Integrated Model of Health Education

By Georgianna Donadio, M.Sc., Ph.D.

 Somehow our Western world has managed to transform yoga into a trendy form of exercise, while bypassing the wisdom and spiritual enhancement that yoga has to offer. True yogis know that this ancient and sacred method of self-care and self-discipline is not just exercise, but rather a system that promotes wellness of body, mind, and spirit. It may be that the challenge in our multi-tasking, fast-paced Western society is teaching or learning about mind/body/spirit science in a way that invites an organic understanding of it, especially in a hectic culture where everyone seems to be running on limited time and seeking immediate results. Most Western yoga teacher training programs do a good job teaching the asanas, but often fall short in providing critical, scientific-based information about how the asanas affect the body systems.

Kathy Farrell, a 32-year old Hatha Yoga teacher and who runs the Boston Public Health Commission’s fitness center, felt that specifically the anatomy and physiology elements were lacking in her yoga certification program. In addition, “I felt that the broader picture and the evidence of how the mind, body and spirit work together was knowledge that I was missing.” Some programs also seem to be lacking in teaching how to develop mindful, meaningful relationships with students. One of the main reasons people do not continue with alternative modalities, such as yoga, is due to a lack of understanding of the enormous emotional, nutritional and spiritual benefits as well as physical benefits from continuing such a practice. A remarkable, integrated model of health education, Whole Health Education ®, has emerged over the past two decades providing, for the teacher and student alike, a larger “whole picture of health” that can facilitate how yoga is taught, and very importantly, how yoga is understood by a Western evidence-seeking audience. Through this whole health, relationship-centered approach, a yoga teacher can possess and share with students a scientific and spiritual understanding of body, mind and spirit health.

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Said Farrell, “Whole Health Education® is essential training for all yoga teachers and anyone in the health arena. Professionally, I am now a better teacher because I now have the evidence of interconnectedness and can help my students delve deeper. For example, in the case of a blocked chakra, I can identify the organs that are connected to that particular chakra. I am not just a better teacher but also a better person all around because it has helped me to graduate to a deeper level of happiness. I no longer want to take the band-aid approach but rather, it has made me more aware of looking at all aspects of my health, the ability to identify imbalances and the knowledge to make the necessary changes.” In addition, in learning how to develop mindful, invitational relationships with students, yoga teachers can attract more students and provide the additional quality of life benefits they are seeking from their yoga practice. An organic understanding of yoga enhances this experience. This model of teaching and learning also helps to integrate current medical research with the wisdom of various ancient spiritual teachings and a natural outlook on healing, all centered on integrity and compassion. In addition, it demystifies anatomy, physiology, nutrition, environment, spirituality/psychology, and integrates these sciences to give yoga teachers and students an integrated understanding of “the big picture of health.” In addition to being an outstanding and unique method of teaching and learning, this education model can uncover what the real cause and effect of our diseases are or how we can heal what ails us. For example, Mature Onset Diabetes (MOD) affects 18.2 million Americans and, like all conditions, it is a multi-dimensional disease state consisting of five distinct dimensions – the physical, emotional, nutritional, environmental and spiritual. Most laypeople consider MOD a result of bad genetics or poor diet, but by looking at the five dimensions that affect our health — the physical, emotional, nutritional, environmental and spiritual — we can uncover the factors that contribute to wellness or illness.

- Physical: Because of eating too much insulin-provoking foods, the cells in the pancreas, which produce insulin, become incapable of producing adequate amounts. Because insulin acts as a mechanism for bringing sugar into cells, and is critical for the function of the nervous system, brain and lungs function, we can experience serious symptoms and illness due to the improper metabolism of sugars and starches and even misinterpret these symptoms as emotional issues.

- Emotional: Carbohydrates elicit the production of Serotonin, “the feel good hormone,” creating a temporary feeling of well-being. Often if people are stressed, anxious or depressed they can experience themselves in a “feeding cycle” of sugar and starch that can cause or contribute to a serious physical problem when these foods are consumed in excessive amounts.
• Nutritional: The nutritional treatment for diabetes is to de-stress the pancreas by making dietary changes that reduce sugars, carbohydrates and calories and increase vegetables, high fiber and lean proteins. By resting the pancreas and allowing ourselves time to slow down and reflect on what is driving our engine to fill ourselves with “feel good foods,” we can realize a deeper personal self-awareness and inner peace. Our nutrition also includes nourishing ourselves emotionally.

• Environmental: The environment that we work in, live near, and walk through has an impact on the way we feel about ourselves and connects our environment to our emotions. By setting boundaries for codes of conduct, including behavior and living, we can gain more control over our environment and our reaction to it.

• Spiritual: A Hindu Vedanta truth is that the “whole world is one family.” The spiritual challenge behind diabetes is the over or under-valuing of oneself, which includes judgment of self and others. The drama of this dynamic can lead to psycho-physiological and behavior issues which can create or contribute to diabetes. When life “loses its sweetness,” when we no longer feel “beloved” or that we belong, we can resort to self-medication with sweets and sugars to elicit serotonin to help us to feel better, at least temporarily.

“Shortly after I started my current job, I had a feeling or sense that something was missing in my life and it turned out that this knowledge was the missing piece for both my personal and personal life,” said Farrell. The Whole Health Education ® model invites individuals to discern what they know about their health, what choices they can make to eliminate or control their health problems and what kind of care they choose to utilize. This invites an experience of whole-person health through our own filters, and in a way that is compatible with our authentic self and personal beliefs. In this model, individuals become the empowered center of their own health and healing process.

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