

Perspective

Healing Ourselves and Healing Our Communities

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As I am driving by, I notice that a billboard announces, “We are the pharmacy that prescribes Yoga.” Leaf through the articles in any issue of this journal and you will find that, as a field, Yoga therapy is largely focused on common chronic conditions. Yoga is prescribed as “medicine” for diseases ranging from arthritis and asthma, through depression and hypertension, to multiple sclerosis and sleep disorders. Research on Yoga therapy is confirming that Yoga affects every major physical system. As a prevention and intervention strategy, Yoga has the potential to substantially impact our physical health.

But is it possible that the impact of Yoga therapy could extend well beyond that? Have we defined the field too narrowly by focusing primarily on individual health and well-being? Can therapeutic Yoga transform education, community crime and violence, or global sustainability? What, if any, are the links between personal health and the health of our fragile planet? To find some of these answers, let us look at the work of community-based organizations involved in outreach through Yoga and mindfulness.

Niroga Institute was born less than five years ago out of a conviction that the healing benefits of Yoga are not only time-tested tools for personal transformation but are also a necessary condition for social transformation. Realizing that sometimes those who may need Yoga the most will not come to a Yoga studio or see a Yoga therapist, we decided to take Yoga to them. And so we went into schools, homeless shelters, group homes, juvenile halls, prisons, hospitals, and centers for rehab and recovery to provide Transformative Life Skills (TLS), a multimodality intervention that includes Yoga postures (*asana*), breathing techniques (*pranayama*), and meditation (*pratyahara*, *dharana*, and *dhyana*).

We started to document the therapeutic effects of Yoga in these settings with independent researchers from academia and industry. The research showed a statistically significant decline in stress and an increase in self-control—two factors

that affect everything from academic potential and interpersonal relationships to emotional regulation, substance abuse, and psychopathology. In other words, our ability to self-regulate affects just about everything we do.

Hearing about our program results, a police chief said, “Do you realize what that means? Self-control is the difference between life and death on our streets.” For this reason, Niroga’s healing Yoga programs for youth are being widely viewed as a powerful and cost-effective front-line prevention and intervention strategy for education, mental health, and violence reduction.

We have trained over 125 certified Yoga teachers, the Niroga Yoga Corps®, to work with vulnerable populations; today Niroga teaches 100 classes and serves over 2,000 people every week. In partnership with the Bay Area Black United Fund and the Alameda County Department of Public Health, we are systematically training minority young adults to become certified Yoga teachers so that they can serve their own communities with cultural competence and linguistic sensitivity. We are also offering our programs to stakeholders in youth development, including school teachers, probation staff, and mental health professionals.

Realizing the tremendous challenges faced by at-risk youth in our communities, we are taking troubled cities, such as Oakland and Richmond, and preparing to provide TLS for every child for a period of 12 years, wherever they are—in schools, juvenile halls, or community centers. I believe this will not only transform that generation but also that the beneficial effects will spill over and affect the generations to follow. This generational reshaping could create a tipping point, leading to lasting societal change.

We cannot do this work alone. A few weeks ago, about a dozen community-based organizations from across the United States and Canada involved in outreach through Yoga and mindfulness came together at the Omega Institute. We discussed areas of collaboration and how we could sup-

port each other as we strive to heal and transform our communities. This gathering was the birth of the Yoga Service Council, whose vision it is “to foster joy, resilience, and well-being in every person, regardless of circumstances, so that all communities can thrive.”

Realization of this vision will require the mobilization of thousands of Yoga teachers and Yoga therapists; they will have to come out of their studios and offices and bring their knowledge and skills into their communities, offering their services to those who are most vulnerable. It will be an op-

portunity for each one of us to practice the essence of *karma* Yoga, for us to bow down to those we serve, thankful for the opportunity to grow.

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