

Purnam: The Heart of Yoga Therapy

<i>Purnamadah Purnamidam</i>	That is the Whole, this is the Whole;
<i>Purnat Purnamudachyate</i>	From the Whole, the Whole arises;
<i>Purnasya Purnamadaya</i>	Taking away the Whole from the Whole
<i>Purnamevavashishyate</i>	The Whole remains.

This familiar verse from the *Brihad-aranyaka Upanishad* may sound like a modern brain-twisting logic puzzle, but its ancient wisdom is at the heart of Yoga therapy. *Purnam* means wholeness, completeness, fullness, and perfection. So the core of the *shloka* above is that everything is perfect and whole as it is and this essence cannot be changed or broken. This is a beautiful and revolutionary idea that is very agreeable to our minds as yogis. Truly experiencing it and imparting it in our Yoga therapy sessions, however, may be a different story.

One of the main messages most of us in the United States grew up with is that we are not O.K. as we are, that there is always something that should be improved or changed. We are socialized to look for problems, for the things that don't work right, and for what is lacking. We become convinced that if we would just buy this product, car, face cream, or toy then we will be O.K. We come to believe that there is something basically wrong with us rather than to have faith in our essential wholeness. Spiritual teachers from other countries have noted Americans' unique skill in feeling bad about themselves.

It is not surprising then that we accept a medical model based on pathology. This is not necessarily a bad thing; I know I have been helped many times by western physicians and therapists who have diagnosed a specific problem and provided a specific treatment. Nevertheless, one of the foremost reasons that Yoga therapy is different from other therapies and approaches is that we are rooted in a yogic perspective. I would argue that it is the concept of *purnam* that puts the Yoga into Yoga therapy.

What Does *Purnam* Really Mean?

When we work with people facing significant challenges and suffering, it can be difficult to

grasp how everything is perfect and whole as it is. How can this person who had a stroke, this child born with autism, this person with severe lifelong depression be perfect and whole as they are? In order to work from a place of *purnam*, we must differentiate between the vehicle and the divine spark. The vehicle includes the physical body, the personality, the emotions, and the mind. It is separate from the divine spark—spirit or soul—which is that essential component of us that remains perfect and whole. So we are absolutely not saying that there is no problem! To say that or to act from that place would be to invalidate the student's experience and to be in denial of reality. It is our role as Yoga therapists to recognize and treat the vehicle in its various states of disrepair while at the same time looking past it to each person's divine spark.

The reality of being human is that we are limited and unlimited, dark and light; we experience suffering and joy, difficulties and

ease, mistakes and successes; there are things we are good at and things we are not so good at; we possess "good" qualities and "bad" qualities. When we fully honor and respect the idea of *purnam*, we are not floating around with a Pollyanna idea that everything is great. When we merely look at parts of ourselves, whether by focusing on an injury or condition, only positive or negative feelings, or only the body or the emotions, we can't experience what it means to be whole. But by acknowledging and accepting the full range of our experiences, thoughts and feelings, we can.

The concept of *purnam* can be a huge relief to us as Yoga therapists and as humans—there is nothing to fix! We can let go of the desire or need to make the "bad" things go away, such as feelings of grief, anxiety, or chronic pain. In my experience, when we enter into a therapeutic relationship focused on some problem and trying to make it go away, we end up feeling frustrated and hopeless. We see only a complaint, symptom, or diagnosis and forget to look at our healing partner as a complete person. Whether we say it out loud or not, the message is that the person needs to change to be O.K.

Another part of the complexity of existence is that everything keeps changing. So *purnam* doesn't mean that we just accept things and stay like that. We can choose the direction of growth and healing, guiding our inevitable change, without thinking that there is something wrong with the way we are.

When we read or chant the verse at the beginning of this article, it would be difficult to argue that it only applies to some people or some situations. If we truly undertake building our life and building our Yoga therapy practice on the concept of *purnam*, we don't get to pick and choose. My family and friends; people I don't like or who I disagree with; co-workers; my boss; the homeless person I pass on the street; the people I work with who have physical, cognitive or emotional challenges, congenital birth conditions, or degenerative diseases, and their families, parents, partners, and caretakers—are all perfect and whole as they are. This is a big project.

How Do We Do This?

We may believe we are working from the perspective of *purnam* as we facilitate acceptance



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of some condition, such as multiple sclerosis, and still find ourselves trying to chase away the feelings of loss or anger that come with acceptance. *Purnam*-based Yoga therapy may be harder than we think.

I believe that to truly love and accept ourselves exactly as we are is the single most powerful healing experience any of us can have. As Yoga therapists, we have the opportunity to facilitate this process of deep acceptance in our students if we are engaged in this work within ourselves. When we choose to do healing work with people, we benefit by continuing our own journeys of self-discovery and self-acceptance. And when we believe we are operating from a foundation of *purnam*, we must stay alert and continue challenging ourselves, because old ways of thinking and perceiving have a way of bubbling up and sneaking in.

The following simple practices can be incorporated into daily life to help us cultivate love and acceptance.

1. For most of us, this is a distinct change in the way we view things, so we have to retrain ourselves to see the positive first. Start by thinking of someone you love and identify what you love about them. Or perhaps, when you meet someone for the first time, try to think of something you like about him or her (rather than make a judgment, as we often do). Consider for a moment how much easier it is to make a snap negative judgment about someone you don't know; we can train ourselves to make snap positive judgments instead. Begin identifying your own positive traits, small successes, and efforts to grow. Over time, you will see a shift in your overall view of people and situations, which will make it easier to convey an attitude of *purnam* in your life and in your therapy sessions.

2. See the upside and the downside in everything. When something disagreeable happens, try to figure out a positive association to the circumstance (or at least something that is not so bad). When something great happens, see if you can identify some way in which it also brings difficulty. Choose an attribute you possess that you consider negative and think of a situation in which that very attribute has been helpful or served some purpose. Do the same with a positive attribute. Examine how this quality may sometimes act as a hindrance for you. As we cultivate our ability to see different sides of situations, people, feelings, and experiences, we are better

able to take a holistic perspective that does not need or want to leave some parts out but embraces complexity. We begin to experience that seeing the whole picture enables us to make better choices based on a realistic view, rather than a biased one.

3. Don't hide from yourself. There is no part of you that is too ugly, horrible, or shameful to be seen. Nothing that has happened to you and nothing that you have done makes you less than whole. When you notice a thought or action within yourself and you have the impulse to look away or push it down, acknowledge it. You can try a humorous and effective phrase from Thich Nhat Hahn: "Hello, judgment (or anger or depression), how are you today?" Even if you don't know what to do with that thought, feeling, or behavior, practice recognizing that it is there and even welcoming it as an old friend. It is present, and trying to pretend that it is not doesn't make it go away. Remembering that we are multidimensional and that we are something beyond all of the outer thoughts, words, and roles makes it easier to turn toward the parts of ourselves that usually makes us turn away.

By choosing to do this work, we ensure that we are in our own process of healing, and we remind ourselves of how difficult it is. It is not necessary for us to have mastered self-love in order to help others develop self-love, but we must be in the process. In fact, when we think we are done, we are likely turning away from fear or discomfort. *Purnam* means that all of this is part of the whole of living and being human—the struggle, the fear, the small successes, my experience, your experience. As Yoga therapists, let us meet the challenge posed to us in the Upanishads: to see everyone as perfect and whole. **YTI**

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