

## Yoga and the Path of Self-Discovery

By Kate Holcombe

I first met my teacher, Sri T.K.V. Desikachar, in 1991 quite by accident. I had come to India as part of a university study abroad program to study social work and was working with the state social welfare board and Indian child welfare society on their female infanticide prevention program. The co-director of the program, Mary Louise Skelton, had been a long-time student of Sri T. Krishnamacharya and had encouraged me to also study the Yoga Sutras with Sri Desikachar, which was offered as part of that program. I found them interesting, but it wasn't until I was hit by a motorcycle while crossing the street on my bike one afternoon that I was presented with an opportunity to discover the healing potential of yoga first hand. It was this accident and the time I spent with Mary Lou through her battle with breast cancer and eventual death that inspired me to shift my career focus to yoga therapy.

About a week after the accident, I was still in incredible pain, and not only had difficulty moving but also found simply sitting and standing both painful. Mary Lou brought me to see Sri Desikachar, who designed and wrote out a personalized, therapeutic practice for me to help support my healing process and recovery.

The practice was very mild, gentle movements with simple breathing that didn't seem unusual or special at the time, yet when I returned to the United States three months later, the specialists I saw couldn't believe how well I was recovering. "Whatever you're doing, keep doing it," they said. It made sense to me: yoga seemed a lot like physical therapy. The physical benefits I experienced and the healing of my body were clearly the result of that practice Sri Desikachar had designed to help me heal. I soon discovered there were many other benefits to yoga I had yet to learn. About a year later, Mary Lou, who had become a dear friend and mentor, had a recurrence of breast cancer. In the year before she died, and particularly while spending time with her during the final weeks of her dying process, I was able to witness another

level of healing through yoga: even when one is unable to change their circumstance, and in fact, can even be quite unhappy about it, there can still be profound healing, and most importantly, one need not suffer.

Mary's Lou's example impacted me so greatly that when the university hired me to help run their study abroad program in Madras (now Chennai) after she died and I was back in India again, I asked Mr. Desikachar if he would please teach me the therapeutic application of yoga to help others in this way. He took me on as his personal student and I had the great

the non-profit center Desikachar had founded in honor of his father in 1976. I also began to study the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali in earnest, even learning the Sanskrit so I could understand them more deeply. I began studying the sutras one-on-one with Mr. Desikachar and his wife, Menaka, going through the sutras word-by-word from the Sanskrit. While I learned much about how personalized, therapeutic practices can help people feel better, it was through the intensive study of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras that I really understood how yoga is most powerful in supporting healing.



fortune of not only studying with him privately each day but also to observe him and other senior teachers at the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram (KYM) when they worked therapeutically with students.

I studied every day with Desikachar and observed and interned at the KYM,

Over those years of study in India, I was able to witness first-hand yoga's profound healing potential as I watched student after student come through the doors of the KYM with such a wide variety of circumstances—from pregnancy, eating disorders, severe depression, cancer, chronic pain, and injury, to the young boy whose

parents were killed in an accident and the young girl who wanted to improve her table tennis for international competition. The common thread in each of these cases was that, while each of these students were given a practice that included asana, the asana was only a small part of their practice and why it worked so well. Surely relationship is important and, no doubt, the many skilled and caring teachers at the KYM developed important and meaningful relationships with their students. But there was another key element common among them as well: each practice prescribed was ultimately about helping the student connect with his or her own true, authentic Self; to help find, cultivate, and strengthen his or her own inner guide. This is Patanjali's goal for us in the Yoga Sutras: to focus and refine the mind so that we can differentiate between our mind, body, and senses (what is impermanent and constantly changing) and our deepest Self, which, according to Patanjali, is pure, perfect, unchanging, and permanent.

We all know yoga can help us feel better at multiple levels—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually—and, in fact, is designed to achieve this. Yet many of us forget or even don't quite realize (or remember) yoga's goals according to Patanjali's Yoga Sutras: to help us focus the mind so that we can differentiate between the mind and our own, true Self; to connect with the Self; and to act from that quiet place of the Self and, as a result, reduce our experience of suffering so that we feel better. Patanjali uses several words to describe this "Self"—*cit*, *purusa*, *drastr* (seer/witness), *pratyakcetana* (internal consciousness)—and we can understand it in English as witness, observer, Self, or even soul. More important than what we call it is our actual experience of it. When we are acting from the Self, we are clear, calm, centered, and don't take things personally. We can see a broader perspective and we respond consciously, rather than simply reacting to events, whether internal or external. This doesn't mean we are "steamrolled," that is, having no passion or feelings or not holding appropriate boundaries. It is quite the contrary. We may experience more passion and stronger feelings, as well as an increased ability to create appropriate boundaries with others. However, when

we act solely from the mind and the pull of the senses and emotions, we often end up in situations that exacerbate our experience of suffering or make our situation worse. We end up reacting hastily, falling into the same destructive patterns and relationships, and feeling out of control. In fact, with my children, we talk about behavior that is harmful or inappropriate as "losing one's Self."

I wonder how many people realize that out of 195 sutras, all designed to help us quiet and focus the mind so we can better connect with our true Self, only three have anything to do with asana!

Of course, Patanjali doesn't say that we won't suffer. The Yoga Sutras is, in fact, quite clear that none of us is immune to hardship, challenges, loss, and suffering. However, Patanjali teaches us that by connecting with and acting from the place of the Self, we can reduce our experience of suffering, even if we can't change the circumstances that initiated the suffering. In short, while we often can't change our circumstances, the practices of yoga teach us that we can influence our experience of that circumstance, and thus, suffer less.

In the second chapter of the Yoga Sutras, Patanjali describes a model for healing in four parts: (1) We recognize the symptom, or *heyam*, the thing we want to avoid or eliminate. According to the Yoga Sutras, the *heyam* (symptom) is *duhkham*, or suffering. (2) We try to ascertain the cause, or *hetu*, of that suffering or symptom. Again, according to Patanjali, the cause of our suffering is the inability to differentiate between the mind and the true Self. Patanjali calls this *samyoga*: the inability to differentiate or discern between two things that are intimately linked or very close together (in this case, the mind

and the Self). (3) Patanjali tells us we must then choose a goal, or *hanam*—where we want to go. And the goal, according to Patanjali, is *kaivalyam*, or independence from suffering, meaning that my happiness is not dependent on my circumstances (i.e., my status, health, job, partner, the car I drive, and so on). As a result, when challenges, difficulties, or losses arise in life, I am less thrown off my center or connection to my authentic Self. I may still express anger, joy, heartache, or grief—appropriately so—but I can recognize that those responses are simply that. They are my authentic response to my current reality but I need not be defined by them or become overtaken by them. Instead, I can move through my feelings or allow the feelings to run their course moving through me. This *kaivalyam*, or independence, is achieved through *viveka* (discernment), the ability to differentiate between two things that are similar or very closely linked (*viveka* is the opposite of *samyoga*). (4) Finally, Patanjali outlines the means (*upayam*) that help us to focus and refine the mind, to distinguish between mind and Self, to connect with and act from Self, and, as a result, to feel better (to experience *kaivalyam*, freedom from the experience of suffering).

The Yoga Sutras is a guidebook of wonderful tools to gain freedom from suffering, and the means that Patanjali specifies in the second chapter are the eight limbs of *astanga yoga* (*yama*, *niyama*, *asana*, *pranayama*, *pratyahara*, *dharana*, *dhyana*, and *samadhi*). Most importantly, as Patanjali mentions in the very first sutra with the word *anusasanam*—yoga is an ongoing, experiential practice. It is not theoretical but practical. As a result, you have to show up and actually do the work. In the first sutra of the second chapter, Patanjali underscores the importance of this with the concept of *kriya yoga*: this is yoga in action, through action, of action. The three components of *kriya yoga* are *tapas* (elimination/purification), *svadhyaya* (self-reflection), and *isvara pranidhana* (acting in the best way we possibly can while letting go of the outcome). We must be present—to whatever degree we are capable—in every action we do, from walking the dog, paying the bills, communicating with our friends or our partner, to performing a concert or making a big work presentation.

While Patanjali's four-part model can certainly be applied to physical issues and mental, emotional, or psychological stresses and conditions (it even works as a fabulous business model!), ultimately, yoga is a spiritual quest, one of personal transformation. Patanjali tells us that we are looking to reduce or eliminate our *dukkham* or experience of suffering, not the suffering itself (which Patanjali teaches us we cannot avoid), by connecting with our own true Self—that quiet inner resource of strength and resilience, of wisdom and inner knowing, and also of our own deep joy and peace. The authentic Self lives in the place within each of us that transcends the body and mind and, according to Patanjali, is pure and permanent.

Because Patanjali recognizes that we are each individuals and that the process of personal transformation cannot be a cookie-cutter approach, the Yoga Sutras is full of many different choices, possibilities, and solutions for calming and focusing the mind and helping to differentiate between mind and Self and to better connect with (and act from) Self. I wonder how many people realize that out of 195 sutras, all designed to help us quiet and focus the mind so we can better connect with our true Self, only three have anything to do with asana!

To continue with my own story: When I came back to San Francisco after several years of living in India and studying with Sri Desikachar, I focused my energies on starting a non-profit healing center in San Francisco modeled after the KYM. In 2006, I founded the Healing Yoga Foundation (HYF), with a dedicated team of teachers and supporters, to fulfill the goal of providing access to the tools of yoga for support to underserved populations in need.

When I teach now, whether as part of the Commonweal Cancer Help Program, HYF's weekly classes for the homeless through Compass Homeless Family Services, or our newest program, a weekly class for women facing domestic violence and their children at the confidential shel-

ter in San Francisco with La Casa de Las Madres, or the many people I work with individually for therapeutic, healing support, I tell my students I have three goals for them:

- 1) to feel better physically, mentally, and emotionally through access to simple yet powerful tools they can use on their own to help reduce pain and ease symptoms;
- 2) that whatever practice we do (asana, meditation, visualization, chanting), my goal is to teach them how to help support their parasympathetic nervous system (or relaxation response), supporting the healing process at multiple levels; and
- 3) Finally, but perhaps most importantly, I tell them my goal is also to help them quiet the mind and connect with that quiet, inner resource within that I call their own true authentic Self.

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When I openly communicate these goals to my students, it not only illustrates yoga's comprehensive and integrated approach to healing, it empowers students as conscious and active participants in their own healing. Understanding the importance of self-awareness and self-discovery in the healing process underscores that it is not me as teacher who is healing them, but the students themselves who are responsible for their own healing and transformation—they are not dependent on me or anyone else to feel better. It shows that ultimately, as Sri Desikachar always says, as a teacher I am "just the postman," passing along tools and prac-

tices that I hope will be useful. The real work of self-discovery, transformation, and healing that evolves from the practice is the result of the students' own efforts. The beauty of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras is that it is indeed experiential and practical: we have to show up and do the work. While an experienced guide or teacher is an important part of this journey, the process for each of us is highly individualized and the efficacy depends on our own efforts.

As teachers and therapists, we must do our own work, of course, constantly striving to quiet and refine our own minds so that we can better connect with and act from our own true authentic Self. We not only feel better in our own lives, we can act with more clarity, and navigate our challenges and ups and downs with greater grace and equanimity, hopefully inspiring our students and those around us to do their own work. It is a practice that, while not easy, is there to meet us where we are and serve us throughout our lifetime.

Patanjali's model of healing, particularly the importance of self-awareness, self-discovery, and the process of acting from our authentic Self is the cornerstone of healing. It is a highly personalized journey and a crucial piece that we can never forget in yoga therapy, no matter how impactful or effective the asana, pranayama, or other tools in reducing or managing symptoms. Ultimately, it is this journey of self-discovery that helps support us in every area of our lives, no matter what challenges life may bring. **YTT**



*Kate Holcombe began her yoga education in 1991 as a student of T.K.V. Desikachar in Chennai, India, and continues to study with him regularly for*

*extended periods of intensive, one-on-one study. Kate has over 20 years of experience working with individuals facing a broad range of health concerns and illnesses. She is the founder and director of the non-profit Healing Yoga Foundation in San Francisco, California, and a contributing editor for Yoga Journal magazine.*