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Yoga and Buddhism as Psychotherapies

John C. Kimbrough

Yoga and Buddhism are multi-dimensional paths which seek to change the consciousness from one hindered by sensual desire, ill-will, restlessness and worry, sloth and torpor and doubt to one which is brightened by mindfulness, energy, joy, investigation, concentration, tranquility and equanimity.

In this manner, their purpose is much the same as psychotherapy, in that they want to bring about a transformation of the personality, so one can experience life from a more wholesome and healthy perspective.

When we are healthier, it is easier for us to set goals and pursue them. These goals do not have to be grandiose in nature, as they can consist of things as simple as cleaning the house, improving our living environment, learning something new, developing a new skill and trying to interact with others in a more compassionate and understanding way.

Both Yoga and Buddhism bring about this change through a two pronged approach.

One is in our attitudes and the other is through mental and physical actions.

We need to be made aware of what might be wholesome ways of living before we can make an attempt to bring them into our lives. Once we are aware of them, we can reflect on them and make the attempt to make them part of our mental and physical actions.

This brings about changes within, and in how we relate to others and the world.

In order to assist in that change, both Yoga and Buddhism recommend sitting meditation practice. This brings about a stillness to the body and mind which has a therapeutic affect on one's consciousness.

The posture that one sits in seems to be of great concern to many, when in reality the criteria for the posture performance consists of only two things:

It "should be comfortable and steady" (Yoga Sutra 2:46).

This means one can sit in a chair, or use pillows, blankets, folded towels or cushions to get them into a posture that meets this criteria.

One of the advantages retreat settings is that we have the opportunity to pay more attention to our meditation practices.

Sometimes we react to this with frustration and anxiety, when in reality, it is an opportunity to make the changes that are necessary in order to bring about the particular posture that is comfortable and steady.

During a recent stay in a Buddhist meditation center in Sri Lanka, it seemed that initially I spent a lot of time rearranging blankets and pillows so that I could be comfortable and steady with my posture.

If someone is interested in getting the therapeutic benefits of meditation, be patient with your practice, but also be consistent. Do not give up. Try a chair or try various postures. Do not initially try to sit in a posture that is complex or advanced.

Two postures that we recommend are the 'Hero Posture' and the 'Easy Posture'.

The Hero Posture, known as vajrasana or virisana in Sanskrit, consists of folding the legs below the body so that one rests on the heels. This is initially quite difficult, in that it is painful.

A few years back, while staying in an Ashram in India, this was, and still is my favorite posture for experiencing the stillness, silence and investigation of meditation.

A Japanese lady who was at the Ashram assumed that I had spent a long period of time in Japan because this is a posture that we frequently associate with Japanese culture.

This posture is quite therapeutic as the spine is straight. Most of the initial discomfort consists of pain in the ankles and knees.

The Easy Posture consists of the legs being folded in front of oneself. It seems to be easier for many people who are new to working with the body in this manner to perform. The Sanskrit name for this posture is Sukhasana.

As mentioned earlier, both postures can be made more comfortable and manageable through the use of props such as blankets and cushions.

I have found that folded blankets work quite well, as they can be adjusted to a way that is most suitable for one's particular needs, whereas cushions do not offer that flexibility.

How does Hatha Yoga fit into all this?

Hatha Yoga is the Yoga which most individuals associate Yoga with these days.

It consists of cleansing, breathing and body techniques and postures.

The purpose of hatha yoga is multi-dimensional as it brings about a wide range of mental and physical changes and benefits.

One of its purposes is to prepare the mind and body for meditation.

So, if we want to apply Yoga and Buddhism to ourselves as a psychotherapy, we should try to cultivate a routine that consists of Hatha Yoga, meditation, a healthy diet, proper habits regarding sleep, and the understanding and application of those mental and physical behaviors which are what we commonly refer to as being moral and ethical.

If an individual is experiencing a sense of discomfort, stress or anxiety on a regular basis, we recommend that they investigate the paths and practices that make up Yoga and Buddhism as a way to help them weaken and alleviate these states.

John teaches Yoga, Buddhism and English and lives in Bangkok, Thailand. He can be reached at johnckimbrough@yahoo.com

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