

The Yoga of Stress Resilience  
Burnout Recovery Program  
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*With the Best of Intentions*

*As we start this course, let us set an intention to be kind to ourselves, to do our best to accept ourselves as we are, and to allow ourselves to take care of ourselves the way we take care of others, because we deserve it.*

## **Introduction**

This course came about from my own recovery from stress and burnout. I am a person who has burnt out many, many times. Unfortunately, I did not recognize burnout in myself, until I became physically exhausted or found myself with worsening health. Then, I was forced to make change. Yoga has saved my life many times.

I started my medical career almost 20 years ago in Emergency Medicine. I really enjoyed the practice of emergency medicine, however, “the system” in which I trained and was working caused me much frustration and undue stress. Throughout this time, I practiced yoga, either when I got home from a shift or when I woke up. I did not know how it worked but I knew I felt better after having practiced. It did not help fix the stress I endured at work, but it helped discharge some of it when I got home. However, as the stress continued to build, my ability to recover lessened, and I realized the job was not a good fit for me.

So I decided to leave Emergency Medicine to practice Family Medicine, where I immediately met with stress again. This time it was the stress the root of many my patients’ problems - their back pain, high blood pressure, depression, anxiety, diabetes, weight gain, heart disease. If we were not getting to the root cause of their symptoms, their health would inevitably worsen. At the time, I working in a community with a large South Asian population, many of whom were removed from their cultural roots. It was natural for me to teach them the skills of yoga, which I was also practicing to help myself. I began to teaching basic movements to relieve pain, simple breathing exercises to reduce stress, and meditation to help with the racings of the mind. Those who practiced, seemed to get better, or at least not worse, and seemed to develop a more clear outlook on life.

Teaching these techniques took time, and with the other pressures of clinical care, I did not feel that I always had the time to practice the way I wanted. Something had to change. I decided to go back to school to study health policy and management, with the intention of learning skills to help change how we practiced medicine, and to improve clinical care. I came back having been inspired with new ideas, tools and the confidence to lead change.

I started working in a new clinic, where we built bottom up, implementing medical group visits, and improving our preventative screening. It was exciting and I really loved the ability to innovate care. Then I noticed something fishy was going with our paychecks and the finances of the clinic. As I began to ask questions, my life at work got really hard. I was being micromanaged, I was being told I was not good at my job and I was not performing. They criticized my clinical care and assigned me tasks that were near impossible. I was being set up to fail. In response, I worked harder to prove myself. It was the most stressful 6 months of my work life (other than residency) and it took a huge toll on my wellbeing.

Then one day, I was asked to meet with our Lead Physician in his office and he advised me I was no longer going to be working in that clinic. As of that moment, they would be taking care of my patients and I was officially locked out. In that moment, the monkey that was on my back, weighing me down, was immediately lifted and a sense of lightness came over me. My first

thought was “WOO HOO! I don’t have to work with the crazy people anymore!” Rest assured, I am not referring to my patients.

After the elation wore off, the effect of having worked in a toxic work environment for so long became clear - the wear and tear on my body, continuously pushing through the stress. I was stuck in survival mode and I went numb to my own personal feelings. When the shock and numbness wore off, I started to feel my body once a again. I recognized that I was aching all over. I was tired, exhausted, barely able to get out of bed. All I could do was get up, go to yoga, eat, and sleep. My body was done. I had no more push left in me.

Eventually, thoughts of “Why did this happen?” set in. My inner critic was quick to provide the answers of all the ways I was not good enough. It was a one-two punch down to the bellows of shame. Shame lead to me to constantly worry about what others would think, on top of the burden of worrying about what was happening to my patients. I got trapped into thinking that I must have done something wrong, or that something was wrong with me! It took me awhile to talk about what had happened to those outside of my inner circle, and I knew I had to be careful with whom I was sharing my story for fear of judgement. I was on guard.

The turning point came when I attended a local yoga conference. Dr. Kelly McGonigal was offering a workshop on Compassion Fatigue, a hot topic amongst clinicians. The workshop focused on Loving Kindness (Metta) meditation, and the practice of Compassion for the Self as the basis of our own wellbeing. It was a much needed reminder of the importance of being kind to ourselves – something which was never fostered in my profession. She also introduced me to Dr. Kristen Neff’s research on Self-Compassion. It was a game changer for me. I started to practice it and it helped me regain my confidence.

When people asked why I was not at the clinic anymore, I had the confidence to speak about my experience. People knew me and respected my hard work. They reassured me there was nothing wrong with me, and this was surprisingly common in many organizations. As I began to own my situation and discuss it openly, the shame of having been locked out lifted. People shared their own stories of having gone through similar situations. Knowing I was not alone helped relieve my stress and gave me strength to move on.

Despite the worries I had about my patients, being locked out of my practice ended up being a blessing in disguise. It gave me the opportunity to practice in a way that was truer to myself and my values. It also gave me the opportunity to go to India to study Yoga and Yoga Therapy. It was something I had always wanted to do, and brought me back to the whole reason I went to medical school – to help people heal by combining western medicine with the ancient knowledge of the East. In fact, it was what I had intended to study as part of my first year medical school project. I remember presenting the idea to one of our Medical School Deans and he told me “You cannot do that here.” Unfortunately, I heard you cannot do that.

What he really meant was I could not do that “HERE,” at my medical school, at that point in time. Yet, at the time, Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn had already published on Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction in Chronic Illness, and Dr. Richard Davidson was beginning his research on the effects of meditation the brain. Dr. Herbert Benson, a cardiologist at Massachusetts General

Hospital, affiliated with Harvard University, was also researching and teaching the “Relaxation Response,” techniques based in Yoga. I had no idea, until one of my patients identified what I was teaching as Mindfulness. I proceeded to google and find out about all the research that had been conducted on the health benefits of meditation. I knew my next move would be to incorporate this into my practice. I had already experienced the positive benefits myself and saw it in my patients.

This program is based on all the things I have learned, and continue to learn, in healing from all of my experiences with stress and burnout. It is all based on the latest research on stress, the effects of the mind-body practice of yoga and the experiences of the many who have gone through this program. Though we may have come to this point via different journeys, yoga as process and path, can be practiced to bring about transformative change and healing, no matter what your background, body type, or ability.

Over the next 9 sessions, we will be practicing gentle restorative postures, breathing, as well as mindfulness, loving-kindness and compassion-focused meditation to help foster our recovery from burnout and build resilience.

We will come to understand:

- key concepts of yoga, mindfulness, compassion, acceptance and how they can come together for personal transformation.
- how we carry stress in our bodies (the embodiment of stress) and how stress manifests as anxiety, pain, or other symptoms.
- the science of human function and factors which contribute to burnout.
- the role of self-compassion and self-care in our response to stress.
- how to cope with difficult emotions which may contribute to our stress.
- how to deal with challenging relationships.
- how to incorporate self-care into our daily routine.
- how to build in the factors that have been proven to help build resilience
- how to apply all the concepts in the moments when we need them to realign ourselves back into our comfort zones.

I hope you get as much out of reading and participating in this group as I get out of teaching it. I also hope that you are able to learn to be kind to yourself and to take care of yourself. As I have learned the hard way, if you do not have, you cannot give.

## Course Outline:

## Part One – Regulate

1. Introduction – Yoga of Burnout Recovery

Topic: Welcome and Introduction.

Exercise: Why are you here? Setting your personal intention and intention for the group.

Exercise: What do you value?

Exercise: Mindful Awareness – Raisin Exercise

Exercise: Breath work - Exhale Focus.

Exercise: Progressive Muscle Relaxation.

BREAK

Topic: The Mind-Body Philosophy of Yoga, Transformation for Personal Change.

Topic: Key Concepts: Kriya Yoga, Mindfulness, Self-Compassion, actions for Self-Care, and Acceptance.

Topic: Working with the Breath.

Video: [Happify – Meditation 101](#).

Exercise: Breath focused meditation.

2. The Embodiment of Stress

Topic: Welcome and Review of Group Rules.

Exercise: How does it feel to Tense and Release.

Practice: Mindful Movement, Compassion Focus.

BREAK

Topic: The Embodiment of Stress/Intro to the Window of Tolerance model

Topic: Eastern Metaphor of the body as a vessel.

Exercise: Where do I hold stress in my body?

Topic: Backdraft/Grounding/Safety.

Practice: Right /Left Body Scan.

3. Understanding Burnout – When the stress becomes too much

Topic: Welcome and review of home practice.

Exercise: Mindful Movement, Compassionate Focus.

Exercise: Breath work - Exhale Focus.

Exercise: Meditation - Loving-Kindness for the self

BREAK

Topic: Human Function Curve (Nixon P, 1976).

Exercise: Applying the Human Function Curve model to your life.

Topic: Introduction to the Window of Tolerance and Cultivating Satva.

Topic: Beyond Burnout – factors which affect those who care for others.

Topic: Stages of Life.

Exercise: Self-Compassion Break Meditation.

## Part Two – Relate

4. Becoming Self-Compassionate

Topic: Welcome and Review of Home Practice.

Exercise: Mindful Movement, Compassionate awareness.

Exercise: Breath Work – Inhale intention, exhale release.

Meditation: Body Scan.

BREAK

Exercise 1: Self-Compassion in the body.

Exercise 2: How do we treat ourselves? How do we treat a friend?

Exercise 3: Park Bench Exercise – What others see and what we see.

Final Meditation: Self-Compassion break

5. Dealing with Difficult Emotions

Topic: Welcome and Review.  
 Exercise: Mindful Movement, Compassionate body awareness.  
 Exercise: Breath Work –Inhale into emotion, Exhale Release  
 Meditation: Working With Difficult Emotions  
 BREAK  
 Topic: Working with Difficult Emotions.  
 Topic: “Name to Claim” / “Name to Tame”.  
 Topic: Tolerating our emotions: Understanding the Window of Tolerance.  
 Meditation: Labelling Emotions/Holding emotions/Allowing Emotions  
 Topic: Introduction of Acceptance.  
 Poem: The Guest House.

#### 6. Dealing with Difficult People and Trying Relationships

Topic: Welcome and Review.  
 Exercise: Mindful Movement, Compassion Focus breath (heart centre), balance poses.  
 Exercise: Breath Work – balancing breath.  
 Exercise: Release – Inhale for Self, Exhale for other (modified *Tonglen*)  
 BREAK  
 Topic: Dealing with Difficulty – Window of Tolerance, recognising our own triggers.  
 Topic: Empathic Resonance, Distress, and Role of Compassion.  
 Topic: Reflecting on our defences, and safety mechanisms.  
 Video: Brene Brown – Boundaries and Compassion.  
 Topic: Strategies for managing difficult relationships.  
 Meditation: Loving Kindness for self-compassion, for someone we love, for one who is suffering, and for the difficult person.

#### Part 3 – Reintegrate

#### 7. Towards Resilience: Daily Routines

Intro: Welcome and Review.  
 Exercise: Mindful Movement, Compassion focus, Strength Poses.  
 Exercise: Breath Work – Alternate Nostril Breathing, *Nadi Shodhana*  
 Meditation: Giving and Receiving Compassion.  
 BREAK  
 Topic: Your typical day (self-study, self-management based on Kriya Yoga – Self-awareness, Self-care Actions, and Surrender, 4P’s  
 Meditation: of choice

#### 8. Re-Union for Resilience

Intro: Welcome and Review.  
 Exercise: Mindful Movement, Compassion Focus, Strengthening Poses  
 Meditation: Giving and Receiving Compassion.  
 BREAK  
 Topic: Building in that which gives Health – Sense of Purpose, Social Connections, Community & Values, Gratitude, Spirituality, Mentorship, Mind-Body Exercise  
 Meditation: Gratitude

#### 9. Reintegration - Becoming

Topic: Welcome and Review.  
 Exercise: Mindful Movement, Compassionate Focus, Warrior Sequence.  
 Exercise: Breath Work – Intention inhale, release exhale.  
 Meditation: Giving and Receiving Compassion.  
 BREAK  
 Exercise: Self-Management Plan - Window of Tolerance and Your Usual Pattern, and Action Steps.  
 Topic: Change, Surrender and Serenity.  
 Final Meditation: Loving Kindness for self, for community, and for all sentient beings



## Part 1 :Release, Rest and Regulate

*“Practice in a way that does not tire you out, but that gives your body, emotions and consciousness a chance to rest. Our body and mind have the capacity to heal themselves if we allow them to rest” Thich Nhat Hahn*

*“My Dharma is the practice of non-practice” the Buddha*

## **1. Burnout and the Path of Yoga**

The Intention of this course is to help those suffering from burnout to release stress, relate to themselves and reintegrate mind and body for resilience.

Session 1:

1. Review the concept of stress and Yoga.
2. Understand how Yoga as Mind-Body practice can help one recover from chronic stress and build resilience.
3. Get started with practices to help us rest.

## **Stress**

Stress has been defined as “the psychological perception of pressure, on the one hand, and the body's response to it, on the other, which involves multiple systems, from metabolism to muscles to memory.”<sup>1</sup> It is a biological, psychological and sociological response to a perceived challenge, threat, or danger. Stress is not all bad. We need our stress response to survive the challenges of life, and we are built to respond to acute stressors. The issues are how we *perceive* stress, how we *respond* to stress, and how we *recover* from stress.

## **Perception of Stress**

How we perceive stress determines whether our stress response is experienced positively or negatively. If we perceive that stress is bad for our health, it can have negative consequences. Unfortunately, whatever you believe can manifest as truth. If you experience a lot of stress and you believe it is bad for you, then you are at higher risk for experiencing negative outcomes. Research shows that if you experience a lot of stress, but do not believe it is bad for you, your risk for negative outcomes is lower.<sup>2</sup>

Another factor that effects our stress response is how we were wired to handle stress. If we grew up in a stressful environment, or had many adverse childhood experiences, our developing brains would have been exposed to a lot of stress hormones, and we may have developed an up-regulated stress response.<sup>3</sup> We had to be on alert all the time, so it makes sense that our stress response would have been primed to protect us, alerting us at any sign of danger. This would have been helpful in our past, but it may not be serving us in our present moment experience. It is not our fault. By becoming aware and accepting how we are wired, we can then work to re-wire, or change, our patterns.

## **Response to Stress**

Sometimes the way we respond to stress is not helpful or beneficial to our present situation. Some of us respond to stress by numbing it - eating junk food, drinking alcohol, or through other drugs. Then we experience the consequences of behaviours that such as weight gain or addiction. Some of us discharge our stress in anger, affecting our relationships. Some of us fall into a pattern of avoidance or procrastination. If we are stressed about completing a task and we avoid

doing it, then our pattern of avoidance may interfere with achieving our goals.

There are also many other ways we respond to stress, which may have been helpful in the past, but might not be helping us in our present situation. For example, always saying “Yes” and people pleasing may have kept us safe in the past, yet in our current life situation, it may work against us if we become overwhelmed with responsibilities. Through this course, we will review our own individual patterns of response to stressors and how we can change those patterns which no longer serve us.

### **Stress Recovery and Self-Care**

As mentioned above, we are designed to handle acute stress. After experiencing stress, we need to complete our stress cycle, by discharging the stress and returning to a resting non-stressed state. However, if we are not able to discharge stress, we stay in stress mode and our stress load increases. Then we may experience the effects of chronic stress, exhaust our energy and become increasingly fatigued. We may find that it becomes increasingly more difficult to do the things which help us take care of ourselves. For example, we may not go to bed on time, we may eat more or eat on the run, and we may give up on our exercise routine. We may even find ourselves withdrawing from our family and loved ones, or other social situations, further isolating us in our suffering. As we will learn, a key factor to building stress resilience is allowing ourselves the time to release and recover from stress so that we can have the energy to take care of ourselves and fully participate in our lives.

In this program, we will reflect on these aspects to understand our own personal experience with stress. We will develop awareness of the situations which trigger our stress response. We will become mindful of how we hold stress in our bodies, and learn techniques to release stress. We will then reflect on whether our responses to stress are useful to us, and if not, learn to practice more functional ways to respond to stress, to build resilience, and live the lives we were meant to live.

### **Resilience**

Resilience has been defined by the American Psychological Association as “the process of adapting well in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, and even significant sources of stress – such as family and relationship problems, serious health problems, or workplace and financial stresses.”<sup>4</sup> Some define resilience as how quickly we “bounce back” after adverse experiences. Dr. Adam Grant, PhD, a popular psychologist at the University of Pennsylvania, describes resiliency as “the strength and speed of our response to adversity.”<sup>5</sup> Essentially, resilience is our ability to recover after bad things happen to us.

Based on my personal experience and my experience working with many patients suffering from the negative effects of chronic stress, how fast one recovers from stress and with what strength depends on many factors. This includes how much stress we have endured throughout our life,

especially adversity experienced during childhood and adolescence. Factors also include our family, workplace, and financial environment, as well as the strengths of our social support network, and whether we feel safe in our environment. Those of us with a more sensitive stress response, may experience stress more rapidly, as well as more intensely, both physically and mentally, than those with a less sensitive stress response. It may also take us longer to recover from stress. This should not be perceived as a weakness, in fact it is a strength and an asset. Those who have undergone adversity are often the ones who stand up to it, creating change to help those others experiencing similar life stressors. We cannot control how much stress we have endured in our lives. Yet despite our experiences, and often because of them, we can develop resilience by learning skills to help us better cope with stress. In understanding our personal response to stress, knowing when to stop, and knowing how to take better care of ourselves, we will learn that we can recover from the daily demands of our modern lives.

Currently, many companies and organizations are looking for ways to make their staff more resilient to increase productivity and efficiency, again often considering it a mark of strength. Unfortunately, when resilience is viewed in this way, it puts the onus on the person, instead of on their situation and source of stress, which maybe environmental or cultural within the organization. This does a disservice to those who work in high stress situations – such as our Military, First Responders and our Medical/Helping Professionals. Most people who work in these professions are some society's most resilient people! Not many others can withstand long hours on their feet, lack of sleep, dealing with human trauma and uncertainty, while making decisions and providing services upon which the lives of others depend. Make no mistake, there is nothing weak about it!

While these professionals may benefit from resiliency training, what they truly need to become resilient is time to discharge stress, resources to help them process the trauma they witness daily, as well as social and organizational support for the important work that they do. Those who are looking to make their work force more resilient may need to review their workplace culture and ask how they can better support employees. For those doing the front line work, it may mean recognizing that no matter how many skills you build, if you are in an abusive, toxic or dysfunctional situation, removing yourself from the situation may be the only way to restore your health and your resilience. These are not easy decisions, and many factors come into play including family and finances. Ultimately, you need to choose for yourself what is best for your overall health.

### **Why Yoga?**

As mentioned, stress is triggered by our perceptions. Our perceptions are subconscious. Some of our perceptions may be true and some of our perceptions may be misperceptions. For example, many people think Yoga is a form of acrobatic exercise in which one twists oneself into a pretzel. This would be a misperception.

As one of my teachers Indra Mohan says “Yoga is not a work out, it is a work in.”<sup>6</sup> It is a practice which prescribes a process for achieving “*Citta Vritti Nirodha*” - the ceasing (*nirodha*)

of the activities and misperceptions (*vruttis*) of the mind (*citta*).” Then as “*Tada drastuh svarupe vasthanam*” the practitioner can come back to dwelling in their own true nature. The path of Yoga can help us release our stress, restore our energy and reconnect us with our true selves.

### **The Mind-Body Practice of Yoga**

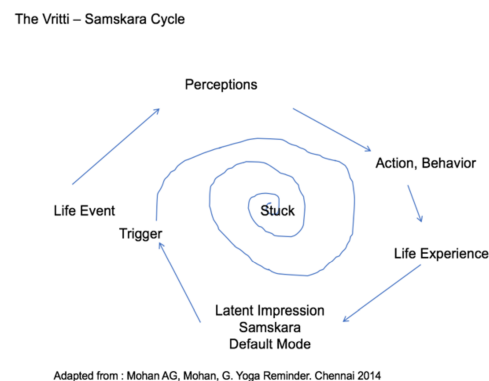
In the eastern Philosophy of Yoga,<sup>7</sup> as in many indigenous traditions, the mind was not separated from the body. Modern Science has shown that our internal perceptions of stress work in a top-down / bottom-up way. As we will discuss, we perceive stress in our limbic brain, and hormones are quickly sent to activate the body. We then have an experience of stress in our body, and the signals come back up to our thinking brain to affect the stress we perceive in our mind. The stress we experience in our mind can feedback to the loop and continue the sensations of stress in the body. This is one reason why in yoga, we work first through the body. The release of the body allows us to focus our minds away from our racing thoughts. In continuing to practice, we reconnect our minds and our bodies, and get back in touch with our present moment reality.

### **The Yoga Sutras**

The Sage Patanjali is attributed to having codified the philosophy of yoga into the Yoga Sutras around 195-200 BCE. Prior to this, they were passed down verbally in the oral tradition and are still chanted today. They are believed to be over 5000 years old. The Yoga Sutras consist of 196 short passages explaining how to practice yoga to attain *Citta Vritti Nirodha* - the ceasing of the racings of the mind.<sup>8</sup> It is spiritual in nature, though it does discuss focusing on a supreme being as an option for meditation. We will keep our practice spiritual and secular, and if you already have a personal religious practice of prayer that you find helpful, you can continue to practice in this way.

### **The Vritti-Samskara Cycle**

The main purpose of yoga is to slow the *vruttis* - the activities of the mind - the racing thoughts, the misconceptions and misperceptions which arise in our minds. These *vruttis* are influenced by our past experiences and the impressions they have left on us. These latent impressions are called our *samskaras*. They cloud the lens through which we see and experience the world. Our *samskaras* effect our thoughts, actions, bodily sensations, and emotions. This then creates more thoughts and perceptions, which manifest in our minds and bodies, further affecting our actions, habits, and thoughts. Thus, carrying on the cycle.



The Ancient Yogis also understood we can develop patterns of response that, if repeated

overtime, can become habitual and automatic. These subconscious patterns are known as *samskaras*. Some of our *samskaras* are beneficial while some do not serve us, and take us off the course of experiencing peace and wellness. For example:

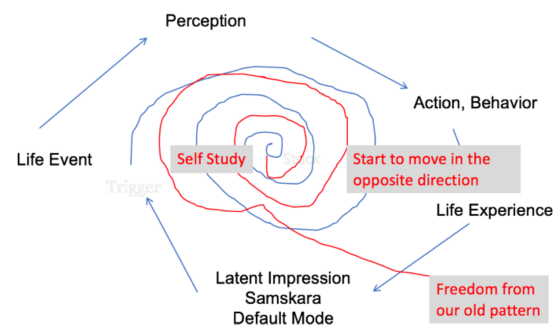
- Food poisoning - if we eat bad food and get sick we may lay down an impression that then reminds us next time we see that food to avoid it. This is an evolutionary response that can be protective. Usually, we are conscious or aware of this cycle.
- Walking - we learn to walk as a baby, and it eventually becomes a subconscious action.
- Anxiety – if we have experienced an anxiety-provoking situation in the past, the next time our minds sense a similar threat, we may immediately feel anxious again. Often, we are not conscious of this cycle.

The practice of yoga helps us develop awareness around our *samskaras*, and helps us to practice new, more functional ways of being, bringing us back to a balanced state. As Sri T Krishnamacharya, heralded as the Father of Modern-day Yoga, said “Yoga is the process of replacing old patterns with new more appropriate patterns.”

If we are unaware of our *vritti-samskara* cycle, we are bound to repeat similar patterns and habits. In repeating our patterns and habits, those neural pathways become stronger, and so does the automatic responses in our minds and our bodies. This can cause prolonged suffering in states of anxiety, anger, depression or pain.

In developing a practice of *smrti* (mindfulness) we can become more aware of what is happening in this moment. Through *svadyaya* (observation, self-reflection, or self-study), we may become aware of our *vritti-samskara* cycles, such that we become more self-aware. In developing a practice of *maitri-karuna* (loving-kindness and compassion), we can self soothe and find the courage and strength for *pratipaksha bhavana*, "to begin to move in the opposite direction." With a conscious effort and action (*tapas*), we can change or reverse the *vritti-samskara* cycle, in our minds and bodies. As our practice strengthens, we may come to know who we really are, and hopefully free ourselves from the cycles and patterns that cause us to suffer.

The Vritti – Samskara Cycle



Adapted from: Mohan AG, Mohan, G. Yoga Reminder. Chennai 2014

### **Neuroplasticity and the Vritti Samskara cycle**

This *vritti-samskara* cycle reflects what science has proven, as Canadian Dr. Donald Hebb originally noted, “neurons that wire together, fire together.” Our experiences cause neurons to fire together and get connected with each other. The next time a situation is perceived or

experienced, we may subconsciously react in a similar fashion, further strengthening the neural network, or “connectome,” for that behavior pattern. We see this in children who are learning to walk. Initially, their brains are immature, and we have to hold them up and guide them. As they continue to practice, often guiding themselves along the furniture, they strengthen their balance and co-ordinate their movement. Eventually, the pathway solidifies, and before you know it they are not just walking, they are running! In recent medical history, it was thought the brain was capable of developing new networks of neurons only during key critical periods of our development in our early life.<sup>9</sup> While our early experiences do seem to become hard-wired, as we get older, our brains can still change under conditions which help the brain’s neurons form new connections.<sup>10</sup> The ability of the brain to modify, change and adapt in both structure and function throughout life, in response to our experiences is called *Neuroplasticity*.<sup>11</sup> The conditions which foster neuroplasticity include:

- novelty (or new experience)
- repetition
- focused attention (concentration)
- perception (awareness and mindfulness)
- perceived challenge with enjoyment (a positive emotional response)
- reduced stress
- better sleep
- exercise
- TLC – Love (we will begin with self-compassion, and respectful connections with others)

We see the effects of Neuroplasticity in the rehabilitation of individuals who have suffered strokes and traumatic brain injuries. Even if they lose capacity in a part of their brain, with awareness and effort, in particular slow repetition with appropriate periods of rest, they too can regain function by rewiring brain circuits in parts of the brain that remain uninjured.

## **Yoga and Modern Day Therapy**

The philosophy and psychology of many modern psychotherapeutic and rehabilitative methods are reflected in the Yoga Sutra – including Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, Psychodynamic Psychotherapy, Mindful and Compassion Based Therapies, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. Those who have studied the Yoga Sutras will attest it is all there and through this course, we will practice these methods. While modern science may now be proving the physical and neuroplastic effects of these practices, it is not new knowledge. The Ancient yogis knew this for thousands of years.

## **The Path of Yoga**

So how do we do it? Luckily, the sage Patanjali described an eight-fold path to achieving clarity. This is called *Ashtanga* yoga<sup>12</sup>

### **Ashtanga Yoga – The Eight Limbs of Yoga:**

### 1. *Yamas* - How we control our actions in relation to our external world.

The *Yamas* include:

- *Ahimsa* – Non-harming/Non-violence.
- *Satya* – Truthfulness.
- *Asteya* – Not taking that which does not belong to us. Not stealing.
- *Brahmacharya* – Non-desiring. Often associated with celibacy, but not for those who have renounced life. It is essentially not letting your desires take control of your actions.
- *Aparigraha* - Non-possessiveness, Non-accumulation, essentially only taking or having what we need.

### 2. *Niyamas* - How we manage or control our actions in relation to ourselves.

The *Niyamas* include:

- *Shauca* - Purifying your body and mind - essentially self-care and treating yourself in a healthy manner.
- *Santosa* - Cultivating an attitude of contentment.
- *Svadyaya* – Observation, self-study, self-reflection.
- *Tapas* - “Burning Intensity” a commitment to actions (effort) that guide your practice.
- *Ishvara pranidhana* – Surrender.

(The *Yamas* and *Niyamas* are considered the observances. They are much like the “10 commandments” that guide our actions towards ourselves and others.)

### 3. *Asana* – Yoga Postures.

Of these 196 sutras, three focus on *Asanas* or postures. The yogis recognized the importance of movement in the preparation for meditation. The postures are there to help us relax the accumulation of tension in the body, and help us connect body, breath, and mind. These three sutras state:

- YS 2.46 *Sthira Sukham Asanam* - The posture should be steady and comfortable. So remember – use the pose to get into your body, never force your body into a pose.
- YS 2.47 - *Prayatna Saithailya Ananta Samapattibhyam* - The posture is mastered by the elimination of effort and the meditation on the unlimited.
- YS 2.48: *Tato Svandva Anabhighatah* - When the posture is mastered, there is cessation of the disturbances caused by the dualities - the *Purusha* (true self/consciousness/soul) & *Prakriti* (all that which is created).

"No pain no gain does not apply to Yoga" Indra Mohan<sup>13</sup>

When performing *Asanas*, use your breath as your guide, rather than how you think you should ideally be in the pose or how a pose should look. The flow of our breath gives us insight into our internal state. When our breath becomes labored, shortened or strained, it is a sign that we are stressed or struggling and no longer in a state of comfort and ease. In this state, we are not in the ideal pose for us. Pull back to the point where your breath flows at ease. This is the edge where the pose is mastered for you. Respect that your body is different from everyone else's and how your body feels will vary from day to day, so the pose will change accordingly.



We practice this as a metaphor for life. If we can practice how it feels to be centered in our pose, then we will understand how it feels to be centered in our lives.

#### 4. *Pranayama* – Breathing exercises.

*Pranayama* is an umbrella term given to the various ways we may work with our breath to achieve balance and release. Breathing techniques are practices unique to yoga. We will mostly use exhale-focused pranayama, and incorporate some other techniques to stimulate centering. Working with the breath in pranayama helps stimulate us after our asana practice back into a more centered state.

#### 5. *Pratyahara* – That which we perceive through our senses.

How we perceive what is going on around us, can often affect our perceptions of stressful situations. As well, when multiple things are happening around us, we may have a hard time focusing, get distracted, or become overwhelmed. In our practice of *Pratyahara*, we want to first tune into to our senses to notice what we are experiencing, and how we experience it. As my teacher A.G. Mohan says, “Pratyahara - minding your senses, should be done from wise self-interest, not as suppression.”<sup>14</sup> In our practice, we will be incorporating a Five Senses meditation.

#### 6. *Dharana* – Concentration.

We will start our meditative practice with building concentration (*Dharana*). Bringing our attention to one point of focus and every time our attention moves away, we acknowledge it and bring it back to our point of focus. It is not necessarily about emptying the mind of thought, it is about focusing away from the racings of the mind.

#### 7. *Dhyana* – Meditation.

*Dhyana* is the state of meditation that you may progress to after the muscle of concentration builds.

#### 8. *Samadhi* – State of Bliss.

*Samadhi* is the state of meditative harmony. Recognize that it is not a linear progression. It is affected by many factors and we often go in and out of states of restlessness and distraction before we can bring our focus to one-pointed concentration, meditation and bliss. So, we practice to practice, not to achieve an outcome. We have no control over the outcomes! Even the Dalai Lama has a difficult time getting to Samadhi!

As well, during the meditation part of our practice, we will let go of all breath control, and allow our breath to flow naturally.

### **The Process for Change**

In each section of this course, we will follow the “cleansing” process of *Kriya* Yoga to reveal habits which are no longer serving us, and commit to efforts and actions which replace the old patterns with new patterns, to build resilience. The three main steps are part of the *Niyamas* and

are called Kriya Yoga.

Kriya involves:

1. *Svadyaya* – Self Study and Self-Reflection. This is a process of bringing conscious awareness to our daily actions. It is an ongoing process that helps us to mindfully understand ourselves and the roots of our suffering.
2. *Tapas* –Efforts and Actions. Effort is how we channel our energy. Action is what we do to help relieve, reduce, and maybe even prevent sources of suffering. It is the repeated practice of these conscious actions that lead us in the “opposite or alternate direction” (*Pratipaksha Bhavana*), and away from suffering.
3. *Isvara Pranidhani* – The act of Surrender. *Isvara* translates to a higher power. For some, that is God, however the Yoga Sutra is clear that it does not have to be God to whom you surrender. It is recognizing and surrendering to the fact that there are forces other than you and that you do not have ultimate control. In accepting a situation as it is, you can then spend your energy on choices and actions which move you forward.

### **Mindfulness - *Smrti***

Mindfulness has been defined in many ways. John Kabat-Zinn’s description is probably the most well-known “Paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.”<sup>15</sup> Others, including Kabat-Zinn, note that this translation is incomplete. The original meaning of *smrti* is not just about thoughts in our minds but more so an awareness of what is happening in the mind and in our hearts, the seat of our emotions, and our bodily feelings. Mindfulness is more of an experience than a concept we can describe in words.

Mindfulness is about having clarity about what is happening in the present moment, without being caught up in, or carried away by our thoughts or emotions. We are often caught in our worries about the future or our ruminations about the past. The skill of mindfulness allows us to be present with our experiences as they are right now, whatever we feel, without judgement. This is essential to our healing process. The practice of mindfulness brings us clarity in our current situations, and allows us to move forward.

Scientific studies show that the practice of mindfulness can lead to physical and emotional changes. Research by Holzel et al<sup>16</sup> shows, that in practicing mindfulness meditation, we lay down more gray matter in key areas of our brain – the narrative center of the prefrontal cortex, the insula where our ability to perceive lies, and we “shrink” our amygdalae, the smoke detectors in our brain that go off when we perceive threat. This doesn’t mean we stop perceiving threat (we need this for survival) but it seems to help us develop clarity around our perceived threats. Building the muscle of mindfulness takes practice, much like running a marathon. We cannot just show up on marathon day and expect to finish! We must start somewhere and build our abilities.

### **Maitri Karuna – Loving Kindness & Compassion**

In this course, we will explore the concept of compassion as a healing force for stress recovery and resilience, not just for others but also for ourselves. In the Eastern traditions, we offer peace first to ourselves, then to those around us and finally to all sentient beings. Many of us were socialized to put the needs of others before our own. We were conditioned to believe that giving back to ourselves was selfish. Unfortunately, this creates an imbalance which can lead to burnout.

We will learn to treat ourselves in the same way we treat others. We all know that on a plane, we must put our own oxygen mask on first before we assist another. The same analogy applies to our energy. As a wise Massage Therapist once said to me “if you do not have, you cannot give”. The Buddha is often quoted as saying “if your compassion does not include yourself, it is incomplete.” So, let us begin with setting an intention to allow ourselves to pay attention to ourselves and to care for ourselves.

### **Beware of Backdraft!**

As we start to practice meditation, we must do so wisely. Many of us have buried memories or unprocessed memories accumulated during times of stress. When we start to relax, or sit in meditation, it is not uncommon for these buried memories to come up. In these situations, it might be necessary to come out of the meditation and practice grounding techniques (discussed below). This will help you to bring yourself back to the present moment, remind yourself the memory is over or not happening now, and begin self-soothing.

This phenomenon can also come up as we start to practice self-compassion, we need to acknowledge a phenomenon that Dr. Christopher Germer, co-founder of the Mindful-Self Compassion Program, calls *Backdraft*.<sup>17</sup> *Backdraft* is term taken from firefighting. It describes what happens when you open a door on a smoldering oxygen deprived fire. All of a sudden, the air rushes in and the fire explodes. As Dr. Germer explains, “Our hearts are hot with suffering. When we open the door, the suffering comes up. When we give ourselves unconditional love, we are met with all the times we didn’t get unconditional love. The door has been opened and all the old stuff comes out. In the short run, these reactions can happen. If we allow them, we will get through them, and life will get better.” Another analogy, that resonates with many of us who live in colder climates, is the one of “frozen fingers.” Being out in the winter can cause your fingers and toes to get very cold, and when you come back inside they may start to hurt as they warm up. The initial experience maybe be uncomfortable and even painful. Unfortunately, the solution is not to return outside and keep them frozen, rather it is to be with the discomfort, and perhaps rub the hands together or offer yourself some other source of comfort until the pain subsides.<sup>18</sup>

### **Grounding**

It is important to note that in any meditative practice, as we begin to relax, unprocessed and

traumatic memories or feelings may also come up. These situations may be difficult to bear. If you begin to feel anxious, emotionally uncomfortable or unsafe, please let go of the exercise, and begin to anchor your awareness to a present moment experience.

For example:

- Feeling the soles of your feet on the floor – rooting and grounding.<sup>19</sup>
- Noticing the colours that are around you in this moment.
- Counting objects in this moment - find five things you can see, four things you can touch, three things you can hear, two things you can smell, and one thing you can taste.
- Placing your hand on your heart and saying to yourself, “This is hard right now. May I be safe.” Or say to yourself whatever it is that you need to hear.

Through this course, we will be working on discovering more of your inner resources that can help you ground when you become triggered, anxious or stressed.

### **Surrender, Acceptance, and Moving forward**

These are deeper concepts we will be exploring as we move through the sessions. Remember, surrender is not resignation. It is merely accepting how things are right now so that you have choices about how you wish to make change and move forward. This comes as we practice and study how we do things presently, what we have control over and changes we can make to get to where we want to be in the future.

To start to bring awareness to this, take a few moments to reflect on the following questions from the Mindful Self-Compassion Program:<sup>20</sup>

#### **Svadyaya/ Self-Study:**

- How do you like to be treated?
- How do you like to treat others?
- How do you treat yourself?

#### **Tapas/Efforts/Actions**

- What action can you take right now to make yourself more comfortable?

#### **Isvara Pranadhani/Surrender**

- To what may you need to surrender as you commit to this course?

## **Practices**

### **Introduction to Mindfulness, Loving Kindness and Gratitude**

- *Concepts: Concentration (Dharana), Awareness of the Senses (Pratyahara), Loving Kindness (Maitri-Karuna)*

### **Practice #1: Mindful Eating - The Raisin**

1. Take a raisin and hold it in the palm of your hand or between your finger and thumb.
  - Focusing on it, start to become aware of the journey that this raisin has taken to appear in your hand today.
  - Envisioning the field in where the plant grew, being tended by the farmer, being watered, growing into a vine, producing blossoms which then developed the fruit – the bunch of grapes, which, once ready, were picked and taken to the place where they dried, your raisin amongst the bunch.
  - Once dried being packaged and taken to market where they were bought, and then made the journey all the way here to Toronto, where they were handed out and you got this individual raisin.
2. Seeing:
  - Now, opening your eyes, and take a moment now to look at this raisin - really see it. Let your eyes explore every part of it examining the highlights where the light shines, it's darker places, the folds and ridges.
3. Touching:
  - Now take a moment to feel the raisin.
  - Turning the raisin between your fingers and thumb, exploring its texture, feeling it with your sense of touch.
4. Smelling :
  - Now bringing the raisin to just beneath your nose and with each inhalation noticing what aroma or fragrance may arise – and noticing what else happens within you as you do this.
5. Taste:
  - Now taking the raisin to your lips, rubbing it against your lips, and just noticing what happens, what it feels like. Then gently placing the raisin on your tongue, and without chewing just noticing the sensations of having it in your mouth. What happens in your mouth? Exploring it with your tongue.
  - Then, when you are ready, prepare to chew the raisin, perhaps placing it where it needs to be between the molars, and consciously biting into the raisin. Simply noticing what happens in your mouth, the experience of it and how it changes.
6. Swallowing:
  - When you are ready - seeing if you can detect the intention to swallow, as it arises, so that this act of swallowing too is a conscious one.

- Following what happens as you swallow, what is left in your mouth, what do you sense in your body.

#### Self-Reflection:

- What did you notice?
- How is this similar or different to how you usually pay attention while eating?
- How is this similar or different to how you pay attention to yourself?

#### Effort/Action:

- Can you take one or two minutes at the beginning of your meal to practice the same techniques? (The same process can be applied to daily activities such as washing the dishes or brushing your teeth.)

#### Surrender:

- Is there anything you must accept in terms of this practice?

### **Practice#2 Working with the breath**

*Concepts: Pranayama, Svadyaya*

There are many ways to breathe. In this course, we will work with diaphragmatic breathing, belly breathing and breathing in a way that is comfortable and tension free for you.

#### Inhalation:

- Begin by placing your concentration where your breath is centred in your body. Then start to build in heart focused breathing. Imagine your breath going into the heart or upper abdomen area. You may feel a slight lift of the heart as you do this. This will correspond to a diaphragmatic lift as well.
- Then place your hands at the sides of your ribs. Feel the lateral expansion as you inhale and the release and contraction as you exhale.

- Then place a hand at your back. Begin to feel how far down your breath goes in your back. Feel the edge of the breath in the back, the expansion and contraction of your back as you breathe.
- If this is uncomfortable or feels constricted in any place, simply focus on your belly, your sides or just your back, where ever the breath moves most freely.
- You can imagine your belly, or your whole torso as a balloon, gently filling up with each inhale. Remember, if you force the air into a balloon, you may meet resistance. In these circumstances, it is best to slowly breathe into the balloon, allowing it to stretch and fill as it wants without resistance. Keeping this analogy in mind, we will practice breathing into our bodies without force.

#### Exhalation:

- As you exhale, gently draw the lower abdominal muscles towards the spine, helping to initiate the exhale from below. At the same time, sensing your pelvic floor gently lifting upward as if by a string. This is activating our lower diaphragm *Mula Bandha*.
- Focus on bringing length to your exhalation to start to stimulate the parasympathetic “rest & digest” part of our nervous system.
- Gently release the air to the point of comfort, such that it is not forced.

#### Ujjai Breath:

Many people are taught Yogic breathing technique called *Ujjai*. In *Ujjai* breath there is a *slight* constriction of the throat (it should not feel like gripping). If this feels too constricting or uncomfortable, please let go of it as a practice, to facilitate less resistance to exhalation. You can incorporate this technique, if it is comfortable for you, as we move deeper into our practice.

As we begin our movement practice, we will work with different ways of breathing into our body, allowing the breath to be the guide.

### **Practice #3 Progressive Muscle Relaxation**

*Concepts: Asana (postures), Pranayama (Breath) Svadyaya (Self-Observation)*

- Start with finding a comfortable resting position - (*lying on the ground in a restorative pose, knees supported with a bolster, head with a blanket or pillow. Variations – include supported Boddha Konasana or knees elevated on the edge of the bed.* )
- Progressive Muscle Relaxation. Please set a routine, protected time to practice.
- If this is uncomfortable for you, make the necessary adjustments to feel comfortable.

#### Key points:

1. Stress is inevitable, yet how we cope with stress and recover is essential to our wellbeing.
2. Yoga, as a mind-body practice, can help us recover from stress and burnout.
3. By practicing Mindfulness and Compassion, we will come to study our habitual patterns, and hopefully commit to making sustainable transformative change.

<sup>1</sup> Source: <https://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/stress> searched May 27, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Hermann Nabi, Mika Kivimäki, G David Batty, Martin J Shipley, Annie Britton, Eric J Brunner, Jussi Vahtera, Cédric Lemogne, Alexis Elbaz, Archana Singh-Manoux. Increased risk of coronary heart disease among individuals reporting adverse impact of stress on their health: The Whitehall II prospective cohort study. *European Heart Journal*, 2013 DOI: [10.1093/eurheartj/ehz216](https://doi.org/10.1093/eurheartj/ehz216)

<sup>3</sup> Middlebrooks JS, Audage NC. The Effects of Childhood Stress on Health Across the Lifespan. Atlanta (GA): Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Injury Prevention and Control; 2008.

<sup>4</sup> American Psychological Association. Road to Resilience <https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience>  
<sup>4</sup> <https://www.inc.com/leigh-buchanan/sheryl-sandberg-adam-grant-option-b-review.html>

<sup>6</sup> Mohan, Indra. Personal Communication January, 2013

<sup>7</sup> Yoga is rooted in the ancient Indian Philosophy of Samkhya, a branch of the Vedic tradition. Samkhya is same philosophy upon which the Buddha based his practice, to eventually become "the enlightened one."

<sup>8</sup> I will be referring to this version of the interpretations of the Yoga Sutras, unless otherwise stated. Aranya, Hariharananda et al. *Yoga Philosophy of Patanjali: Containing His Yoga Aphorisms with Vyasa's Commentary in Sanskrit and a Translation with Annotations Including Many Suggestions for the Practice of Yoga*. State University of New York Press; 1st edition (June 30, 1984)

<sup>9</sup> Feldman DE, Brecht M. Map plasticity in somatosensory cortex. *Science*. 2005; 310(5749):810–815

<sup>10</sup> Shaffer J. Neuroplasticity and Clinical Practice: Building Brain Power for Health. *Front Psychol*. 2016;7:1118. Published 2016 Jul 26. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01118

<sup>11</sup> Voss P, Thomas ME, Cisneros-Franco JM, de Villiers-Sidani É. Dynamic Brains and the Changing Rules of Neuroplasticity: Implications for Learning and Recovery. *Front Psychol*. 2017;8:1657. Published 2017 Oct 4. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2017.01657

<sup>12</sup> The term Ashtanga Yoga is not to be confused with the *style* of Yoga practice called Ashtanga made popular by Sri Patabhi Jois).

<sup>13</sup> Mohan, Indra. Personal Communication. January 2013

<sup>14</sup> Mohan, AG. [@ag\_mohan]. (2018, Nov 10). #Pratyahara #Svastha. [Instagram Photo] Retrieved from

<https://www.instagram.com/p/BqAC6NjDNhM/?igshid=1xo2fi4tcz9oy>

<sup>15</sup> Kabat-Zinn, Jon. Full Catastrophe Living : Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness. New York :Bantam Books trade paperback, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Hölzel BK, Carmody J, Vangel M, et al. Mindfulness practice leads to increases in regional brain gray matter density. *Psychiatry research*. 2011;191(1):36-43. doi:10.1016/j.psychres.2010.08.006.

<sup>17</sup> Germer, C. The Mindful Path to Self-Compassion – freeing yourself from Destructive Thoughts and Emotions. The Guildford Press, 2009. Pgs 150-152.

<sup>18</sup> Germer, C, Neff, K, Becker, C, Hickman S. Mindful Self-Compassion Program. September, 2015

<sup>19</sup> Singh, Nirbhay & G Wahler, Robert & Adkins, Angela & Myers, Rachel. (2003). Soles of the Feet: A mindfulness-based self-control intervention for aggression by an individual with mild mental retardation and mental illness. *Research in developmental disabilities*. 24. 158-69. 10.1016/S0891-4222(03)00026-X.

<sup>20</sup> Germer, C, Neff, K, Becker, C, Hickman S. Mindful Self-Compassion Program. September, 2015



