

## Yoga and Yoga Therapy in Germany Today

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Over the years, Yoga in Germany has become a valid and strong field with many skilled teachers and respected schools and is booming in the field of fitness and health. Fewer people proportionately, however, seem to be interested in the original purpose of Yoga, which is self-development and awakening. Yoga first became known to the general public mainly through the "Volkshochschulen" - the evening school system, a powerful phenomenon in Germany. Most little towns have such an evening school where people can meet and learn about a wide variety of topics. Over the years, this has been the place where many housewives and other interested people have first learned about Yoga.

It was and is an inexpensive way to learn something about your primary interest or hobby. It was these Volkshochschulen and the 1973 television program "Yoga for Everybody" that popularized Yoga in the early years, along with the very few Yoga schools that then existed in Germany - we were one of them. Later, health insurance plans joined in, which indicate that they were starting to become aware of the great health benefits Yoga can have. This is significant considering that every person in Germany has to be a member of a health insurance plan up to a certain income level.

Approximately 10 years ago Yoga took on significant importance when several health insurance companies started reimbursing for Yoga classes, and it became "in" for the general public to participate in them. If Yoga had been looked at with a bit of suspicion until then, this rapidly changed when we started seeing yogis smiling from advertisements and on television. Om became a mantra that was even used as a joke or for entertainment, as the advertising industry did not seem to understand its meaning.

### Standards for Yoga Teachers

This growing interest resulted in health insurance companies starting to offer Yoga classes themselves, often with only marginally qualified instructors, however. It soon became apparent to the insurance companies that some minimum standards needed to be established regarding basic qualifications for a Yoga teacher. Their subsequently established standards, however, did not quite meet the requirements of the minimum standards that had long been established by the German Association for Yoga Teachers (BDY), their associated schools (we are one of them), and the European Yoga Union (EYU). These BDY/EYU standards have thus far been accepted by 14 European countries and their Yoga unions.. They include a 4-year Yoga teacher education with a minimum of 670 classroom hours and a final oral and written examination, as well as a teaching demonstration in front of a Yoga class. The WEG DER MITTE Health Foundation (WdM) and its European College for Yoga and Therapy ECYT follow these standards as a basis, but our Yoga Teacher Education is far more encompassing and comprises more than twice the hours.

It has proven of great benefit to Yoga that such standards have been in place here for many years, and yet you will still find Yoga centers that offer a one-month "teacher education" program or programs of even shorter duration than this. As the adaptation of standards is voluntary and the title "Yoga Teacher" is not legally protected in Europe, it remains a title anyone can adopt. However, this might change in the future. Our staff has been very involved for many years in the German Association for Yoga Teachers BDY together with several other Yoga schools working seriously to help lift the standards, create quality management, and have Yoga properly presented in the media.

Because of the lack of regulations and general clarity in Yoga education, the current development with health insurance companies is that they have gone to a new extreme. Participants of Yoga courses can at present receive reimbursement for part of the course fee by their health insurance plan only, if the purpose of the course is not Yoga for self-development and enlightenment! A Yoga course must, according to them, be solely for increasing the flexibility of muscles, enhancing the mobility of the skeletal system, or enhancing cardiovascular circulation. This reflects a typical Western medical point of view, completely ignores Yoga's original purpose as a self-developmental path, and does not take the transformative healing aspects of Yoga into account.

In addition, teachers giving insurance-reimbursable courses must meet standards similar to those outlined above — i.e., they must have completed a two to four-year Yoga teacher training program at an acknowledged Yoga school with a final diploma, also they must have obtained either a university degree or have a professional background in a health or social profession. If any of these requirements are missing, the insurance company will refund nothing. Several insurance companies in the larger towns offer their own Yoga courses and only pay if one attends those classes.

## Yoga Therapy and the Law in Germany

History shows that Yoga, Yoga Therapy, and Ayurveda have been natural integrative approaches from the beginning, with a high level of benefit for the user/practitioner. Yoga Therapy is at present just on the verge of becoming known to the general public in Germany and of finding its place in holistic medicine in the areas of prevention and health enhancement.

Using the term "therapy" in Germany, however, signals that your intent is to heal people. The law from 1939 pertaining to "HPG", the law for healing practitioners, or Heilpraktikergesetz, is of major importance. You are not permitted to use the term "therapy" unless you are a medical doctor with approbation, a psychologist or a Heilpraktiker/Healing Practitioner (HP) with examination and acknowledgement by the state. Whatever you do that has the purpose of diagnosing and healing or easing illness, as well as eliminating suffering, is viewed in Germany as practicing medical science - it makes no difference whether it is natural medicine or allopathy. You can study to become an HP through appropriate schools or via self-study with additional training in your chosen complementary medical field of interest. The examination that is done by the state, is very tough, however, and since some years about 90 % do not pass the first time. When you do succeed, you are licensed in the whole of Germany and in some European countries to work

therapeutically. You can prescribe natural remedies, but you are explicitly not allowed to treat either infectious diseases or dental problems.

Using Yoga therapeutically is thus more difficult for Yoga Teachers in Germany than for those in the United States, as they must undergo HP education and examination if they do not have the required qualifications. This entails additional years of study in biomedical sciences, naturopathy, and other subjects. There are no legally qualified Yoga Therapists as such in Germany - meaning qualified by state examination. We have, however, created high standards in this emerging field for our school, the European College for Yoga and Therapy ECYT, that we are applying, and since years we are working towards European requirements and standards in Yoga and Yoga Therapy.

We have no statistics on how many Yoga Teachers adapt Yoga Therapy in their classes or in private sessions, but many interested Yoga Teachers have taken further training to learn BenefitYoga<sup>®</sup> Therapy at ECYT. They become registered as BenefitYoga<sup>®</sup> Teachers when they have completed a 4 1/2 year Yoga Teacher Education, and with further education in Yoga Therapy they become a certified BenefitYoga<sup>®</sup> Therapist. Qualified Yoga Teachers usually have the short initials from the educating school behind their name. If they also have been examined by the Yoga Union, their title is, for example (for our school), as follows: Yoga teacher WdM and BDY/EYU (Yoga teacher Weg der Mitte (WdM) and the Yoga unions, Berufsverband der Yogalehrenden in Deutschland BDY/European Yoga Union EYU).

## Crisis in Health Management

In the past years the political situation regarding health care has become strained due to the enormous cost explosion in this field. New ways of managing this situation must be found. Since a few years patients, in addition to their health insurance plans, have to pay much higher fees for their medications and clinical visits. Up until then, only MDs could cooperate with the health insurance companies, and only their patients could gain the benefits. As a result, MDs and Healing Practitioners (HPs) have become more equal from the point of view of the patients. Whereas before a person may have hesitated, due to economic reasons, to choose a natural healing method that was not paid by health insurance, now, since s/he has to pay anyway, there is a growing trend to try natural medicine, Yoga, and Yoga Therapy. Patients choosing natural health methods make an investment in the future, they introduce no chemical pollutants into their body and the environment, they lower costs, and they learn health and life-affirming methods for self-application.

In addition, the new focus of health research is increasingly more on health than on illness. Originating from social medicine and psychosomatic medicine, as well as humanistic and transpersonal psychology, it now includes salutogenesis (life style, social relationships, and psychological and spiritual health) in addition to the genetic and pathological factors underlying illness. Furthermore, the concepts of patient self-responsibility and self-empowerment have gained an increasingly important role. This change of approach within the world of medicine, and the opening to and integration of natural healing sciences, the Theory of Cognition, and modern philosophy, can increasingly be seen, although it has taken a long time to manifest. We, however, have worked in this holistic way since 1977.

The integral approach is becoming more accepted for a number of reasons, primarily economical. A rapidly increasing number of people are choosing alternative medicine and healing methods and, instead of going to a conventional doctor's office, are seeking alternatively educated health professionals. Several European research projects have found that many symptoms in patients have been created through wrong medication that has subsequently led to severe diseases. This has significantly escalated costs for health insurance companies, and consequently this has led them to seek measures to lower expenses. They have, however, in spite of the aforementioned evidence, not reduced their cooperation with the pharmaceutical industry nor have they initiated the development of less harmful remedies. Unfortunately, it does not seem to be the benefit for patients that they have in mind.

## **It Is Important to Draw Attention to Factors that Create and Sustain Health**

The concept of creating and sustaining health as an approach to healing is essential in the traditions of Yoga, Ayurveda, Chinese Medicine, and Western naturopathy. Currently, Yoga has become part of the field of holistic health and complementary medicine in the area of prevention.

The purpose of Yoga Therapy can be viewed as supporting people in their health and healing process through the science of Yoga. The term "Yoga Therapy," however, has found its way into the general Yoga scene in Germany in the last few years. Although the Yoga Unions and many of the most well-known yogis in Germany have for years proclaimed that Yoga Therapy does not exist, since Yoga is in itself therapy, those very same yogis are now using the term "Yoga Therapy" for their work. One notices that the Yoga scene also has "fashions," and when something becomes fashionable everyone wants to jump on the bandwagon. Yoga Therapy is growing to be the next big thing here, very much like what is happening in the United States. Each month you can find on the German internet new places that claim they are now working with Yoga Therapy, but without defining what that means.

## **Working with BenefitYoga® Is a Whole-Person Approach to the Art of Healing through Yoga Science**

The WEG DER MITTE Non-Profit Foundation for Holistic Medicine, Health Education and Social Services (WdM), founded in 1977 in Berlin, was the first health center in Germany to utilize a combination of natural medicine and Yoga in healing. Natural medicine has a long tradition in Germany, and many powerful techniques and healing methods have come out of this tradition, e.g., Hildegard von Bingen and her monastic healing tradition, Hahnemann and the homeopathy, Kneipp and his method of applying water in various health-related ways, and more recently Gindler and Goralewski and their unique bodywork, Middendorf and Breathing Therapy, Collier and her Acidity Elimination Therapy, to mention just a few.

BenefitYoga® is firmly grounded in traditional Yoga as well as in over 30 years of research and practical application of Yoga as a Healing Science at the WdM Centers

and European College for Yoga and Therapy ECYT, our Yoga educational facility, and the understanding and respect for the interconnectedness of life.

**Benefit Yoga® is a pioneer and leading method in training Yoga teachers and Yoga therapists.** With all its levels of working including Yoga Therapy it is applied as a powerful approach to health care and rediscovery of a person's health potential. For the benefit of the patient/client we also use Eastern and Western natural healing methods when appropriate.

In our multidimensional work of BenefitYoga® we emphasize a holistic approach, which is the very nature of Yoga, rather than an "allopathic Yoga" aimed at curing symptoms. It is thus of major importance that the teachers and therapists who practise BenefitYoga® have a thorough education in and profound understanding of the physical, emotional, and mental aspects of Yoga, of Ayurveda and biomedical science, and as well of the energy-based teaching leading to meditation and Yoga's spiritual dimensions. It requires many years of personal practice in order to work with patients/clients in this way.

### **We work integratively with and educate in Yoga and Yoga Therapy on different levels:**

- On-going Benefit Yoga® classes
- Benefit Yoga® seminars for beginner, intermediate, and advanced students
- Yoga and meditation retreats
- Yoga vacations
- Individual Benefit Yoga® Therapy sessions
- Patient Education Programs (PEP) done in conjunction with patients with tinnitus, rheumatic illness, or heart disease, where the core teaching is Benefit Yoga® Therapy
- Benefit Yoga® Teacher Education, 4 1/2 years
- Postgraduate education for Yoga Teachers
- Ayurveda
- Benefit Yoga® Therapy Study Program Level I - IV
- Postgraduate training in Yoga Therapy

In addition to our staff, our study programs include international Yoga Teachers from India, Europe, the United States, and Canada.

### **Benefit Yoga® is a pioneer and leading method in training Yoga teachers and Yoga therapists**

Although there are now many Yoga schools in Germany, only 35 of them are associated with BDY. ECYT is one of few schools in Germany thus far that educates Yoga Therapists. All of our main Yoga Teachers and Yoga Therapists have extensive and long-term Yoga Teacher and Yoga Therapy Education and many years of practice as Yoga Teachers and HPs (Heilpraktiker) in addition to whatever other qualifications they may have

Ayurveda in Germany has become very popular over the last ten years. It was initially of interest to insiders only. Now you can read articles in most women's magazines about the doshas and the benefits of the different massages, foods, etc.

You will find many health centers that offer Ayurvedic treatments and several schools in addition to ours that offer trainings in this field. Yoga Therapy traditionally was integrated with Ayurveda, and we find this useful today as well, along with the incorporation of Western diagnostic methods.

Most of what is on the market today under the name "Yoga Therapy" could more accurately be called "allopathic Yoga," e.g., Yoga for this and Yoga for that, Yoga for the back, Yoga for the heart, and so on. To our understanding, however, Yoga Therapy is not at root allopathic. We have found it very useful if the apparent symptoms are recognized as "doors" through which one can holistically explore with clients what Yoga is for them, including the spiritual dimension.

## Core Competence for Yoga Therapists in a Health Care System

According to the illustrative standards published in the 2003 issue of the International Journal of Yoga Therapy, "A Yoga therapist is a well-trained and well-experienced Yoga teacher with substantial additional training in therapeutic applications, clinical practice, and biomedical science." [1] We agree with this statement. The two most important things in Yoga Therapy are the ability of the Yoga Therapist to know his or her métier in a deep and profound way and for Yoga to be applied as each situation requires. The key abilities for a Yoga Therapist to cultivate in addition to compassion are those of mindfulness, observation without judgement, and an understanding of how the many parts work together for the whole.

The following standards for applying Yoga in a therapeutic way reflect our understanding and experience at EGYT and at the Weg der Mitte Health Foundation. Substantial training, experience, personal maturity, and accomplishment in Yoga Therapy are needed and can be gained in the following order:

- Personal practice: at least three years supervised by a qualified teacher (BDY and EGYT standards)
- Yoga Teacher Education: a thorough training (4 1/2 years, min. 880 - approx. 2,000 hours) including supervised hours of teaching and biomedical science, with written and oral examination and a demonstration of teaching skills. EGYT also requires a written thesis (min. 60 pages on A4 paper) on a self-chosen topic related to one's personal work with and understanding of Yoga during the 4 1/2 years of education
- Experienced Yoga Teacher with substantial work of teaching Yoga to beginner, intermediate, and advanced students. The teacher must demonstrate a thorough understanding of Yoga in all its aspects, including Yoga psychology and Yoga philosophy.
- Yoga Therapy Study Program Level I (200 classroom hours with certificate of completion)
- Yoga Therapy Study Program Level II (350 classroom hours and supervision, examination through EGYT, certificate of completion)
- Yoga Therapy Study Program Level III (250 hours and internship, examination through EGYT, certificate of completion) The Benefit Yoga® Therapist Certificate at EGYT is given only when the student has reached maturity in his/her own practice, understanding and application of the learned

principles and after final examination through the board of examiners. To work as a therapist in Germany one also needs to have the certificate either of an HP, an MD, a physiotherapist or a psychologist and must document this for ECYT. Otherwise you graduate as Benefit Yoga® Health Educator/Pedagogue

- Yoga Therapy Study Program Level IV: the spiritual dimension of healing through Yoga science
- Postgraduate training for Benefit Yoga® therapists

## Further Perspectives in Yoga Therapy

On May 1, 2004, a major historical change took place in Europe. The European Union grew overnight from 15 to 25 states, adding 75 million people for a total of 450 million! Until now it has grown further to 27 states. The EU has never before been so large or so cooperative changing our lives individually and politically, and been such great challenge for all the health care systems.

Health is more than the absence of illness, and the trend in society today is toward more natural, powerful, and non-harming healing methods. One of the primary reasons for this is the growing consciousness of humans. There is a deeper interest in health and health issues, and a growing understanding of the necessity for self-responsibility and self-initiative in prevention.

Socrates is documented to have said: "When somebody wishes to become healthy, ask first if he in the future is ready to avoid the causes of his illness, and only then are you allowed to help." This is, of course, a strong and quite controversial statement, and must be seen in the light of the underlying philosophy. In the case of hereditary diseases and a disease such as cancer, suffering is obvious and leaves patients often with hopelessness and no means of cure. The statement indicates additionally, however, that we must be responsible for what happens to us and for our own health and that there are measures we can take ourselves and strategies we can apply. The therapeutic aim of holistic treatment through Yoga Therapy must therefore be not only to help, but to provide means of self-help.

It is our intention to further promote Yoga Therapy in Germany, Europe, and the United States as a recognized and responsible discipline and as a contributor to natural health care in cooperation with professionals in other health care modalities. The acceptance of Yoga Therapy largely depends, however, on the quality of the work of Yoga Therapists.

We thus appreciate and value the initiative of the International Association of Yoga Therapists to define and establish standards for Yoga Therapists in a cooperative worldwide effort to integrate alternative perspectives into modern health care systems.

*Benefit Yoga® is a registered trademark in Europe and the United States.*