

# Yoga and Psychodrama

by Nathan Dorra

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As a yoga therapist and a psychodramatist I find myself wondering more and more about the interactions between these two fields that I have chosen as a profession. Looking back I'm not really sure I can point out when did I start practising yoga or psychodrama. Both fields have been a mutation of different studies and occupations. My journey passed through studying acting and theatre in Tel Aviv University. Introspectively those were the happy non-awareness days. I have learnt to view and identified the need for stage, expression, adoration from people and being obsessively emphasising on body, fitness and sport as a way to expand and to take out the psychopathology of expression. My chapter of travelling to east Asia took six years, there I met yoga. It started in Thailand as I torture myself learning and practising meditation in a monastery near the Cambodian border. Later in Varanasi in India, a city of death and beauty, I trained in yoga, but still I was looking for results, new abilities. I can't simply point out where, when or how all this came to be a way of living. But I can definitely say that a different feeling of love toward the process of practice took place.

The return home was hard as expected, but it was real and peaceful this time. Back home, in Israel, as the circle brought me back, I started studying psychodrama in 1991 at Haifa University and finished my diploma as a yoga teacher. That constant dynamics between body and soul mind and spirit was probably unavoidable. For me it was not possible to function as a yoga trainer without referring to the therapeutic aspects involved. I also find I couldn't keep clear boundaries between teaching psychodrama and training group psychodrama. That unavoidable connection, in my experience, was a link between yoga and psychodrama. In Israel psychodrama, probably as in any other place in the world, struggles with suspiciousness and fear from the Academy and has been left out of curriculum. Teachers' training programs were the back door for psychodrama to enter university.

In the last three years I was working with teachers in Oranim seminar and Izrael College near Haifa. I have found the majority of them disconnected to their bodies. It was very easy to run a conventional psychodramatic warm-up such as sociogram, games, share something, but very hard to bring people to a

warm-up emphasising their body. There was a great interest in speaking about yoga, but almost impossible to bring these groups to start with a simple breathing exercise. I often heard complaints like: "I have no energy, my back hurts me ... I don't like my body ... If I breathe deep I get dizzy." I think that each of these statements can be turned into psychodrama where these conflicts can be explored.

But digging deeper, my concern is that our body is a non-defended discover of our self and being. The body cannot hide as good as our manner of speaking. We probably prefer to live near by the body and to ignore it's needs.

As I experienced in myself the possibilities of simply feeling better by listening to my body, this encouraged me to try to share it with those psychodrama trainees by allowing the body to be a part of the session. Often in those sessions I was putting yoga and psychodrama together to a combined experience. In this article I will try to share with you some of this experience that I'm still developing into practice.

Not so long ago I received a sixteen year old girl for yoga therapy. She was suffering from breathing difficulties and her main complaint was, "I often forget how to breath and suddenly find myself short of oxygen." As our work on breathing awareness progressed, the emphasis being on rhythm, consecutiveness, enlarging exhalation, we were slowly aware of the thoughts and feelings that influenced the form of breathing.

The images conjured by the girl illustrated strangulation and suffocation, "... as if a weight is bearing down on my chest". She was afraid of falling asleep and losing her breath. We started using yoga

breathing exercises to facilitate her breathing through this blockage. As she gained mastery over her breathing pattern and her fear subsided I directed her to make a sculpture of these pressures which were revealed as a metal weight constructed from chains of all the negative opinions people might have towards her. The type of breathing that melted the metal blockage started as a technical breathing exercise (measured and controlled) and developed into being a psychodramatic one. Could we localise and identify the source of the flow of energy that enabled shifting and opening up new waves of air into her lungs? The answer is a connection of body and mind, the awareness of breathing, yoga and psychodrama.

Another example is a student who was suffering from sleeplessness, felt alert at night, and was very tired during the day. He wanted to find some relaxation via yoga exercises. Our therapeutic journey to the source of insomnia started by loosening the muscle tone. As a result of this, a great fear of being bare, uncovered, threatened, and defenceless emerged. As he set-up a psychodramatic event reconstructing "one of these nights" clear and significant essence to his long and restless nights was formed. That was the anxiety and fear of failing at a new managing job in his professional career. My track with the student went toward "failing at the new job". He created an imaginary situation: "The Fall" (the two words fail and fall have the same translation in Hebrew, as fall illustrate failure), there he stayed for a while. In that scene he finds out that life continues after the fall. He let him self be the "happy failure" in

the final scene. To end he created a relaxation pause in which he was lying on his back letting himself to loose the job and still to live. That student finish his studies two months later. He didn't get the job, but he was able to fall asleep. He claimed that the improvement in his ability to relax and the development he did in understanding the roots of his destructive ambitions were both

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influencing one the other. In these two examples and in many others, I have found that yoga can enrich the psychodramatic process by adding important elements which receive legitimacy and support from a non-dependant source, namely; the body. I don't mean that psychodrama is blind and disable in viewing or understanding the body. But emphasising on somatization through the practice of yoga direct links are formed to the fundamental stagnation clearly evident in our body. As I often reverse between the two methods yoga and psychodrama, I like to name these direct links "psychodramatic mines". These are components that can be measured and has immediate psychodramatic stimulus. For example: breathing (duration, rhythm, volume), concentration and

focusing, coping with different degrees of pain and tension, presence, the flexibility level of the body, muscles, tone, and stability. In each one of these "psychodramatic mines" I find representations of the emotional and psychological states of a person and relating to them is essential for diagnosis and for enriching the therapeutic process.

Often people ask me to demonstrate a singular use of yoga as a warm-up to a psychodrama workshop, or just for a session. It is possible, although my intention is for a prolonged use of both techniques. When such an event take place only once, it is interesting to spot fresh and natural reactions because participants which are not trained in yoga have an immediate, spontaneous body response to the exercise.

Resistance is hard to hide, and stands out clearly. Under these circumstances the body reaction tends to be stronger and will differ from one person to another.

I'll share with you these two examples:

The first is a woman, age 36, she participated a group combining yoga and psychodrama and came very enthusiastic toward the experience. In one of the early encounters we had she said: "I cannot stand people breathing in such way", and she adds voice while exhaling through the nose, named Hudjaai in yoga.

"It is like snoring ... disgusting!" Later in the psychodramatic part she as a protagonist had a fight with her partner as she woke up because of his snoring. As long as we were warming-up using yoga exercises, she was annoyed by the sound, she didn't make an effort to concentrate, she giggled, and made jokes about the process. But later in the session she wished to share with the group

her irritations that day. She did get the group to support her need to work, and brought us to that argument with her partner the night before as she woken up because of his snoring. In her work there was a strong negative emotion toward her partner. That emotion was translated into symbols of territory. She claimed more space, more territory of her own! "If he is snoring what is happening with you?" I asked her. "I feel it is the same like when we talk, he interrupts me, doesn't let me finish the sentence and doesn't hear me at all!" Then we went back to yoga, as the group helped her to try this kind of yoga breath she couldn't stand. In the new situation she "made the effort" to breath. It was not better in the sense of quality improvement, but it link her straight to the sense of taking place, to snore meant for her in this stage to exist, to be there. The symbolic insight she brought was: "If I breathe that way I feel bigger and wider ... like having a monster inside me." So she was now the monster her self, trying to extreme the emotions by using the noise of the yoga breathing. The feeling she expressed was mainly concern with anger. The monster was the tool she used to allow her self to shift her aggression out. In the following sessions as we came back to the Hudjaai breath, she took her time and shared with us: "I'm trying to learn to live with the monster, but I'm not sure I know who is the monster now, him or me".

The other example is a 65 years old man. He had no previous knowledge in psychodrama. He was training yoga for few years before being introduced to the combined group work. In comparison to his age he seems to be very fit and had no problem in hard postures. I can't remember what was the first catalyst

toward work with him. The memory I visualised sharply is the way he showed irritations and couldn't concentrate on easy and basic postures. As I confronted him with that observation he laughed and admitted he was simply in boredom. In his psychodrama he used the whole group to sculpture his life.

His work was huge, 12 people, a lot of movements, sounds he gave each auxiliary. The life that came of his work was identified by him as a fight, built by challenges, slow losers, and strong winner. That split he related to his father's way of treating him, "you can only be a real strong man or you would be treated like nothing." The attitude he had toward this sentence was first very positive. By reversing roles he started to realise there is something in this powerful awareness in contradiction to his presence in the group and his appearance. That psychodrama brought him to the fear of being weak, the loss of control and destruction. The protagonist took us to the death camps of the Holocaust.

As I'm writing to Australian psychodramatist most of who are far away from the holocaust influence about an experience happened in Israel where the majority of people practising psychodrama or yoga are on 2nd and 3rd generation of the holocaust survivors, I have to warn you from expecting new insights or solutions when protagonists find out holocaust patterns in his/her work or behave.

The big issue in such events is the sharing. The long silent sharing of memories, pain, despair and frustration namely the non-recovered scar of the group, probably any group in Israel, is still very real in these days.

At the beginning of a session that

uses this kind of approach we should remember that participants may come with body limitations or in bad physical condition. There is a danger of sociometric polarisation activated by the self-consciousness of the participants who have significant health problems such as obesity, lower back problems (very common in Israel), differences of age, low or high blood pressure, asthma. The training and knowledge that a psychodrama director has acquired is very helpful in observing and assessing the data and refer to the personal level of difficulties of each individual, rather than look for a high quality of performance. People can simply be overweight, non-sportive, stiff and these difficulties should not be identified as resistances. If one is used to certain diet that doesn't obviously mean what we as therapist may wish to understand. It is better to look for the approach, feeling coming through the process, changes, new images.

To have this happened we need time. Introversion, and insights as a result of process is very helpful. Therefore, I recommend a combined class with regular use of yoga exercises as a systematic framework gradually built up among the individuals toward psychodramatic work and group development.

We may wrongly interpret the use of hatha yoga (the practical framework of yoga) as a wish to bring the trainee to a better control over his/her body. Such control may act as a blockage or resistance, which in psychodrama may play a major therapeutic role. Thus it is important to explain that the natural pretence of yoga to gain control over the body is endless and "the way" (the training process) is a major component in the doing. That means

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that the process comes prior to the quality or result. The way and the search for control is endless and is embedded with difficulties which should be spontaneously channelled to the psychodramatic process. Control, as far as yoga is concerned, is a release from the burden of illusions which dictates and misleads human beings (Venkatesananda, 1962). A major principle in yoga regards restlessness as the cloud which covers the opportunities of living in harmony and creates illusions which confuse our perceptions of good and bad. In yoga, the way to the truth involves constant pain. Without going through the pain, the participant will be unable to reach the balance between good and bad, the existent and the missing, the comprehensible and the incomprehensible, the body and the soul.

Psychodramatically speaking, this means, living with the new insights which come out of the drama. That type of pain can be defined in both techniques as a good pain, presenting a new development.

- As yoga meets psychodrama, psychosomatic elements play a major role regarding body image and body language in connection

with the existing and the repressed in our body. Through this experience I found a track in which yoga practice can support the psychodramatic process. In those sessions the practice started with personal yoga postures. I gave participants the freedom to choose the rhythm and time needed. I found that when the training finish it was important for the group to be seated in a circle in a symmetrical position balanced towards the centre. Such a concept help us focusing on the by-products of the psychodramatic work. Which was about to come. During this sitting, the group continues practising breathing (mudra). I regarded this situation as a “low fire warm-up” toward psychodrama, stimulated by breathing and directed the participants to be tuned to the practice outcome, and the new sociometric changes.

- At the beginning of those sessions I have presumed that the present warm-up of the protagonist will probably lead him/her to work on physiological elements concerning his body organs atom or symbolic work related to his breathing or any somatic problem. In fact some works were linked directly to the actual practice, but I witness protagonists moved towards any direction he or she wishes to. As the nature of process, the first attention had often concern the body, dealt with physical feeling, voices and tones changes through practice. However, the continuation was unknown as in any psychodrama. So often somebody in the group would ask, “How did we get to this?” Or, “Where did we start it all?”

- As I have witnessed many times before, the first 45 minutes of the session, usually brings up an irreversible multi-direction warm-up. Therefore, it is important for me to establish a repetitive, systematic and a stable form of training before utilising the method of psychodrama. That “non-spontaneous” form of doing again and again the same group of exercises kept the group in contact with similar materials and memories of feelings and senses. That amazed me how certain exercise could bring up the exact emotion two weeks later although is was consciously forgotten. As one described it: “Every time I’m lying on the stomach and lifting my upper body (cobra) it remind me of my brother. Till this exercise I hardly thought of him at all!” There was nothing specific she could relate to that vision but she mentioned that few times and always during the cobra exercise she thought of her brother. It was not important to find out the connection to the brother as she didn’t ask to search further on. Not every image need to be translated or analysed into words. I presume she needed more time for incubation and she will find her explanation when ever she wished to. This kind of reaction supported the idea that the body is a store house that contain heaps of imprinting emotions and memories. Those could easily come out if we learn to observe and listen carefully to the somatic soliloquy. To end sharing with you that particular and very personal experience, I’ll simply try to show how this all come to practice. I would like to present two typical postures, which are

- different in their physical effect and both need minimal effort to start practising. I often use these postures with participants that have not done yoga before.
- For example, we can start with Capalabati – a breathing exercise in which the diaphragm is pressed inwards and downwards while exhaling through the nose. While exhaling we shrink the stomach inside. Generally I'll pause after the first step and find with the group images to describe the feeling in that posture. More than once I've heard people saying: "I feel as if my belly is sticking to the back". On the next step the trainee exhales strongly and sharply in different rhythms through the nostrils. The way the air is streaming through the sinews (voice strings) causing a change of distance between the strings. As the person progresses, a sound will be heard throughout his or her breathing. The group then listens (one person in a time) and focuses on the Capalabati sound. According to the progress of the practice, I would turn into the psychodramatic tools: a soliloquy, words, images, sculptures, role exchange, drama. Regarding further development I add different gradation of difficulties by extending the duration of the exercise. The sound and the images are likely to appear from the beginning. My argument is that progress and skills development in yoga will not reduce spontaneous emotional and psychosomatic reactions. Rather it will shift the psychodramatic action to a deeper level.
  - The other example is Padahatasana – a standing posture of bending forward (also named "head to the knees"). Without getting into the settings and details connected to this posture, it is prominent for the low holding of the head. As for balancing the blood pressure in this posture, a shift in breathing is required. Now we ought to put the emphasis on inhaling followed by a slow and soft exhalation. (Simply try to bend your head forward and down and stay there for a short while. If you are not use to that you may feel nausea or dizziness.)
  - But if we stay like this for 2-3 minutes breath in strongly and exhale softly we can balanced the change of blood pressure and slowly get used to the new position without any side effect. A new observance of the world is apparent now (upside down). The eyes should be kept open for balancing. Lifting the head up is the essence of the posture. The shifting back should be slow, synchronised with the breathing. On this point I pause to allow the group to share reactions. Here are few reactions I found in my notebook, all came out in the same session with a small group of adolescents:
    - “I feel as if I returned home, I was too far away.”
    - “The view down there is funny, people looks like marionettes, disconnected from each other.”
    - “It gave me the wish to cut my head ... I mean to stop thinking all the time.”
    - “I had a bitter taste in my mouth, maybe because I have eaten just before we started.”

- The last reaction was in my opinion “the less psychodramatic oriented one”. But as in psychodrama that boy show spontaneity and wish to explore it. I asked him to go back to the posture, this time he had the choice to put the feeling into verbalisation, or to get the next sight that will appear. But I made sure he should not stay too long in the posture as he mention the fact he just finished eating not so long ago. The first link he had was “the sea, the salt that test of bitterness”.
- Now the waves opened up different perspective towards psychodrama. “Where am I now? Where was I? What did it feel like down there?” “I’m not afraid of swimming but I hate the sea!!” We went through a monodrama in which he enacted an incident of almost drowned to death in the sea as he was six years old.
- That posture combined quite few more elements toward psychodrama like diving down, climbing up and a change of breathing. In each posture we can find the expression that refers to the movement and to different qualities of experience located in the intra-subjective world of images. I always try to make participants aware of their personal balanced pain. That is the border between pleasure and pain in doing the exercise. My wish is to have a constant awareness of the body limitations of the protagonist. Therefore, I keep repeating exercises through mundane postures such as lying on the belly, the embryo posture, and lifting up the upper body leaning on your hands. The

stream of associations following in this is enormous. The experience is likely to be different in every session according to the emotional and physiological and sociometric changes in the group. I found that staying with the same framework will be an important method and will be necessary for evaluation and sociometry changes. It will also allow a new present and create attention towards listening to the inner self.

I like to end that kind of experience, after the sharing, with relaxation technique. By then the group focus could shift from the protagonist to themselves as an individual. Relaxation starts with the echoing of the psychodramatic event and the senses will preserve and store the colours, odours, and forms of the work.

At the very end and just before saying good by there are two – three minutes of total silence ... end.