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Yoga in Black Communities: A Healing Justice Movement

By Marilyn Peppers-Citizen and Charlene Marie Muhammad

Yoga therapy is a path to healing, one that supports our journeys toward living better-quality ways of life. The World Health Organization in 2024 defined *quality of life* as “an individual’s perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards, and concerns.” For many Black people around the world, quality of life can be quite low, as it is challenged by chronic health conditions resulting from systemic and institutional inequalities. As the U.S. National Institute on Minority Health and Health Disparities stated, also in 2024, “All populations with health disparities are socially disadvantaged due in part to being subject to racist or discriminatory acts and are underserved in healthcare.”

The historical precedence for life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness is rooted in universal precepts. The United States Declaration of Independence, the United Nations’ motto of “peace, dignity and equality on a healthy planet,” and yoga’s philosophy of transcending the human experience from one of suffering to living a blissful life of peace all share a common theme that health is a human right. And yet due to the historical legacy of the physical, mental, and emotional abuse of Blacks from enslavement to the present day, disparities in health persist because of distrust in social support systems—especially the healthcare system.

Black communities are not homogeneous. Many Black communities can be economically challenged, underserved, and depressed, while some can be affluent, advantaged, well-traveled, and well-

educated. What is consistent is the prevalence for race-based trauma and its impact on Black people, especially in the United States and throughout the African diaspora, caused by the slave trade.

Yoga as a practice and therapy guides us through a process to discern the causes of our suffering and prescribes a practical application as a way out of it! As a means of sharing our research, thoughts, and ideas for offering yoga as an effective, accessible, evidence-based therapeutic practice in Black communities, we agreed that yoga professionals would benefit from understanding: (1) the historical perspectives of Black people's relationship to health and healing, (2) the importance of research-based evidence on yoga as a complementary and integrative healing strategy, and (3) the importance of embracing a community-based/client-centered participatory approach to yoga therapy to cultivate equity in yoga spaces.

Fanny Brewster, PhD, a clinical psychologist and Jungian analyst, reminds us that African people have long believed that there is no separation of body and mind and that "who we have been need not be the future selves we are becoming."² The Akan people of western Africa have a concept in their language called *sankofa*. The Adinkra symbol for the principle of *sankofa* is a bird moving or flying forward while looking back to pick up a seed from its back. In African culture, the symbol represents the need to reach back and reclaim traditional knowledge from the past to move forward with integrity, as well as traditional African peoples' deep appreciation and respect from their history and ancestors.

Psychologist and founder of the Soulfulness Center Shelly Harrell, PhD, has been studying the importance of *sankofa* principle in healing the African diaspora. Dr. Harrell writes (thesoulfulnesscenter.com/sankofatheory):

The inevitability of disconnection (e.g., lostness, fragmentation, disharmony, confusion) in our lives emerges from multiple sources including historical and collective traumas, experiences in our personal-familial-social lives, as well as the ongoing daily assaults and challenges to wholeness, harmony, and humanity. *Sankofa* compassionately calls us into healing through the power of RECONNECTION (to our own bodies/minds/hearts, to others, community, culture, the natural world, Spirit).

The Tenacious Roots of Unequal Treatment

In contemporary healthcare systems, the receiver of therapeutic services is considered the "patient." *Patient* as an adjective comes from the noun "patience," which the American Heritage Dictionary describes as the "capacity of calm endurance; tolerant understanding." To be patient is to embrace the "capability of bearing delay and waiting for the right moment" with perseverance. For Black communities living in the West, patience has been an enduring struggle, especially in seeking assistance from a system that perpetuates the very health disparities it claims to cure. History affects cultural attitudes toward the healthcare system in Black communities and influences trust in whether the system's policies and practices are in their best interests.³

Historically, African Americans have been subjected to exploitative, abusive, and involuntary experimentation within the healthcare system at rates far higher than in other ethnic groups.⁴ Since the time of enslavement, the systematic abuse of Black bodies to justify the institution of slavery was predicated on a medical system that employed "scientific racism" to reinforce racial bias. Although slavery as an economic institution was foundational to the United States becoming a world power, the institution of slavery was also a source of medical scientific research and training for American medicine. Race-based medicine perpetuated beliefs about the physical bodies and minds of people of African descent as being inferior to Whites. These beliefs were presented in research findings, explained by scientific theories, and promulgated by White people who were sympathetic to or actively profiting from the institution of enslavement, so not surprisingly, scientific racism provided medical and scientific justifications for slavery.⁴

During enslavement, Black people were subjected to various forms of physical and mental abuse in the name of science. Black bodies were exhumed from graves for display and dissection in Southern U.S. schools of medicine. Enslaved Black women and girls received experimental gynecological procedures and surgeries without the use of anesthesia and without their consent, yet with the consent of, and compensation going to, their owners. Pain tolerance of enslaved Black people was believed to be higher than that of Whites, and experiments were performed to test this through medical procedures such as skin grafting, exposure to bacteria and viruses, and dental extraction.

From 1932 all the way to 1972 the infamous "Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis on the Negro Male" was conducted by the U.S. Public Health Service and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to investigate the natural progression of syphilis, a highly contagious venereal disease. Black men in the South were led to believe that they were getting treatment for syphilis when they were not. As a result of the study, hundreds of test subjects and their loved ones lost their lives in monstrous ways as they suffered through horrific stages of the disease, and some of their children acquired congenital syphilis during birth (for more information, go to www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/history/40-years-human-experimentation-america-tuskegee-study).

Although the Tuskegee study is perhaps the longest and most infamous experimental abuse of Blacks Americans, "it has been eclipsed in both numbers and egregiousness by other abusive medical studies."⁴ Throughout the 20th century and into this one, Black people have been

administered toxic substances or deliberately exposed to a wide range of biological hazards, including lethal radiation doses, toxic amounts of lead in the water systems, hazardous experimental technologies, a wide range of untested chemical products, risky non-therapeutic vaccines, and injections with infectious agents.⁴

Freedom Within an Environment of Disparity

The prevailing belief that chronic health conditions in Black communities are inherent defects of our race and ethnicity rather than addressable by such socioeconomic factors such as better housing, access to affordable healthcare, and optimal nutrition perpetuates feelings of mistrust. This sets the stage for Black patients' "perceptions of acceptance and support, or lack thereof, from their healthcare providers and the overall system of care."³ Without trust, overall quality of life within Black communities remains poor due to fears and concerns that participating in the healthcare system and medical research will prove to be harmful and perpetuate negative stereotypes rather than provide a comprehensive understanding of ways to improve the health of Black people.

In the foreword to the 2024 book *Practicing Yoga as Resistance: Voices of Color in Search of Freedom*, edited by Cara Hagan, yoga teacher Dianne Bondy describes freedom as a state of being and identifies freedom in the West as fluid. She asks the questions, "Who gets to be free, and why?" Black people in America have been asking these questions for hundreds of years.

In this context, yoga is a tool for liberation, codified by a people who experienced the suffering associated with colonialism. Here in the West, with a predominant focus on the physical aspect, yoga can be a practice that reinforces oppression. It can also be a tool of liberation affecting social, political, and cultural diversity. Dominique Malebranche discusses in her chapter in *Practicing Yoga as Resistance* how yoga is a practice that connects individual and universal consciousness for personal and collective liberation. For yoga to orient beings toward liberation, it is important to "engage the experiences of those who have been historically traumatized by ongoing oppressive structures, then to re-envision those structures—radical healing." This radical healing is an ethic of love that addresses the individual human being and focuses on transforming the roots of systemic harm through interpersonal relationships and communities.⁵

Overcoming Trauma Through Bodily Reclamation

If we talk about healing, we need to first talk about trauma. Buddhist activist, author, and spiritual teacher Lama Rod Owens explained in the 2016 book *Radical Dharma: Talking Life, Love, and Liberation*, co-written with Angel Williams and Jasmine Sedyullah, that the experiences of trauma affect how we relate to ourselves and to others. This past and ongoing wounding and hurting happens to both our subtle and gross selves and negates efforts toward well-being and happiness.

To heal the generational trauma in Black communities there is a need to further develop self-awareness and to nurture self-compassion. Structural and systemic racism, bias, and other forms of harmful discrimination persist and contribute to health disparities in Black communities. But we envision a future for Black people in which we realize our wholeness and continue the query about what it means to be whole.

Owens also stated that "if you really want to disrupt the system, start reclaiming your body." So, in essence, our work as yoga therapists is part of that process, providing a reminder and an impetus to reclaim

our wholeness and disrupt that which moves us away from wholeness. For many of our collective communities this is a recurring battle that must be addressed personally, internally, and from numerous angles under conditions forced upon us every day. It is also a conflict of continuous situations and systems purposely curated toward convincing us Black people, and others, that we are inferior.

Members of Black communities have told us that they prefer to attend yoga classes or work with a yoga therapist who represents them. Representation in yoga spaces cultivates feelings of trust as a result of shared lived experience or intersectionality of the experiences of racial bias.

A Dialogue of Support

How might yoga therapists approach and support the Black community? We pose questions encompassing four areas to meditate on and promote the beginnings of understanding.

Representation and Inclusion

How important is representation and inclusion in the yoga community?

What steps can be taken to ensure that yoga spaces are welcoming and inclusive for people of color?

All relationships are built on trust. Unfortunately, in Western society physical appearances are prioritized to achieve status and power, and members outside of the dominant culture have little or no status or perceived power due to a culture of racialization. Black communities in particular are "regularly exposed to racial discrimination [and] must integrate coping mechanisms into their everyday life to combat the many and ongoing adverse effects associated with race-based stress and trauma."⁶ A culture of institutional distrust—including in yoga spaces—has grown in communities of color.

Members of Black communities have told us that they prefer to attend yoga classes or work with a yoga therapist who represents them. Representation in yoga spaces cultivates feelings of trust as a result of shared lived experience or intersectionality of the experiences of racial bias. However, key concepts for any yoga therapist or teacher, regardless of racial identification, are sincerity and trustworthiness. "Trustworthiness is a requisite condition to foster trust that is frequently overlooked; in the absence of trustworthiness, distrust is only rational."⁷ Being sincere implies a genuine heartfelt expression of care and compassion for the student/client. The attribute of sincerity is foundational to practicing with fidelity the yoga principles of

ahimsa (nonharming), *satya* (truthfulness with yourself and others), *asteya* (nonstealing), *brahmacharya* (moving toward the Divine), and *aparigraha* (nonattachment).

These yamas are guidance for building relationships with others. Working to ensure that yoga spaces are nonharmful, trustworthy, nondiscriminatory, sympathetic, and impartial builds a sense of inclusivity where all are welcomed, regardless of racial affinity.

Community Building

In what ways can yoga be used to build stronger communities and foster solidarity within and between Black communities?

Yoga provides an opportunity to move toward personal healing. Strong communities comprise healthy and whole individuals. Beyond the beneficial physical practice of asana, incorporating the multitude of yoga's philosophical tenets may align personal life experiences of members of these communities so that the struggles and challenges we face can be tended to through the practical application of key yoga concepts. For example, by examining Yoga Sutra 1.2, the Samadhi Pada—*Yogas chita vritti nirodha* ("Yoga leads to the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind")—members of the Black community can discern the ways in which our perceptions of reality are shaped by patterns of thought influenced by the biases of others and not coming from who we truly are. The path of yoga, like the indigenous paths of African ancestry, is one of discovering the true Self. Unpacking the layers of burdens of living in a racialized society as a focus for healing will begin to mitigate the impact of race-based stress and trauma.

Spirituality and Identity

How does the practice of yoga intersect with spirituality and identity for Black individuals in particular?

What aspects of yoga may resonate more deeply because of cultural or historical contexts?

Yoga is an ancient traditional healing art with principles and practices inherent to uplifting the human condition. We maintain that as such it is a culturally responsive practice that may be adapted to harmonize with various racial, ethnic, and cultural groups' needs. Within the African-American cultural context, the principles of humanity that resonate across our religious and spiritual belief systems are paths to the one truth.

The yoga practitioner is guided on a path of evolutionary transformation. One who upholds the practices and principles of the yoga path recognizes the challenges and struggles of letting go of perceptions and experiences that shape our reality in negative ways and sees also that yoga provides guidance on best practices to overcome the biases of self and others. Yoga can be viewed as a path toward achieving freedom, justice, and equality for all humans.

The Future of Yoga in Black Communities

How can the practice evolve to better serve and empower Black individuals and communities?

How can we transition toward yoga's more spiritual practices?

Yoga in Black communities is a healing social-justice movement. "Healing justice, born from rich [African-American] Southern roots, began as an investigation into how we can hold the traumas of deep and painful injustices and heal from them as we fight to end them."⁸ Offering therapeutic yoga in Black communities can help us transform our collective trauma collaboratively. The practice of yoga evolves as our understanding of the practice grows beyond just "breaking a sweat" with asana. Yoga is first and foremost a spiritual practice intended to transform humanity with love. Understanding the historical context of Black yoga communities will assist us in reclaiming our trust in one another and invite each of us to engage in karma yoga—service to humanity.



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