

The Future of Yoga Therapy: An Interview with Remo Rittiner



Remo Rittiner is the founder and director of the Ayur Yoga Center in Zurich, Switzerland, which integrates traditional Yoga therapy and Ayurveda. Remo is a full-time Yoga teacher, balancing his time between teaching group classes, private sessions, teacher training programs, and annual retreats. He has created the first Yoga therapist training program in Switzerland. YVIP talked with Remo about his training program and experience as a Yoga therapist.

Interview by John Kepner

How would you describe your approach to Yoga therapy?

Ayur Yoga is a traditional approach based on the Yoga tradition of T Krishnamacharya and Ayurveda. The main focus is the individual, and the adaptation of Yoga and Ayurveda for personal needs. *Asana*, *pranayama*, self-reflection, relaxation techniques, meditation, and food counseling according to Ayurveda are tools in Ayur Yoga therapy. In many cases, it includes the application of muscle function therapy, for releasing muscle tensions and emotional stress. Ayur Yoga therapy requires self-discipline for regular practice and integrating Yoga and Ayurveda in daily life. That's the reason we call it "Ayur", because it means daily, and it only works effectively when you integrate it into your life.

What is your training for teaching Yoga therapy?

I started my training as a Yoga teacher in Switzerland in 1995 and trained for about a year. To be candid, I did not find this very useful, so I went to India to study with a living master. I studied full time with AG Mohan for six months. He was a long-time student of Krishnamacharya and primarily used to working with people one-on-one. Much of my study with him was private as well. When I left India, Mohan awarded me a diploma as a Yoga teacher and Yoga therapist. Since then, I have studied extensively with several other teachers in the Krishnamacharya lineage, primarily Sriram (a student of Desikachar) in Germany, but also Gary Kraftsow in Maui, HI, and Mukunda Stiles in Boulder, CO.

My Yoga studies have been aided by complementary studies in Western anatomy and physiology, and formal and self-study in Ayurveda. My wife Asmita, an Ayurvedic physician, helps me with Ayurveda. She also teaches Ayurveda in Yoga teacher and Yoga therapist training programs, and provides consultations for many Yoga therapy clients.

Given your experience, how would you define Yoga therapy?

A holistic approach for balancing body, breath, and mind. A way to increase awareness about yourself and become open for healing and spiritual awakening. Keywords for Ayur Yoga therapy are self-acceptance, self-reflection, self-awareness, and self-healing.

How has your approach to teaching one-on-one evolved?

In the first two years, many Yoga students from group classes

came with mostly structural issues, like lower back, knee, and neck pain. After a while, and to my surprise, people started to come with chronic conditions like asthma, arthritis, and migraines. At that point, I decided to study more about anatomy, and found Dr. Harald Daub, from whom I learned the very effective muscle function therapy. I integrated this in my Yoga therapy classes and also in my understanding for teaching *asana*. My programs of Yoga therapy became more effective, and that's one of the reasons I included muscle function therapy in my Yoga therapy course.

Also, I could better understand when clients came with medical diagnoses. In the last five years, a lot of clients have come to me with serious diseases, like cancer, AIDS, and depression. I have even had people come and ask me if Yoga would help them in the process of dying peacefully. Also, more clients came with difficulties dealing with loss of relationships.

At the same time, I was deepening my study of the Yoga *Sutras* and the practice of meditation. This has helped me as a Yoga therapist to be more a witness, and to have more compassion with others. I have started to teach more meditative practices, including self-reflective questions and guided meditations to let clients find the answer in themselves. This also includes cultivating *bhavanas* [intentions] that are meaningful and important for the clients. All this helped me understand why relationship and trust are so important in the healing process.

In Switzerland, Yoga therapy is reimbursed by some of the private health insurance plans. How does this work? What are the qualifications required to be reimbursed?

Actually, only a few health insurances accept Yoga as a therapy. Ayurveda, however, is more accepted by many insurance companies. Clients who have insurance for alternative medicine and whose insurance accepts Yoga can come to see me directly. Some private health insurance plans accept Yoga teacher training with a minimum of 300 contact hours. To be accepted as a Yoga therapist, you also must have additional contact hours in allopathic disciplines, such as anatomy, physiology, and other subjects. The minimum requirements are currently about 150 hours, but the requirements increase almost every two years.

Do you find a difference in the motivation and practice of students whose sessions are paid by insurance, compared to those who pay out of their own pocket?

In my experience, motivation and practice are dependent on many factors. For many clients, it's not easy to keep the self-discipline to practice regularly. Patanjali has clearly described the reasons and obstacles to regular Yoga practice. Of course, clients are not unhappy when their insurance companies are paying for Yoga therapy. Maybe some clients paying out of pocket come a little less frequently because of the cost. But when clients are motivated, they are ready to pay without insurance. If a motivated client reports money difficulties, I am open to finding a solution.

Do you work with other conventional as well as complementary and alternative healthcare providers?

Working together with conventional doctors and alternative medicine is very important in my work. I work especially with osteopaths and some allopathic doctors. That means they refer

clients to me, and I also refer to them. In my Yoga therapy courses, I encourage students to build a network with allopathic and alternative healthcare therapists.

You have started the first Yoga therapist training program in Switzerland, now entering its third year of training. Can you summarize your objectives for this program?

The primary objective of the program is for therapists-in-training to develop a clear understanding of the principles of Krishnamacharya's teaching, including adaptation and sequencing for different needs, skills in observation, learning to be a listener, and how to use breath and sound in Yoga therapy. We emphasize the study of Yoga *Sutras* and how to use the *Sutras* as a collection of tools in therapeutic situations. We also emphasize self-reflection and learning to integrate meditation into life and our relationships with others. We also teach anatomy, physiology, kinesiology, muscle function therapy, and the basics of Ayurveda.

Your teacher training program is two years long, and your therapist training program is three years following the teacher training program. Can you provide more specifics about these two programs?

The teacher training program is a basic introductory course for teaching group classes. The course consists of 12 weekends, plus a two-week intensive. This course is 280 contact hours, with 150 hours of homework. As I understand them, this exceeds the U.S. Yoga Alliance minimum standards in all categories. For example, we teach 50 hours of Anatomy and Physiology, as compared to the minimum Yoga Alliance requirement of 20 hours.

The therapist training course is much more in-depth, and focuses on working one-on-one in therapeutic situations. There is much more emphasis how to adapt practices to individuals in a wide variety of circumstances. We also discuss how Yoga can provide spiritual support. We provide more hours of anatomy, physiology, and pathology, taught by a physician. Overall, the therapist training course consists of 18 weekends and three one-week intensives. Contact hours are 420, and 200 hours of homework, including case studies.

One subject that is perhaps unique for our course is the integration of muscle function therapy. Students are trained to use their hands to apply deep pressure to the muscle origins to release muscular and emotional tension. I find that most helpful in releasing tension in specific muscles, and increasing flexibility and range of motion. In particular, I have found Dr. Daub's teachings about the relationship between lower back pain and chronic muscular tension in the psoas and rectus abdominis muscles, and his manual techniques for releasing that tension, a most useful complement to classical Yoga therapy. The training with Dr. Daub includes in-depth discussion of the details of stretching and strengthening muscles, something most Yoga students have only a rather general knowledge of. Dr. Daub also serves as a medical consultant to the students during the course.

Is there a mentoring or internship part to this program?

Yes, students must do some work or project with other health professionals as part of their diploma work. There is a lot of flexibility in how they develop that project or relationship.

How do you judge competency before awarding a diploma?

Students of Yoga therapy have different tests throughout the training. They also have to do much homework, including instructing individuals in Yoga therapy. In the last year of training, they have to demonstrate their competence in Yoga

therapy by working with invited clients. Also, they have to write a long diploma work in which they illustrate their theoretical and practical application of Yoga therapy. Finally, each year they have private meetings with me about their own Yoga practice and competence in the training.

Will insurance companies in Switzerland accept graduates of this course as Yoga therapists?

Most of the graduates have done both the two-year teacher training and the three-year therapist training, which means they have around 710 contact hours of training. The standards for Yoga are 300 hours of Yoga and 150 hours of allopathic medicine. So the graduates are fulfilling the standards that are required and should be accepted. As I mentioned before, however, only a few insurance companies accept Yoga as a therapy right now.

Are there any other standards for Yoga teachers and Yoga therapists in Switzerland?

In Switzerland, there are two Yoga Federations that set very high standards for Yoga teachers. The training to become a Yoga teacher requires four years of study with 600-800 contact hours. The Western tendency to emphasize the number of hours does not always directly correspond to quality, however. For example, having 12 different teachers in a Yoga teacher training program from very different backgrounds can lead to confusion and lack of in-depth study. This was my experience when I was a student in such a teacher training in Switzerland. After that, I decided to study Yoga in the traditional way, one-to-one. In most of my own Yoga training with senior Yoga therapists around the world, I have worked with them one-on-one for extended time periods.

In general, how well recognized and respected is Yoga therapy in Switzerland?

Yoga has become very popular in Switzerland in the last few years. Very few people, however, have heard about Yoga therapy. There are some Yoga teachers who are teaching private lessons, but few are using the term Yoga therapy. Overall, I would say Yoga therapy is not very well known in Switzerland.

What else should or could be done to improve the acceptance and recognition of Yoga therapy in Switzerland?

There must be some standards for the training and practice of Yoga therapists. I know IAYT is considering this in the U.S. This would be a hard job in a small country like Switzerland, with only seven million people. I can barely imagine how difficult this might be in as large and diverse a country as the U.S., with almost 300 million people. But it needs to be done. Otherwise, the discipline will not develop as a real profession.

At the moment, I have regular contact with Yoga Federations and Yoga teachers in Switzerland, to discuss what we can do to encourage more health insurance companies to accept Yoga therapy. In Switzerland, I pay an annual fee of about \$300 to be recognized as a Yoga therapist by the insurance companies. I don't exactly like this, but I accept this as part of the price I have to pay as a professional therapist in my country. I also note that they seem to be raising the standards a little bit every year or so.

Of course, the best way to increase recognition of Yoga therapy is word of mouth from the clients who see the benefits of Yoga therapy. That's how most people come to me. □

For more information, visit: www.ayuryoga.ch

Contact Remo Rittiner: info@ayuryoga.ch

Read past Future of Yoga Therapy interviews at www.iayt.org.