting the *Yoga Sutras* again “These transformations of thought explain the transformations of nature’s properties, characteristics, and conditions.”

The following are practical and accessible postures that will benefit most people, regardless of their condition.

Supported *Sukhasana* pacifies the gastrointestinal tract while it expands the chest and helps improve lung capacity. A blanket placed beneath the head and neck will further induce mental relaxation. An eye bag or cloth can be placed over the eyes.



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Supta Baddha Konasana opens the hips and soothes the reproductive organs while the elevated chest increases coronary blood flow. Blankets should evenly support the thighs so that there is no irritation in the legs or lower back.

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Cross bolsters support a full expansion of the front of the body, thus giving space to all the vital organs. With space comes a generous increase in circulation throughout the abdominal and chest cavity, thus pacifying hyperactivity or any irritation. Backbends will build emotional and mental stability. While the sequence leading up to cross bolsters is progressive, there are many variations. Contraindicated if there is a headache.

Viparita Karani is an accessible and passive inverted posture that can easily be held for up to twenty minutes. The support beneath the kidneys and waist enable healthy circulation throughout the lungs while elevating the legs will improve venous return to the heart and relieve congestion or excitation in the eliminatory tract. If there is any muscle tension in the legs, use a belt around the big toes. If the hamstrings are tight, set the bolster further from the wall. If the legs fall asleep, use the variation below. A pillow placed beneath the head may further quiet the mind.



Viparita Karani with the legs bent will be more comfortable for some students, and it may enable them to remain in the pose longer. Timings, that is, holding the poses for extended periods of time, are integral to “changing the properties” or conditions in the body. The position of the head and throat in *Viparita Karani* encourages the relaxation response by stimulating the vagal nerve reflex.

A mild *Setu Bandha* with one or two blankets folded lengthwise to elevate the chest while supporting the length of the body and maintained for ten minutes will act like a magic wand to shift [the practitioner] from wakefulness to the hypnogogic state. This *parinama* (transformation), like the rays of the Sun, brings an inner radiance that nourishes the body and soul.

Savasana, the corpse pose. There are many variations to this much loved pose. Begin with soft, quiet, breathing, wherein the inhalation and exhalation are equal. The exhalation will naturally begin to lengthen. If coerced prematurely, a long exhalation may incite anxiety. Let it come naturally. The mantra So-Hum, a quiet Aum, Blessed be, indeed any brief affirmation plants the seeds of peace within.



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In closing, this article leaves many practical questions still to be explored. A well documented study that monitors classes designed specifically for this population will give us more detailed information. Even as science discovers new ways to treat HIV, yoga can also be powerful medicine, which will only increase in potency with dedicated practice. As B.K.S. Iyengar so succinctly states “[The] regular practice of yoga can help you face the turmoil of life with steadiness and stability”.

¹ Iyengar, B.K.S. Yoga Rahasya. Bombay: Light on Yoga Research Trust, 1999.

² Miller, Barbara Stoler. Yoga Discipline of Freedom. Bantam Books, 1995. III.13.

³ Iyengar, *op. cit.*, II.15–19.

⁴ Iyengar, *op. cit.*, II.16.

⁵ *Ibid.*, II.14. According to our good, bad or mixed actions, the quality of our life, its span, and the nature of birth are experienced as being pleasant or painful.

⁶ *Ibid.* II.31. Sorrow, despair, unsteadiness of the body and irregular breathing further distract the citta.

⁷ Cohen, Sheldon, PhD, *et al.* Positive Emotional Style Predicts Resistance to Illness After Experimental Exposure to Rhinovirus or Influenza A Virus. *Psychosomatic Medicine* 68:809-815, 2006.

⁸ Iyengar, B.K.S. Yogadhara. Bombay: Light on Yoga Research Trust, 2000.

⁹ Cole, Roger, Ph.D. Physiology and Practice, yogadelmar, 2004. Pilot study, DLF Session 2, Epoch