

Interview

A Conversation with IAYT President Matthew Taylor

Interview by Kelly McGonigal, PhD

IJYT Editor in Chief

Matthew J. Taylor, PT, PhD, RYT was elected president of the board of directors for IAYT in February 2008. He has 27 years of clinical experience in physical therapy and is a leader in integrating Yoga with Western approaches to rehabilitation and therapy. He received his Masters of Physical Therapy degree from Baylor University in 1981, and served as a physical therapist and active duty Army Medical Specialist officer in the United States Army from 1980 through 1988. In 1988, he left the military and opened a private physical therapy practice in Galena, Illinois. In 1995, he expanded his physical therapy practice into an integrated clinic and health club. He became a certified, advanced-level Integrative Yoga Therapy therapist in 1998, and in 2006, he completed his PhD in transformational learning and change thorough the California Institute of Integral Studies. In 2003, he founded the Dynamic Systems Rehabilitation (DSR) clinics in Scottsdale, AZ. The clinic offers therapy and wellness services that integrate classical Yoga, physical therapy, and modern transformation learning theory. He has been an IAYT board member since February 2007 and is IAYT's representative for the Academic Consortium for Complementary and Alternative Health Care. Matt sat down with us to discuss his perspective on Yoga therapy, IAYT, and some possibilities for the future of both.

You have a fascinating background in traditional Western institutions—from medicine and the military to research in academia. When and how did Yoga enter your life? Was Yoga therapy a reaction against, or natural extension of, this early training?

What a great exercise this interview is on the eve of my 50th birthday. I think rather than Yoga entering my life, there seems to be patterns of my recognizing the Yoga in life that is already there—if that isn't too thin a philosophical hair to split on the first question?

I vividly recall standing at attention on the parade field at Ft. Sam Houston at dawn, saluting the flag, as I stood in formation with more than 200 nurses and 20 PTs, preparing to do the physical training of our basic medical officer training. I remember wondering, "How did this happen... me in the army?" Flash forward 28 years, and I felt the same thing as I stepped to the podium to open SYTAR 2008, after Sonia Nelson's beautiful chant, asking myself, "How did this happen... me a Yogi?" In reflection, I can truly appreciate how these apparently disparate aspects of my life are so beautifully part of the whole of life, not just the small self named Matt.

By name, Yoga entered my life in 1996. A client of our health club and physical therapy clinic in Galena, IL, sug-

gested to me in the hallway that I bring this Yoga teacher in from a town 20 miles away. I knew there was a "buzz" about Yoga in the health club industry, so I acted on it from a pure business basis. Silly me!

During this time of pushing and striving, I was also experiencing an increasingly embarrassing and disabling chronic low-back problem. To my surprise, two months after attending the Yoga class, I was getting better. So much for 15 years of intensive study and tens of thousands of dollars of continuing education! My teacher was Jeff Wright, a special education high school teacher who taught an Iyengar-style class out of a 20-year love of Yoga. While the *āsana* alignment precision offered an easy inroad to my PT mind, it was in the silence of *savāsana* that I discovered the holding patterns of striving for control that created my back problem. Release the striving, release the compression. *Annamaya* heals as *prāna* and consciousness expands and flows.

Long story short, I took that Western rigor of analysis and critical discrimination and dove into Yoga. I completed the first two levels of Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy (PRYT) with Karen Hasskarl, IAYT's newest advisor, and gained both experiential and practical tools for understanding the gross and subtle interplay of living. I wanted to teach group level, which was not available at that time with PRYT. So I went through the entire Integrative Yoga Therapy (IYT)

training. I quit my full-time patient care schedule to open a seminar business to teach these new understandings to healthcare professionals in 1998, which eventually led to opening our current clinic in 2003.

I also ran IYT for Joseph LePage for 15 months, learning the business of training. During this time, I had the good fortune to interact with [former IAYT Editor in Chief] Trisha Lamb and Georg Feuerstein of the Yoga and Research and Education Center (YREC). Trisha tagged me to start writing and reviewing journal articles. Somewhere in that period [IAYT Executive Director] John Kepner started giving me things to do, and somehow I now find myself in this interview!

Is my Yoga therapy practice a reaction against Western medicine? I have to answer, absolutely not. I cherish both my Western training and the tradition of Yoga. I think to exclude one's experience, and especially one's culture, in the end leads to more suffering and *avidyā*.

In your own teaching and writing, you come across as someone who juggles “heart” and “science” well, honoring both and not finding them incompatible. This is something IAYT strives to do, as well. How do you think about these two approaches that are sometimes viewed as incompatible? How do you integrate personal connection and spirituality with evidence-based practice and scientific inquiry?

This comes back to my opening comment about seeing the Yoga in life versus adding it in. I by no means consider myself an expert in classical Yoga. I don't think that is my work right now. Rather, I am a bridge builder, offering both theory and practical applications to resolve the misperception that heart and science are dichotomous. This misperception is imbedded in most of our collective institution's consciousness—education, religion, healthcare, government, industry, and so on, as well as our individual consciousness. Just yesterday, my wife Jennifer sat through a meeting of Arizona integrative healthcare providers whose stated goal is to bring integrative care to the public. Much of the talk was “us and them.” How quickly we forget that “them” is “us.” To my mind, our Yoga is meant to develop our individual and collective ability to see when and how we separate ourselves, either through debates about heart versus science or allopathic versus integrative, and maybe even Yoga teachers versus Yoga therapists! How we do this is the juggling part. Let me try to explain by going to an easy example: evidenced-based medicine (EBM)! This beautiful concept, which can hold both heart and science, has been misunderstood from the minute it was first introduced.

Intended to be a triad of standards for quality care decision-making, it includes: (1) Research Evidence, or what do we know based on a variety of research methods (let's call this science); (2) Clinical Expertise, both accumulated experiential and conceptual knowing (science) and the intuitive/mastery level input (heart); and (3) Patient Values, which reflects both the need for efficacy (the science of safety and effectiveness) and the need for a caring relationship (heart).

Yoga therapy training gave me language to express how I was already using evidenced-based medicine as a PT. I didn't just process people and their complaints by what the research suggested might work. I often made clinical decisions by attending to a “gut” sense that this situation needs humor, or sternness, or tears. I now see that these decisions were also tempered by taking the time to know my patient's needs and values—where they lived, who they cared about, and what mattered to them. It was in creating this space for healing to emerge that amazing things happened.

So evidence-based medicine should be a balance of science and heart, and has the potential to create these healing spaces as well. Unfortunately, in practice, evidenced-based medicine has often been reduced to demanding and relying on randomized controlled trials of specific treatments. This outcome has been shaped by a variety of forces, ranging from practitioners' fear of not being reimbursed to the defense of academic/disciplinary turfs.

This misunderstanding is beginning to shift, though, as practitioners understand that evidenced-based medicine provides the freedom to shift emphasis amongst the triad of research evidence, clinical experience, and patient values. Basically, the more acute and urgent, the heavier the research weighs, whereas chronic, complex conditions require a highly individualized approach relying more on clinical expertise and patient values. If this sounds familiar, it is—this is what I generally read about Yoga therapy. Not so great with acute health issues, but often beneficial with chronic conditions.

If I'm in a car accident and my femur is sticking out of my pants, there is a best way to manage that. If I got in the accident because I was angry with my co-worker and not paying attention, there is a good deal more nuance required to address that situation. And, if I'm angry because my work is meaningless and I have no sense of purpose, I need an expert who can create a space where I can discover my values and act on them, which sort of sounds like Yoga therapy.

As a Yoga therapist, can I witness the situation, and from a place of compassion, offer the proper balance of evidence, expertise, and values? I believe Yoga therapy is the emerging profession that, with awareness and discipline, can move to evidence-based practice, adjusting heart and science as the circumstance requires.

On these pages last year, I asked then-president Janice Gates if this would be the year IAYT finally defines Yoga therapy. Well, IAYT took a big first step—and you played a large role in the process. Are you personally satisfied with the proposed definition, “Yoga therapy is the process of empowering individuals to progress toward improved health and well-being through the application of the philosophy and practice of Yoga”? Is there anything in that definition that you argued for, and that you feel is particularly important?

I am personally satisfied that this first definition is meeting its intended purpose. I am seeing it show up on Yoga therapists’ websites and promotional literature. The definition was never intended to be exhaustive nor complete. We did a very thorough process of looking at it from multiple perspectives. We tried to look through the lens of Yoga teachers, healthcare professionals, the lawyers, the public, the press, and I think most importantly, our hearts.

The year-long process was a very profound experience of searching for the essence of Yoga therapy, while holding all of its many facets and expressions. The process was like a group painting, each member dabbing here, blending there, until finally there was this stillness in the group, and we all looked at one another and nodded. Like any piece of art, it is never really done, but at some point it’s time to put the work on the wall. We fully expect that as we evolve as a profession, this definition will be expanded, as standards, ethics, and scope of practice emerge.

Looking back at the definition, I can see my brushstrokes “arguing” toward process, in contrast to the dominant prescriptive model of wanting things fixed now—a perspective that can be held by both the recipient and the provider. The other color I kept dabbing was empowering. As a culture, we’ve made being healthy far too complicated and cumbersome. If we take on the helper/expert model, I fear we will miss a crucial opportunity for real health reform. Fourteen advanced *āsanas*, four onerous *prānāyāma* practices, and a 90-minute-a-day “prescription” leaves the student dependent on someone else again.

So I would like to see us maintain a vigilance to avoid that very subtle trap, both as individual therapists and collectively as a profession. I have observed so many professionals in not just healthcare, but business, education, and many other fields either frustrated by the limitations of their discipline’s particular worldview, or responding to a personal call to serve in an integral manner that is consistent with their personal practice. I’d like to think we can bring Yoga therapy forward in a way that no one misses that the power lies within each of us, not the provider.

What are your own aims for the next year? What can IAYT members expect in terms of member services and advancing the profession?

I like to refer to Yoga therapy as the first new health (not healthcare) profession of the 21st century. I believe that through the hard work of past boards, and most especially our current executive director John Kepner, IAYT is uniquely positioned to make this so.

Let me share a few examples of the plans I hope to see implemented. First, transformation takes place within a defined space or vessel (either physical or virtual). My first priority was to bring our board up to a size capable of holding our expanding services. The board creates the “space” in which structure and operations can take place. My many years of board-level participation taught me that boards need to be thoughtfully developed, and that board governance and succession is very different from professional practice, though obviously needs to be rooted and informed by practice. To that end, we are expanding the board by two members to a total of six, with a total of three new members coming on in this year. All have rich board experience, which will help to create a new structure that can both hold past history and usher in the future boards. I’m very excited about the potential of this board.

I envision shaping IAYT to become a learning community. While we are a professional association, I don’t believe we want to become a multi-layered, hierarchical bureaucracy that many associate with that mission. We hope that SYTAR 2009 will be a prototype for, and stepping stone to, a learning platform for Yoga therapists to come together to share resources, discuss issues of importance to all of us—standards, ethics, scope of practice, and many unknown topics—and promote the profession to the world. I see our job as the board to create the guidance and resources for our membership to come together and shape the profession and practice of Yoga therapy. The exact format is still emerging, but let me describe what we are doing right now to allow this process of collective creativity to emerge.

First, we as a board are committed to supporting the diversity of our membership coming together. This year we witnessed the historic first meeting of the founders and directors of Yoga therapist training program. We are also restructuring the annual meeting process to bring together communities of Yoga therapists with shared interests on the first day of SYTAR 2009. Around these budding communities—we’re calling them Common Interest Communities (CICs)—we will be building online communities where therapists come together to share and build resources. For

instance, one community might be those interested in biomechanical issues, or those interested in Yoga therapy for psychological issues. We now have the capability for the community to build online resources out of collective sharing, much like Wikipedia. This self-organizing and fluid community will be able create knowledge bases to which any member can contribute.

Take Yoga therapy for knee pain. What are the issues to consider? What is the relevant anatomy and kinesiology? What are the safety concerns? And so on. If we come together in these communities to share what we know, and the space allows for emergence and self-correction, imagine what can be made available to our newest members, our student therapists, and the newest graduates of a training program. Imagine what can be made available to the public. These communities will also be tasked with content and selection of programming for future annual meetings.

Our research community, led by Sat Bir Khalsa, PhD, is a wonderful example of a CIC that has already begun to contribute in these ways. IAYT will continue to be the prime venue for accessing and disseminating Yoga-related research. Several of the world's leading Yoga researchers will be presenting at SYTAR 2009, including Dean Ornish from the U.S., Lucian Bernardi from Italy, and Shirley Telles from India. We are also raising the profile of Yoga at integrative medicine conferences. IAYT is an official participating organization at the North American Research Conference for Complementary and Integrative Medicine in 2009.

We are in the process of putting this journal, including back issues, available online to both members (for free) and to the public (for a fee). This will extend our reach to those outside the association and generate more memberships and global participation. In turn, this should create revenues to expand our services and community resources.

You are, according to your PhD, a “Doctor of Transformational Learning and Change.” Tell me more about this. What is transformational learning? How does it fit into Yoga therapy?

My degree is from the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) in San Francisco. Imagine the discomfort of this old Baylor Army grad when on the first day, they left our class in a room alone and let us self-organize! The ultimate California experiential learning, but a little disorienting for a guy from the Midwest!

I later came to learn that to generate transformational learning environments, you need to establish safety and then provide a disorienting experience. This creates optimal con-

ditions for shifting the individual's paradigm or worldview. This is how transformational learning differs from traditional teaching, which is merely the imparting of data, facts, and skills, but leaves the student with the same perspective. So we can “teach” someone Yoga technologies and philosophies, but if they go back out into the world and behave the same, has transformation occurred?

CIIS is founded on the principles of Sri Aurobindo and his Integral Yoga philosophy that we as humans are transitional beings in the evolution of life on earth, and through our Yoga practice can accelerate this evolution. What CIIS has asked is, “How do we translate these principles of integral practice into our culture to effect transformation of ourselves and the communities in which we live?”

Which brings me to what I hope might be part of my contribution to IAYT. My advisor and dissertation chair at CIIS, Alfonso “Monty” Montuori, PhD, is a leader in social creativity. He impressed upon me the importance of being culturally relevant to inspire transformation. He also understands the potential of technology to accelerate change in consciousness.

I believe we can achieve our mission of making Yoga therapy an accepted profession in modern society if we can make Yoga more culturally relevant. As the first professionals on the leading edge of this evolution, most of us began our personal transformation in Yoga as we learned it from its culture of origin in India. We are the first 10-15% of early adopters of change. What we are witnessing as Yoga moves into the culture is some penetration into the next 10-20% of adopters. But most of us are not satisfied with how what we cherish has been largely commoditized as physical exercise limited to well-off white females. If we as an organization can share the essence and depth of Yoga in language and settings that are culturally comfortable for the respective audiences, the rate of adoption of the full practice will be accelerated. Our flexibility has to extend beyond physical suppleness to include being able to present our work in ashrams, board rooms, and impoverished neighborhoods.

CIIS called our program “Transformational Learning and Change” for that very reason. They understand that in our culture, in both education and organizational science, “transformational learning and change” is comfortable terminology for what might just as well be called Yoga. Sri Aurobindo saw Yoga as part of every aspect of life, and not limited to segments of culture or certain professions. I think this is such an exciting time for us as Yoga therapists to observe how Yoga is moving through each of us in our communities in so many creative ways. I can't wait to see what tomorrow brings!