

the recovery sutras: yoga, habit and freedom from addiction

by robert birnberg

part one: the symptoms



This article—the first of a series—contains excerpts from an upcoming book about applying yoga’s classic healing models to the chronic, debilitating and potentially fatal disease of addiction.

Discomfort du Jour

Addiction has been called “a plague,” “a modern scourge” and “the disease of our era.” Statistics show that at least one in ten Americans are currently addicted to alcohol or drugs (prescription or otherwise), and that every addict-alcoholic negatively impacts at least 10 people. Whatever else these numbers indicate (volumes, actually), it is quite clear that the tendency to become dependent on substances such as drugs and alcohol, and processes like shopping and sex, is a pervasive human characteristic which has adversely affected millions worldwide. Yoga, correctly understood and practiced, can help.

Addition Defined

“Continued use of a substance (or behavior) despite increasingly negative consequences” is one accepted definition

of addiction. Another—my personal favorite— is “wanting the wrong thing very badly.” The 12-step program defines alcoholism (essentially identical to addiction) as “a physical allergy coupled with a mental obsession linked to a spiritual malady,” thus qualifying alcoholism-addiction as, perhaps, the first truly holistic disease. Yoga explains addiction as the mind’s innate tendency to mechanically and habitually respond to present-time challenges with behaviors that worked in the past (*samskaras*). In other words, today’s problems were once yesterday’s solutions.

Yoga Redefined

Far from its current incarnation as a group stretch class (now with music), yoga is originally one of six classical *Darsanas* (philosophies) derived from the ancient Indian Vedas. In Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras, yoga’s source text, yoga is outlined as a practical spiritual psychology. In this sophisticated self-care system, the intimate student-teacher relationship provides the rich context for developing unique strategies and practices that

ultimately lead the individual to profound personal transformation. (As one who studies and teaches from this traditional model, I am perpetually amazed at yoga’s immense power to heal disease and change lives.)

In Another Dimension

Yoga presents the human system as an ever-evolving matrix of five interconnected dimensions, or *mayas*, each of which affects and is affected by the others. (Though some early influential commentaries inaccurately referred to the levels as *koshas*, literally “bags,” the Taittiriya Upanishad, the actual source text, describes these interrelated components more appropriately as *mayas*, or “that which extends throughout.”)

The Five Mayas progress from gross to subtle, beginning with the physical body, or *anna-maya*. The second Maya, the energy or *prana-maya* level, is linked to breathing and the physiological functions. Next, we find the senses and outer mind, or *mano-maya*, followed by the deeper mind, the values-shaping *vijnana-maya* level. Finally, at the deepest heart of the

person is the emotional level, the *ananda-maya*, expressed as the inherent potential to experience a lifetime of sustained joy.

Yoga uses the Five Mayas model to understand and treat health and disease holistically. Thus, a physical problem might have its roots in the mind, an emotional trauma could affect digestion or other physiological functions, and behavior that conflicts with our core values could negatively affect our emotional state, the regularity of our heartbeat, and the shape of our spine.

In later articles, we will explore yoga's various tools for treating the mayas, including asana for the physical body, pranayama and chanting for the prana-maya, meditative tools for the mental levels, and the loving support of a kind, honest teacher as a primary tool for cultivating positive, flowing emotions.

How to Heal

In addition to the mayas model, yoga offers a precise four-part methodology for creating and improving health. Clearly outlined in the Sutras' second chapter, yoga's healing strategy requires that we identify the symptoms (*heyam*), discover the cause (*hetu*), establish a goal (*hanam*), and choose the best tools to achieve the desired results (*upayam*). This simple model works whether the problem presents as primarily physical, physiological, mental, emotional, or in the case of addiction, a combination.

Let's begin to examine the heyam of addiction related to the Five Mayas.

Houston, We Have Heyam

At the *anna-maya* level, the physical effects of long-term abuse include damage to the heart, lungs, stomach, liver and kidneys, as well as structural degradation, such as osteonecrosis, in which there is skeletal deterioration. Furthermore, addicts in the acute stages of withdrawal experience nausea, vomiting, tremors, aches, fever and seizures, depending on the specifics of the addiction.

At the *prana-maya* level, all addictive substances distort natural, healthy breathing, which according to Yoga Sutra II:50, is long (*dirgha*) and smooth (*suskma*). Depressants such as alcohol and heroin make the breathing slow and shallow, while stimulants like methamphetamine and cocaine induce

breathing that is rapid and irregular. Compromised breathing impairs circulation, digestion, elimination, communication and many other physiological functions. In addition, substances that are snorted or smoked, such as marijuana, cigarettes and cocaine, can aggravate and ultimately destroy the sensitive organs of respiration.

As the Eastern model considers the lungs, rather than the heart, the body's central pump, many of yoga's tools, including asana (done properly), pranayama, chanting and the like, are aimed at making the breath slow and deep. Conversely, anything that distorts the breathing, such as stress, obesity or drugs, is clearly life-diminishing and should be reduced, replaced or avoided altogether. This includes the widespread and damaging habit of holding the breath while performing various yoga postures (*asanacide*).

Nowhere But Up

At first glance, the phenomenon of addiction seems a bleak obstacle to the sustained joy (*paramandana*) that is, according to yoga, our birthright. For many, however, hitting bottom is a springboard to an exceptional new life, one in which the sorrows and loss of addiction serve as an opportunity for transcendence and growth. For these lucky addicts, the desolation of addiction provides a stark reminder of the mind's limitations, while simultaneously creating an energizing thirst for what lies beyond it.

In yoga philosophy, that which exists beyond the mind is called *purusa*, the unchanging, individual consciousness at the core of all living things. This formless spirit, a true higher power, is the essence of freedom and the limitless source of all confidence, wisdom and joy.

Next month, we will explore the remaining three mayas and the complex relationship between the mind, emotions and addiction by examining the addictive cycle—the downward spiral from occasional user to full-blown addict.

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