

# Yoga and emotional literacy

## Abstract

The Sidran Institute (2017) estimated that 70% of adults in the United States will experience some form of trauma and that 20% of this population will experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Yoga instructors receiving 200-hour and 500-hour certificates are not adequately trained to recognize and treat trauma. Yet, yoga students and instructors have access to using principles of emotional literacy, which can aid in cultivating self-awareness and resiliency. This commentary article is a reflection of my observations practicing yoga through my lens as a mental health provider. The article defines emotional literacy and discusses my experiences of yoga and emotional awareness.

Emotional literacy is a term that describes the interplay between identifying one's emotions, understanding their gifts, and cultivating self-awareness.<sup>1,2</sup> In this article, I discuss emotional literacy and emotional intelligence, the gifts of our emotions, shortfalls of contemporary psychosomatic inquiry, and reflect on my experiences practicing yoga. For this, I used methods of personal observation and literature reviews

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## Emotional literacy

Emotional literacy was pioneered in the United Kingdom by Susie Orbach, who suggested that studying our emotions is a life-long process of cultivating self-awareness.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, Claude Steiner<sup>2</sup> suggested that emotional literacy skills encourage identifying our emotions and speaking about their roots, developing an intuitive capacity, and creating amends for our mistakes. Emotional literacy is rooted in the art of self-love and cultivates a personal power.<sup>2</sup> In addition to Steiner, I assert that emotional literacy teaches individuals how to set healthy emotional boundaries and to create new family narratives to mend intergenerational trauma.<sup>3</sup> Despite emotional literacy's value, it is second to popular notions of emotional intelligence testing promoted by Daniel Goleman.<sup>4</sup> Goleman's research studies were based on workplace efficiency and emotional competence for customer service<sup>5</sup> Emotional intelligence is fixed and rooted in workplace efficiency<sup>2,6</sup> and historically is rooted in eugenics testing that promoted the notion that being smart is an inherent trait that is not learned.<sup>6</sup>

## Emotions are gifts

Karla McLaren<sup>7</sup> suggested that emotions are gifts. Each gift has a unique attribute that is helpful: Anger teaches us how to develop boundaries; shame asks us to question if we broke our internal boundaries or if others are emotionally manipulating us through shame of violence. Jealousy reminds us to look at what we have and invites us to see where we need more nourishment; grief and sadness tell us to let go of old situations and let loved ones move on. McLaren's type of emotional recognition is key to resolving violence and systemic sexual abuse because shame, fear, and repetition are control tactics employed by abusers.<sup>8</sup> Shame and fear have also been used in institutional settings, such as religious organization, prison systems, and medical wards, to minimize trauma narratives.<sup>8</sup>

Emotions have hallmarks that exist cross-culturally.<sup>9</sup> According to Paul Ekman, who has studied facial expressions around the globe for more than 40 years, research findings suggest that there are universal emotional states: anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise

in both literate and preliterate cultures. Subsequent researchers scientifically validated seven basic emotions: anger, contempt (jealousy), fear, disgust, happiness, sadness, and surprise.<sup>10</sup> Yet, current emotional research often disconnects the mind from the body.

## Emotions are psychosomatic

The more one cultivates self-awareness in yoga or qigong, the more one learns that emotions are psychosomatic.<sup>11</sup> One's muscles, nerves, and tendons respond to emotional signals from the brain and are felt in different parts of the body.<sup>12</sup> Indigenous and prebiomedical ways of knowing information about the psyche, body, and research are advanced and have much to offer biomedical science.<sup>13-15</sup> Yet, a positivistic framework and biomedical scientific inquiry are limited by instruments and scientific laws that refer to the area of emotion and cognitive studies as "meaninglessness, or nonsense".<sup>16</sup> Though reliable studies exist, attempting to bridge this gap demonstrates a somatic response to emotional stimuli.<sup>12,17,18</sup> I assert there is still room to grow, and there is a need to look to old-world medical knowledge that lives within hatha yoga and Chinese medical traditions that bridge psychosomatic treatments, because they have been shown to increase emotional, physical, and mental interpersonal changes.

The Vedic tradition asserts that 72,000 channels in the body align at one's belly.<sup>19</sup> Hence, the gut instinct. Other traditions outside of Western science have been effective in documenting the ways that internal organs hold and digest emotional states.<sup>15</sup> Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), a system that is more than 2,000 years old, suggests that the five primary organs are responsible for processing. According to a five-element theory in TCM, the lungs process grief, the heart joy, the spleen overthinking, the kidneys fear, and the liver anger.<sup>15,20</sup> In TCM therapy, movement and breathing exercises are invaluable because they help to stimulate organ function and to process any related emotions.

## Practicing and instructing yoga

From my experiences practicing yoga for more than a decade, I have found what Paul Chapman<sup>21</sup> referred to as an opportunity to incite "real world relationships in the yoga room" to unblock trauma

(p.1). Chapman suggested that yoga also can be a tool to work through developmental crisis and to assess the complex interdependence of body and mind (2010). When one has emotions that linger or are repressed, they stagnate and create physical symptoms. In the yoga practice, each pose is an opportunity to negotiate one's internal state with external objects and to listen to the gifts of one's emotional wisdom.<sup>7</sup> When a yoga practitioner opens the pericardium, which encases the heart in a deep back bend, or when one leaps into a handstand for the first time, it can be frightening because beliefs and limits are being challenged. But such activities are a release; they are safe and normal for emotional growth.

Emotional health worsens if familial and intergenerational trauma is not assessed (Kezelman & Stavropoulos, 2012). I suggest that the path toward a healthy society starts inward. Thus, as a self-reflexive activity, the next time the yoga teacher remarks that yoga releases emotions, I invite you to explore more deeply. Ask yourself which emotions? What are your emotions gifting you? Is anyone attempting to control or shame you? In what postures are your emotions speaking? You might be surprised at the ways that yoga asanas and self-reflection can help cultivate deeper levels of emotional literacy.

## Conclusion

Emotional literacy teaches one to recognize the messages of our emotions,<sup>7</sup> develop healthy boundaries (Dinallo, 2017), and go deeper into a compassionate stance with others. Emotional literacy is not the same as emotional intelligence. Some key hallmarks of emotional literacy for yoga instructors and yoga students include that emotions are cross cultural,<sup>22</sup> they prompt us to take action when we need to reframe a situation. And ancient epistemologies found in TCM and yoga have much to offer biomedical science, especially they are related to overall treatment, emotional stagnation,<sup>23,24</sup> and Channel theory. Yoga for somatic release and emotional literacy should be a central aspect of yoga instruction and continuing education.

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## Conflicts of interest

The author declares there are no conflicts of interest.

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