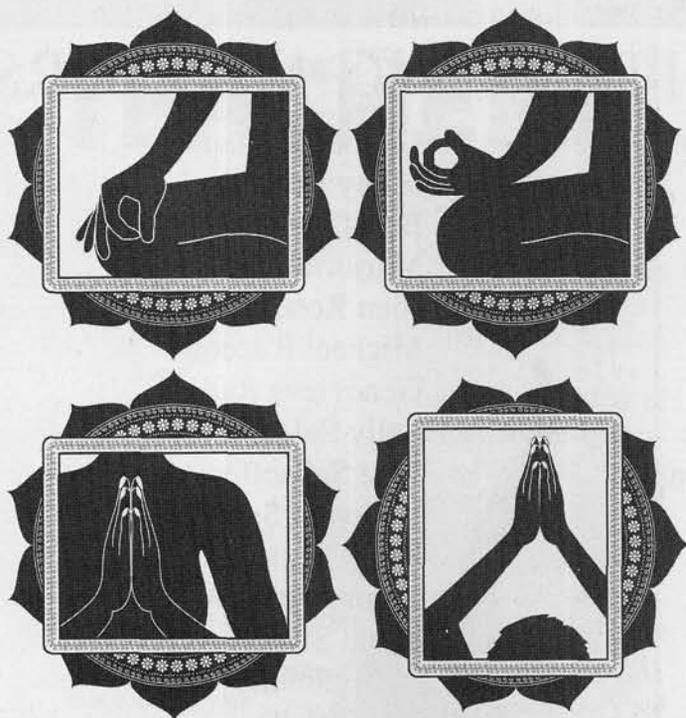


# ASANA AND MUDRA: A YOGA THERAPY CASE REPORT



**D**uring a night out at a concert, Mary, 67, slipped, fell, and broke her right shoulder in three places. The surgery inserted a titanium plate, nine screws, and bone grafts, and led to considerable pain and severely restricted mobility. After more than eight years of studying and practicing Yoga with me, Mary had enough experience to know that the practice could be a source of healing and comfort to her, and enough faith in me to trust that I could guide her toward what she needed. Two weeks after her surgery she was ready to begin, and we spent the next six weeks working three days a week in intensive Yoga therapy. *By Karen Schwartz*

**T**he abrupt change in Mary's circumstances, combined with the urgency of her need, ignited a creativity in me that stretched me beyond my limits and drew me deeper into the mental and energetic realms of the practice. Because of her limited arm use, I immediately thought of incorporating *mudras*—hand gestures that require virtually no arm movement—as an accessible way to intentionally focus energy and healing. Beyond this, I had no plan or agenda, and trusted that being present and listening would result in the appropriate guidance. What emerged was an organic process, woven together through meditation, visualization, *asana*, and *mudra*, with themes that became clear to me as we proceeded with moment-to-moment awareness and sensitivity.

## DAY 1: OFFERING SUPPORT, NURTURANCE, AND HOPE

Mary's arm is in a sling, and she is in a lot of pain. She's had difficulty sleeping. She is tired and overwhelmed, but looks forward to the healing, restorative effects she is sure will come from Yoga practice. I allow myself to tune in to her feelings as closely as I can, and I feel humbled by the responsibility of my role as teacher and guide.

We sit in chairs facing one another, and I begin with a guided meditation/visualization, focusing first on relaxation to dissipate the tension accumulated from holding an injury. Eventually she releases her arm from the sling. I ask her to draw her attention to the injured area and focus on releasing pain with each exhalation. Then I ask her to bring her awareness to the parts of her body located closest to the injured area that are pain-free, and to allow the sensations of ease and comfort in those areas to flow into the injured area. After about twenty minutes, her face is softer and the pain in her shoulder is greatly diminished.

We do some seated Yoga stretches to awaken and enliven her body, and then move on to standing postures. I guide her first in knee-bending exercises, borrowed from bioenergetic therapy, to get energy moving through her legs. We continue with *uttanasana* (standing forward bend), *virabhadrasana II* (warrior pose), and *uttitha trikonasana* (triangle pose), all with the support of a chair. I physically spot her to minimize any balance challenges. Throughout the postures, she lets her injured arm hang freely or rest at her side. These poses, practiced with *ujjayi* breathing, allow her to feel her whole body, and remind her that she still has considerable strength and power. She is greatly encouraged to realize that she can still do many aspects of the practice she has grown to love.

We finish by sitting again and focusing on *mudras*. With eyes closed and soft, and with steady breathing, we practice an energy *mudra*, using the fire energy associated with the thumb to send warmth and healing to the shoulder and elsewhere throughout the body. We practice a *mudra* for internal nourishment, a *mudra* to move *prana*, and a *mudra* for joint health, in which she has special interest. After the session, Mary feels revitalized and pain-free, which is a great relief to her.

## DAY 3: CONSISTENCY AND FOCUS

On this third day of practice, Mary is in acute pain and highly focused on her injury. Again, I sense the need to send healing energy to her shoulder, and also to encourage her to feel her whole body, especially the parts that feel strong and well.

Along with the same *asana* and *mudra* of the past two days, today I offer a *chakra* meditation in which Mary begins with *muladhara* and moves upward, focusing on the qualities of each energy center, and the different qualities and strengths she

possesses and can access for healing. As has happened over the past two days, she emerges from her meditation with diminished arm pain, and she feels lighter and more energized.

#### DAY 5: RECOVERING A SENSE OF SELF

Mary speaks of the bereavement group that she and her husband have been going to for several months after the loss of their daughter to cancer. Remembering that we are working with this additional layer of trauma reminds me how we can suffer fragmentation on many levels. She speaks of her own experience and the shared experience of the other parents there. She begins to notice that others appear quite fragile—unable to leave their homes, interact socially, or function at work as they had before—but that she herself is not fragile in the same way. She also describes waking up in the middle of the night with pain, and being pleased to figure out how to support her arm so she is more comfortable.

Today's meditation focuses on locating a center of energy in her core that feels strong and grounded, and that eventually radiates out through her body and through the permeable boundaries of the self. It is meant to strengthen her sense of self, while reassuring her that she can move out into the world. The *asana* practice includes some new standing poses that require greater concentration and maneuvering, such as dropping to a lunge on the floor, and a modified *pavritta trikonasana* (rotated triangle pose) with chair support. Each new *asana* or modification increases her sense of mastery. I include a *mudra* to increase endurance and self-confidence, and the *mudra* for joint health, now a staple that she insists be included in each practice. After each session, her arm feels virtually pain-free long enough to provide some much-needed relief and give her healing process a boost. I am struck by the way healing works simultaneously in mind and body, with interventions on one level affecting another.

#### DAY 6: DEALING WITH FRUSTRATION

Today Mary expresses frustration with the fact that she has been practically homebound for several weeks. She is unable to go out alone on the busy New York City streets without someone to act as a shield against someone jostling her or bumping into her arm. The pain in her shoulder persists, challenging her tenacity and optimism. Her husband's overprotection, though well-meant, at times clashes with her sense of self-sufficiency.

I empathize with her frustration and want to help counter this sense of helplessness. As we settle in, I ask Mary to rub her hands together and then gently place her free hand on her injured shoulder, allowing the warmth and healing energy to sink in. We utilize the energy *mudra* early in the session, first sending heat and warmth to one side of the body at a time, and then focusing on the two sides merging, moving energy through the body as a whole. My conscious intention is the reintegration of the wounded parts of both her physical and psychic selves.

We continue with a focus on leg work, with fewer modifications so the practice feels more like one she might do under normal circumstances. She comments that she feels more like her old self. We conclude by practicing *mudras* for grounding and for joint health. While practicing the *mudras*, I have Mary focus on

the continuum of energy moving in and moving out, so that her frustration can be experienced and then released.

#### DAY 7: RECOVERING A SENSE OF HOPE

After her first doctor's appointment since the surgery, Mary is excited to report that her range of motion has improved dramatically. It is still too soon to tell how well the bones will heal, but she feels she is on the right track. She was given new exercises to do, focusing on movement of the rotator cuff. She slept well last night and managed today to put on a pullover shirt by herself.

With her renewed sense of optimism, I sense that today Mary needs activity to support this sense of forward movement. We practice *kapalabhati* and *anuloma viloma pranayama* to increase energy. As an adjunct to the physical therapy exercises, I show her how to use the natural movement created by the breath to loosen up the rotator cuff muscles. The chest lifts and opens on the inhalation, allowing gentle external rotation of the arms, and the upper back rounds and slightly collapses the chest on the exhalation, allowing the arms to rotate inwardly. We move on to our regular *asana* work, continuing to build grounding strength and power in the legs. I guide her in energy and joint *mudras*, and notice that her fingers curl easily into the shapes now, almost without thought.

#### DAY 8: OFFERING EMPOWERMENT

Mary recounts a recent social encounter with an older man—a priest, in fact—who asked about her injury. As she explained it to him, he nodded his head knowingly and said, "Well, you'll never be the same. You'll never be able to do what you used to do." As she describes the exchange, both her blood and mine begin to boil.

Though such comments are often meant to be "realistic," we cannot know what someone is going to go through based on our own past experience. With Yoga practice, we learn how to work with our limitations in order to transcend them. I point out to Mary that, in fact, she never will be the same, simply because she will no longer be someone who has never had this experience before—the same as it is with her daughter's death. However, now she can choose how she responds, which will be the real determinant of her unique experience and outcomes. I offer a guided meditation to call up the assertiveness and strength of the *manipura chakra*, visualizing swirling yellow flames burning up any obstacles to freedom. The *asana* on this day challenges her to use her strength and balance to do things she did not think she would be able to do. She practices modified sun salutations and simple *vinyasas* to create a continuum of energy, and *vrkshasana* (tree pose) and *virabhadrasana III* (balancing warrior pose) with no support. She chooses the *mudras* that give her the greatest sense of healing. Later, she says firmly that she is determined not to let this injury diminish the quality of her life or her energy.

#### DAY 10: INTEGRATING EMPOWERMENT

Mary excitedly describes being able to cook for friends over the weekend for the first time since her injury. As her late daughter's birthday approaches, the first since her passing, Mary and her husband discuss what they will do that day to support themselves

in case the pain is especially hard to endure. They accept an offer of company from good friends, and she talks about understanding how important it is for her to practice self-care in this way.

We practice *kapalabhati pranayama* to increase energy and activate a sense of power in the *manipura chakra*. During *asana* practice, I lead her through modifications of sun salutations and poses such as *ardha chandrasana* (balancing half moon pose). However, much to my surprise, I find her continually making more appropriate modifications of her own. She seems confident and in charge of her practice. When I point out on several occasions that she is spontaneously (though carefully) using her injured arm for support on the chair, we are both delighted. After practicing the energy *mudra* and joint *mudra*, she is animated and energetic, and exclaims that we make a good team.

#### DAY 12: THE ROAD AHEAD

As soon as I arrive, I can feel Mary's excitement. Her second doctor's appointment since the surgery confirms not only continued improvement in range of motion and strength, but crucial bone regeneration as well. She was given additional exercises and told she could even drive while on her upcoming island vacation, taking short trips on easy roads. The news was bittersweet, coming on the same day as her late daughter's birthday, and we shared a moment in which joy and pain seemed to float side by side. It occurred to me that reintegration after a major wound, be it in the body or in the spirit, requires awareness, deep compassion for oneself, and true faith in our connection to an energy greater than ourselves—the essence of Yoga. O

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*Note:* The *mudras* used in this practice were taken from Gertrud Hirschi's *Mudras: Yoga in Your Hands* (Boston: Weiser Books, 2000).