

Yoga Therapy in Bhutan

The next big step in individual well-being?



Happiness under pressure

In recent years, the world has witnessed an increasing awareness of the importance of physical and mental health. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), mental health disorders are now the leading cause of disability worldwide, affecting millions of people. Similarly, physical ailments, from chronic pain to cardiovascular diseases, continue to rise globally, straining healthcare systems everywhere.

Even Bhutan, known around the world for its unique guiding development philosophy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) and the inspiration behind the UN Sustainable Development Goal "Good Health and Well-being", is not immune to these global health challenges. In recent years, national health records

have reported rising cases of non-communicable diseases such as hypertension and diabetes, alongside growing mental health concerns like anxiety and depression. As the country continues to modernize—bringing with it urban stress, sedentary work environments, and changes in dietary habits—issues like chronic back pain, obesity, and reduced physical mobility are becoming increasingly common. In this context, Bhutan's holistic approach to Happiness is more relevant than ever.

Working on well-being in Bhutan

My name is Yangchen Lhamo, also known as Yoga Yangchen, and I am a yoga teacher based in Thimphu, Bhutan. Over the past five years, I've worked with students of all ages and backgrounds—supporting them not just in building

physical strength, flexibility, and balance, but also in cultivating resilience, mental clarity, and a greater sense of inner peace. Yoga has been a deeply transformative force in my own life, and I've been fortunate to witness it shift the lives of many of my students as well.

But despite these positive experiences, I noticed a recurring pattern: many people remained hesitant to try yoga. Some assumed it was only for the

flexible, or thought it required a level of stamina and strength they didn't feel they had. Others believed yoga was meant only for highly spiritual people.

These perceptions were often reinforced by something deeper—our cultural tendency to keep personal struggles private, especially when it comes to mental or emotional well-being. In Bhutan, where humility is valued and health concerns are often quietly carried, many people feel more comfortable turning to conventional medicine or Bhutanese traditional medicine—or avoiding help altogether. And while changing mindsets is part of my work, it's a long process that takes time and trust.

In the meantime, I kept looking for ways to make my well-being practice more accessible and inclusive. That's when I discovered the healing power of sound. And after completing a Sound Healing Teacher Training in Rishikesh, India, I began offering Sound Healing sessions in Bhutan. Especially sound bath sessions appealed not only my regular yoga students, but also many others, including visitors to our country, who had been hesitant to join a yoga class.

WHAT IS SOUND HEALING?

Sound Healing is a holistic practice that uses sound vibrations to support well-being on physical, mental, and emotional levels. It involves instruments such as singing bowls, chimes, bells, rain sticks, gongs, and voice to promote relaxation, reduce stress, and bring the body and mind into balance.

While it has roots in traditional healing practices, Sound Healing is also supported by scientific principles such as vibrational resonance and the effect of sound frequencies on the nervous system.

It can take different forms. In a sound bath, participants lie or sit in a shared space while being immersed in sound—a calming, often deeply restorative experience. In a one-on-one setting, Sound Healing can be more tailored, with specific instruments and techniques chosen to support an individual's needs or health concerns.

Still, I felt something was missing in my well-being practice. While group yoga settings are meaningful, they don't always allow the space to address someone's individual health needs—whether physical, mental, or emotional. I wanted to go deeper. I wanted to offer people the privacy and support to speak openly, and the tools to work through what they were carrying.

And then, during one of my morning walks, the words of my Yoga Guru on my last visit to India came to my mind: "The next big step in individual well-being is Yoga Therapy".

At the time I did not really look into it, but now I felt the time was right to explore his bold claim further.

The start of my journey as an aspiring Yoga Therapist

What exactly is Yoga Therapy? How does it differ from the yoga I am already teaching? And how can it help people in a more personalized way? Questions, questions, and more questions...

I began researching, reading everything I could about Yoga Therapy—its roots, methods, and its role in supporting people with health challenges. The more I learned, the more I felt that this was the missing piece I had been looking for in my own well-being practice. It could offer a way to serve individuals more deeply, more directly, and with more sensitivity to their unique needs.

Once I knew, and felt, this was the right path, I began looking for educational institutes that could train me to become a certified Yoga Therapist. I only focused on programs accredited by the International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT), and that search eventually led me to The Yoga Therapy Institute, an international school based in the Netherlands. What immediately stood out was that it was the only Yoga Therapy school offering an accessible and fully remote accredited program. This meant I could study at a high level while remaining in Bhutan, continuing to serve my community. I decided to contact them right away.

After a long and inspiring conversation where we both shared our vision for the future of Yoga, the Founder of The Yoga Therapy Institute, Montserrat G. Mukherjee generously offered me a scholarship to enrol in their course. Her encouragement meant a great deal. She told me, “You will become the first-ever accredited Bhutanese Yoga Therapist.” Hearing those words gave me not only a sense of possibility, but also a quiet responsibility—to learn with care and eventually share that knowledge in a way that respects both Bhutanese traditional wisdom and modern medical practices.



WHAT IS YOGA THERAPY?

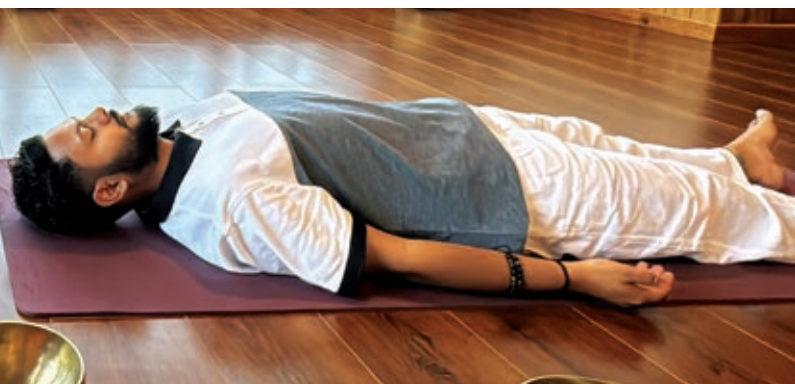
Yoga Therapy is the professional application of yoga principles and practices to promote health and well-being within a therapeutic relationship. It involves personalized assessments, goal setting, lifestyle management, and tailored yoga practices designed to address an individual's specific physical, mental, or emotional needs.

Unlike general yoga classes that focus on overall wellness in a group setting, Yoga Therapy sessions are typically conducted one-on-one or in small groups, allowing for individualized attention. Practices may include movement, breathwork, meditation, and relaxation techniques, all adapted to suit the client's condition and capacity.

Yoga Therapists are not medical professionals and do not diagnose or treat diseases. Instead, they work in conjunction with conventional healthcare providers to support individuals in managing symptoms, reducing stress, and improving quality of life.

What I've learned so far

I am only a few months into my journey to become a certified Yoga Therapist, but already the learning has been profound. The training is rigorous and deeply rooted in both science and empathy. We study anatomy, physiology, and the psychological effects of stress, alongside the classical foundations of yoga. But more than anything, we learn to listen—to our clients, to the body, and to the subtle messages that surface when someone is given time, space, and care.



What strikes me most is how deeply personal Yoga Therapy is. Every case, every person, every path is different. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, and that's exactly why it works. I am learning to develop therapeutic programs that adapt to individual lives, not the other way around. Whether someone is healing from trauma, managing chronic illness, or simply struggling to find balance, Yoga Therapy offers gentle, practical ways to support them in moving forward.

Studying remotely, while staying in Bhutan, has also made me reflect on how well this approach aligns with the realities of life here. The emphasis on compassionate presence, mindfulness, and respect for individual experience is something that feels very Bhutanese to me. It's about being with people, not fixing them. It's about guiding, not leading. That distinction has changed the way I see not only my work, but also my role as a human being.

Yoga Therapy in Bhutan's healthcare system

While Yoga Therapy is not yet practiced in Bhutan, I have often found myself imagining how it could one day support our country's approach to health and well-being. These thoughts are based on what I am learning in my training, combined with my



understanding of Bhutan's healthcare landscape—one that uniquely blends modern and traditional systems.

Bhutan's national healthcare includes both modern allopathic medicine, practiced in hospitals and clinics across the country, and traditional Bhutanese medicine, rooted in the Sowa Rigpa tradition and based on centuries of indigenous knowledge. Both are officially recognized and respected, and they coexist in parallel, often offering patients a choice of approaches.

I believe that Yoga Therapy can offer valuable complementary support to both. Whether someone is receiving treatment in a district hospital or undergoing herbal therapies at the Traditional Medicine Hospital in Thimphu, Yoga Therapy might serve as an additional layer of care—helping to reduce stress, enhance recovery, and support the body's natural healing capacity.

My hope is that, over time, as more Bhutanese professionals explore this path, Yoga Therapy could be integrated thoughtfully and respectfully—supporting the mind-body connection in a way that aligns with Bhutanese values and ways of healing.





Yoga Therapy and Gross National Happiness

Another thing I found of interest is how Yoga Therapy aligns perfectly with the concept of Gross National Happiness (GNH). In Bhutan, we measure progress not by GDP, but by GNH. It's a development philosophy that places well-being at the centre of every decision. GNH reminds us that health is not simply the absence of disease, but the presence of balance—physical, mental, emotional, social, and even spiritual. In this sense, Yoga Therapy and GNH speak the same language.

One of the key concepts within Yoga Therapy is Quality of Life. Rather than focusing only on cure or symptom elimination, Yoga Therapy aims to

improve how people experience their daily lives. This could mean reducing chronic pain so someone can walk to the market again. It could mean calming anxiety enough to sleep through the night. Or it could mean helping someone recovering from illness regain a sense of purpose and connection.

This attention to lived experience—the small, meaningful changes that restore agency and dignity—is deeply aligned with the Bhutanese understanding of well-being. Just as GNH calls for inclusive, compassionate policies that serve the whole person, Yoga Therapy offers practical, personalized care that honours the whole human being.

Both are rooted in the belief that how we live matters more than how long we live. That happiness is not a luxury, but a fundamental right. And that caring for our inner world is just as vital as caring for the outer one.

My hope for the future

As I continue my studies, I'm simply grateful to be learning something that feels both meaningful and needed. My hope is that one day, Yoga Therapy will find its place in Bhutan—as a gentle, supportive approach that complements the care already available to our communities.

If my journey can contribute to that in a small way, I'll be grateful. And if it inspires others to explore this path too, even more so.




For me, this is not just a new chapter—it's a continuous commitment to care, in a way that feels truly Bhutanese.



YOGA YANGCHEN

She is a yoga and meditation teacher, yoga therapist in training, sound healer, animal rights advocate, and content creator. Her passion in life is improving the well-being of all sentient beings, people and animals alike. Based in Thimphu, she works on changing mindsets through her well-being practice.

Connect with Yoga Yangchen

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