

Benefits On and Off the Mat LifeForce Yoga® Practitioner Training

Our Yoga students often experience emotions on the mat that may be confusing or even embarrassing to them. I was drawn to learn more about how to help my students move safely through emotions that can surface on the mat and to help them manage their moods because of my own experience in a Yoga class. About the sixth week of my first Yoga course with a wonderful instructor, I had an unexpected emotional release. The tears silently streaming down my face seemed connected to finding something I didn't even know was lost. I felt like I was coming back to my body—reintegrating somehow—in an overwhelming feeling of coming home. I approached my instructor afterward, hoping for insight into why the practice would bring me to tears. Her response was that crying sometimes accompanies Yoga practice and that I should see a therapist.

The answer felt incomplete, and so I browsed the studio's bookshelf, where I found *Yoga for Depression* by Amy Weintraub. This book allowed me to tie many loose ends together about depression and inspired me to continue my own healing journey in a new direction, first to become a Yoga teacher and later to complete advanced training in LifeForce Yoga (LFY), developed by Amy Weintraub. The LifeForce Yoga Practitioner (LFYP) Training completely transformed my personal practice into something that nurtures my heart and soul as well as my body, and it fuels my passion to support other people on their own healing journeys.

Trained in the Anusara™-inspired style of Hatha Yoga, I had a strong appreciation for proper alignment and student safety, as well as the benefits of continuously refining a pose to deepen one's experience. Hatha Yoga led me into self-awareness as I learned to still my mind and focus on the sensations in a pose. It opened the door to my own inner journey. I went to LFYP Training out of curiosity and interest. Could other aspects of Yoga really help me and others I cared about manage our emotions, including depression and anxiety?

What I encountered in LFYP training is a style of Yoga very much from the heart.

Within a remarkably compassionate container, the training provided numerous opportunities to connect deeply with myself and experience layers of release. Beginning on the very first night after dinner, the focus was on creating a safe container for doing the deep work contained in the training. Amy Weintraub introduced two archetypal icons that form the foundation of the training program: Shiva, representing self-awareness and staying present to what arises; and to balance Shiva, Kuan Yin, known as the bodhisattva of compassion, who would serve to remind us of self-acceptance and observation without judgment throughout the training. Our ensuing discussion focused on not only creating our own safe container for our training group but also on the importance of doing this for every one of our clients, classes, or groups.

Based on my experiences throughout the rest of my week in this training, the LFY practice and training focuses on two essential healing processes: the art of releasing obstructions, toxins, and trauma in our lives to create more space for health and wholeness, and the art of replenishing ourselves and filling that space with healing, life-affirming energy, and a sense of Oneness with the Divine in each of us.



The fundamental nondual belief that *Atman* and *Brahman* are one, that there is no separation between the individual self and the Divine Self, is foundational to LifeForce Yoga. It is life's traumas, losses, everyday difficulties, and disappointments that create the illusion that we are separate and alone, which can be the source of our depression. LFY combines cleansing and energy-building practices (*tapas*) with the development of a calm mind through self-study (*svadhyaya*) and the willingness to surrender (*ishvara-pranidhana*). This therapeutic Yoga practice is based on Patanjali's formula for union in action (*Kriya Yoga*), and is designed specifically to enable people to build emotional resilience. The training emphasizes that we are intimately and eternally connected to our Divine Self, no matter how distant we may feel, and offers daily opportunities to reinforce this concept through personal experience.

Along with the foundation of *asana*, LFYP Training integrates extensive instruction about and use of *pranayama* (controlled breathing) and *kriya* (cleansing breathing), *sankalpa* (intention), *bhavana* (cultivation of visual imagery), sound to activate or calm the energy centers in the body, *mantra* and chanting, Yoga *nidra* for deep relaxation, and meditation. The training includes poses and *asana* flows, starting with a two-hour sunrise practice of *asana*, chanting, and meditation every morning. Each day, we worked with successively deeper levels and combinations of the Yogic tools and techniques designed to manage the mood.

On a day focused on learning energizing breathwork, we experienced seated *kapalabhati*, or skull-shining breath, in the morning as a method to raise and cleanse the energy of a depressed, lethargic person; in the afternoon we went deeper into that technique to experience *kapalabhati* during a pose, such as reverse plank or *utkatasana* (air chair). It might be followed by other energizing techniques such as pulling *prana* or *uddiyana bandha* combined with *agni sara* (pumping the belly). The appropriate application of each technique by Yoga teachers or mental health professionals, including use with specific client backgrounds and con-

traindications, was discussed at length.

Morning and afternoon didactic sessions included a variety of topics such as Yogic strategies for mental health, post-traumatic stress disorder and seasonal affective disorder, the value of *nada* (sound) Yoga and *mantra*, nondual interventions, current neurobiological research on various techniques, use of sound with *asana*, and Yoga *nidra* and iRest.™ These sessions were interspersed with presentations on the application of each technique, followed by discussions and practice sessions on each of the tools. Evening sessions tend to vary from training to training and are more experiential, often including workshops on such topics as *bhavana*, Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy, *kirtan* chanting, Laughter Yoga, and Yoga dance.

One of my favorite tools that I worked with during the training is the LFY *Chakra* Clearing, an 8–10 minute process that combines *bhastrika* (bellows breath), *brahmari* (bee breath), and a *chakra* clearing that incorporates sound and *hastamudra-s* (hand gestures) to help balance the *chakra-s*. *Bhastrika* is a *kriya* that leaves me feeling energized and cleansed both physically and mentally. I feel lighter and more open and focused after this breath. *Brahmari* is a calming breath that brings me into greater balance and facilitates *pratyahara*, or withdrawal of the senses; it helps to break the cycle of obsessive thinking or negative loop thinking, leaving me in a state of great peace. The use of *hastamudra-s* allows me to withdraw my senses of sight and sound, and the bee breath creates wonderful vibrations that resonate throughout my entire body.

When I finish the LFY *Chakra* Clearing process, I find myself sensing into a vast inner space where I feel more spacious and aware, connected, and present. It is a portal into meditation where I can connect with my true Self that is not defined by mood or roles, the part of me that is more than my body, mind, or emotions, the part of me that feels a sense of true Oneness with the Divine.

LFYP Training combines many aspects of Yoga to address the well-being of the whole person. In this way, the practice and the training both address blockages in all of the five *koshas*—the physical body (*annamayakosha*), the energy body (*pranamayakosha*), the psychoemotional body (*manomayakosha*), the wisdom body (*vijnanamayakosha*), and the bliss body (*anandamayakosha*). The practice of LifeForce Yoga is intended to clear *samskaras* (obstructions)

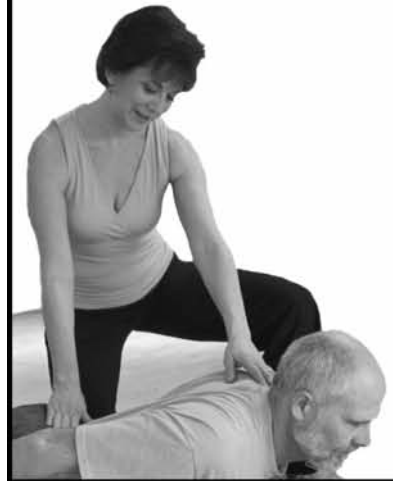
at all levels of our existence and promote whole mind-body wellness without focusing on a person's particular story. The LFY *Chakra* Clearing process described above affects several *kosha-s*. I believe that this whole-person approach leaves no aspect of my being untouched and contributes to the powerful impact this training and practice has had in helping me remove blockages and bring balance into my life.

The LFY Staff consists of Amy Weintraub, several experienced LFY Level 2 Practitioners, and expert faculty brought in throughout the practitioner training to discuss related topics or present specialized techniques. During the 2009 training in Tucson that I attended, Yoga therapist and teacher Maria Mendola, RN, MA, ERYT-500, discussed the Ayurvedic approach to the emotions. In this session, trainees learned about the *dosha-s* and how knowledge of the Ayurvedic system can be helpful in balancing the emotions related to each *dosha*. Similarly, as a method of encouraging future practitioners to respect and facilitate the client's own inner-body wisdom in order to release stored tension, J.J. Lee, a Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy practitioner and trainer, presented an evening workshop that included a sample session. Students were able to observe the practitioner's compassionate presence with the client and witness a client-directed session.

The staff's presence, healing energy, and the tender language surrounding the entire training all served to create a space filled with opportunities to explore the self, but without any pressure to perform. Staff gave presentations on various topics, offered feedback, and provided support to allow attendees to dive deeper into the experiences of cleansing, releasing, and connecting with the Divine Self. Unconditional permission was given to each of us to listen to ourselves while going deeper into a pose, breathing technique, or exercise, witnessing ourselves and the sensations that arose from each new technique. Frequent times of silence and meditation were included to allow us to process and assimilate our experiences quietly and thoughtfully, giving us opportunities to sense into our bodies, to feel the location of the energy in the body, and to experience the spacious silence inside ourselves. In this way, trainees could evaluate the impact of the tools and techniques (continued on page 9)

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on themselves, consider their possible application for students and clients, and discuss their reactions and ideas for future use of the tools.

As a former business executive, I also appreciated the structured approach of the LFYP Training Program. Goals are clearly articulated, communication is reliable, materials are well-organized and presented, and a schedule is established and followed. This attention to detail allowed me to maximize the training experience.

LFYP Level 1 Training prepares future practitioners to work with groups and individuals and to teach students and clients in the Yogic strategies we learned there. Since both Yoga teachers and mental health practitioners attend the training, special attention is paid to differentiating between techniques like *asana* practices and *kriya* breathing that may be safely led by a Yoga teacher and those that may be led by a psychotherapist. A more limited selection of practices with modifications appropriate for a clinical setting are introduced for psychotherapists, who are encouraged to incorporate simple Yogic strategies to help their clients focus, relax, and achieve greater access to their feelings. Psychotherapists learn simple *pranayama*, *mantra-s*, *mudra-s* and the effective use of *bhavana* and *sankalpa* that they can teach their clients to self-regulate emotion and manage their moods.

LFYP Level 2 Training continues with more in-depth training in the Yogic strategies for balancing mood and more practice teaching of all the strategies. The training emphasizes working one-on-one with clients and how to structure and lead workshops. Both Level 1 and Level 2 training culminate in a practice teaching session followed by a standardized self-mentoring report. Each Yogic strategy is practiced with a training partner in a nonevaluative way first, followed by the actual practice teaching that includes a 50-minute session for each trainee. The practice-teaching sessions take place in a large training room and are continuously monitored by staff. Following the practice-teaching session, each trainee is required to complete a session-planning sheet outlining the client's symptoms and the rationale for selecting certain tools and techniques, along with a standardized self-evaluation form. An online evaluation by Amy is provided to the trainees the week after training is completed.



In order to participate in the LFYP Level 1 Training, attendees must be 200-hour Yoga Alliance registered Yoga teachers or mental health professionals with an ongoing Yoga practice. Candidates who do not meet these criteria but who work as healing professionals will be considered on a case-by-case basis. Other requirements include reading *Yoga for Depression* and the *LifeForce Yoga Practitioner Level 1 Training for Depression and Anxiety Manual*. The Level 1 training consists of 40–50 contact hours, depending on location.

Students who wish to enroll in the advanced training must have completed Level 1 Training. Requirements include reading the *Level 2 Training Manual*, viewing the *LifeForce Yoga to Beat the Blues* Level 1 and 2 DVDs, and listening to the LifeForce Yoga CDs for *Yoga Nidra*, *Bhavana*, and *Breathe to Beat the Blues*. We were also required to complete additional hours of self-study and self-mentoring, as well as demonstrate our experience incorporating LifeForce Yoga within classes, private sessions, and/or workshops. Students must select an approved LifeForce Yoga mentor and complete three one-hour mentoring sessions with their mentors before receiving their certificate of completion. I felt this was one of the most beneficial aspects of the program, as it gave me a chance to work one-on-one with someone adept in applying the LFY tools and techniques in real-life settings. As part of this

process, students complete and submit three standardized Self-Mentoring Reports to their mentor, which forms the foundation for the mentoring sessions. Level 2 training consists of 56 contact hours.

The LFY tools and techniques helped me to clear the space within and invited me to connect deeply with my true Self (*atman*). I left feeling cleansed, refreshed, and revitalized. Although I have done a lot of previous experiential work, the subtle power of this practice opened a portal to a vast consciousness inside myself that I had only experienced in rare moments of my life. It moved me to not only commit to hold onto this delicious sense of connectedness but also to find ways to share this opportunity with others still suffering from the energy-draining experience of living with depression. I left there ready to dive even deeper into my own practice of LifeForce Yoga.

I now teach LifeForce Yoga classes and see private clients who are interested in learning how to apply Yogic practices to help calm their anxiety and/or enhance their sense of well-being and personal empowerment. At each opportunity, I offer my students and clients tools and techniques to take home with them to build more emotional resilience in their daily lives. The “take home value” of this therapeutic practice is significant; it encourages independent self-regulation of moods.

LifeForce Yoga helps me take my Yoga practice off my mat and integrate it more deeply into my daily life, enabling me to live life on life's terms with more dignity, grace, and compassion—and without depression. Sharing these tools with others who are still suffering inspires me to continue in this loving work so that they may explore ways to improve their quality of life. **YTT**

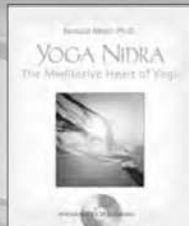


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Photos of Felicity Boyer and student taken at LFYP training during a practice teaching session.

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