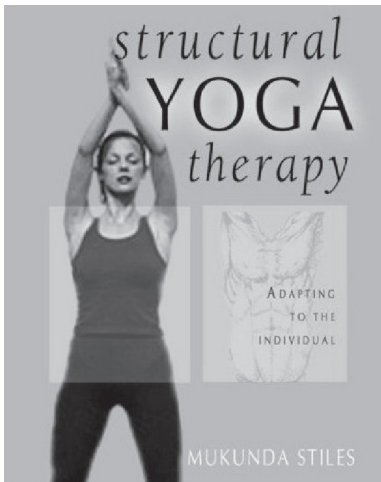


YOGA THERAPIST TRAINING



YTIP publishes training reports to help members understand the approaches of various Yoga therapist training programs. This issue, we present two reports on Mukunda Stiles's Structural Yoga Therapy (SYT) program.

Mukunda Stiles's Structural Yoga Therapy (SYT) program is a 700-hour, two-year course based on his book of the same name, and

Patanjali's *Sutras*. Certification through this program is available to certified Yoga teachers and licensed health professionals. The course I attended in 2004-2005 consisted of several three-day intensive sessions and concentrated on *darshan*, which is a practice of "seeing through a Yogi's eyes," SYT anatomy and practice, questions and answers, client analysis, and specific conditions.

The syllabus presents a grueling schedule and daunting requirements, such as mastering the basics of human anatomy and kinesiology, range of motion and muscle testing (including the use of a goniometer, an instrument that can measure the angle of a joint), and even Ayurvedic diagnosis. All students are required to evaluate twenty clients and observe ten of Mukunda's client evaluations. At the end of the program, each student must also submit a research paper. In the course I completed, fifteen students began the program and ten finished.

A cornerstone of this type of Yoga therapy is the joint-freeing series, or *pavanmuktasana*, developed by Mukunda. This set of exercises is designed to improve blood and lymph circulation, *prana*, and energy. All Structural Yoga Therapy students are required to practice the joint-freeing series, as well as a set of twenty-four *asanas*.

We worked with volunteer clients and learned how to complete a physical, mental, and often spiritual assessment of their conditions, without injecting our own opinions about what needed to be "fixed." We learned range of motion and muscle testing according to physical therapy techniques and then determined the type of Yoga exercises that would best suit the client. We studied procedures for sciatica, scoliosis, shoulder injuries, stress-related trauma, asthma, and many other conditions.

The other portion of our weekends consisted of questions and answers, *sadhana* practice, and teachings from the *Yoga Sutras*, *Yoga Vasistha*, and Mukunda's own experiences. *Sadhana* practice helped me to deepen my own understanding of my body, my mind, and my intention. Mukunda's thorough explanation of the *asanas* strengthened my observation skills so that I could improve my own Yoga practice and pass the benefits on to my students. I learned that true *darshan* (seeing) begins with recognizing myself.

Mukunda imparts many other practices, such as advanced *pranayama* and meditation, in-depth scriptural exegesis, and personal guidance. These teachings provided me with the stamina, self-confidence, and clarity to complete the course. To me, these

are the most valuable benefits I received.

After the first weekend, the students in my session paired up into study groups. Most of us tried to meet weekly or bi-weekly throughout the course. We concentrated on learning and practicing range of motion and muscle testing on students, clients, friends, and family. At first, it seemed to me that those students with a background in medicine would have a decided advantage. However, my own Yoga study proved very valuable during discussions of *pranayama*, *kriyas*, and meditation. Our study sessions allowed us to share expertise and formulate questions so that we all benefited from the varied experience of each student. We also became friends, and many of us continue to correspond and get together.

Along with the intensive weekends, we had access to Mukunda through the internet. His website, www.yogatherapycenter.org, houses an extensive Q&A forum about physical, mental, and spiritual conditions. Mukunda encouraged us to email questions throughout the program. Mukunda brought an atmosphere of calm (*sattvic*) acceptance to every question, so that I felt comfortable asking the most basic or esoteric things.

At the end of the course, we met for a retreat week in which we each presented our specialty papers, took our final examination, and received a final evaluation from Mukunda. This course gave me a basic knowledge of anatomy, a solid knowledge of diagnostics and Yoga principles, and a beginner's understanding of Ayurveda. I think the Ayurveda portion of the course could be expanded. Mukunda presented us with a draft of his soon-to-be published book on Ayurveda, which will make a valuable addition to the course.

Many supplemental texts also helped me expand my technical knowledge. *Anatomy of Movement* by Blandine C. Germain and *The Muscle Book* by Paul Blakey helped me with anatomy and muscle movement. *Ayurveda: The Science of Self-Healing* by Vasant Lad and *Yoga & Ayurveda* by David Frawley gave me a base in Ayurvedic terms and methods. I think that students who enter the program without a background in Yoga would need to supplement the course with additional study and Yoga classes.

My Structural Yoga Therapy certification has expanded my vocational and academic horizons. It has helped me to bring together the physical knowledge of Yoga with the vital spiritual background of the practice and a deeper understanding of myself through discernment and self-study. □

Contributed by Gyl Elliott, a Structural Yoga Therapist and massage therapist with a private practice in Arcadia, California.

I recently completed the Structural Yoga Therapy course in New York City taught by Mukunda Stiles. The most basic and initially important aspect of this training was to learn anatomy and kinesiology in depth. This was done by practicing the joint-freeing series, a series of twenty-one movements that systematically work the joints from the feet to the head. In this series, we explored action and sensation, observing whether muscles were contracting or stretching. We also practiced Mukunda's twenty-four poses, as outlined in his book *Structural Yoga Therapy: Adapting to the Individual* (Weiser Books, 2001). In this way, the material becomes known in one's own body, rather than memorized from a book or a sketch.

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The training addressed conditions that may benefit from a therapeutic Yoga program, such as scoliosis, sciatica, arthritis, knee and shoulder injuries, and other conditions found in the general population that can cause discomfort. The therapeutic approach of the training deals with the condition itself from a musculoskeletal perspective, but also takes into account the subtle nature of Ayurvedic principles.

We were guided in how to make an initial connection with the client and how to thoroughly assess the client's condition. The initial client-therapist meeting was highly emphasized, and intake procedures were reviewed in depth. Mukunda gave us a list of questions to present to the client so that we could not only understand their situation, but also answer some important questions for ourselves: Can you make a connection to your client on the first meeting through being present to them? Does the client seem to trust you? Is there a sense of stress unwinding in the client from simply describing his or her discomfort? If the answer to these questions is not "Yes," it would be wise to refer the client to another person.

Physical assessment procedures were taught using a goniometer, to measure the range of motion of the joints, and muscle-testing procedures. From this information we would choose *asanas* to address the client's weakness and tightness. The training also emphasized how to tailor the prescribed *asana* and lifestyle regimen based on follow-up assessments. We practiced these assessments among ourselves in class and were required to meet in small groups to continue that work outside of the training hours. For those of us who were already seeing students privately, we could weave that into our existing procedure.

We were trained to take the whole client into view, looking for the stressors in the client's life, the degree of spiritual connection or interest, the basic lifestyle of the client, and the Ayurvedic *dosha* of the client. Therapeutic prescriptions were shared for the different *koshas*, and we learned how to determine which *kosha* would be most effective for a client to focus on, understanding that this may shift over time and with dedication to practice. The best prescription for the client will be something he or she will follow. For example, a person who tends toward *kapha* may not want to do as many rigorous poses as someone who is more *pitta*. Perhaps the *kapha* person will have a practice that holds poses longer, and maybe simple devotional practices, all geared toward the client's specific issue. A *pitta* person may get a more rigorous practice at first because he or she will be more motivated to do it.

We had the wonderful opportunity to observe Mukunda working with several different clients and see the different approach he took with the different temperaments. In some cases we would see the same physical issue dealt with completely differently. In one case, a person came in presenting tight hips



Structural Yoga Therapy founder Mukunda Stiles

"In some cases we would see the same physical issue dealt with completely differently. Through this apprenticeship with Mukunda, we learned how to take the whole person and personality in to view."

and roving pain, and the advice Mukunda gave was to get a dog! This person was very *kapha* and didn't like to exercise, but did like to walk in the woods. Through this apprenticeship with Mukunda, we learned how to take the whole person and personality in view, and structure a program that will keep that person interested.

To complete the course, we were required to choose a condition and write a paper based on our work with clients who suffered from that condition. We applied our understanding of Structural Yoga Therapy to one or more people who were suffering from that condition, and noted the changes in the client or clients over a three-month period. We were required to research the condition and design maintenance programs from both a musculoskeletal standpoint and an Ayurvedic view.

Probably the most obvious benefit to taking this training, initially, was learning the anatomy and kinesiology of *asana*. I taught for so long not understanding how the body moves and what may be preventing it from moving fully. So just the idea that I could now keep my students safe and actually offer them ways to heal themselves was amazing. The training continued to become a life-changing experience. Mukunda offered information and experience on so many different levels that it became difficult for me to keep the physical component separate from the subtle component. The optional online tantric practices that he offers (to anyone interested) were instrumental in my being able to work on the different *koshas* with my clients, as well as myself. It became very clear to me that Structural Yoga Therapy is multi-dimensional work, and a strong *sadhana* is needed to maintain the approach.

I would recommend this training to anyone who enjoys problem-solving and working with people to heal them, and wants a deeper understanding of Yoga and how to apply it to life. Mukunda's approach is not linear; he speaks on many different levels about many different things at one time. Note-taking can sometimes be chaotic! But it is well worth the effort to go and clean them up later. He also responds very closely to the energies that his students bring with them. So if you are not comfortable "being seen" completely by your teacher, stay home! ▣

Contributed by Bonnie Parisier, RYT-500, the founder, director and senior instructor at Yoga Loka in Frenchtown, NJ.