Review Article

Meru Chikitsa and the Yoga Sutras the convergence of a contemporary spinal touch practice with classical yogic theory for self-regulation and wellbeing

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ABSTRACT

Background: Meru Chikitsa is a light-touch spinal practice taught by Sri Sri Wellbeing within the Art of Living tradition. Practitioners are certified under the Competency Enhancement Programme of the Healthcare Sector Skill Council of India. Two clinical reports have been published, but no theoretical framework exists. This review describes the practice as it is currently transmitted and proposes a framework by identifying convergence between the practice's own account and the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali.

Methods: A hermeneutic review was conducted using two source sets. Practice sources comprised the recorded introductory talk by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, the article by Stone and Chaudhary, the Sri Sri Wellbeing curriculum and treatment pages, the certification pathway, and nine recorded practitioner testimonials. The classical source was the Yoga Sutras in two scholarly editions. Statements on aims, mechanism, instruments, and outcomes were extracted and mapped to sutra clusters. Statements about the cure of named conditions were excluded.

Results: Five convergences were identified. The stated aim of relaxing into one's deepest nature converges with the seer abiding in its own nature (I.2 to I.4). Assessment of pain, low mood, spinal unsteadiness and disturbed breathing converges with the accompaniments of obstacles (I.30 to I.32). Touch that creates pranic flow converges with the regulation of prana as the route to a clear mind (I.34, II.49 to II.53). The supported, effortless posture of the client converges with asana (II.46 to II.48). Staged transmission converges with the graded application of samyama (III.1 to III.6). The four elements of the practice – the client, the practitioner, the table and the technique – each have a place in the framework.

Conclusion: Meru Chikitsa can be understood as a distinct yogic practice with a coherent classical foundation rather than as a form of manual therapy. The framework provides a basis for practice standards and future research.

Key words **:** Yoga, Complementary Therapies, Meditation, Integrative Medicine

Meru Chikitsa is a light-touch practice applied along the spine. It is taught by Sri Sri Wellbeing, the wellness division of the Art of Living Foundation, through a structured practitioner programme with a published curriculum, in India [1] and Canada [2]. Practitioners receive a 150-hour competency certificate issued jointly by the Sri Sri Wellbeing Training Institute and the Healthcare Sector Skill Council of India, an awarding body recognised by the National Council for Vocational Education and Training [3,4]. The certificate does not fall within the National Skills Qualification Framework [4]. The practice therefore has a defined competence set, a national certificate and a growing number of practitioners. Every therapy carries an implicit account of the person it treats.

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Spinal manipulation, for example, treats the body as a structure whose disorders are corrected by applied force [5]. A practice that arrives without a written account of its own is interpreted through whichever account is nearest. This is the position of Meru Chikitsa. The published clinical record consists of two reports from one group, a case series of nine patients with chronic low back pain and a case report of traumatic optic neuropathy [6, 7].

Both measured outcomes and reported improvement. Neither set out a theoretical account of the practice in the tradition's own terms. A comparable situation faced yoga therapy a decade ago. The field was professionalising and accrediting programmes while its explanatory framework lagged. Sullivan and colleagues responded with two papers.

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The first built an explanatory framework for yoga therapy from its philosophical sources [8]. The Yoga Sutras were selected as the classical text for three reasons. They are the recognised philosophical charter of yoga, and the organisation that teaches Meru Chikitsa treats the practice as a form of yoga rather than as a separate therapy [10]. The founder of that organisation has published a commentary on the sutras, so the lineage's own reading is available [11]. The sutras are also almost silent about anatomy, which requires the argument to proceed at the level of principle rather than through claims about the body.

The present review was done to describe Meru Chikitsa as it is currently transmitted, from its founder, its senior teacher, its curriculum, and its practitioners, and to propose a theoretical framework for the practice by identifying where its own account converges with the Yoga Sutras and where it does not, following the method of Sullivan and colleagues.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1 Design

This is a hermeneutic review. Its material is text and recorded speech, and its method is extracting statements and mapping them to a classical framework. The practice's own account is treated as one framework and the Yoga Sutras as the second. The two are stated separately and then compared (Figure 1).

2.2 Sources

Practice sources were confined to material in the public domain produced by the practice's own lineage (Figure 2). They were the recorded introductory talk by Sri Sri Ravi Shankar [10], the article by Stone and Chaudhary published by Sri Sri Tattva [12], the Sri Sri Wellbeing training and treatment pages [1,13], the description of the certification pathway [3,14], and nine recorded practitioner testimonials published by the Sri Sri Meru Chikitsa channel [15-23]. The two clinical reports were used only for their descriptions of procedure, setting, and proposed mechanism, not for their outcomes [6,7].

The classical source was the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali in the editions of Bryant [24] and Araṇya [25]. Sutra numbering follows Bryant. Where Araṇya differs in the third chapter, the alternative number is given. Sanskrit terms are given in International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) and set in italics. Titles of cited works, organisational names and web addresses retain the spelling used in the source. The practice is also written Meru Chikitsa without diacritics for indexing, and the two forms are equivalent.

2.3 Procedure

Statements about aims, mechanism, instruments, session form, and stages of progress were extracted from the practice sources. Testimonials were used only for what they state about the aim of the practice, the experience of receiving or giving it, and the structure of training. All statements in testimonials about the cure or improvement of named diseases were excluded. No unpublished material was used.

Candidate sutra clusters were identified for each extracted statement. A candidate was accepted only if the practice statement would be unmotivated if the sutra's principle were false. Accepted mappings were classified as direct, structural, mechanistic, formal, or outcome-only, and rated for strength as strong, moderate, or weak (Tables 1 and 2). Sutras considered and excluded are reported with reasons. The method can show that the practice is consistent with and supported by the sutras. It cannot show that the practice is described by them, and it cannot show that the practice is effective.

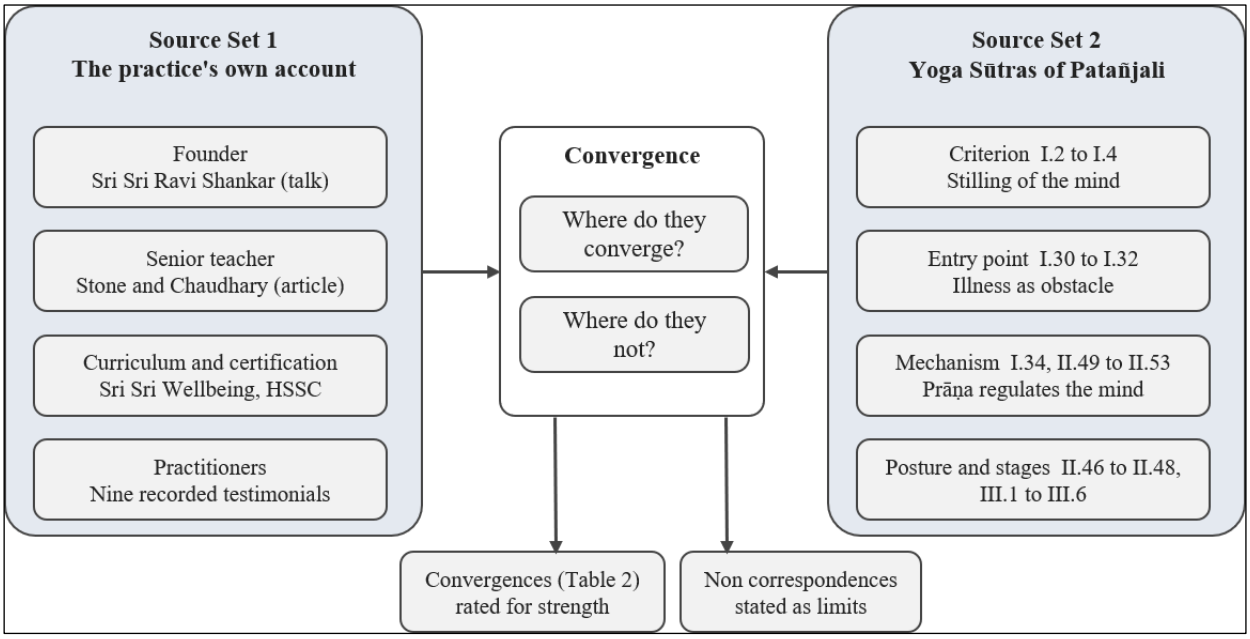


Figure 1. The method of the review. The practice's own account and the Yoga Sutras are presented separately, then compared.

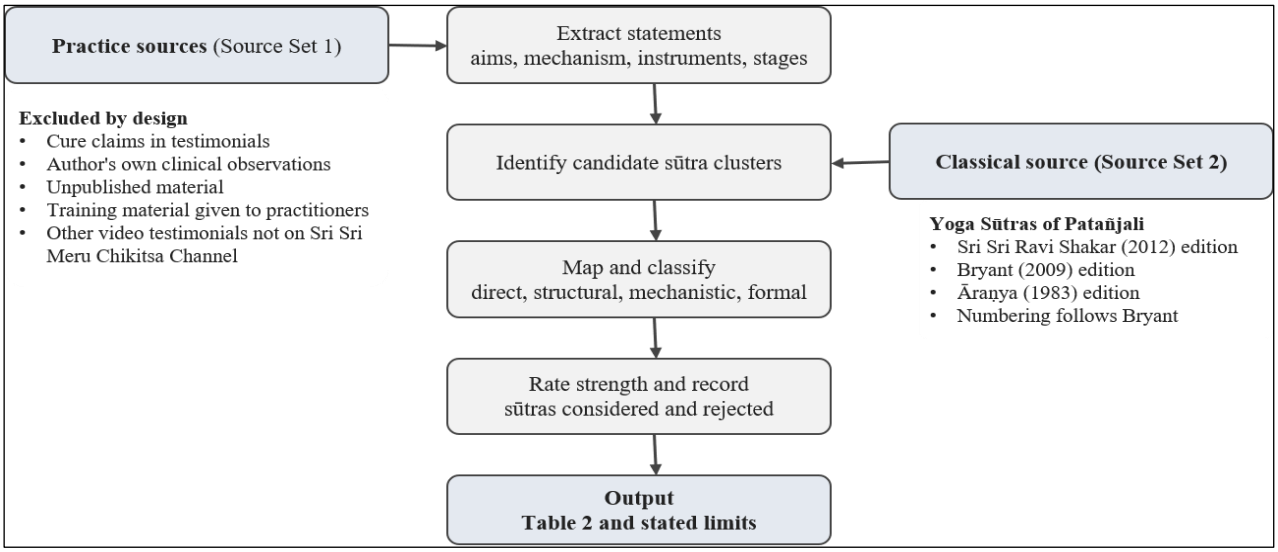


Figure 2. Sources, procedure, and exclusions of the hermeneutic review.

Table 1. Classes of convergence used in the analysis

Class	Definition	Test	Example in this review
Direct	The practice statement and the sutra make the same claim in different words	Could the statement be substituted for a translation of the sutra without loss of sense?	Relaxing into one's deepest nature and svarupe avasthanam (I.3)
Structural	The practice statement has the same form as the sutra: the same parts in the same relation	Do the components of the statement correspond one to one with the components of the sutra?	Assessment of pain, low mood, unsteadiness and breath, and the four accompaniments (I.31)
Mechanistic	The practice statement asserts the same cause and effect as the sutra	Is the direction of causation the same, from the same kind of cause to the same kind of effect?	Touch creates praṇic flow and enlivens awareness; prana regulation clears the mind (II.52 to II.53)
Formal	The practice statement and the sutra share only the shape of a process, not its content	Is the progression graded in both, without the stages themselves corresponding?	Training in modules with assessed competence, and saṃyama applied in stages (III.6)
Outcome only	The practice reports a result that the sutra also names, with no shared aim, form, or cause	Does the correspondence hold only at the level of what is observed afterwards?	Improved posture and alignment, and kayasampat (III.46)

A candidate sutra was excluded when the practice statement would remain motivated if the sutra's principle were false.

Table 2. Strength ratings used in the analysis

Rating	Criterion
Strong	The practice statement is motivated by the sutra's principle alone. No premise outside the sutras is needed.
Moderate	The statement depends on the sutra's principle and on at least one premise the sutras do not supply, such as the spinal location of praṇa.
Weak	The link holds only by outcome, or the statement would survive if the sutra's principle were false.

3. RESULTS

3.1 The practice as transmitted

Meru is the cosmic axis of Indian cosmology and, by extension, the spine, the meru daṇḍa. Chikitsā means setting right. The founder's message, repeated at the start of each testimonial video, is precise on this point. He states that the practice is not a treatment of the spine but a means by which, through the medium of the spine, a person learns to set themselves right [10,15]. The spine is the instrument, and the self is what is set right. This distinguishes the practice, at the level of its name, from spinal manipulation, whose object is the spine.

In the same talk, the founder describes what the practice acts on. It attends to the body's alignment, its meridians and its electrical circuits, and to any mismatch among them. It works at a subtle level on the electrical circuits and bodily fluids, and through them on spinal fluid, the nervous system, and bone structure and position. He compares it directly to yoga, stating that what yoga does for the body and mind, Meru Chikitsa does subtly, and he states that healthy people as well as the unwell benefit from it [10]. Two features follow. The order of causation runs from the subtle to the structural and then to the functional, and the practice is offered to the well as well as the unwell. Stone and Chaudhary give the fullest teacher's statement [12]. The nervous system is designed to heal itself, and the practice enhances the capacity of body and mind to self-organise, self-regulate and self-heal. The touch is light and feather-like. When it is applied, awareness is enlivened, praṇic flow is created, and the condition of disease resolves. They describe the practice as the art of penetrating one's deepest nature, increasing self-awareness, accessing infinite energy, and creating a state of well-being. It is not presented as a quick fix but as a means of prompting the body towards self-healing. They also place it within Ayurveda as a balancing of vata, pitta and kapha. The Sri Sri Wellbeing pages repeat the core statement almost verbatim: the practice allows a person to relax into their deepest nature, which increases awareness, grants access to infinite energy and creates a state of wellbeing [1,13].

The training curriculum specifies what a practitioner must learn. Principal competences are identifying spinal patterns, correlations and energy centres, releasing spinal torque, and perceiving the flow of breath as wave patterns to create stability and integration in the system [1]. Entry requires completion of the Art of Living Happiness Programme, an age of 21 or above or a graduate qualification [14], and completion of the Sahaj Samadhi meditation programme and two Art of Silence programmes [2]. The programme consists of four modules of five days each, with supervised practice and case study work between modules, followed by assessment and a joint 150-hour certificate under the Healthcare Sector Skill Council's Competency Enhancement Programme [3,4,14]. Practitioners report giving 150 to 200 sessions during training [20,22]. Earlier accounts describe the programme as three seminars or eight modules, which indicates that its structure has changed since inception [20,22].

The testimonials add the practitioner's perspective. Their most consistent theme is not cure but change in the practitioner. One practitioner states that the practitioner heals and grows first [23]. Another states that the goal is how the practice changes the practitioner as a person rather than how the practitioner changes others [19]. A third reports that giving a session restores her own energy and relieves her own pain [20]. Several describe deepened meditation [18,22]. One describes the mechanism in terms that are examined below: ordinary attention moves outward, the practice turns it inward so that the person reposes in their own nature, and healing then follows [16].

3.2 The four elements of the practice

The practice has four elements: a client, a practitioner, a purpose-built table [6,7] and the technique that passes between them. Figure 3 sets out each element with its function as described in the sources. The curriculum order is significant. Perception precedes application. The practitioner first learns to identify patterns and to perceive breathing as wave patterns, and only then learns the touches. The client's breath guides the practitioner's hands. The table makes the client's position effortless. The technique is defined by perception, awareness and light touch, and by what it excludes: pressure, thrust and manipulation.

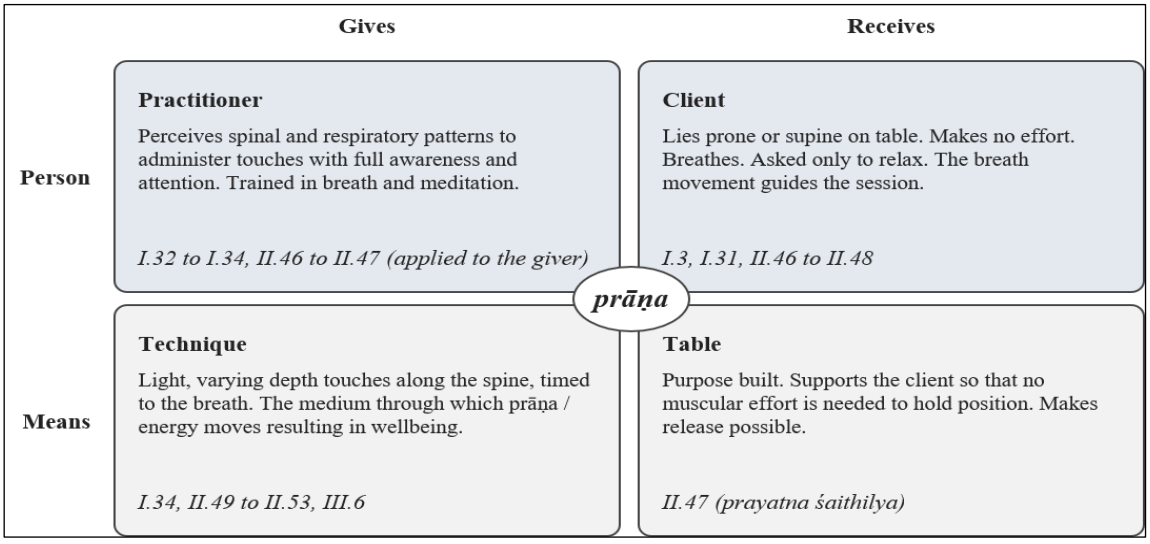


Figure 3. The four elements of Meru Chikitsa as described in the primary sources. Descriptions are taken from organisational and practitioner sources and have not been independently standardised.

3.3 The five sutra clusters

Five sutra clusters were identified. They are stated in their own terms before mapping, as Sullivan and colleagues set out polyvagal theory before comparing it with the guṇas [9]. The first cluster defines the goal. Yoga is the stilling of the fluctuations of the mind, yogas citta vṛtti nirodhaḥ (I.2). The seer then abides in its own nature, tada draṣṭuḥ svarupe avasthanam (I.3). Otherwise, the seer takes the form of the fluctuations, vṛtti sarupyam itaratra (I.4). A practice claiming a foundation here is judged by its contribution to this goal, not by its other benefits. The second cluster gives the entry point. Patanjali lists nine obstacles to the stilling of the mind, of which the first is illness, vyadhi (I.30). He names their accompaniments: pain, dejection, unsteadiness of the limbs and disturbed breathing, duḥkha daurmanasya aṅgamejayatva svasa prasvasaḥ (I.31). The remedy is the practice of a single principle, eka tattva abhyasaḥ (I.32). The third cluster names the mechanism. Among the means of clarifying the mind is the expulsion and retention of praṇa (I.34). The fourth limb, praṇayama, is the regulation of the movement of breath (II.49). It has outer, inner and suspended forms, regulated by place, time and number, and becomes long and subtle (II.50). A fourth form lies beyond these (II.51). The covering of light is then destroyed, tataḥ kṣiyate prakasa avaraṇam (II.52), and the mind becomes fit for concentration, dharanasu ca yogyata manasaḥ (II.53). The principle is that prana is the bridge from body to mind. The fourth cluster defines posture. Asana is that which is steady and easeful, sthira sukham asanam (II.46).

It is accomplished by relaxation of effort and absorption in the infinite, prayatna saithilya ananta samapattibhyam (II.47). The pairs of opposites then cease to assail, tato dvandva anabhighatah (II.48). Asana is a state, not a pose. The fifth cluster gives the progression. Concentration, meditation and absorption, dharaṇa, dhyana and samadhi (III.1 to III.3), applied together to one object constitute samyama (III.4). From its mastery comes the light of insight (III.5). It is applied in stages, tasya bhumisu viniyogah (III.6). Later sutras name bodily results of samyama: knowledge of the arrangement of the body (III.29, Araṇya III.30), steadiness (III.31, Araṇya III.32), mastery of the upward and balancing currents, udana and samana (III.39 and III.40, Araṇya III.40 and III.41), and perfection of the body, kayasampat (III.46, Araṇya III.47). The progression also has a starting point. Suffering that has not yet come is to be avoided, heyaṃ duhkham anagatam (II.16). Yoga is preventive before it is remedial, so the graded practice begins before illness does.

3.4 Convergences

Table 3 presents the convergences using the classification in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 3. Convergence between Yoga Sutras clusters and the account of Meru Chikitsa in primary sources

Cluster & sutras	Patanjali's commitment	Statement in the practice sources	Class & strength
1 Goal I.2 to I.4	The goal is stilling of the mind. The seer then abides in its own nature.	Through the medium of the spine, a person sets themselves right [10]. The person relaxes into their deepest nature [1,13] and reposes in their own nature, after which healing follows [16]. The aim is not the absence of symptoms but a sense of oneness [19].	Direct. Strong.
2 Entry point I.30 to I.32	Illness is an obstacle. Its signature is pain, dejection, unsteadiness, disturbed breath. The remedy is single-principle practice.	The practice attends to mismatch [10]. The curriculum assesses spinal patterns, torque, and breathing waves [1]. The case series measured pain, depression and health [6]. Recipients are less easily disturbed [22]. One client, one axis, one signal, one short session.	Structural. Strong.
3 Mechanism I.34, II.49 to II.53	Regulation* of praṇa clarifies the mind. The covering of light is removed. The mind becomes fit for concentration.	Subtle level first, structure downstream [10]. Touch enlivens awareness and creates praṇic flow [12]. Energy movement in the spine felt before symptom change [22]. Meditation deepens [18,22]. Touch to areas where energy may be blocked; normalised energy flow and breathing promote wellness [7].	Mechanistic. Moderate. Spinal location of prana is inferred.
4 Posture II.46 to II.48	Asana is steady and easeful, achieved by release of effort. Pairs of opposites cease.	Client supported on the table without effort [6]. A few light touches [17]. Perception rather than pressure [21]. More grounded and present [19].	Structural. Moderate to strong.
5 Progression II.16, III.1 to III.6	Future suffering is to be avoided. Saṃyama gives insight and is applied in stages.	Healthy people also benefit [10]. Four modules of five days each with supervised sessions between [14]. Certification by assessed competence [3,4].	Direct (II.16). Strong. Formal (III.1 to III.6). Moderate.
III.29, III.31, III.39, III.40, III.46	Attention yields knowledge of the body's arrangement, steadiness, regulated currents, perfection of the body.	Identifying spinal patterns, correlations and energy centres; creating stability [1]. Improved posture and alignment [10,12].	Outcome only. Weak to moderate.

*Sutra numbering follows Bryant [24]. Strength is the author's rating of how far the statement in the practice source depends on the sutra's principle rather than resembling it. *Spinal location of praṇa is inferred.*

3.4. a. Goal

The first convergence establishes what kind of practice Meru Chikitsa is. The founder's gloss on the name places the spine in the instrumental case, and every other source states an aim that paraphrases I.3. Stone's penetrating one's deepest nature and the curriculum's relaxing into one's deepest nature describe the movement that Patanjali calls svarupe avasthanam. One practitioner describes the same movement: attention that ordinarily moves outward is turned inward, the person reposes in their own nature, and healing follows [16]. This ordering matches the priority set by the sutras. Abiding in one's own nature is the aim (I.2 to I.3), and bodily ease is among the fruits of practice on the way to it (II.48, II.53, III.46). Pain relief, posture and energy are listed by every source as benefits, but no source states them as the aim.

3.4. b. Entry point

The four accompaniments in I.31 are the practice's assessment targets. Pain and dejection were the measures chosen by the first clinical report [6]. Unsteadiness is what the curriculum trains the practitioner to see in spinal patterns and torque. Disturbed breath is what the breathing wave reveals. The founder's word for the condition addressed is mismatch, a lack of coordination among the body's alignment, circuits, and fluids [10]. Patanjali's word for the condition the obstacles produce is viksepa, scattering (I.30). Both name a loss of coherence rather than a named disease. The reversal is reported in the practice's own terms: clients become more focused and less easily disturbed [22]. Patanjali's remedy is a single principle practised steadily (I.32). The session has that form: one client, one axis of the body, one guiding signal in the breath, sustained for twenty to thirty minutes. The practice can be read as an assisted form of eka tattva abhyasa, delivered to a client who cannot yet sustain it alone.

3.4. c. Mechanism

The sutras hold that praṇa is the bridge from body to mind (I.34, II.49) and state what+3 follows when praṇa is regulated: the covering of light thins (II.52) and the mind becomes fit for concentration (II.53). The practice describes itself as an intervention on praṇa. Stone states that the touch enlivens awareness and creates pranic flow [12]. The founder states that the practice works at the subtle level first and that structural change follows [10]. The clinical group that published both reports describes the practice in the same way: touch is applied to areas of the spine where energy may be blocked, and normalised energy flow and breathing promote healing [7]. One testimonial gives the order of events that II.52 and II.53 predict. The practitioner felt a strong movement of energy in her spine while her neck cramp was still present; the praṇic effect came first and the somatic effect later [22]. Practitioners also report that their own meditation deepens [18,22], which is the fitness for concentration that II.53 names. The limit is stated here. Patanjali locates praṇa in the breath, not the spine. The claim that the spine is where praṇa is most accessible belongs to the later haṭha literature [26]. Patanjali establishes the chain from praṇa to mind; the practice adds a hypothesis about where that chain is best entered.

3.4. d. Posture

Patanjali's asana is a state, steady and easeful (II.46), reached by release of effort (II.47). The client of Meru Chikitsa is placed in that state by design. The table removes the need to hold position. The touch is too light to provoke bracing. The only instruction is to lie still and breathe. What II.47 asks the yogi to accomplish alone; the practice induces in a client who may not be able to. This has a consequence for classification. Spinal manipulation requires the practitioner's force and is indifferent to the client's inner state. Meru Chikitsa requires the client's release and is defined by it. The two may touch the same vertebrae and still belong to different categories, and the sutras supply the category. The same reading explains why the practitioner's own practice is an element of the technique rather than an organisational preference. The practitioner must have completed a breathing and meditation programme before training [2,14]. Practitioners state that the practice changes them first [23], that giving a session restores their own energy [20], and that the goal is not to change others [19]. A settled practitioner is what allows a light touch to be received as an invitation to release rather than as a stimulus to guard. Clarification of the mind (I.33, I.34) applies to the giver as well as the receiver.

3.4.5 Progression

The practice is transmitted in stages, with competence assessed at each module, and practitioners describe their progress by modules and by the number of sessions given. The content of the stages is not derived from Patanjali; the principle that skill in attention is graded is (III.6). The progression also has a beginning, and the founder places it before illness. His statement that the practice is for the healthy as well as the sick follows from II.16, which makes yoga preventive before it is remedial. A practice defined by symptom relief could offer the healthy only prevention. One founded in the sutras can offer them what the founder describes, feeling better, because its aim was never the symptom.

3.5 Sutras considered and excluded

This review maps the practice's aims, mechanism and form, not the states it produces. Two clusters were excluded on that ground (Table 4). The sutras on entering another body and on the other powers (III.38, III.42 to III.45) were also excluded as adding nothing to the mechanism.

Table 4. Sutra clusters excluded from the review and the ground for exclusion

Cluster and sutras	Ground for exclusion
Pratyahara II.54 and II.55	Defines a withdrawal of the senses from their objects that the yogi performs. Meru Chikitsa works through a sensory input applied by another person, so it is not pratyahara in mechanism. Practitioners describe clients as more present after sessions, but that is a state of attention, not the act that II.54 defines.
Fruits of the yamas and niyamas II.35 to II.45	Describe what comes to the person who practises them. They could be read as outcomes in the client, such as greater calm or contentment, but that reading concerns states the practice produces rather than what the practice is and does.

DISCUSSION

This review found that the account of Meru Chikitsa given by its founder, its senior teacher, its curriculum and its practitioners converge with the Yoga Sutras at five points. The practice's aim, its assessment targets, its mechanism, the client's posture, and its staged transmission each correspond to a principle in the sutras. The one premise the text does not supply is the spinal location of prana. Two convergences are strong, one moderate to strong and one moderate, and the progression is strong for II.16 and moderate for III.1 to III.6. The four elements of the practice – the client, the practitioner, the table and the technique – each serve this account. On this reading Meru Chikitsa is a yogic practice that works through the spine rather than a manual therapy that uses yogic language.

These findings are consistent with the two clinical reports on the practice, which measured pain, depression, and self-reported health [6] and visual recovery [7], and which describe the mechanism in terms of energy flow and breathing [7]. The present review supplies the textual grounding that those reports did not attempt and shows why the outcome domains they chose are the ones a sutra-based account would predict. The findings are also consistent with the approach of Sullivan and colleagues, who argued that yoga therapy should be explained from its own philosophical sources before being related to outside theories [8,9]. Reviews of marma therapy treat marma points as seats of prana and note that yogic posture acts on the marmas of the spine [27,28], and Frawley and Hankey argue that prana is the concept through which yoga and Ayurveda are unified [29,30]. These works support the mechanism proposed here from the Ayurvedic side. The evidence on light-touch practices in general is mixed. A pilot randomised study reported that therapeutic touch reduced back pain in neurological inpatients [31], whereas a controlled test found that therapeutic touch practitioners could not detect the energy field they claimed to sense at rates better than chance [32]. The present review does not resolve that disagreement. It offers a textual account of what the practice aims to do, which is before, and separate from, the question of whether it does so. The review has many limitations. The Yoga Sutras do not mention the spine, touch, or a therapist acting on another person; every correspondence is between the structure of the practice and a principle, and the spine is the practice's chosen locus, not the text's. The practice sources are organisational and practitioner sources, appropriate for establishing what the practice claims to be but neither independent nor peer-reviewed.

Those sources describe the practice as ancient and Ayurvedic, but no classical text using this name was identified, so the claim of antiquity should be read as a claim about lineage rather than about texts. The testimonials were produced for recruitment and contain statements about the cure of named diseases, which were excluded and are not endorsed here. The analysis was conducted by a single author. Future work should test the framework in three directions. A study designed on this foundation would measure what I.31 names, pain, mood, bodily steadiness and the quality of breathing, together with the client's own report of settledness, rather than structural change alone. The curriculum's language could be aligned explicitly with the sūtras it presupposes, and the meditative prerequisite for practitioners stated as a condition of the technique. A second review could examine the Ayurvedic vocabulary of the practice, the balancing of vata, pitta, and kapha, against the classical Ayurvedic texts, which this review set aside by the discipline of a single source.

CONCLUSION

Read through the Yoga Sutras, Meru Chikitsa is a yogic practice that works through the spine rather than a form of manual therapy, with its stated aim, entry point, mechanism, posture and progression each converging with a sutra cluster. A study designed on this foundation would measure pain, mood, bodily steadiness and breathing rather than structural change alone.

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