

Yoga: the Roots of Body Psychotherapy

(based on an interview with Dr. Jack Rosenberg and Dr. Beverly Kitaen Morse)

by Terra Gold

Every week I try to make it over to my friend's house where he holds Kirtan chanting gatherings. Countless times I have sat at his kitchen counter looking at a 1950s framed poster of Swami Yogananda that hangs on the wall. The poster is a close-up of Yogananda, one of the most influential yogis in the West, and above his head are his titles as "Lecturer, Orator, Psychologist, Mystic, and Philosopher."

It always struck me that the word "psychologist" was listed and not long ago it occurred to me that two of the most masterful yogis I have ever met, both psychologists, are largely unknown to the yoga community. Like many of the great yoga masters in the west, they too are Westerners who used Eastern yoga techniques for their personal growth. Unlike any of the great teachers I had met before, they are both Doctors of Psychology who use elements of yoga specifically for psychological awareness and maturation. Their teachings are given outside of yoga studios, in small groups or one-to-one, and spread around the world through their books and their Institute of Integrative Body Psychotherapy (IBP).

Located in Santa Monica, CA. IBP was developed by Jack Rosenberg and his partner and wife, Beverly Kitaen Morse. The work provides a model that is straightforward and applicable to everyday life issues. In a recent interview with Jack and Beverly, Beverly describes their work, “We are providing a guide for the psychological-somatic support needed as a foundation for the transformation of consciousness. We help the client discover how to open their own body for emotional insight, to soften, or heighten their charge of aliveness and move this energy throughout the body. They develop the skills, patience, courage and trust for opening and learning from inside their being. Clients learn to find and trust their own somatic intelligence, what Ghandi called the still small voice within.”

Jack defines a “transformation of consciousness” as such, “There is within our being a natural impetus for a spiritual journey that seeks authenticity, inner peace and an essence within that is connected to something larger. This consciousness is ever evolving within our essential nature; perhaps it is an interior acceptance or wellbeing. Before we can transcend this self, we have to come to some level of true inner acceptance within our being as to who we are so that we are an integrated self. As Jack Engler, a well known spiritual teacher says, ‘You have to be somebody before you can be nobody.’”

As yoga practitioners eventually discover, practicing yoga can bring about awakenings (i.e. a heightened sense of aliveness and an increased sense of awareness and sensitivity). In my own experience as a yoga practitioner and teacher these awakenings would sometimes erupt like an explosion, but usually they arose out of time and a commitment to practice. There were periods over the years when I found this exhilarating, and then there were times when I was more inclined to change the style of my yoga practice so that I could have a gentler time assimilating the deep effects yoga was having on my body and mind. I realized early on that I could open up. That became the easy part. But the question persisted, “What is opening, and how can I work with these tools wisely?”

Hatha Yoga is based on principles of nature but is awkward for someone until they learn the language of the postures. Similarly, Jack states, “certain psychological/mental wellness skills are innate to an ‘alive being’ but will feel unnatural if they weren’t taught them in the early formative years.”

Both Jack and Beverly have engaged in yoga practices over many decades. Jack started practicing yoga in 1960. Beverly started meditation around 1973. As she recalls, “All of my children were given mantras and we all meditated together.”

In the popular forms of yoga in the West there is a strong emphasis on physical form and function. Many of the asanas (postures) have been adapted to suit the physical needs of people in our modern times but in the West we tend to be neophytes when it comes to the workings of our spirit or our minds and hence have little understanding of how to use the postures to skillfully affect our consciousness. As Jack puts it, “Consciousness is the unfolding of the true Self. Consciousness is also the ability to witness the disparity between the authentic and false self. Consciousness is embodied in our being. It is a body experience that brings about dramatic changes. If we try to think our way into figuring out a transformation of consciousness using our linear left-brain we will only gain an idea of consciousness, not a body experience.”

On the other side of the coin, one can practice asanas for hours every day, feel at one with the universe internally, and yet unless the skills are developed to recognize and nurture the deeper transformations of one’s consciousness, we may find that we lose a sense of centeredness when facing the outer realities of life such as job, family, or other relationships. Beverly states, “Our map offers a way through the psychological/somatic interruptions to well-being and core experience. Psychological interruptions include repetitious behavioral patterns of early life traumas (Primary Scenario), protective defenses (Character Style), how we abandon

our core selves for love and approval (Agency), and the concept of Fragmentation.”

As psychological interruptions occur our life themes of unresolved issues, or handed down patterns of behavior tend to undermine our ability to lead the life we find most meaningful, or consistently engage in the relationships we find most loving. Stress will continue to arise in our lives but as Beverly puts it, “Stress is related to how we deal with the impermanent nature of everything. We usually think of impermanence as experiences of fears of death and dying that permeate our life. But it is the little things that keep us frightened, unsure and insecure. They tighten our body, leave our mind unsure and shake up our sense of somatic [physical] constancy. We try holding on to small familiar things to find an external constancy in the midst of ever changing life.”

Jack states, “The concept of impermanence comes from Eastern thought. It recognizes that nothing stays the same. Everything is in constant change, growing or decaying. The unremitting cycles of life and death are part of everything. These changes remind us that we can be in charge of our life but never in control.”

When we feel destabilized we may experience a state of emotional and physical fragmentation. The fragmentation can occur over something seemingly wonderful or disturbing. Beverly

explains, “Fragmentation is like a period of insanity that intermittently disrupts your state of mind, causing you to see life in a distorted fashion. Your judgments become black or white, and thoughts can turn negative and hopeless—a jumble of ‘You always . . . You never . . . What’s the use?’ Your eyes blur and stop seeing in vivid color. Your mind dulls. You can’t find your keys, your wallet, or your sense of self, or sense of humor. You either don’t want to have sex or think you can’t live without it. You stumble and trip over words and thoughts. You feel smothered by loved ones or abandoned by them or both at the same time, and all your defensive patterns become exaggerated.”

Jack adds, “Sometimes a person is not aware that they are fragmented. They find themselves feeling irritable, angry, depressed, horny, hungry, or split off. These feelings don’t seem associated with anything specific. This shift in body and mood is not random or without reason. Something has caused the upset. But dealing only with the current, obvious, external or superficial symptoms and not the underlying patterns allows ‘the blues’ to hang on.”

Both Jack and Beverly agree that fragmentations are in themselves a normal part of life and not pathological. Stressors are not in themselves bad for our general health. They can trigger our creativity, stimulate our mind and keep us active. But Beverly

states, “if people are ‘off’ long enough or deeply enough it changes the chemicals in the body. Fragmentation triggers a closing down in the body that can numb the body experiences of love, sexual desire, trust and hope. The stress and body closure of fragmentation slows growth and repair. Fragmentation can cause us to split off and lose precious moments of presence and aliveness. Recognizing when we are fragmented is an important tool because it influences how we look at and deal with physical, emotional and mental problems.”

In yoga practice one practices flowing. Whether it is with an emphasis on breath while maintaining long holds, or flowing with moving breath and postures, it affects our emotional sense of belonging. In yoga we end up having to face impermanence and depending upon how strong our early development of constancy [consistent experience of love] was, this practice can reveal a profoundly vulnerable, maybe even scary place- the realization that we may not be as emotionally stable or strong as we thought.

Beverly’s opinion of yoga practice is that, “These practices are not meant to adequately deal with underlying interruptive psychological issues nor do they facilitate presence in the body for that purpose. [But] if you wish to acquire the comfort to hang out in these rarefied states with any consistency, you have to do the

work. You have to develop consistent body-mind, psychological-existential practices.”

When asked, “What arises psychologically when we have a transformation of consciousness,” Beverly said, “The transformational process is really seeing anew with the innocence of a child. This is new territory and it requires a shaking up of our belief systems, attitudes and ways of being. Many of the ways in which we have conducted ourselves in the past will no longer work as we age.”

Jack responded, “To embody the peacefulness and compassion we develop through inner contemplation—to carry this inner state into our life and sustain it when we finish a meditation or prayer—we must be able to put our psychological ‘ghosts’ of the past to rest. Without psychological consciousness, when we search for spiritual essence and/or existential answers we will only encounter psychological motifs stored in our body ready to prove what we already fear and believe.”

When we have a transformation of consciousness Beverly says, “we may awaken to knowing, seeing, hearing and sensing things far beyond that to which we are accustomed. Our perceptions of time and space may become altered. Our senses such as vision and hearing may become intensified or diminished. Some visually see lights, colors and energy around others. This

may unnerve family, our friends and us. Not to worry. Enjoy it while it lasts.

We may feel that the mysteries of life are being revealed to us; at the same time, paradoxically, it is common to feel that we don't know anything at all for sure any more. Our assumptions through which we see the world may seem to be melting away. We may question our beliefs about everything.

We may become hypersensitive, with our emotions constantly rising to the surface. Our heart may open with compassion as a central theme in our life.

Heightened intuition or knowing is another possible experience. For example, we may follow a gut feeling to telephone someone and have him or her say, 'how did you know I needed you right now?' We may be more accurate about what people we are close to are thinking and feeling than is comfortable.

When we are feeling wonderful, paradoxically we may also feel anxious. This is usually in response to going past our 'speed limits for wellbeing and aliveness. It is also as a result of feeling the intensity of universal truths. This anxiousness may be due to our being more alive and conscious. We may also be afraid of the experience of being fully alive. We are afraid to let go of our many ideas about who we are so that we can experience our essence and come from a place of self-volitional, unfolding and knowing.

With the changes in our perspective we develop a wider, more whole and realistic view of the nature of life. We acquire respect for humanity, for all living things in a different way. We can no longer treat people and judge them as objects. We can't expect that our parents or our partner were born to serve us or to fulfill our needs. We must accept people in their wholeness. We have to see the nature of life in humanity. We must take responsibility for our own life.”

When it comes to exploring the yoga that is right for an individual Jack and Beverly suggest that there are a few things to keep in mind. Jack states, “A somatic sense of self must be supported by a practice, a yoga, a yoking to a greater sense of consciousness. Some people need to relax and be more parasympathetic. Some people need to be more sympathetic and need to get energized. We are not trying to get them to be one way or the other. We are trying to help them move back and forth between the two more seamlessly in their bodies.” Jack and Beverly have witnessed repeatedly how profoundly this style of somatic practice translates into emotional benefits for the lives of their clients and students.

Jack adds, “Most practices that further a psychological awakening involve the body and are done in a consistent and repetitive fashion. Many of these practices put the left-brain to rest, allow us

to become present, and can provide us with an immediate experience of the life energy, soul or spirit that is within us and everywhere that there is life. A practice that initiates contact with this energy of essence can open a path for a transformation of consciousness. Unfortunately, our deeper intuitive knowing is not trustworthy as long as it remains interlaced with unresolved psychological themes.

Beverly continues, “In the body we have holding patterns for a reason. When the original traumas were occurring either we didn’t have the maturity to integrate it or it was more than we could emotionally handle at the time. A lot of things get stored in the body over the years and if you do body opening exercises, and you do them too profoundly, too largely for a person to tolerate or integrate then that can fragment people deeply. There have been times we have seen people become quite psychotic. Most of us know whether we are doing meditation, or psychological work, how to open people up emotionally. That’s not a trick. But if we open them more than they can handle, more than they can integrate, we are doing them a disservice. Then they can get scared and close down more than they were originally.”

One of the ways Jack and Beverly work with assisting people in finding a somatic state of constancy is through a set series of postures and breathing techniques that help to bring about a change

of consciousness. It is a short practice of about ten minutes that can be easily modified to suit people of all ages, sizes, and needs, called the “Sustaining Constancy Series.”

Some of the exercises are from yoga, “brain games”, some from Feldenkrais. One of the major portions is the “cross crawl” designed to help older people with balance (based on physical therapy), used for athletes as a warm up, or children who are having learning difficulties. All of the exercises are combined with chest breathing based on Reichian breath therapy instead of belly breath because that is sympathetic breathing that wakes you up. Beverly states, “We want to wake up the body. Then we use belly breathing to induce the parasympathetic nervous system. If you use breathing techniques that calm and soothe first, you are just lethargic.”

The order of the exercises in the Sustaining Constancy Series prepares you for the “Orgastic reflex pattern” exercises. Jack explains, “The orgastic pattern replicates a full body release and rhythm of movement that will heighten the charge throughout the body. Like a cloud lifting, a clarity of knowing emerges with a direct experience of self, a new understanding of former problems and a larger view of life. We call this opening the ‘I am’ experience of self.”

As Beverly says, “In the Sustaining Constancy Series what we want to do is help people get present, to be able to ‘build a charge,’ and spread that charge in a way that opens up all the segments of the body, and all the holding patterns.”

With the fuller sense of being present and open comes an opportunity to assist the client through using psychological tools. Some of the tools Jack and Beverly use are known as “Steps Out of Fragmentation,” “Agency mantras,” or the “Good Parent Messages.” These help to further deepen the client’s sense of well-being and supports the foundation for their authentic Self to feel safe enough to emerge.

When asked, “What would you recommend to practitioners of yoga as they age,” Beverly says, “Inner knowing is at the very foundation of our being. Only with consciousness, can somatic interior ‘knowings’ reveal the larger than life messages that we must live by. We also have to pay attention to our changing rhythms and respect them. Particularly as we age it is imperative that we fully participate in our own consciousness through practices that support our growth. The responsibility for our own consciousness or lack of it is ours. No borrowed idea or belief can substitute for personal integrity and authentic experience.”

Looking through one of Jack’s books I came across a segment that sums up IBP beautifully, “While traveling the path

(inward), change begins to take place inside our being and also in our bodies. We begin to see and experience life from a greater vantage point, from a greater depth of meaning, from an inner place of belonging. There is an inner surrendering to the beauty of the Tao or 'the plan', divine wisdom, or cosmos. This inner surrender has its counterpart in the relaxing, surrendering, and healing of the body. We have a body we cherish and care for, and yet we are more than our body" (Rosenberg, Body Self and Soul).