

Why Yoga Works & How It Can Work for You: Based on the Teachings of T. Krishnamacharya and T. K. V. Desikachar

By Robert Birnberg,
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Yoga Unites Publications,
2018

Review by Clare Collins

Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (1888–1989), South Indian master of yoga, esteemed scholar, and ayurvedic physician, is widely regarded as the “father of modern yoga.” A brilliant teacher, he taught what he learned through his life of study to his son, T. K. V. Desikachar. A highly skilled yoga therapist and teacher himself, Desikachar refined and disseminated his father’s teachings to Westerners, yet few students of yoga today are aware of the breadth and beauty of the Krishnamacharya tradition.

The aim of *Why Yoga Works & How It Can Work for You* is to deepen understanding of yoga’s principles and how to apply them to one’s personal practice through the lens of the Krishnamacharya-Desikachar teaching tradition. The authors have taken on an ambitious task. The result is a clearly written, concise, and practically oriented introduction to the fundamentals of this approach.

Early on, the authors highlight the transformative impact that seminar study with Desikachar and individual mentoring with his long-term students has had on their work as yoga teachers and yoga therapists. Their enthusiasm for the Krishnamacharya tradition is contagious, and they reach out to a broad audience of students with varying levels of yoga experience.

Reading this book, I was reminded of a quote attributed to Albert Einstein: “Out of complexity, find simplicity!” Part 1, *Why Yoga Works*, contains brief sections on the hallmarks of Krishnamacharya’s approach and the philosophical perspectives fundamental to his teaching tradition. The authors use short case examples to illustrate the potential for yoga teachings to change lifestyle and perspective. They have done an effective job summarizing and providing understandable examples of basic concepts, although the section would have been strengthened by references to source texts and resources to guide students’ deeper exploration of yoga philosophy.

Part 2 includes chapters about the classification of asana, breath and movement, pranayama technique, mantra, sound, and meditation. Although the reader may hear strong echoes of Desikachar’s words in Part 2, the only direct acknowledgment of his work is a quotation preceding this section.

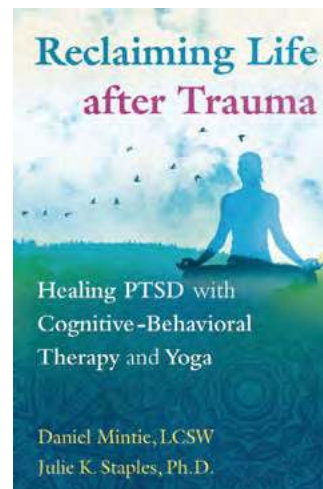
The content of Part 2 will be familiar to students who have studied this teaching tradition. Careful attention is paid to how the specific aim of a practice guides the selection and sequencing of yoga techniques. Practice sequences are depicted and explained concisely

by a “why we did what we did” section in table format. The sequencing sections will be particularly useful to yoga teachers and educators of yoga teachers.

The chapters on meditation and sound make a strong contribution to our understanding of how to select meditation strategies and prepare body, mind, and breath for meditation practices. Having introduced students to the Krishnamacharya teaching tradition, the authors conclude with comments about the importance of cultivating a one-to-one relationship with a teacher. Yoga students are left to consider the practicalities of finding a suitable teacher to guide their personal development.

This book contains useful information for yoga students working with a teacher trained in a Krishnamacharya/Desikachar approach and for educators of teachers in this tradition. The absence of references to the work of Krishnamacharya, Desikachar, and their senior students (as primary sources or suggestions for future study), however, limits its usefulness for practicing yoga therapists and educators of yoga therapists. For the former, the book will introduce the approach and may provide inspiration to explore the tradition’s systematic and nuanced approach to yoga therapy.

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Reclaiming Life After Trauma: Healing PTSD with Cognitive-Behavioral Therapy and Yoga

By Daniel Mintie, LCSW,
and Julie K. Staples, PhD

Healing Arts Press, 2018

Review by Tzipporah Gerson-Miller

This book is a much-needed resource as the integrative field of mental/behavioral health and yoga continues to grow and evolve. Authors Daniel Mintie, LCSW, and Julie K. Staples, PhD, deliver a thorough and wise compilation of immediately accessible strategies to manage and resolve the psychological and emotional challenges caused by traumatic experiences. They invite the reader on a journey of personal exploration by sharing accessible and clearly defined exercises from the cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) tradition that they refer to as “experiments.” Twenty-five exercises throughout the text include clear directions to help readers examine common ailments, such as self-limiting beliefs and self-sabotaging behavior. Toward the end of the book, Mintie and Staples provide a series of Kundalini Yoga techniques specifically designed

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to address hypervigilance, flashbacks, and insomnia, all commonly occurring challenges associated with PTSD.

Throughout *Reclaiming Life After Trauma*, the authors wisely remind us that trauma is a mind-body condition that can produce negative emotions lasting a lifetime if left untreated. They further deconstruct the root causes of human suffering embedded in our early primitive stress-response systems, which helps to normalize our fear-driven reactions to nonthreatening stimuli in the environment. Chapter 2 on embodied stress provides a thorough explanation of the brain structures implicated in trauma and could serve as a major resource and reference for both clients and professionals.

Several other chapters are devoted exclusively to unpacking the theoretical underpinnings of CBT and then of acknowledging the hidden wisdom of symptoms. This is probably the strongest portion of the book, as time is spent on helping the reader to understand symptoms as survival strategies rather than inherent deficits. This powerful reframing offers readers the chance to not only shift their perspective on symptom management but to also engage in personal reflection. The authors follow this up with clearly defined tools for further rewiring default patterns specifically related to PTSD. The book concludes with an overview of yoga as well as diagrams illustrating specific Kundalini techniques for further personal exploration and support.

I find this book has two major strengths. First, regardless of whether one is a practitioner with years of experience working in the mental/behavioral health field or a client seeking a practical guide for further healing and discovery, one can grow in beneficial ways using the techniques of CBT and yoga. This book also can serve as a refresher and desk resource for seasoned CBT therapists or as a departure point for yoga therapists to learn how to integrate basic CBT tools into their therapeutic work. The second major strength is that the authors draw upon their many years of clinical experience by providing clear and concise case examples to further illustrate the therapeutic application of these techniques and the successful outcomes that enabled their clients to rediscover their inner joy and peace.

With that said, although the case examples offer an important didactic component to the text, most of them leaned heavily toward illustrating only the cognitive-behavioral dimension of the treatment. I would have appreciated clinical examples outlining the combined and layered use of yogic techniques with CBT techniques and the subsequent client outcomes of this interdisciplinary framework.

Overall, this book demonstrates an extraordinary initiative in offering a holistic approach to trauma treatment. So much of the current literature by trauma pioneers such as Bessel Van der Kolk and Peter Levine suggests that trauma treatment must include a somatic component to be successful, as the physical aspect addresses certain nervous system challenges that cognitive therapy alone fails to achieve. The authors deserve to be recognized for their ability to skillfully draw from two dynamically different traditions and demonstrate therapeutic efficacy with traumatized patients in an integrative setting.

Tzipporah Gerson-Miller, LCSW, C-IAYT, RYT 500, works in community mental health and private practice, specializing in complex trauma, chronic pain, and women's mental health. Tzipporah is the founder and director of the Southern Yoga Therapy Association and produces the podcast "Ancient Tools for Modern Living." YTT