

YOGA & PSYCHE

INTEGRATING THE PATHS OF YOGA
AND PSYCHOLOGY FOR HEALING,
TRANSFORMATION, AND JOY

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sounds true
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THE MARRIAGE OF ANCIENT WISDOM AND DEPTH PSYCHOLOGY

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing, there is a field. I'll meet you there," wrote the thirteenth-century poet Rumi. This book is an invitation to create a new field in which we discover the endless mysteries of yoga and the deep psyche—a place to practice deeply with these exquisite, complementary inner traditions. Doing so as a globally linked community, we can collaborate, co-create, exchange knowledge and skills, and together become more than any of us can be alone.

Whether you are a yoga teacher or psychologist, a student of either practice, a health professional, or simply someone who wants to explore themselves and these subjects, you are entering a field in which anyone with sincerity and interest can find a place. You, the reader, are an essential voice in the birth of this field. Picking up this book indicates a curiosity—and most likely some experience or expertise—in one or both of these fields. Together we are engaging in a collective inquiry, investigation, dialogue, and exploration into this intersection of disciplines. By allowing psychology to impact yoga, and yoga to influence psychology, they each become more through the inclusion of the other—and we become more through the inclusion of each other's wisdom and alliance. Once you gain the foundation presented in this book,

I encourage you to engage in your own experiments, theories, research, and practices, and to contribute to this evolving field.



Psychology is a field in the making. Whereas the yoga tradition is estimated to be anywhere from 2,500 to 5,000 years old, Western psychology has been a recognizable field for only about 135 years.¹ Globalization, increased interest on the part of Westerners in Eastern spirituality, and significant developments in neuroscience, trauma research, and somatic psychology all have opened the doors for a truly new synthesis of Eastern and Western approaches to mental, physical, and spiritual health.

Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950)—an Indian nationalist, philosopher, and yoga master—taught that the desire for a transcendent, beyond-this-world enlightenment found in various spiritual traditions needed to be turned inward, or involuted, in order to transform our bodies at a cellular level and positively affect society on a grander level. I also believe this to be true and imperative at this time of environmental and political intensity. We who are interested in greater possibilities are not called to merely transcend the life we live and the earth we inhabit, but to transform them.

Part of this evolution includes transmuting the psychological aspect of our experience. We need to understand our own psychology in a deep way, penetrating our conditioning and understanding its multigenerational influence on us, and transforming unconscious limitations and conditioned ideas of who we are and how we are to live. Doing so, we become free to fully apply the great truths that yoga and other spiritual traditions have to offer. When that occurs, we increase our ability to penetrate our psychology more fully, which further opens spiritual awareness that again bears upon psychological deepening. In this way, we create a golden thread of infinity as to the possibilities of psychological and spiritual unfolding.

I envision a field of yoga in which more and more people of various backgrounds, cultures, ages, life stages, body types, and degrees

of health and illness engage with this extraordinary practice that has thrived for thousands of years. I also envision a quality of yoga practiced in the Western world that embraces the value that psychological insight has to offer teachers and practitioners. In this way, people can simultaneously heal physically and psychologically and, if they wish, explore the deeper spiritual insights of yoga, which become more accessible through the tools of psychology.

YOGA: THE ENDLESS EXPANSE

As I mentioned before, the precise origins of yoga are not known, and even renowned yoga scholars disagree on the historical dates of its inception. Writer and philosopher Mircea Eliade suggests that the first systematized form of yoga could have been written by Patanjali in his *Yoga Sutras* sometime between 300 BCE and 500 CE.² Georg Feuerstein proposes that less structured yogic ideas and practices can be found dating back to the time of the *Rig Veda*, a Hindu text and hymns composed before 1900 BCE.³ India religion scholar Edwin Bryant, PhD, asserts there are images of figures in yogic postures dating as far back as 3000 BCE.⁴

Throughout the course of this book, when I refer to yoga, I'm not just talking about the physical postures that yoga is commonly associated with in the Western world. I'm referring to everything yoga entails—*asana*, meditation, breathwork, ethics, self-care, service to the world, concepts of consciousness, and views on personal development. Looking at yoga from this wider perspective, we discover many of the goals of modern psychology to be complementary with those of yoga. Yet what yoga distinctly offers are maps of consciousness that expand far beyond where most psychology ends. These maps can add enormous depth, richness, and valuable tools to Western psychological approaches. Additionally, they're more accessible than the interpretations of consciousness offered by other spiritual traditions. Unlike contemporary religions that offer a viewpoint that adherents are expected to believe and follow at face value, yoga offers practices that introduce direct, personal experience of what it teaches.

Even if you have decades of yogic practice, you will continue to encounter new subtleties, blind spots, pitfalls, challenges, and unforeseen possibilities along the path. Fortunately, the yogic masters have already mapped these out in incredible detail. If you soar into the domains of angels, yoga has already mapped out how to navigate that territory. If you fall from grace, yoga offers guidelines to pick yourself up again. No matter how deep you immerse yourself in yogic practice, no matter how far your consciousness expands, yoga will give you a map to guide the way. But yoga doesn't ask you to mistake the map for the journey itself. Yoga shows you the way and expects you to experiment and make your own discoveries. Yoga teaches us to experience spirituality for ourselves, as opposed to just taking someone else's word for it.

The physical practice of asana is so effective and timeless that it translates into every culture in which it is placed. We are living in a time in which yoga is literally taking root in new countries and populations with unprecedented frequency. A 2016 study conducted by *Yoga Journal* and Yoga Alliance reveals that there are nearly 37 million yoga practitioners in the United States (up from 20.4 million in 2012), and 34 percent of Americans say they are "somewhat or very likely" to practice yoga in the next year (the equivalent of more than 80 million Americans). The study also shows that 37 percent of practitioners have children younger than eighteen who also practice yoga.⁵ These days, there seem to be few people who disagree with the value of yoga. It shows up in all types of places: organizations that serve veterans, the elderly, youth, and underprivileged populations of every kind; businesses; government; conventional and alternative medicine practices; insurance companies; the corporate world; centers for trauma and conflict resolution; and among the millions of people who find a spiritual or inner connection and increased physical and mental health through its practices.

There's a common fallacy that people need to be flexible, young, or physically fit to do yoga. The reality is that anyone can practice. In my teaching experience, even students who are highly compromised in terms of physical capacity still benefit from yoga. One student

could not engage in physical movement without overheating, so I helped him follow the yoga instructions mentally, visualizing the practice and working with his breath. He gained immense physical and emotional benefits from the practice. Of the 196 *sutras*, or idioms, that comprise the Yoga Sutras, only three refer to the physical practice of asana. Although many people prefer to enter the yogic path through asana, yoga also offers doorways of breathing techniques, meditation, and internal practices available to people at every age and stage of development.

Yoga is a popular complement to the practices of other spiritual traditions, and you'll find yoga as a component of religious retreats around the world. People from all backgrounds enjoy yoga without feeling that doing so contradicts the teachings of their traditions. Buddhists have been incorporating yoga into their seated and walking meditation practices, and people from all backgrounds practice *kirtan* or attend concerts to hear the sacred chants. Once, in Barcelona, I sang *mantras* with hundreds of people at an outdoor gathering. In Israel, I was exposed to the Om Shalom movement, which integrates the physical practices of yoga with the prayers and philosophical teachings of Judaism.

Big business—particularly in the fields of fashion design, physical fitness, and nutrition—has taken note of yoga's popularity, often to the dismay of committed yogic practitioners. The 2016 study conducted by *Yoga Journal* and Yoga Alliance mentioned earlier states that the “annual practitioners’ spending on yoga classes, clothing, equipment, and accessories rose to \$16 billion, up from \$10 billion over the past four years.”⁶ Yoga has also become popular among professional athletes and is marketed to fans of those sports, including professional football, surfing, and mixed martial arts, to name a few. Whereas many serious practitioners feel concerned that this “dumbing down” and commercialization of yoga confuses people about the real nature of yoga, others believe that entering the practice of yoga at any level still brings benefit and offers a doorway to discovering yoga's deeper dimensions.

PSYCHE: THE ENDLESS INTERIOR

Psyche refers to a concept of the intangible self. Although the self is invisible, it is felt palpably within all of us. Originating from Latin and Greek, the term refers to “the soul, mind, spirit; breath; life, one’s life, the invisible animating principle or entity which occupies and directs the physical body; understanding.”⁷ I choose to use the term *psyche* because it intimates centuries of thought regarding the self and soul prior to the somewhat recent construction of the field of psychology. Specifically, *psyche* points to an aspect of the human being that is individual, unique, more unconscious than conscious, and conditioned through time, yet capable of transformation.

In contrast to the infinite expanse of yoga, Western psychology—in particular somatic psychology, trauma research, and neuroscience—has discovered methods to unravel and heal the ailments that afflict the Western psyche while valuing the individual’s unique personal story and history. I choose to address the Western psyche in this book rather than the global psyche because individual cultures impact the structure and formation of the human psyche. As a Western psychologist, I have worked successfully with people from different cultures throughout the world, and it is my hope that the proposed integration of yoga and psychology will be relevant to people of other cultures. However, I also want to be clear about the limits of my knowledge of the formation of the psyche in cultures far different from my own.

Carl Jung (1875–1961) was one of the first Western psychologists to make the connection between psyche and yoga, and he articulated some of the most eloquent thoughts on the psyche itself. Although not always known as such, Jung was a modern mystic who explored the esoteric domains of consciousness, including the vast territory of the unconscious, in a way similar to that of the yogis. However, Jung valued and embraced the personal and archetypal dimensions of the human being that yogis have often ignored or prematurely transcended. He spent much of his life exploring the experiences, images, desires, and longings of humans everywhere. In his *Psychology and Religion: East and West*, Jung writes, “I would not advise anyone to touch yoga without careful analysis of his unconscious reaction.”⁸ Although we as a culture have come a long way

from this perspective, this statement points to Jung's respect for the power of the deeper dimensions of yoga.

In *Civilization in Transition*, Jung asserts, "Even if the whole world were to fall to pieces, the unity of the psyche would never be shattered. And the wider and more numerous the fissures on the surface, the more the unity is strengthened in the depths."⁹ Some Eastern traditions regard the psyche and psychology from an impersonal perspective, suggesting that "life is but a dream," and they view the psyche as something unreal and impenetrable, and something to be transcended. Jung and his contemporaries, however, offered a doorway to the nascent field of spiritualized psychology. Unlike others, they held a deep respect for the psyche and recognized the value of exploring it, relating to it, and discovering an inherently spiritual process of unfolding by doing so.

In my own explorations, I have found the psyche to have an invisible but palpable "shape" that can almost be seen. It can be molded, worked with, and moved into healthier, deeper, and more integrated shapes, bringing people more happiness. As a young psychologist, and particularly during my early forays into spirituality as a late teen, the psyche seemed like an impossible labyrinth to engage with, much less unwind. Yet over the years I have found I can engage with it and help it transform into its full potential, and this particularly happens when combining Western psychology with yogic practices. With dedication, time, and skillful guidance, even a tangled psychological makeup can be unwoven and transformed.

Western psychology also offers interest in—and inclusion of—the shadow elements we all have within us. These are aspects of ourselves that we repress from awareness but that often cause pain or even harm to ourselves and those around us. The shadow is somewhat accounted for in yogic teachings as an aspect of the unconscious mind that one aims to transcend, or it is worked with meditatively through yogic deities. However, in Western psychology, the shadow is the gateway to integrating aspects of the unconscious in order to become a more unified and individuated human being. In *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, Jung writes:

In contrast to the meditation found in yoga practice, the psychoanalytic aim is to observe the shadowy presentation—whether in the form of images or of feelings—that are spontaneously evolved in the unconscious psyche and appear without his bidding to the [person] who looks within. In this way we find once more things that we have repressed or forgotten. Painful though it may be, this is in itself a gain—for what is inferior or even worthless belongs to me as my Shadow and gives me substance and mass. How can I be substantial if I fail to cast a Shadow? I must have a dark side also if I am to be whole; and inasmuch as I become conscious of my Shadow, I also remember that I am a human being like any other.¹⁰

YOGA AND PSYCHOLOGY RESEARCH

Science matters. And it is particularly valuable when examining the integration of yoga and Western psychology because research can promote the acceptance of yoga and its practice in tandem with psychology into mainstream policy, thus linking contemporary science with sincere spiritual practice. Fortunately, yoga has recently been widely studied through the lens of scientific research, and thus the intuition of the yogic mystics is now supported through science in a way that is beginning to bring it into mainstream acceptance and helping it garner public funding.

My research for this book is an overview of the popular literature related to this subject, as well as an outline of the academic research done to date on the integration of yoga with psychology and its related fields. A team of five talented graduate-school interns and I included studies on yoga's impact on stress, as well as the use of yoga in treating clinical diagnoses and promoting well-being. We also researched yoga and neuroscience literature, studies regarding the usage of yoga to treat trauma, and investigations into the integration of yoga and somatic psychology. From approximately two hundred studies, we developed the following propositions:

1. The Western psychologist can benefit from insights, practices, and research on yoga.
2. The Western practitioner of yoga can benefit by integrating the larger yogic perspective of breathwork and meditation, as well as somatic psychology, neuroscience, trauma research, mindfulness, and other developments in Western psychology.
3. The long-term integration of these two fields offers the practitioner the possibility of becoming fully embodied—for the consciousness and intelligence that are ordinarily associated with the mind to become awakened throughout the whole body.
4. There is a new field emerging in which a variety of methods that integrate yoga and psychology can be created, researched, and implemented.

There is ample evidence to show that yoga has a positive effect on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, anxiety, immunity issues, eating disorders, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), schizophrenia, well-being, and mood. More than 150 detailed references for the studies cited below are available online in an article published in the *Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* entitled “Yoga Psychotherapy: The Integration of Western Psychological Theory and Ancient Yogic Wisdom.”¹¹ Here are some highlights:

Yoga Reduces Stress

“Yoga for Anxiety and Depression,” an article in the *Harvard Mental Health Letter*, addresses the significance of yoga on stress management. It asserts that by “reducing perceived stress and anxiety, yoga appears to modulate stress response systems. This, in turn, decreases physiological arousal—for example, reducing the heart rate, lowering blood pressure, and easing respiration. There is also evidence that yoga

practices help increase heart-rate variability, an indicator of the body's ability to respond to stress with more flexibility."¹² Additional studies have found the following:

- A relationship exists between yoga and decreased stress in young adults, older adults, businesswomen and men, and patients suffering from chronic illness.
- Yoga has the ability to train the body to relax on a muscular level, helping practitioners to more easily manage their stress response.
- Compared to beginners, advanced practitioners of physical yoga displayed lower levels of stress and increased awareness of being present in the moment.
- Yoga helps adults and traumatized youth regulate their emotions and practice self-soothing techniques.
- Yoga's meditative practices and breathwork (pranayama) have been shown to promote emotional regulation.

Yoga Can Assist in Treating Clinical Diagnoses

Yoga has been shown to assist children with a diagnosis of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Specifically, yoga practice has been used to help them stabilize their emotions, reduce hyperactivity and impulsivity, increase attention span, provide feelings of calmness and confidence, and improve social skills. Yoga also has been shown to improve sleep patterns, parent-child relationships, and the child's approach to school.¹³

People who suffer from eating disorders and also practice yoga have experienced improved mood, increased physical and emotional awareness, and decreased symptoms of their disorders. Overeating and "emotional eating" were also reduced. One study reported that through