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The Yoga of Health Reform: Transforming the Way We Think About Our Bodies

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Everyone is talking about health reform. The hundredth monkey phenomenon seems to apply here ... the problem has been visible for decades and courageous public health advocates, politicians, ethicists and activists have been calling for change, for inclusion, for a widespread understanding that it is a travesty to be the richest country in the world and claim to be the home of democracy and freedom yet not provide the opportunity to be healthy to every single citizen. For decades these voices have been ignored, marginalized, quashed by the lobbying power of the pharmaceutical industry, political medicine and insurance companies. Finally, though, enough people have recognized the problem and stood up to demand a solution. To be on the threshold of a seismic shift is truly thrilling, for suddenly everyone seems to clearly understand just how broken our system is and how that broken system in turn breaks hearts, bodies and lives.

Throughout the endless political campaigning that led to the election of Barack Obama, I heard this term, “fundamental change.” If someone asked me, a chiropractor and yoga teacher, what must happen in order for our country to transform its health care system, I would answer that we need a “fundamental change” in our understanding of what it means to be an embodied human being. While those words may sound a bit esoteric, I believe that every human being has had multiple experiences with his/her body-mind that confirm that a system based primarily upon scientific materialism, the biomedical model, and curative approaches to disease is inadequate and when used exclusively throughout the lifespan may lead to unintended negative health outcomes.

Yoga philosophy, like many non-Western wisdom traditions, conceptualizes the body-mind differently. It is described as a system of layers or sheaths. The most obvious, gross layer is called the *annamaya kosa*, the *food body*. It is the layer at which many of us stop when we are thinking of our bodies – our skin and hair and muscles and organs, that which is a result of the food we consume. The physical elements. One who adheres stringently to the biomedical model treats only the *annamaya kosa*. The next layer that yoga philosophy describes is *pranamaya kosa*, the energetic body. *Prana* is the Sanskrit word for our life force, our energy, our vibration. Those who are familiar with acupuncture and oriental medicine might recognize a similarity to the concept of *qi*. These non-Western traditions of maintaining balance, and healing when imbalance occurs, give recognition to the embodied experience of human beings by including consideration of our life force, energy, breath in their disciplines. They understand that while there are many elements of the body-mind with direct material correlates that can be seen and evaluated, there is clearly more to the human experience (even of health and disease) than can be weighed and measured, visualized with the unassisted (or assisted) eye.

In addition to the food and energetic layers of the body-mind, yogic philosophy describes the *manomaya kosa*, the mental body, and the *vijnanamaya kosa*, the intellectual body. The mental and intellectual processes are clearly understood to have impact on the energetic and physical layers of the body, and the quietude one achieves through skillfully moving the body through an *asana* practice and skillfully moving the breath through a *pranayama* practice is an antidote to the disordered thinking and stress of our hectic lives.

Of all the yogic teachings, one of my favorites is that the deepest and truest layer of the body-mind complex is the *anandamaya kosa*, the bliss body. I think of the times in my life when I’ve experienced pure bliss – running in the morning mist at sunrise, mind, breath, heart, lungs, and legs synchronized with the rising of the sun, the lightening of the sky, the smell of Spring. Pure bliss! Or the first moments of *svasana* following a fiery yoga class, drenched

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with sweat, but so very relaxed, breathing deeply and finally able to surrender entirely into the deepest spaces within. Aaaaah! What yogic philosophy suggests is that the fundamental reality of the human being is bliss, connection, peace, and that our physical, energetic, mental and intellectual layers can either be a help or a hindrance to realizing that truth. When we are physically sick, it is difficult (though not impossible) to experience bliss. When we have no energy, bliss is far away. When our minds race like wild horses or swing through the trees from one branch to another in an endless cycle like monkeys, our energy and our physicality is disrupted and bliss eludes us. When we begin to live in such a way that all the layers of our body-mind work in harmony, bliss is possible. Health is possible.

So, what do we need from health reform? We need first and foremost a fundamental understanding that we must provide care not only for *all* people, but for *all parts* of the people – for the complexity that is the human being. We need a system that in both its theory and practice, its structures and functions, educates people that their lifestyles and behaviors matter not only for their physical health, but also for their mental and emotional health. We need a system that encourages people to become self-aware – not just to go to the gym to get a six-pack abdomen and some “big guns,” but to realize that their physical body is their connection to the world, and the vehicle through which they will experience life. We need a system that provides equal care for mental and emotional problems...for they are the root of many physical problems, and they are as debilitating and real as physical illnesses. It is unlikely that health reform in the United States will occur based upon the yogic understanding of the sheaths of the body-mind, but I can dream. And, if we achieve a system that is available and functional for all, that places more emphasis on prevention, and includes more than the classic biomedical approach to disease, then we will be miles ahead of where we are now.

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