

Yoga Therapy in Practice

Partner Yoga for Establishing Boundaries in Relationship: A Transpersonal Somatic Approach

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Abstract: This article is written for yoga therapists and psychotherapists who work with couples who have difficulty setting boundaries and maintaining individuality in their relationships. Partner yoga, transpersonal psychology, and somatic-based psychology are approaches that can provide clients with a holistic system of therapy to encourage healthy boundaries and emotional connection. The process of partner yoga is described from a transpersonal, somatically oriented approach. Examples of specific *asanas*, or yoga poses, are discussed alongside the special considerations that a therapist must consider when exploring boundaries and communication through partner yoga. Insights from individual case sessions with couples are included to illustrate the process of differentiation and the possibility of experiencing a transpersonal union through partner yoga.

Key words: yoga, couples, close relationships, emotion regulation, transpersonal psychology, somatic psychology, co-dependency

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Introduction

Creating and maintaining healthy relationships is challenging work. It takes dedication and courage to explore one's self both individually and in relationship with a partner. This article will explore how partner yoga, in the context of psychotherapy or yoga therapy, can help couples who experience challenges related to boundaries and emotional connection. Through consistent and constructive practice with a yoga therapist or psychotherapist with a yoga background, partner yoga can serve as a tool for couples to develop healthy boundaries and connect on a deeper, spiritually unified level.

Differentiation in Close Relationships

Most yoga teachers and therapists have had the experience of feeling grounded in self-awareness and in our own bodies, yet also “in synch” with our external environment, including other people. That is the feeling of healthy dif-

ferentiation. Differentiation, analogous to ego strength or emotional stability, is “the capacity to think and reflect, to not respond automatically to emotional pressures, internal and external.”^{1, p.127}

In contrast, undifferentiation, a term coined by Murray Bowen, describes dysfunctional boundaries within family systems. The experience of undifferentiation is described by Michael P. Nichols in *Family Therapy* as being “easily moved to emotionality. Their lives are driven by reactivity to those around them...they find it difficult to maintain their own autonomy, especially around anxious issues.”^{1, p. 127} Undifferentiation is not a diagnosable condition, but it is prevalent in many relationships, oftentimes described as codependency or emotional fusion. In codependent relationships, one or both partners tend to immediately react to situations instead of checking in with themselves first, then thoughtfully responding. As Nichols writes, “The greater the fusion, the more one is programmed by primitive emo-

tional forces, and the more vulnerable to the emotionality of others.”¹, p. 133 Such undifferentiation and emotional fusion in close romantic relationships creates emotionally unsatisfying and stressful dynamics that make it difficult for individuals to maintain their identity in relationship. For instance, if one partner feels ungrounded in her own body, unable to connect with her feelings, and has a poor sense of emotional boundaries, it will be hard for her to offer compassion when her partner comes home in a bad mood from a stressful day at work. Instead of comforting her partner, the undifferentiated partner may instead react to her partner’s fears and anxieties and become overwhelmed by anxiety herself, thus heightening the friction for the both of them.

Lancaster also describes an unhealthy desire to merge with the other person among those who are undifferentiated in relationships. *Merging* “is an attempt to create the feeling of infantile wholeness by becoming one with another person.”², p. 213 According to Lancaster, “Both individuals need to actively develop a self-referent orientation and look for a sense of self outside rather than in each other.”², p. 410 The desire to merge also creates relationship obstacles, making it difficult to see one’s partner for who she or he truly is, letting go of the fantasy or ideal—especially when confronted with realities that conflict with that ideal. A true, embodied knowing is more than a conceptual understanding of the other, but is a deep identification that allows one person to truly *see* another without projecting a fantasy onto that person and includes the ability to sit with the imperfections that all of us carry. As Janet Adler points out, humans long for this kind of connection and have an inherent desire to feel understood: “We want deeply to be seen as we are by another. We want to be witnessed.”³, p. 158

How Yoga Can Help

The most important task for undifferentiated partners is to develop a strong sense of self within the relationship, including self-awareness and acceptance, which can be explored through practicing partner yoga and enhancing self-awareness, as well as awareness and sensitivity to one’s partner. Partner yoga is a practice built on trust where the roles of giver and receiver flow back and forth, with each partner taking turns to bear some of their partner’s weight in balancing *asanas*, for example, or in helping one’s partner go deeper into a pose by applying pressure to parts of the body that are ready to stretch deeper, much like a yoga instructor would in assisting a student. Partner yoga can support the differentiation process by encouraging clients listen to their own internal experiences and to regulate their emotional reactivity to external situations, including their

partner’s emotions, while engaging with the partner during the *asana* practice. After all, there is much in life that we cannot control—but we *can* control our responses to what happens. Through the process of partner yoga we can learn to respond more mindfully to life’s changing circumstances as well as to our partners.

Another aspect of partner yoga that is useful for healthy differentiation is an emphasis on deep and synchronized breathing, which can reduce anxiety while creating a state of relative openness. This can provide a sense of safety and in turn foster the willingness to explore emotions and to take slow steps toward a more differentiated self. In practicing yoga *asanas* together, both partners can find an inner, individual stability through physical sensation and breath. Sensation and breath become somatic markers, or reference points, that can be used as both a touchstone to calm the self when emotional intensity arises and as a reminder of each person’s individual identity separate from the partner, a state conducive to response-based actions rather than impulse-based reactions.

Holding space in a healing environment for couples to experience their relationship to themselves and each other is imperative to the unfolding process. The therapist must allow each partner as much time as necessary to tune into his or her own body individually before coming together in partner yoga *asanas*. Beginning with honoring the self, the partners are then able to come together and openly explore their boundaries with each other. The therapist simply provides a safe container for the couple as they attune to their bodies and reach a state of mindful awareness, gently leading them from one *asana* to the next, offering guidance that will help the couple experience the balance between differentiation within their personal boundaries and emotional connection with each other.

The Partner Yoga Process

Grounding In Self-Awareness

Before working with a partner in yoga, the individual works, or listens, with his or her own body first, anchoring into a somatic marker, or reference point in the body that can be continually revisited during the session. The individual must find his or her own inner stability, or root system, first. By rooting in one’s own somatic experience through introspective and grounding *asanas*, the risk of emotional fusion and merging with the other is reduced. Poses and practices that evoke feelings of introspection and groundedness are recommended to tune into one’s own somatic language. Examples include meditation or a seated forward bend such as *paschimottanasana*. In *Hatha Yoga: The Hidden*

Language, Swami Sivananda Radha uses words like balance, roots, density, sturdiness, and other stability-themed metaphors to describe the *pachimottanasana* pose. Radha also describes the experience of connecting to inner wisdom in this pose: “The answers—to be found within—will perhaps be an inspiration to bow down in awe and wonder at the Divine Wisdom that comes to the individual in so many ways.”⁴, p. 69



Photo 1. *Paschimottanasana*

The therapist encourages the client to move into an inward-focused *asana*, such as *pachimottanasana* (Photo 1) or *balasana*, to turn the senses inward and focus on the internal experience. The client then is guided into a seated, cross-legged pose with eyes closed, as the therapist explains the concept of a somatic marker: a safe place in the body where the client can be directed for self-comfort and more grounded decision making. The therapist helps the client focus on prospective somatic markers, such as the lower abdomen or heart (two common somatic markers) and explore which marker helps the client feel more connected to his or her grounded self before working with the partner. The body part that a client chooses will be the somatic marker the therapist can refer to, or the client can choose to check in with, for the rest of the session.

As the individual takes the “listening” approach first, a foundation is built to work with more awareness, both with the self and the partner. For example, in one of my client sessions, after one partner meditated before the practice, she noticed an ability to sense the subtle details of her partner that she described as a “kindness in his eyes,” which brought out a softness within her that was not present once they first sat down. She said that the “softness” she felt helped her connect to him on a deeper level.

Practicing Boundaries

In working with couples exploring differentiation, the therapist can help them create boundaries and learn what it feels like to be independent of the other, moment by moment, through various partner yoga practices. Back-to-back meditation is one such practice (Photo 2). As described in *Yoga for Partners* by Jessie Chapman,⁵ the *asana* begins with the two partners sitting back-to-back in a cross-legged pose. As the therapist instructs the partners to inhale and exhale in unison, they can practice being aware of their own somatic experience and feelings while also being aware of their partner’s presence. The therapist can also suggest one partner inhales while the other exhales, and then switch, and notice the difference in the experience. The partners can then choose which breathing technique helps them feel most connected to one another: synchronizing breath through simultaneous inhalation or exhalation or breathing in opposition to each other. In this practice, an undifferentiated partner may notice that he follows his mate’s breath so vigilantly that he only notices her breath and has trouble focusing on his own body when they are breathing together. The therapist could encourage that partner to pause and take note of his somatic marker, for example, his heart center, and then go back to the breathing.



Photo 2. *Back-to-Back Breathing*

Another *asana* that can help a couple explore boundaries is partner *virabhadrasana* II, or warrior II pose. According to Chapman, *virabhadrasana* II brings “strength and willpower to the practitioner.”⁵, p. 52 In this pose, partners face away from each other and hold each other’s hands, with the edges of their back feet touching. The therapist can guide them into a visualization of boundaries, imagined as a vertical line

drawing up from the crease where their feet touch (Photo 3). Although they hold hands, they are looking outwards and away from each other. Partners are asked to notice what it feels like—both in their bodies and emotionally—to be connected, yet with a boundary between them. Partners are encouraged to simultaneously notice their own breath, or a somatic marker, and the presence of their significant other. From here, the therapist allows the partners to talk about the difficulties of holding awareness of both themselves and the partner at the same time. As the partners experience the boundaries between themselves and their mates in this or another *asana*, therapists can carefully draw out more information about their relationship dynamics. The therapist can ask the partners to name feelings, words, images, that come to mind in the pose, and gauge their feelings of safety, comfort, and confidence on a scale of one to ten. The clients can also bring up examples of real-life moments or situations in which they have had similar feelings.



Photo 3. *Virabhadrasana II*

Partners can also be encouraged to play with the pose. In one of my client sessions, a couple agreed that they felt more differentiated when they lifted their arms forward in an exalted, upward-curving shape. One of the partners stated, “I feel part of a u-shaped magnet where I am grounded in my body, but I can feel her energy beside me as we lift our arms up.” Such playful exploration can gently encourage both individuals to maintain security in their bodies as they delineate their boundaries, which can be uncomfortable and sometimes frightening for those who are very emotionally dependent on their partners. If any anxiety arises, the partners will have the option to go back to grounding and introspective postures discussed earlier, such as *pachimottanasana* or *balasana*, child’s pose.

Identifying Without Merging

When working with undifferentiated couples, it is important to distinguish between merging (or emotional fusion) and healthy identification with one’s partner. Awareness is what enables partners to distinguish between merging and identifying. A partner who is too concerned with merging is unable to healthily identify with the significant other or see the partner clearly. Instead, that partner is projecting wishes and desires of who the other partner should be.



Photo 4. *Ustrasana*

One *asana* that can help distinguish healthy identification from merging is partner *ustrasana*, or camel pose. Partners kneel in front of each other about a yard apart, then hold each other’s hands and lean back (Photo 4). Partners are encouraged to feel into the heart-opening *asana* and attune to themselves, their breath, and each other simultaneously. As one partner assists in the other’s deepening back bend, communication is necessary. Both partners have to communicate somatically, energetically, and intuitively to be able to extend into a full expression of the pose. There is no room for projecting one’s desires onto the partner because they are co-creating an *asana* where they must stay in the moment, without thinking about who or what the partner should be doing, in order to maintain balance. The manifestation of such an action in this pose can be visually apparent, for example, pulling the partner further into the pose than he or she is capable of or comfortable with. When partners are able to increase their awareness through such a pose and see each other without projecting emotional needs or false identities onto one another, a shift takes place. A veil momentarily lifts up, and partners can more fully and clearly see each other, lack of coordination and all.

Offering Support

Weight-bearing partner yoga *asanas*—those that involve one partner supporting or assisting the other partner—provide an opportunity to learn how to witness and relate to one's partner without losing a sense of connection to oneself. Lancaster describes how touch can be used as an “‘evoked experience’ in order to develop awareness.”^{2, p. 426} When weight-bearing *asanas* are implemented into the partner yoga flow, touch can affirm and solidify their identification and boundary building. However, physical contact when adjusting a partner is a healing ingredient that should be treated like spice. Too much can be overpowering and invasive of boundaries, and too little can prove ineffective and distant. Therapists and practitioners are cautioned to be mindful that although touch can be healing and therapeutic, it can also unravel progress and trigger feelings of merging and emotional fusion if it is too invasive for the client's taste.

If partners have already successfully established a sense of boundary-making with *virabhadrasana II* and *ustrasana*, the therapist can introduce a weight-bearing *asana* to feel the powerful healing qualities of witnessing the other's emotions without absorbing them. *Baddha konasana*, or bound-angle pose, is a perfect *asana* to explore the space where feelings and boundaries are put to the test. In my years of experience as a yoga instructor for a variety of populations, I have noticed many commonalities that transcend demographics. One observation is how emotional trauma and tension can be stored in the hips. An *asana* that releases tension in the hip and pelvis region can allow access to the stored emotions. As the client allows the hips to release and open in a safe and supportive environment where trust is already established, he or she is also presented with an opportunity to feel those emotions that may have been previously unbearable. As one partner sinks forward into *baddha konasana*, the other kneels behind and breathes, inhaling and exhaling to the partner's rhythm, and on his or her exhalation, gently applies pressure to their thighs.^{5, p. 83} In this *asana*, the partner in *baddha konasana* has the opportunity to get deeply in touch with his emotions in a safe way, feeling held by the attention that the partner and therapist give to him (Photo 5).

If the partner who is providing the physical assist is prone to projecting emotional needs onto the other, or to taking on the partner's emotions and losing touch with his or her own, this partner *asana* will be challenging. Boundaries are difficult to uphold when one's partner is feeling highly charged emotions. Oftentimes, and especially with partners who do not have strong boundaries, one person becomes swallowed up in the other's emotions and

loses his or her own sense of self. The witness, especially if he or she is undifferentiated, will be challenged to not be absorbed into the other's deep inner experience, leading to dissolution of boundaries. Both must remember to keep their boundaries firm and to co-create an experience that enhances awareness both individually as well as between the two of them.



Photo 5. *Baddha Konasana*

If the *asana* is done with awareness and strong boundaries, the partners will be able to enjoy simply being with both their individual selves and the other, in the present moment, as deep emotions arise, without being *absorbed* by the emotions. For example, in another client session, the partner in *baddha konasana* was noticing feelings of fear. The partner doing the adjusting said he felt honored to be there for her as she allowed her fear to surface. In return, she said she felt deeply connected to him and “seen” as he witnessed her. The partner doing the *asana* was able to express herself in an authentic way that resonated with her partner, with both partners being seen and accepted for who they were. Appropriate boundaries were maintained by owning what belonged to themselves and what belonged to their partners, creating a new way of experiencing how to be with another's emotions without having to take them on as their own, setting up a new, healthier pattern of behavior to follow in the future.

Experiencing a Transpersonal Union

This quality of deep connection between partners is sometimes described as a *transpersonal union*, a state in which two individuals mirror each other in a state of unified consciousness. A transpersonal union is a balance that

comes from two partners who are highly attuned to each other. It is not meant to describe a permanent state of existence, but a powerfully healing moment of awareness. Carl Jung's describes a transpersonal union as

An hermaphroditic being capable of uniting the opposites, but who is never complete in the individual unless related to another individual. The unrelated human being lacks wholeness, for he can achieve wholeness only through the soul, and the soul cannot exist without its other side, which is always found in a 'You.'³, p. 158

In Jung's view, relationship is necessary to feel seen, and without that outside validation of oneself, the individual loses contact with the soul. In Lancaster's view, the transpersonal union blossoms out of identification with the other:

Through this identification, self and other become unified. With transpersonal awareness, it is the sustained focus on the immediate experience of who we are at each moment that allows us not to lose sight of how self-other and private-public are mutual processes where each supports the other. In this balance, one finds unified consciousness.², p. 555

Navasana balance, or partner's boat pose, is a yoga *asana* that can allow partners to embody, and oftentimes evoke, the state of transpersonal union. It is recommended for partners who have experienced moments of healthy differentiation in other partner yoga poses. In this *asana*, the individuals appear to be sailing in a calm sea, mirroring each other's resilience as they balance in unison. Their breathing is synchronized, tying them to the moment as they breathe with mindful awareness of themselves and of one another. Although they form a beautiful union, physically, they pull away from each other and establish a balance independent of each other (Photo 6). This symbolizes their autonomous self-identities. However, there also exists a shared "central point of balance" that encompasses the essence of the transpersonal, unified consciousness.⁵, p. 76 In one client session, a couple expressed feelings of extreme pleasure in this *asana* after they finally found their point of balance without teeter tottering and flopping back onto the floor. Both partners were giggling. One of the partners described his joy, "It's authentic because we can play together, and that's a true sign of differentiation. We can create together and still be ourselves."



Photo 6. *Navasana*

Final Thoughts

The process of differentiation is an admirable one, but the desire to engage in the process is not the kind of goal one sets to be checked off a list of *Things to Do*. It is not a striving upwards to reach a glowing brass ring, but a spiral that winds in and out, slowly yet steadily moving toward a richer, more attuned, loving, and accepting connection. Since differentiation is a process that moves in a spiral rather than a straight line upwards, many people, including Carl Jung, might argue that implementing yoga in the process is not a good fit. As Judith Harris writes in her book *Jung and Yoga: The Psyche-Body Connection*, "Jung did not actually advocate the practice of yoga for his patients as he understood yoga to be a striving upward which he felt, and rightly so, to be dangerous."⁶, p. 96 Though some forms of yoga do ascribe to the philosophy of striving upwards to obtain enlightenment, partner yoga is much more about the process and being with the partner in the moment. As with all practices, the intention of the practitioners also contributes to the effects of the practice. If the partners take the practice as an opportunity to travel down into the abundant wisdom that lies beneath the veil of the skin, yoga can serve as an alchemical ingredient to improve their relationship.

Creating and maintaining healthy boundaries is a difficult challenge that takes years, sometimes a lifetime, to build and enforce—even through the trying moments that shake one to the core. As the process is undertaken, it is imperative to continually honor oneself and one's partner for the strength that both embody to even set foot on such a challenging journey, and the tremendous work that is being done on the path to emotional and spiritual health.

It is a combination of intention, loving-kindness, commitment, courage, forgiveness, and insightful therapeutic interventions like partner yoga that bring about positive transformation in relationship.

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