

Yoga Therapist or Yoga Teacher?

Leigh Blashki
Secretary Australian Association of Yoga Therapists &
Vice President Yoga Australia

Unless you have been on retreat in a cave in the Himalayas for the past few years, you are probably aware of the terms 'Yoga therapy' and 'Yoga therapist'. Equally, you may have come across a variety of articles about therapeutic Yoga, workshops and short courses on therapeutic Yoga or Yoga therapy and a growing number of people using the terms 'Yoga therapy' and/or 'Yoga therapist' to describe themselves and their work.

Just as not that many years ago it was unclear who could genuinely be regarded as a Yoga teacher or what constituted the guidelines for becoming recognised as a Yoga teacher, the Yoga community is once again in a position of needing to provide clarity, but this time in relation to what Yoga therapy is and who can genuinely be regarded as a Yoga therapist.

There are many in the Yoga community who believe that all Yoga (Sadhana) can be therapeutic in the broadest mind-body sense and I am certainly one of those. After all what could be more therapeutic for many of our modern human conditions and predicaments than *citta vrtti nirodha*? However, does this necessarily translate to every Yoga class being Yoga therapy and every teacher a Yoga therapist?

When the issue of defining and establishing guidelines for recognition as a Yoga teacher arose in the late 1990s, it led to the formation of the Yoga Teachers Association (the words 'of Australia' came later), with one of its first tasks being to clarify who or what a Yoga teacher was and to develop a set of common standards for Yoga teachers, irrespective of style or tradition. In the ensuing decade, Yoga Australia (previously YTAA) has become recognised and accepted as the peak representative body for Yoga teachers in Australia, its membership standards are a benchmark, and in the absence of regulation / certification, a form of default accreditation and formal recognition, both in relation to teachers and training programs.

These standards were developed by those best qualified to do so, namely long standing, experienced, well trained and respected Yoga teachers from a variety of styles and traditions, in consultation with other leaders in the field.

This same process has been undertaken for the Yoga therapy community by the Australian Association of Yoga Therapists Inc (AAYT). In 2008 a working party of experienced, well trained and respected practitioners, including strong YTAA representation, developed a set of standards for the practice of Yoga therapy in Australia and a pathway for recognition as a registered Yoga therapist. These standards were endorsed in November 2008.

AAYT was formed by a number of trained, practicing Yoga therapists who recognised, as others have internationally, that the field of Yoga therapy and Yoga therapists themselves have support and representation needs that are not necessarily met by a Yoga teachers association. A specific representative organisation was deemed both worthwhile and appropriate. The AAYT is one of only nine Yoga therapy organisations to be formally affiliated with the International Association of

Yoga Therapists (IAYT), globally the peak international representative body. The AAYT membership standards are currently being used as a template and guideline by the IAYT for the development of its own International standards.

However now to come to the subject indicated by the name of this article. What makes the difference between a Yoga teacher and a Yoga therapist? To help answer this question it will be useful to firstly look at the endorsed definitions of Yoga therapy and Yoga therapists.

Yoga therapy empowers and supports individuals to manage their health using the principles of yoga and applying a range of yoga practices developed within a professional therapeutic relationship. It is about assisting the whole individual, rather than focusing on the condition and the tools used may include asanas (postures), pranayama (breath work), mudras, relaxation, meditation, dietary advice, lifestyle counselling and other self-development guidance.

A Yoga therapist is an experienced yoga teacher with additional, specialised skills and knowledge in the application of yoga in a therapeutic setting. A yoga therapist draws from the principles of yoga and the full range of yoga practices, bio-medical knowledge and assessment skills to establish a professional relationship with clients in developing a self empowering therapeutic program appropriate to their needs.

Yoga therapy, while founded upon the same Yogic principles and philosophies as Yoga teaching, differs from Yoga teaching in the following ways:

- It deals with health and well being issues specific to the client, usually on a one to one consultation basis
- Each client has specific, individual needs, so that unlike a Yoga teacher who can prepare a class based on what she or he wishes to teach, the Yoga therapist must be able to respond effectively to the client's needs at the time of the consultation.
- Requires a depth and breadth of expertise and understanding of a wide range of Yoga techniques in order to provide for the individual client needs.
- Requires an extensive knowledge of psycho-pathologies and patho-physiologies to underpin the work
- Requires familiarity with current research in the field
- Utilises in-depth health assessment skills.
- Yoga therapy interfaces with other therapeutic disciplines and requires a good understanding of common terminology used in broader health care.
- A Yoga therapist needs to have the skills and knowledge to deal sensitively and effectively with clients in a therapeutic, clinical setting and to develop and maintain of therapeutic relationships.

Pathways to recognition as a Yoga therapist

Some readers may be able to relate one or more of the abovementioned points to their own dealings as a Yoga teacher, possibly throwing more fuel on the fire of uncertainty as to whether you regard yourself (or are regarded) as a Yoga therapist as well as a Yoga teacher. So to help bring further clarity, the following is a list of the additional training or learning requirements for recognition by the AAYT, that a teacher who has met a minimum of Yoga Australia (YTAA) level 2 membership standards would need to show evidence of:

- At least 10 hours of training in the **therapeutic** application of Yoga principles and philosophies

- At least 10 hours of training in the **therapeutic** application of Yogic physiology (or Yogic subtle systems) (incl. vayus, agni & ama)
- At least 20 hours of training in the **therapeutic** application of functional anatomy & physiology and patho-physiology
- At least 5 hours of study of basic Ayurveda principles
- At least 5 hours of study of basic psycho-physiology
- At least 24 hours of training in the **therapeutic** application of Yoga practices (incl: asana, pranayama, relaxation, dhyana, mudra & bandha)
- At least 10 hours training in **therapeutic** lifestyle modifications (incl. diet) in the Yogic model
- At least 30 hours of health assessment training (inc assessment in the Yoga framework)
- At least 20 hours of training in **therapeutic** Yoga program development (with a focus on one of one programming)
- At least 5 hours of training in basic counselling skills in a **therapeutic** setting
- At least 12 hours of training in **therapeutic** relationships
- At least 5 hours of training in group dynamics in **therapeutic** settings
- At least 60 hours of Yoga Therapy treatment training, including at least 12 hours of client case work (hours may vary according to a nature and depth of any Yoga teaching specialisation)
- The equivalent of 1 full day training in OH&S for the health-care sector
- At least 4 hours of legal & ethical training in professional health-care practice.
- At least 4 hours of training in practice administration for health care professionals
- At least 3 hours of training in referral (to and from other health care practitioners)
- At least 4 hours of training in knowledge of the roles of other health-care providers and common, health-care sector terminology
- At least 4 hours of training in health-care research evaluation
- Commitment to ongoing professional development as a Yoga therapist as well as a Yoga teacher

As the registering organisation for Yoga therapists in Australia, the AAYT encourages experienced and suitably qualified Yoga teachers to consider the pathways to recognition as a Yoga therapist. The following table indicates the main pathways:

1. Training formally recognised by AAYT <i>(Recognised full and partial training programs can be found on the AAYT website www.yogatherapy.org.au)</i>	2. Training and experience not formally recognised by AAYT
<p>EITHER</p> <p>Successfully complete a full Yoga therapy training qualification recognised by AAYT and provide evidence of a minimum of 3 years regular Yoga teaching and Yoga Australia L2 or L3 membership or equivalent</p>	<p>Undertake a membership self-assessment and submit it for evaluation. This is likely to apply only to those who have many years experience and study in the therapeutic application of Yoga and can carefully document and provide supportive evidence, to meet the standards as required by AAYT.</p>
<p>OR</p>	<p>Yoga teachers who undertake workshops or short courses in Yoga therapy (or the</p>

<p>Successfully complete a combination of other, partial training programs recognised by AAYT, that individually meet some of the standards, but in combination meet all the standards and provide evidence of a minimum of 3 years regular Yoga teaching and Yoga Australia L2 or L3 membership or equivalent</p>	<p>therapeutic application of Yoga), but are likely to meet only a small number of the standards, may still submit a membership self-assessment form, so they can be advised which standards they have met and which ones still need to be met (so appropriate learning can be undertaken). Over time, an appropriate combination of short courses/training programs may help the person meet all the standards and achieve registration.</p>
--	---

Just as Yoga Australia (in its previous incarnation as YTAA) has worked tirelessly and in general very effectively at educating the Yoga and wider communities about who and what a recognised Yoga teacher is and what standards they need to meet to use the title of Yoga teacher, the AAYT is currently focused upon improving people's understanding of Yoga therapy and ensuring the integrity of standards of practice.

All Yoga teachers who are training as Yoga therapists or are simply interested in Yoga therapy, can apply to become subscribers of the AAYT, to receive newsletters and information on Association activities.

For further information about AAYT, contact info@yogatherapy.org.au or go to www.yogatherapy.org.au