

A New Experience- an exploration of Trauma Sensitive Yoga

Yoga is about enquiry..... not about the pose- Desikachar

It's a beautiful Spring Day in the Berkshires, Massachusetts at the Kripalu Centre for Yoga and Health. Over 70 yoga teachers and clinicians from all over the world have come together for a five-day workshop, to explore how the traditional yoga class can be modified to support clients who are dealing with trauma. This story is my experience of this ground breaking work.

The basis of this work is to support clients to be able to "safely inhabit their body" through the combination of traditional yoga practice and the evolving understanding of trauma and it's effect on the body; based on the research of pioneering psychiatrist Bessel A. van der Kolk at the Justice Resource Institute, based in Boston.

This innovative workshop commences with a practical introduction to the work by Dave Emerson, yoga teacher and associate of Bessel van der Kolk. Dave has a wonderful, warm, inviting and quite playful persona as he invites us to explore our body through some basic chair based yoga movements. It is evident from the beginning that Dave has dedicated a lot of time and knowledge to the evolution of trauma sensitive yoga- his passion and enthusiasm for the work is evident in his very presence.

At this early stage I notice the distinctive invitational style of language, informing me that I have choice around how I might like to move my body. I feel so comfortable and supported that I am sure if I rolled onto my side and kicked my legs in the air, Dave would be there supporting me to explore how that feels and what I'm noticing. He might even actually encourage me to explore this even more and notice what is happening. Rather than sticking to strict yoga guidelines of alignment and structure, I feel liberated and that whatever I choose to do I can actually do it.

I have never felt drawn to the more "regimented" styles of yoga practice that privilege strict form. In fact the traditions of Satyananada, which was my personal practice for many years, and later on Dru Yoga, which I now teach and practice for myself, encourage self exploration. They are naturally more invitational in nature than other yoga traditions that I had experienced. However the very simple prospect of being able to choose how I might want to interact with my body versus following instruction seemed revolutionary both for my body and my psyche, despite the gentle practice that I have had for many years.

This is fun and I become aware of my own internal dialogue every time I'm invited to "choose" to do something "when I'm ready". This supported me to feel very empowered and safe in the practice. Dave through his language and demonstration, was giving me an opportunity to be in total control of what I did and didn't do and whatever I did was OK. Whilst it seems such a simple shift in

focus to offer choice of participating in a certain way, the greater awareness for me became that actually **you have to first choose** to explore and notice rather than be **told to explore and notice**- it's a subtle distinction but what I was beginning to discover , an important one.

As yoga teachers we can be so vested in the instruction and correct alignment, I was struck by the fact that we had inadvertently taken the option of choice and personal responsibility out of the class experience. It was a profound experience as an experienced yoga teacher to be offered choice and the invitation to explore different postures rather than rigidly adhering to a prescribed set of alignment points. This is not to suggest that the practice is unsafe but more invitational and exploratory.

After this first introduction I am left wondering... if this experience felt revolutionary and freeing for me, how might a person who is not able to inhabit their body on any level as a result of trauma, experience this class? This question was answered in a variety of ways over the coming days – not only in what the research in telling us but in hearing the personal accounts of survivors of PTSD and how this style of yoga has supported them to “come home” to their body.

“The memory of trauma is imprinted on the human organism.... I don't think you can overcome it unless you learn to have a friendly relationship with your body.” Bessel A. van der Kolk

In the next part of the program, Bessel van der Kolk takes us through the latest neuroscience around the effect of trauma on the brain. It is not within the scope of this review to go into the detailed neuroscience of trauma. For that, you might want to read van der Kolk's book, ***Traumatic Stress- The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body and Society***. He wrote this book in conjunction with Australia trauma expert Alexander McFarlane and associate Lars Weisaeth.

Van der Kolk discusses the phenomena of PTSD clients- they tend to lose their way in the world and their bodies continue to live in an internal environment of the trauma. It is difficult for the person to take pleasure in the moment as the body keeps replaying the past. One of the guiding principles of Trauma Sensitive Yoga (TSY) is to support the body to feel strong and comfortable which will help the trauma survivor to experience the present rather than re-experiencing the past.

Van der Kolk highlights the main challenge for trauma sensitive clients- that is the ability to learn how to modulate the arousal that they feel in their body. Yoga can assist in this by supporting clients to increase their capacity for internal awareness- basically they learn to notice what is going on inside and to be able to better regulate their limbic system responses.

Domains of a Trauma Sensitive Yoga Class

As the workshop continues, Dave Emerson introduces some of the early outcomes of the work being done at the Justice Resource Institute (JRI) in

relation to Trauma Sensitive Yoga. In a pilot study to look at the impact of trauma sensitive yoga on PTSD symptoms , after eight weeks of gentle 75minute sessions, participants reported the following outcomes. (Emerson, 2009 p124)

- Increase in positive emotions and a decrease in negative emotional experiences
- Increase in their physical vitality
- Increase in body attunement

To ensure a safe and effective environment for the Trauma Sensitive Yoga class, Emerson recommends the following modifications to a normal yoga class. (Emerson, 2009 p 125)

- Have windows covered if they are open to the general public.
- Lighting is soft, but not too dark.
- Mirrors may be a distraction- if mirrors are present it's important that clients aren't facing into them.
- Work to minimise external noise where possible.
- Ensure that no-one enters the class once it has commenced.
- Have enough chairs, mats and props for everyone. It's preferable not to use straps in the room due to potential trauma associations.
- It's preferable not to use Sanskrit terms in the class as they may cause confusion and potential provocation.
- Be sensitive around language used. Trigger words may include words such as relax, pelvis.
- Use "us" & "we" versus "you" & "I"
- As a teacher be safe, predictable and consistent- this encompasses aspects of the teacher's presentation such as modest dress and awareness of how the teacher uses their own body and their reactions to events in the class. This also allows students to challenge themselves as they are ready and in their own way.
- Use the lower register of the voice, as it is more soothing for students.
- No physical adjustments.
- Music may assist in the person taking their attention away from their body when the purpose of the class is to encourage the client to have a connection and relationship with their body.

What are trauma survivors saying about this work?

As part of this five-day workshop, clinicians and students of TSY were invited to a half-day panel to tell their story. This was a profound morning of discovery to hear war veterans from both the Vietnam campaign as well as current campaigns in Afghanistan who are dealing with PTSD.

I was left with the profound awareness of how we all need to be able to make some meaning of these horrific events as part of a way to complete our story- either as a participant or as a witness to the horror of each survivor's story. I was deeply touched by the courage of these survivors to even turn up to a yoga class. It requires great compassion and an educated awareness around trauma in each TSY teacher to ensure that their students feel safe and supported. For one

of these survivors he poignantly tells us- “the only place I feel safe is on my mat. My teacher taught me how to breathe again.”

It feels incredibly special to have been able to spend these five days with such inspiring people from all over the world- all interested in one thing- to help people find their way home to their body in a safe and supported way. I leave Kripalu with a renewed energy to continue this work within my clinic and beyond, supported by the knowledge that there is good and meaningful work to be done. Thanks to both Dave Emerson and Bessel van der Kolk for their inspirational passion and commitment to this work.

This review of Trauma Sensitive Yoga Teacher Training at Kripalu in April 2012 was written by Shirley Hicks. For further information Shirley can be contacted at www.shirleyhicks.com.au or 07 5530-6708.

Resources and further reading:

Emerson D., et al (2009) **Trauma- Sensitive Yoga: Principles, Practice and Research**, International Journal of Yoga Therapy No 19

Van der Kolk, BA., et al (2007) **Traumatic Stress- The Effects of Overwhelming Experience on Mind, Body and Society**, The Guildford Press New York

www.jri.org- Justice Resource Institute

www.kripalu.org- Kripalu Centre for Yoga and Health

www.traumacenter.org- Trauma Centre based at JRI

www.traumasensitivelyogaaustralia.com – Trauma Sensitive Yoga Australia