

The Polyvagal Fountain for Finding Dynamic Flow: Supporting Compassion and Capacity in Practice

By Cheri Dostal Ryba

Belonging and authentic expression are the top desires I hear most often from my community and students. At its best, yoga therapy returns us to our humanity and to each other. We can reclaim a cyclical, body-based approach that rehumanizes the person at the center of the care while weeding out oppressive and hierarchical systems and beliefs—a necessary, often uncomfortable, reckoning.

Similarly, our understanding and application of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) and polyvagal theory (PVT) within yoga therapy continue to evolve. (See, e.g., the *Frontiers in Neuroscience* article “Yoga Therapy and Polyvagal Theory: The Convergence of Traditional Wisdom and Contemporary Neuroscience for Self-Regulation and Resilience,” by Marlysa Sullivan, et al.) In the pursuit of “wellness” and “regulation,” the instinctual wisdom of our body may be misjudged as maladaptive or less evolved, with unrealistically static outcomes expected.

Many yoga therapists utilize the concept of *pratipaksha bhavana* (literally, “opposite sentiment”). This therapeutic decree to cultivate a positive emotion when a negative one is felt encourages the use of contrasting elements from the *gunas* (attributes of people and things); it is seen as both desirable and a somewhat linear path forward in yoga therapy planning. And just as we shouldn’t attempt to whip a U-turn at top speed, we should not expect clients (or ourselves) to instantly choose radically different responses than what currently feels familiar and safe. Expanding one’s capacity requires wise, incremental, and often rhythmic exploration alternating between what is known and what is new.

In this article we’ll question common presentations of the ever-popular PVT and employ a new dynamic model for compassionate, skillful growth and integration.

Learning the Territory

It’s widely accepted that the ANS governs much of our involuntary biological processes—digestion, heart rate, breathing, and more. Popular media has propagated a dualistic model of the ANS with the “gas pedal” associated with the stress response (sympathetic mode that makes us alert and ready to act) and the “brakes” of the relaxation response (parasympathetic dominance, which supports feeling calm and being able to relax or sleep).

PVT, developed by neuroscientist Stephen Porges, PhD, goes further in offering insights about how the ANS can dictate behavior and emotions and determine our overall health, largely through the differentiated involvement of the two main branches of the vagus nerve.

The ventral and dorsal branches of the vagus, both primarily parasympathetic in nature, serve distinct functions. The ventral branch allows for what’s known as *social engagement*, our ability to feel connected through understanding subtle facial expressions and the quality of communication being one example. Dorsal vagal activity leads to quietude, feelings of contentment, and stillness. Activity in both branches joins together with the sympathetic channel of the ANS to create a triad of adaptive neural pathways, as well as additional “blended states” between them. Whether we feel safe and which

ANS state we are in at the moment are largely determined by a subconscious scanning mechanism Porges called *neuroception*.

PVT reveals the deep well of wisdom to be found and respected in all ANS states. In yoga therapy, we too assume a student's innate wholeness and aim to make these unconscious mechanisms more available through awareness, practical interventions, and working together (known in PVT as co-regulation).

Because of our possible cultural biases and the quick growth of its popularity, it's good to question the representations used to illustrate PVT in therapeutic settings. Let's take a look at them.

From Tolerance to Freedom

One widely circulated image regarding PVT depicts the primary states of experience as a three-rung ladder. This may lead some to believe that the optimal or only desirable state to strive to maintain is the top rung, safe and social in the ventral vagal complex. Filtered through the lenses of productivity or toxic positivity, this hierarchical metaphor may perpetuate self-judgment and suffering when we find ourselves in a stressed, insecure, or unmotivated state.

Similarly, the vertical spotlight metaphor used to color-code the three primary states implies a green-light ideal state of connection and belonging while linking caution and potential fear and avoidance to

the mobilizing and immobilizing states. The sympathetic and dorsal vagal systems are sometimes depicted solely as creating defensive states, when they in fact can and do function with purpose voluntarily and in conditions of safety.

Although this hierarchy shows evolutionary history that points to how human capacity differs from that of other mammals, it's helpful to remember that *all autonomic states serve us*—both in times of relative ease and times of crisis or threat. True resilience means agility and responding appropriately in accordance with the environment and context.

Lastly, I've shifted away from the term *window of tolerance* to using *window of freedom*, a relatively new term coined by psychologist Nicola Jane Hobbs, MSc (see www.nicolajanehobbs.com/theories.html). Although window of tolerance is the phrase employed in the research literature, this window can feel more like a corral, perhaps with morality implying that we must stay inside the bounds to maintain sufficient "balance." This language, too, can perpetuate hierarchy and generate avoidance toward hyper- and hypoarousal states, which are normal and common lived experiences that can show us what needs attention and support potential maturation.

A dynamic window of freedom means the frame of our capacity widens and narrows depending on a multitude of factors. We expand what's possible while refining our inner authority. We play with this



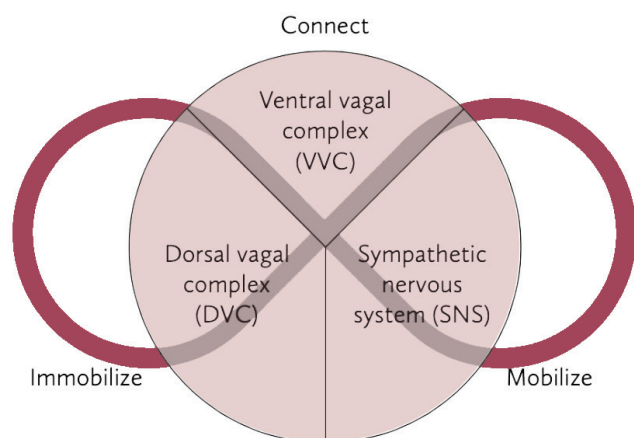
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The figure eight shows agility within and between states, all resourced by VVC

central space, exploring skillfully and choosing responses more freely. It's normal to fluctuate in state and capacity.

Try it yourself: Take one or both hands and carve a wave pattern in the air. You choose how big or small, fast or slow, consistent or varied. Fun, right? This is dynamic regulation!

Patterns serve a purpose. People are more likely to expand into and embrace opportunity when honored for having done their best. We know our past responses were wise, or at the very least functional, by the sheer fact that we're here now. The nervous system governs survival. What's familiar feels safe and conserves energy. When we come to understand the purpose(s) of our well-worn grooves, we gain insight that fuels choice.

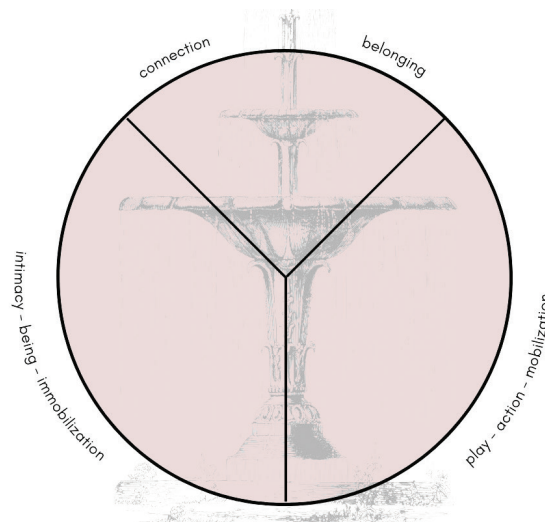
Of course, our nervous system is built to evolve, evidenced by neuroplasticity and the human gift of inquiry. Understanding the nervous system and one's physiological capacity dynamically is key.

Why a Fountain?

All these reflections led me to create the circular autonomic model first published in *Pelvic Yoga Therapy for the Whole Woman: A Professional Guide*. I've since added the fountain metaphor and movement gestures that illustrate dynamic regulation in action.

In our atmosphere, water lives in cycles, changing from solid to liquid to gas, and back, but it is always water. In yoga, we aim to embody our authentic nature. We grow comfortable sharing and being witnessed in the unchanging essence of who we've always been while simultaneously increasing command over the fluctuating states of day-to-day living. This is the dance of *purusha* (unchanging pure consciousness) and *prakriti* (the everchanging states of the matter and energy of embodiment), what's innate and what else is possible, as we grow capacity in our practice.

Regulation comes to life with the movement of water through the fountain's basin, filtration system, and the pump that drives the



Water flows freely outward in 360 degrees, returns to the basin, and travels up the center for renewal

circulation. The outward expression of the fountain's jets is sourced internally, with regulation and awareness always in play.

First, we locate ourselves according to state. As an exercise in autonomic mapping, I use the circular graphic to educate clients about the three primary autonomic states according to PVT and invite them to write or share about useful or positive examples of their experiences with each state. Highlighting what worked can build the person's self-efficacy and trust in their body while building loving containment around acute experiences that lie outside the scope of practice for yoga therapy. When therapeutic rapport and the clients' self-trust are sound, we may venture into exploring examples of effective defense responses, further normalizing the sensations and emotions associated with those responses and clarifying the client's personal autonomic mapping skills. Yoga therapy focuses on the present, and centering effectively paves the path for continued self-inquiry.

When we have ample inner resources on which to rely, we have capacity to investigate or amplify what's present within us. For instance, if a work conflict left us feeling angry and frustrated, we may wish to go for a vigorous walk, generate some heat with purpose, or vocalize the energy. Another person may notice when faced with overwhelm that they shut down and grow numb. We may afford such a person a space to curl up in a fetal position so they can go inward as a way to honor the existing feeling and as a way to re-fund themselves gradually by connecting with the pose and gentle micro-actions within that shape. These examples show how mapping can guide us in being within our current experience before, or instead of, attempting to cultivate the opposite. Alternatively, we can take comfort in simply naming what's present more accurately with mapping before moving into a familiar practice as planned.

The central, upward projection of water from the fountain shows the need for the building of skills and resources appropriate to where we've been

on our autonomic map. For example, a client arriving to a session in an upregulated sympathetic state may need to share verbally more than usual or shake, dance, or flow through a structured sequence to regain a sense of ground and steadiness. Or a student whose baseline tends more toward dorsal vagal states may use a sensory orientation to gently “arrive in the space” by seeing, hearing, or connecting with objects through touch. In many contexts, a simple walk side by side outdoors can work wonders for co-regulation before coming to the mat.

Finally, we acknowledge our ability to explore new ways of responding. From the platform of our current experience or state, we can build skill in contrasting states through rhythmic repetition and diligent practice. With embodied awareness, we can direct the fountain’s level and range of outflow through a figure-eight pathway—quieting or slowing down outdated patterns while amplifying more of what we choose. We learn to alternate rest and action, comfort and the expanding edges of growth, always coming up renewed by pure presence and connection. The shape and contours of a person’s pattern will be determined by their history and ingrained responses, as well as by their capacity on any given day.

Yoga therapy supports being invested and skillful within the process of being who we are, which fluctuates daily and seasonally over the lifespan. When we become proficient in moving within and between all states, we retain access to and control of the fountain: the vital central channel of the ventral vagal nerve pathway. We desire the flow of life that touches all states with equal regard.

The Theory in Practice

Using the Gunas and Autonomic Mapping

Swinging between the extremes of unconscious rajasic and tamasic behaviors brings suffering. Yet attempting to take bold action by overriding one’s familiar responses will likely backfire. Before we can cultivate the opposite, we must bring loving awareness to what is—after all, yoga requires clear perception.

Although many desire the relative comfort or stability perceived when in a sattvic state, regulation remains a moving target. *Sattva* (purity/harmony) is more of a spectrum than a still point. I’ve found that teaching autonomic awareness from this cyclical model brings clients great insight, self-compassion, and a willingness to be and move with what is true in the moment.

The gunas provide a useful tool for building self-awareness and choice, similar to the autonomic mapping described earlier in this article. Clients can learn the “somatic signatures” of each state, and this can lead to greater self-efficacy.

Finding the Body’s Baseline

Each practice begins with a body baseline, which means tuning into or observing our current sensations, breathing rate, posture, and other felt-sense information.

Deceptively simple, it often takes practice to refrain from self-correcting or immediately looking to improve one’s state. Decoding our bodily sensations and behaviors allows us to drop underneath insistent narratives of the mind or to pause when we sense an old protective pattern we’ve used to attempt to reclaim presence.


This baseline awareness also grants the possibility of comparison during or after a practice. As yoga therapists, we should identify incremental, subtle changes that clients may miss or disregard and welcome dialogue. Bearing witness for clients in therapeutic relationship gives them a thread of continuity to tie them into their healing process.

Accessing Resources from Where We Are

The yoga sutras teach us to take small, consistent, right actions toward our goal. The same is true for building autonomic capacity. Consider the qualities of each defensive state and make a list of suggestions for meeting people where they are when they are in them. As clients build their somatic awareness, we can gently nudge them toward safety and connection with themselves. Then, over time, guide them into exploring contrast.

For example, when working with those who tend toward immobilization or collapse, we might consider how to support them in landing in their physical sense of place while also creating warmth and interest. We might add music or aromatherapy, have them explore opening their eyes and using *drishti* (focused gaze for developing concentrated attention) to generate movement, or suggest they use self-touch

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YOGA THERAPY IN PRACTICE

to engage kinesthetically or spatially in a chosen posture. We're awakening their connection to the ground, the environment around them, and the possibility of engaging with exertion and more sensory input. They are growing capacity to mobilize.

When clients spend the bulk of their time existing in a fight-or-flight state, we may need to begin with movement or a structured flow to discharge the sympathetic energy, gradually harnessing the exhales; softening their gaze; and scaling down the size, effort, and pace of movement toward eventual subtlety or stillness in a dose they can receive. They're remembering what it feels like to shed vigilance and immediacy in favor of trusting rest or moving more slowly. They're becoming comfortable with being, perhaps for the first time.

Fawning and social engagement also exist on a spectrum in this fountain model, but this is outside the scope of what I can share in one article. Genuine rapport with students provides the foundation for any meaningful process to unfold. Neither teachers nor students need to appease, perform, pretend, or hide. If we're not the right fit, we can refer them to colleagues we trust.

Creating More Space for Being

Yoga is powerful. Sometimes that power comes from the technical specificity with which we engage. Learning the form, details, and refinement of practices can give students a glimpse at new aspects of Self.

Yet, if we're not aware, we can become enraptured by the sense of control these practices lend us and lose sight of our innate goodness just as we are. This becomes more apparent when working with those who've experienced trauma or who have come to yoga precisely because of this sense of external instruction or perfectionism.

Let's learn to encourage more space within sessions, playing with the spectrum of technical or intellectual rigor and creative license. Within a single posture, for example, we can weave in stages of open awareness, directed attention or breath, and amplified breath or action, yielding to the moment and welcoming whatever impulse comes from within.

Filtered through the lenses of productivity or toxic positivity, hierarchical metaphors may perpetuate self-judgment and suffering when we find ourselves in a stressed, insecure, or unmotivated state.

This trust in one's body and the ability to *not* override the yawns, tears, sounds, shudders, stops in breath, and settling of the weight of our attention can be just as healing as all the doing. Building capacity includes letting the wild and sometimes weird instincts of our body play out, free of judgment.

In Conclusion

No autonomic state is more or less desirable than another. What matters is the response in context, which includes the current environment, the body and mind of the individual, as well as their unique history and the unseen interactions at play between all of these contexts. Our work begins with accurately locating ourselves on the autonomic map. Then, we can find our way through the wilds of story, state, and bodily sensations.

Which path do we take? How do we best respond to what emerges? This fluid discernment and application uses the science of PVT to support the living art of therapeutic relationship and yoga therapy.

One hallmark of this theory is the innate need to feel safe and connected. In the circular graphic, notice the midline that rises into the ventral vagal portion to create a Y shape—the wellspring to which the fountain model returns. This conduit represents the face-heart connection of the ventral vagal pathway and the possibility of knowing and loving oneself fully through this practice.

If you'd like, bring your hands to your heart in lotus mudra. Sense the sphere of warmth inside your hands and heart and let it emanate upward onto your face. Settle into yourself, knowing that all of you is wise and welcome. Can you tap into a memory or felt sense of

being known and appreciated? Let this create the ground of inner security from which you can explore a more expressive and amplified range of states. Have courage, and see how this embodiment anchors you in growing comfortable with the necessary discomfort of compassionate inquiry and self-expression.

Can you offer yourself sincere permission to play with what's here for you?

Dynamic exploration of the polyvagal theory unlocks radical acceptance as we command the flow of the fountain of our awareness and actions, choosing response-ability. May we trust the pulsing surges of the experience of being alive and the continual cycles of renewal.



Cheri Dostal Ryba (hello@cheridostalryba.com), C-IAYT, is a Franklin Method Movement Educator who has devoted 2 decades to sharing embodiment as a personal fitness trainer, dancer, and yoga therapist trainer. She is the author of *Pelvic Yoga Therapy for the Whole Woman: A Professional Guide* and offers polyvagal-related continuing education.



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