

THE SOMATIC PSYCHOTHERAPY/ YOGA CONNECTION
BY MARJORIE L. RAND, PH.D. AND MICHAEL RUCCOLO, III, BA, RYT

We would like to discuss some basic concepts of somatic psychotherapy and compare them to some basic concepts of Yoga. Our goal is to explore the synergy of the two practices. We believe they have much in common and they can support each other.

Working with the body in psychotherapy is a way to achieve integration of body/mind/spirit. In the West, the body has been separated from the mind and spirit. This is not the case with Eastern practices, which include the body and breathing practices. Yoga asanas (poses) can influence our life processes, our reactions and responses to everyday life. Combining psychotherapy and Yoga can help us learn about the specific energetic and emotional issues that are held in the body and how to heal them. Both practices promote presence through introspection, expanded self awareness, connection to Self and others, autonomic self-regulation, containment and grounding. By presence we mean the ability to stay in the moment, the here and now of our experience. The first sutra of Patanjali says “Now –in the present moment-yoga (Oneness, Wholeness) appears”.

The concept of developing expanded awareness and witnessing our process is key in body psychotherapy. Without awareness there can be no change. We know from Quantum Physics that we are constellations of energy and change is the only constant. When we resist this, we become stuck or blocked. Our goal in somatic psychotherapy is to open the blocks in the body and restore free energy flow. In fact, we believe that the sense of Self is the experience of aliveness in the body. We come into our bodies with this essence of Self, but even before birth it can be covered over by defenses formed against experiencing trauma or pain.

In Yoga we learn to witness or observe ourselves and our process. In the second sutra Patanjali says “We experience this Oneness when we can let thoughts arise and subside..just noticing...creating in our awareness a spacious container-a Witness for whatever is happening”. In Yoga we start with the body and the breath, but we also deal with the mind, concentration and levels of consciousness. In the asana practice, we

aim to become aware of the contents of the mind, which keep us from being present with our immediate experience of each pose. Effort is a multilayered human response that yogis peel away using analysis and experimentation. The right Effort begins from the ground and travels up through the body particularly during Asanas. This movement takes the yogis from the gross posture to a balanced Effort of Meditation or controlled energies. At this moment, body Awareness and Attention reveals itself as Self.

In psychotherapy and in Yoga the goal is to reach the experience of the authentic Self and connection. In Sutra three Patanjali says “In that place where the witness resides, in that place of pure awareness, exists the true self”. Expanded awareness not only calms the mind, but creates a deeper connection to Self (body) and others. The importance of relationship to Self and other (the environment) is recognized as essential in psychotherapy. In Yoga the practice of union (connection), an individual develops internal and external relatedness and connection to the universe. There is the realization that all beings are interrelated. In psychotherapy defenses (false self) are revealed and released. In sutra four Patanjali says “Otherwise the experiencer splits off from the Self and creates false identities, whose distorted understandings are mistaken for the whole”.

This process begins at the sensory and motor levels where external information enters the nervous system and processes according to an individual’s perceptions, misperceptions, illusions, memories and beliefs, such as “I see the benefits of Yoga.” Maybe Yoga will help me.” Then his or her volition drives him or her to practice where the sensory and motor information enters the nervous system again. Now, bidirectional mental activity communicates with the individual and asana. This is being present. Iyengar suggests this is “Mind Communion.” A reflection of the activity soon reveals the individual’s Self.

In somatic psychotherapy (and in Pre and Perinatal Psychology), we believe that our early life experiences (including prenatal experiences) are imprinted in our bodies. These experiences and memories are pre-verbal and cannot be reached by verbal means. They are largely unconscious, but are very powerful in dictating how we live our lives As

we develop we begin to identify with our defenses (character, personality) and move further and further away from the experience of the authentic Self. We aim to reconnect with this experience.

But in order to achieve this, we need to become aware of, experience and release the content of the blocks.

Through introspection, we begin to witness our patterns and to disidentify from them. One such common pattern is to dissociate (split off awareness of the body). As an early defense mechanism it is a survival strategy, but over time it's function becomes reversed and it is a liability. So presence becomes most important in the process. Learning to stay in the here and now moment observing and directly experiencing the body and mind is called mindfulness. Related concepts are grounding and containment. An unblocked body will be flexible (physically and psychologically) and will be able to contain the flow of energy (prana, chi) without discharging it, cutting it off or splitting off from it. To do this we must be grounded in the body.

We use breath as a primary tool for opening the body, expanding awareness, and increasing energy flow. The way a person breathes is often the most obvious indication of his/her emotional and mental state. As we practice the asanas and the breath (pranayama) we can balance the Autonomic Nervous System (ANS). Breathing is both a conscious and unconscious function, therefore it can be seen as an intermediary between body and mind.. As an individual practices and masters this skill, he/she will be able to regulate his or her own nervous system.

In Yoga the breathing practices can teach a person how to be aware of and move energy in the body. The physical practice of Yoga can teach the body to relax, release tension and calm the mind. By regulating the ANS through the breath many emotional and physical health benefits are gained. Anxiety, depression, stress and tension are decreased. Blood pressure, heart rate, metabolism, brain waves, temperature, sleep patterns and digestion are affected.

The body psychotherapist accompanies the client on this path to self awareness, by mirroring the client's process and helping the client re-connect to his authentic self and flow of energy in the body.

It is this relationship to self and other that promotes healing the early wounds. This can often lead to a transpersonal experience of connecting to something greater (God, Nature, the Universe).