

Body Image and Self-transformation: Patanjali's Sutras as Underpinnings for Change

By Tra Kirkpatrick

If your childhood was anything like mine, you probably learned many untruths about who you were or should be. For some, the story revolved around socioeconomic status and being taught that happiness and success is reached only once you live in a certain neighborhood, drive a specific car, or have a high net worth. Others' stories perhaps came from religious affiliations, restrictive gender roles, or racial archetypes. My personal story revolved around my body, a theme with which many of us—and our clients—can certainly identify. Growing up with plus-sized clothes and undermined self-esteem, I spent the first three decades of my life linking my self-worth to my body and believing that my size-22 pants were symbolic of my inability to set goals, stay focused, and maintain discipline. And despite the many other professional and personal goals I accomplished, all of my achievements were outweighed by the fact that I was fat.

My path to change did not begin with yoga therapy per se, but it did begin on a yoga mat. Like many who get pulled into the stories of our youth, I had bought into the myth that self-worth was a valuation system that wormed its way in from the outside. Over time and with consistent practice, yoga changed that; the outer world dissolved as if the edges of the mat simply softened into the periphery, pulling at the tapestry of my ego-self until it gently unknotted.

The ego-mind is the keeper of our stories, and yoga imparts therapeutic benefits that engender deeper self-awareness and awakening. As a yoga teacher I am often asked, "Isn't yoga in and of itself therapeutic?" I would like to simply respond with a yes, but yoga's intricate and systematic practices are not that clear cut. Yoga becomes therapeutic only when the multidimensional system of the person is addressed: body, mind, breath, nervous system, intellect, emotions, and the interactions among those systems must be understood for yoga to forge a transforma-

tional path to health and wellbeing. Otherwise, yoga is just another layer of our outer experience.

Although I had been practicing yoga for nearly eight years and was two months from finishing my yoga teacher training, my sense of self-worth was still bound tightly to my body. Yes, through yoga I had come to a space of greater non-judgment and self-acceptance, but it was as if this acceptance was presupposed on self-loathing rather than on compassion: my

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experience of *santosha* (fulfilled contentment) was based on the fact that I was a yogi in a bodacious body, physically and psycho-emotionally unhealthy and largely unhappy, and that was that. Still, I continued to go to the mat, I began to teach yoga, and in my desire to pass on healthier messages to my newborn daughter, I decided to change my eating habits, start an exercise routine, and envision a life no longer limited by my oversized body. After all, I thought, if I could change my body, I could change my mind, and my perception of value would rise. However, I began to discover that I was looking for my self-worth to improve from the outside in. Yoga student and yoga teacher were simply additional roles with which my ego could identify, like two new outfits—only a few sizes smaller than before. The person wearing the clothes was essentially the same fat girl she had always been.

A Journey of Self-discovery

A couple of years later as I was training for a half marathon, I went running for the first time without music. As I ran in silence, my head overflowed with the bar-

rage of messages that I received as a child and young woman, all of which leave little room for the diversity of women's bodies. Page after page of my story turned through my head: hearing time and again from my parents how pretty I would be if I just lost weight; being compared to my two sisters who were both taller and skinnier and, naturally, more attractive than I; watching my mom try on outfit after outfit while looking at her thin physique in the mirror with disdain because she was "bloated"; watching my grandmother apply

rose-colored paint to the lips that spoke to the reflection of her self-proclaimed round and ugly face. Covertly assimilated media messages also recited their views of perfection and how to attain it with various weight-loss pills, fad diets, and fat-sucking surgeries. Voices from my past suffocated me with every foot strike on the pavement, and in that final moment of my run I came to realize these visions of me were not my own yet had become deeply entrenched within my belief system.

Like all good stories, our experiences often contain complex sub-plots. This is where the therapeutic applications of yoga support our ability to peel back the layers to help us more fully understand our day-to-day experiences. As we explore the ways in which our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs are habituated, we move away from the victim mentality of "Why is this happening to me?" and evolve to more penetrating questions, such as, "What does this pattern have to teach me?" This inquiry invites our psychological process to move away from habitual negative patterns to build and sustain the self-awareness required for change. The yoga concept of

vidya (correct knowledge) creates a therapeutic environment that trains our insight to objectively observe the parallel worlds of body, psychology, and spirit to help us uncover the ways in which we create meaning from our experiences while *tapas* fans the inner flame of awareness to help us recognize and change deeply held patterns of belief. Self-awareness is neither an accidental nor automatic process but rather a “call to awakening,” a term coined by mythologist Joseph Campbell. This call ignites the change through which yoga practice becomes self-generating, self-sustaining, and self-renewing.

The Research

Despite that yoga is an age-old tradition, one that began primarily for self-understanding and spiritual growth, only recently have the interrelations of behavior and yoga begun to emerge in scientific research studies, these often being focused on specific areas such as addictive behavior, weight loss, lifestyle, stress, and anxiety. One commonality across studies is that the body-mind-spirit practices of yoga enhance awareness, cultivate commitment and discipline, and increase self-acceptance, all of which are vital components to life-long behavior change.

Addiction specialists in private practice, rehabilitation programs, and 12-step recovery programs recognize that the mind-body-spirit approach of yoga is a great adjunct therapy to conventional treatments for drug, alcohol, and food abuse as well as addictive behaviors like gambling and shopping. Yoga treats the biology and the psychology of an addict.¹ Yoga also helps with the many reasons people relapse while in recovery (stress, anxiety, depression, boredom, inadequate coping strategies), while preliminary findings from studies regarding yoga and psychiatry indicate changes in neurophysiological and neuroimmunological measures.² Further, yoga targets unmanaged stress, a main component of chronic disorders such as anxiety, depression, obesity, diabetes, and insomnia. The practice enhances resilience and improves mind-body awareness, which can help people adjust their behaviors based on the feelings they’re experiencing in their bodies.³

As articulated through various yoga and behavior research studies, changing

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one’s behavior is much more than willpower; change is a dynamic process that requires not just preparation for the journey ahead, but a deep understanding of one’s thought patterns, beliefs, and how those patterns and beliefs are actualized.

This largely explains why my own experience of weight loss did not lead to an automatic 10 on the self-evaluation scale: my body had changed, but only through the deeper practices of yoga did my psyche change. Aside from the fact that



Transformation happens only when we acknowledge the energetic underpinnings of all experience and shift the energy in a way that elicits evolution.

Photo by Tra Kirkpatrick

exercise such as running or lifting weights is generally a competitive, goal-oriented activity and yoga is an inward, process-oriented activity, yoga offers psychological benefits including an increase in subjective wellbeing, greater self-acceptance, improved self-actualization, and a decrease in hostility (in other words, an increase in the practice of *ahimsa*).⁴ Sustainable change requires that we continually evaluate ourselves to uncover the subtle attitudes and beliefs that drive our behaviors.

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In *Changing for Good: A Revolutionary Six-stage Program for Overcoming Bad Habits and Moving Your Life Positively Forward*, the authors reveal that one weakness of generalized therapies is their reliance on select techniques without many individualized alternatives. *Changing for Good* notes that change is a fluid process and moves through six consistent stages: pre-contemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, maintenance, and termination.⁵ While the stages and processes identified in this book delineate a roadmap for successful change, they simultaneously offer malleability for people to individualize their processes for greatest effectiveness and growth. The personalized process is analogous to yoga therapy, which empowers individuals through the teachings and practices of yoga to maintain a consistent practice that increases self-awareness, engages their energy in the direction of desired goals, and changes their relationship with their condition.⁶

Yoga's Path to Truth

Similarly, Patanjali's Yoga Sutras offer a roadmap for change with a comprehensive analysis of how the workings of thought trap us in misconceptions about ourselves and the world as well as a scientific yoga system of observances and disciplines to clear the mind of accumulated experiences and memories that bind us to pain and suffering. The eight limbs of yoga provide tangible, predictable

methods that build awareness about how we treat ourselves and create clarity around the impact of our thoughts and behaviors. In the model of yoga therapy, the physical body is the vessel with which we experience the world around us. More often than not, we become so preoccupied with the body that our ability to look inward is diverted. Yoga therapy intimately links the body to personality and emotion, often paralleling various methods of behavior therapy where therapeutic sessions begin with a process of relaxation so that one

can become more clearly aware of internal states.⁷ Through yoga therapy, we move beyond our stories and into a space of expansiveness and truth.

At its foundation, the eight-limbed path of yoga cultivates discernment and expands our ability to witness our experiences. The practice challenges our beliefs, guides us gently to our edges, and then expands the boundaries of self. In this way, yoga is the doorway to the contemplation and consciousness raising required for any person to embark upon change and sustain new behaviors. In correlation with the behavior model's pre-contemplation and contemplation stages, yoga helps us create a sacred, nonjudgmental space and cultivate a discerning mind to observe the potential causes of suffering. Patanjali states that, "when impurity is destroyed by practicing the limbs of yoga, the light of knowledge shines in focused discrimination."⁸

The discerning mind is imperative to understand the grooves of our conditioning, also referred to as *samskara*. *Samskara* is the unseen force that paralyzes us just when we are ready to forge ahead. In terms of behavior change, without recognizing *samskara*, we are apt to become chronic contemplators or cycle through the contemplation, preparation, and action stages over and over and wonder why we are not reaching our goal. Repeating *samskara* reinforces them, creating a groove that is difficult to resist, which is why we

cling to habits, remaining in patterns of unhappiness and lacking fulfillment.

Strong similarities exist between the yoga path and the behavior-change model used by successful self-changers. Each model represents a change framework that begins on the inside: our ability to listen deeply and cultivate self-awareness allows us to learn about our own personalities and patterns so that transformation is initiated from a sense of true self rather than at the behest of a voice that shames us into change; the latter only works to deepen the grooves of our *samskara*. The models teach us how to communicate from that place of depth, receptivity, and honor, increasing our ability to listen deeply; ask inquisitive, thoughtful questions; and see where we hinder our own ability to listen/receive and perceive that which blocks our ability to see truth. Responsible freedom arises when we choose to change our attitudes or behavior for the best reason(s), regardless of conditioning, belief systems, gratification, or pleasure. Our fullest freedom emerges from choosing that which enhances our lives, cultivates a deep and true sense of self, and enhances our relationship to the world at large. From a place of truth, transformation begins.

Intellectual insight that does not travel beyond the mind and backfill the grooves of conditioning seldom translates into change. Transformation happens only when we acknowledge the energetic underpinnings of all experience and shift the energy in a way that elicits evolution. The day I began training for that half marathon, my body had already significantly changed with the loss of nearly 100 pounds and greater strength. Yet my self-image and sense of self-worth still carried much of the weight of my story. It wasn't until that fateful silent run that I began to more fully understand that the burden I continued to shoulder came from the patterns of my *samskara*. That story of worthlessness had become my sacred wound, enshrouding any sensibility and sense of real self-worth.

Yoga therapy is not a one-size-fits-all proposition, and it took twenty years of a dedicated yoga practice to unveil the *samskara* that for so long kept me bound to my low self-worth. "Revolution doesn't have to do with smashing something; it has to do with bringing something forth. If

you spend all your time thinking about that which you are attacking, then you are negatively bound to it. You have to find the zeal in yourself and bring that out.”⁹ To evolve into our greatest selves is not about simply exchanging one thing for another, like getting a dress in a smaller size. Yoga therapy has the potential to reveal all layers of experience without dismissing or discounting that which we find unappealing; specifically, Patanjali’s path grounds us in a greater truth that reshapes an image of unworthiness to a reflection of liberation and freedom. **YTT**

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