

Yoga as Supportive Care for Healing from Cancer

By Jim Carson and Kimberly Carson

Jane was a 45-year-old woman who had been diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer. The diagnosis changed everything, not only for Jane but also for her husband and their two young children. All of the family rhythms were impacted by appointments, treatments, and how Jane felt following treatment. Jane began attending our group yoga classes because she wanted a way to relax herself out of the constant state of worry. The gentle poses felt deeply nourishing to her body and helped her to begin to reconnect with a sense of wellbeing. She described that, although she loved the sense of ease she experienced in the class, it wasn't long before the real and often overwhelming experience of cancer treatment would again agitate her system. It was during her meditation practice that she noticed the familiar but subtle thought, "Good parents aren't sick. I can't parent while going through treatment." She began to recognize how this thought was influencing how she showed up in her family and was initiating a withdrawal from her children and husband. When she gained insight into how this thought-form was impacting her experience, she felt empowered to still honor how her body was struggling, and yet be as present as possible with the people she loved—that although she may feel sick or fatigued, she could still listen to her children's stories from the day, could still come to the dinner table, could still cuddle with her husband. As she shared this insight with the group, other students described similar insights and healings of their own. For Jane, the combination of the relaxing and nourishing dimension of the postures, the clarity that came with the meditation, and the support of the community all supported her commitment to herself and her yoga practice.

Notably, although Jane found yoga to be extremely helpful for navigating her challenges, yoga did not provide her with a cure. We believe that it is wise to approach the prospect of teaching yoga to cancer patients with this explicit understanding: Yoga can be a wonderful sup-

port for the healing process, which may even result in a remission of symptoms. But without the aid of other therapeutic treatments, yoga is unlikely to lead to a cure,¹ despite claims to the contrary.²⁻⁴

Rich Practices Beyond the Poses

As well as providing an example of how yoga practices can be powerful tools to promote the process of healing from cancer, Jane's story illustrates the rich diversity of practices offered by the yoga tradition. During recent years, as yoga poses have become popularized in Western countries, the term "yoga" in common usage has largely become synonymous

tice of meditation (*dhyana*), breathing exercises (*pranayama*), self-study (*swadhyaya*), and practitioner meetings and interchange (*satsanga*).⁸⁻¹²

Note that the term "evidence-based" is used here with the specific meaning that this program—along with a variety of other yoga programs such as Iyengar yoga therapy,¹³⁻¹⁶ Viniyoga therapy,¹⁷⁻¹⁹ and iRest Yoga Nidra^{20,21}—have been studied in rigorous, published clinical trials. Yoga of Awareness, for example, has demonstrated consistent improvements in pain, fatigue, emotional distress, relaxation, acceptance, and invigoration in women living with metastatic breast cancer,⁹ in sur-



with this single aspect of the fuller discipline. However, the emerging field of yoga therapy holds the potential for correcting this misperception by way of highlighting the complementary value of other traditional yoga practices, such as meditation.^{5,6} In keeping with this perspective, this article will draw on examples from the Yoga of Awareness Program,⁷ an evidence-based therapeutic protocol developed by the authors of this article. Yoga of Awareness is a well-defined program that focuses strongly on cultivating a mindful perspective during asana practice, in conjunction with substantial time engaged in the prac-

tice of meditation,¹⁰ and also in women suffering from other conditions that make them vulnerable.^{11,12} The outcome data from such formal research is the type of evidence that is considered credible to the general medical community (including medical insurance companies). This is no way implies that other forms of yoga are not therapeutic. Rather, in twenty-first-century societies, scientific substantiation of the benefits of yoga carries a special value that is not conveyed by yogic lore or anecdotal reports about its effects on wellbeing.

Not a Prescribed Set of Postures

Choice of postures is a very important consideration when working with this population. Given the disease process, stage, treatments and the profile of side effects, keen attention must be given to the selection of postures for the safety of each patient. However, based on our experience teaching in oncology settings for over ten years, we do not subscribe to the perspective that a prescription of specific postures exists for specific symptoms. Gentle postures should be chosen that are appropriate to the student and taught as a forum for developing mindful awareness of bodily sensations and related thoughts and emotional currents. We would hope that yoga therapists are well prepared to welcome students living with cancer as they are, rather than clinging to expectations of how they should be, including how their bodies should move.²² In teaching asanas to people living with cancer, we are guided by a framework, *Principles of Practice* (see Table 1), that integrates knowledge gained from Western medicine with yogic teachings.²³

Along with making our bodies stronger and more flexible, yoga poses, when done in a mindful manner, offer myriad opportunities for developing a new awareness of and relationship to our bodily sensations. Richer dimensions of this practice open up as we learn to pay closer attention to both skillful bodily movements and the shifting sensations that accompany such movements. We often become aware of pleasurable currents of sensations as we move, or hold a certain pose, or during the final relaxation pose (*shavasana*). Frequently, a sense of feeling refreshed, invigorated, and more at ease remains with us at the end of practice.

In addition, yoga poses offer a context for becoming aware of, and freeing ourselves from, subtle patterns of reactivity, such as shallow breathing, excessive muscle tension, guarding patterns that prevent fluidity, and anxious or fearful thoughts. By learning to practice while attending to and accepting more subtle aspects of our experience during and between movements, we can begin to skillfully engage with our sensate, affective, and cognitive patterns. For example, range of motion in a joint may be diminished due to disease or treatment effects, which may stir frustration, sadness, or speculation on future limitations when moving that joint. Learning to be present with all of those experiences as they are (e.g., the sensations, the emotional responses, and the mental commentary) creates the conditions for us to allow those experiences to move through our system without either resisting them or clinging to them. This skill can be directly extended into working with a significantly more aversive context, such as pain or an overwhelming emotion. Certainly, mindful asana practice can provide the benefits of healthy physical activity. But just as important, moving with awareness develops skills that allow us to inhabit the body and mind in more meaningful and tolerable ways.

Table 1. Carson-Krucoff Principles of Practice^a

1. **First, Do No Harm.** Join with our physician colleagues in making this our primary intention as yoga therapists.
2. **Create a Safe Environment.** Cultivate *ahimsa* (non-harming) by encouraging students to honor their own personal journey and to explore their full potential, with compassion and integrity.
3. **Encourage Yogic Balance.** “*Sthira sukham asanam*” — A yoga pose is, by Patanjali's definition, stable and comfortable. Invite students to challenge themselves, but never strain.
4. **Meet People Where They Are.** Honor individual abilities and limitations by offering accessible and appropriate modifications that reflect the intention and function of traditional postures.
5. **Emphasize Feeling Over Form.** Guide your students to let go of ideas of how a pose should look and to focus instead on how a pose feels. Teach students to discriminate between discomfort, which may be welcomed as an inherent part of the growth process, and pain, which is to be avoided.
6. **Honor the Inner Teacher.** Don't assume that you know what's going on with someone, even if you've asked them. Consider yourself a guide, helping students to explore what works best for them.
7. **Encourage Gratitude and Joy.** Create an environment that celebrates what students can do rather than focusing on what they can't do.
8. **Emphasize Fluidity.** The Tao's teaching that “those who are soft and supple are disciples of life” is particularly important as the body becomes rigid with age. Minimize static holds.
9. **Use Skillful Language.** *Encourage* and *invite*, rather than *direct* and *demand*.
10. **Respect Our Scope of Practice.** Recognize that what we do as yoga therapists is only part of the integrative health care landscape. Do only what we are trained to do and refer to other practitioners when necessary.
11. **Be a Guardian of Safety.** Get CPR/AED training and keep your certification current.
12. **Teach People, Not Poses or Conditions.** While acknowledging the inevitable changes inherent in life, it is essential to recognize the unchanging spirit at the heart of all beings.

^a Modified from *Therapeutic Yoga for Seniors Teacher Training Manual*, ©2014 Kimberly M. Carson and Carol Krucoff.

Folding-in Elements of Yoga Philosophy

Along with supplementing asanas with meditation and other practices, the depth of the learning experience can be greatly enhanced by folding elements of yoga philosophy into classes. For example, one fellow with gastrointestinal cancer was really struggling with severe nausea due to tumor load, as well as radiation damage and chemotherapy side effects. He found that with consistent practice, working with the breath and the principle of *nama/rupa*—that whenever we name (*nama*) something, either mentally or verbally, the very act of naming it begins to bring that something into form (*rupa*) in our consciousness—despite severe nausea he was able to settle his system enough to keep himself out of the emergency room on two occasions. By becoming aware of how he was naming and creating an image of the nausea in his mind, he could then soften out of that particular thought-form and consequently invite his system into a less reactive state.

A key to successfully applying yogic principles to cancer patients' or other students' experiences is to translate yogic terminology into words that convey the wisdom of yoga in a manner that is unencumbered by cultural trappings, and thus rendered more accessible to everyone, regardless of their cultural or religious background. Table 2 presents the *Foundations of Yoga Practice* that are intensively cultivated in the Yoga of Awareness program. Suggestions for how to apply these foundations to daily life are woven into this program. For example, students are encouraged to pause for a few moments throughout their day to take clear notice of their sense of simply being present, just watching and observing in the midst of whatever else they may be experiencing; then, as soon as they feel ready, they go back to attending to whatever else needs their attention. Likewise, they are assigned brief “homework” practices that include

- discovering and observing the wave-like pattern (arising, cresting, subsiding) of all types of sensations, whether pleasant or unpleasant: touch (e.g., warm or cool, rough or smooth, painful or comforting), sights, sounds, smells, tastes;
- distinguishing between actual events that occur in daily life and the mind's tendency to create “stories” about these events; and
- practicing kindness and patience with themselves and others.

Table 2. Foundations of Yoga Practice^a

Simple Being	Our immediate sense of simply being present at any given moment; a reliable point you can come back to, to get centered and find your bearings.
Awareness	Watching yourself in your daily life with alert interest—noticing bodily sensations, thoughts, feelings, and actions—with the intention to understand rather than to judge. ²⁴
Love	Within all of us there is a deep-down goodness, which is the basis for qualities such as kindness and carefulness.
Acceptance	Being willing to have the experience you are already having versus resisting and struggling to escape your own experience. ²⁵
Riding the Waves	Living skillfully: finding your balance and keeping your poise amidst the tumult of life's ever-changing waves. ²⁶

^a From *Yoga of Awareness Teacher Training Manual*, ©2014 James W. Carson and Kimberly M. Carson.

Cues that highlight these foundations are also woven into instructions for doing poses. For example, to encourage acceptance of the often unavoidable discomfort or physical limitations cancer patients experience during movement, the teacher may say something along the lines of “Can you—for a moment—allow this experience to just be here without resisting?”

Choice of Words

As indicated above, we believe the choice of words that teachers use to speak about yoga and its benefits is very important. This is especially true when yoga is taught to cancer patients in a clinic or other medical setting (as contrasted with teaching spiritual seekers at a yoga studio). We have found that it is helpful to keep discussions focused on the actual yoga practices and the tangible benefits students are noticing (e.g., postures help with flexibility and relaxation, three-part breath helps calm anxiety, meditation helps in not getting trapped in the mind's story as well as remembering presence). In keeping with this approach, it is often best to avoid emphasizing the more esoteric and peripheral topics often associated with yoga (e.g., chakras, auras), and if these topics are raised by students, to quickly shift the emphasis back to students' direct experience of the practices (versus, for example, speculating on which chakra is

activated by what). Likewise, it is best to avoid language that might become a barrier, such as overuse of Sanskrit terms or constantly framing yoga as “spiritual” in a manner that can turn off people from traditional religious (or non-spiritual) backgrounds. In many regions of the United States, students are likely to come from more conservative religious backgrounds. Describing yoga to them as a spiritual path may provoke unnecessary conflict in their minds about whether yoga is compatible with their religious views. On the other hand, if discussion remains focused on the universal nature of the yoga practices (e.g., “we all breathe all the time, but the way in which we breathe can make a big difference”) and stays close to the direct effects of the practices, students often comment on experiences such as “feeling a deep sense of peace” without it raising any concerns for them.

Moreover, as teachers we need to recognize that our choice of words holds great power in helping our students learn not just what to do, but also how to do it. Both what we say and how we choose to say it play an essential role in setting the appropriate tone for our students' experiences. For example, notice your reaction to the words or phrases in the left-hand column below as compared to how you react to the words in the right-hand column.^{8,23}

I want you to step your right foot forward.
Lie down on your back.
Tighten your abdominal muscles.
Push into the floor with your foot.
Reach your arm out.
Work at staying balanced.

Please step your right foot forward.
I invite you to lie down on your back.
Engage your abdominal muscles.
Root down into the floor with your foot.
Extend your arm out.
Play with staying balanced.

It is best to avoid language that might become a barrier, such as over-use of Sanskrit terms or constantly framing yoga as “spiritual” in a manner that can turn off people from traditional religious (or non-spiritual) backgrounds.

The words and phrases in the right-hand column invite and encourage while those in the left-hand column are more directive and demanding. This type of “skillful language” that sets the tone for a non-stressful, non-struggling, non-judgmental relationship to one’s body is a fundamental component of how Yoga of Awareness is taught to students whose bodies are physically or emotionally challenged.

Relationship to Self, to Difficulties, and to the Therapeutic Relationship

As our awareness grows broader, deeper, and clearer through yoga practice, the ways we relate to our experiences are likewise transformed. A fundamental shift develops in how we relate to “self.” As described by the sage Nisargadatta Maharaj, we begin to recognize more readily that “whatever [we] think, say or do, this sense of immutable and affectionate being remains as the ever-present background of the mind.”²⁴

Through anchoring into this simple, stable, unchanging aspect of our being, we discover an internal refuge that is deeply nourishing and, importantly, always available to us. This inner refuge is especially helpful when dealing with difficult challenges such as being diagnosed with cancer. Greater awareness builds an ability to relate to cancer-related difficulties—such as bodily changes, pain, fatigue, and emotional distress—in a less reactive way. As insight grows, students with cancer find themselves more at peace and more able to access the courage, flexibility, and patience to face the adversities they must deal with. They discover how to “ride the waves” of such experiences with equanimity and some measure of freedom from the suffering that comes from trying to hold on to what can’t be held or stopping what can’t be stopped.

Moreover, yoga therapists, as their awareness becomes more refined, begin to relate to their therapeutic role differently. A deeper realization develops of both the responsibilities and opportunities they accept when serving as yoga therapists.

One aspect of this change entails a merging of the yogic principle of *ahimsa* with Hippocrates’ intention to “first, do no harm.” In our experience, avoiding harm includes becoming better informed about evidence-based medical concerns. Hence, our Yoga of Awareness for Cancer teacher training course at Duke Integrative Medicine includes expert presentations by Duke faculty on topics such as “Cancer 101,” “Movement considerations with cancer patients,” “Cancer-related pain,” “Psychosocial aspects of cancer,” and “Palliative care and integrative medicine in cancer.” Another aspect of this re-orientation is in understanding that to maximize one’s therapeutic impact, it is important to hone one’s personal skills in being mindfully present with students. Although it is by no means easy, it can be profoundly transformative for students with cancer and very rewarding for the therapist if the therapist learns to “hold space” for and address the student’s difficult concerns rather than deflect them, try to fix them, or view them as “negative.” As Erica Ross so poetically expressed it, “Holding space is a beautiful responsibility, an endless well, a womb, a wand, a wind.”²⁷

Sharing practice experiences with a group of students facing similar cancer-related challenges produces an exponential, transpersonal effect on learning.

A recent example of holding space arose in one of our cancer classes. A woman had been diagnosed with a rather aggressive cancer and her fear of how the disease might progress was overwhelming to her. Not only was coming face-to-face with her potential mortality deeply unsettling, she was profoundly afraid that she could die in excruciating pain. She was also terrified that she would not be able to afford to stay in her house and that she would die alone on the city streets. It was a very grim and frightening story she was telling herself over and over. This “catastrophizing”—mentally playing out the worst possible scenarios—left her breathless and in an almost perpetual state of panic. When we provided her the space to share her fears, without trying to change or fix her or reassure her, she was able to apply the yogic tools she was learning in

the training. She was able to notice the stories her mind was telling her; she was able to return to the present moment and to rest in Simple Being so that the emotional currents could pass through her and she was ready to face with courage what was actually occurring in her life.

Advantages of the Group Context

Although the overall therapeutic approach described in this article can be tailored for one-on-one work with individual students, there are valuable advantages to working with small-to-medium-sized groups (five-to-ten students). Foremost of these advantages is the profound element of *satsanga*. Sharing practice experiences with a group of students facing similar cancer-related challenges produces an exponential, transpersonal effect on learning. A powerful, very moving, and supportive bond usually builds between individuals participating in a group program of this sort. Each person’s contributions tend to evoke new or deeper insights in other participants.

Another salient advantage is in the cost-benefit ratio. To address all participants’ needs, group sessions typically need to run somewhat longer than individual sessions. However, yoga therapists commit much less time to leading a group two-hour session versus five-to-ten individual sixty-to-ninety minute sessions. This allows for group classes to be much more affordable for students.

Of course, effectively leading group yoga programs requires that the therapist obtain training in specific group facilitation skills.⁵ Even when the overall content and goals of a yoga program are predefined, as they are in Yoga of Awareness, each group’s journey tends to have its own uniquely shifting rhythms. Like many things in life, group dynamics are best learned experientially and it takes time as well as training to hone skills for holding space and other leadership skills. As one gains more experience in leading groups, the process refines one’s abilities to foster an exchange that is characterized by trust, openness, deep listening, truthful speaking, and mutual caring and support.

Students with Various Stages of Cancer

Working with students with active cancer—and especially those with metastatic

or other forms of advanced cancer—calls for distinct perspectives and unique challenges, relative to working with “cancer-free survivors.” Disease-free survivors (commonly understood as more than five years without any medical signs of cancer²⁸) typically regard themselves as cured. They often engage in yoga as a way to further improve their health, but without the ongoing treatment and associated symptoms or immediate concerns about the possibility of death. In contrast, students with active cancer are often very worried about their prognosis and are struggling to maintain quality of life in the context of pain, poor sleep, nausea, fatigue, and other symptoms related to both their cancer tumors and cancer-treatment side effects. So it is best to approach such students with a focus on living well with cancer for the time being (rather than necessarily gaining “victory” over cancer).

Furthermore, students diagnosed with metastatic cancer typically have been told by their oncologists that their cancer has progressed beyond the likelihood of cure and that the goal of continued treatment is to help them manage their symptoms—most prominently pain, fatigue, and emotional distress.⁹ Among other concerns, these students must directly deal with the probability of a shortened life span. For example, of women diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer in the United States, only about 25% survive for five years or longer.²⁹ For students with advanced cancer, yoga therapy ideally should also address helping them cope as best as possible with the possibility of death. Indeed, yoga has much of deep value to offer. One of our students shared a poignant story regarding the healing potential of the practices. She was a woman in her early sixties, and the metastatic breast cancer in her body was progressing and causing a great deal of physical pain. After about six weeks of working with the practices, she described a weekend at the coast with her family in which she had a pain crisis while she was changing into her swimsuit. Her usual response to these pain crises had been to fall to the sofa or floor and scream out in pain. Using the skills of riding the waves of sensation and resting into Simple Being, she was quite pleased that this time she was able to stay with the experience until it lessened in such a way that it didn't scare her family or detract from their precious time at the ocean. For her, the ability to maintain her dignity and sense of presence was a profound and meaningful healing. Unfortunately, the disease overtook her body and she died shortly after the program ended. Everyone was so honored to have known her and to have

witnessed her courage in living yoga in the midst of such tumultuous seas of cancer-related severe pain and then bodily death.

Because of these differences between students with advanced cancer and other students who now have or once did have cancer, at times it may be best to offer separate yoga programs for these groups. Another important consideration is the yoga therapist's preparedness for working therapeutically with students who may be approaching death or who may even die while participating in a yoga program. Unless therapists have gained insight into their own perspectives and *samskaras* about death, they will find it difficult to help others in this regard. This again is an aspect of training that is directly addressed in the Yoga of Awareness for Cancer courses.

In summary, yoga practices provide students with cancer with powerful, transformative tools to support their healing process. However, refined teaching and therapeutic skills are essential for maximizing the potential benefit for these students. **YTT**

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