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## Gateways for Transformation

Amitice L. Saremi

*Pacifica Graduate Institute, Clinical Depth Psychology, Santa Barbara, Ca, Lisa@limitless-u.com*

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## Gateways for Transformation

AMITICE L. SAREMI

*Pacifica Graduate Institute, Clinical Depth Psychology, Santa Barbara, Ca*

Big life transitions, typically resulting from loss, can cause physical, emotional, and behavioral problems. Using a heuristic methodology, this article answers the question: Given polyvagal theory, how can yoga and depth psychology combine to support clients to make transitions more easily? Polyvagal theory hypothesizes that the vagus nerve, the longest cranial nerve, impacts many parts of the body related to physical and mental health. Breathing helps the vagus nerve function properly along with self-regulation, homeostasis, and the social engagement system. Yoga and depth psychology recognize the continuous cycles of life that exist in nature, the constancy of change, the aspects of the person that are unchanging, and the ability of both client and therapist to witness it all. To demonstrate the utility of combining yoga and depth psychology to heal the pain of transitions, a therapeutic program was developed and depicted graphically.

**KEYWORDS:** Transformation, Metamorphosis, Depth Psychology, Yoga Therapy, Autonomic Nervous system, self-agency, polyvagal theory, self-regulation, mood management, irst, yoga nidra, life transitions, yoga, portals, transitions, grief and loss

## Gateways for Transformation

*I am halfway between two worlds, the known and the unknown. I feel as transparent as the wind, as if my spirit is hovering in the sky, waiting to land. I am driving toward a future I can't see, leaving behind a past that already feels distant. Nothing is clear—and yet the trees are sharp against the sky; I can see the hard outlines of everything.*

Kline (2007)

The monomyth, also known as the hero's journey, was introduced by mythologist Joseph Campbell (2008). Both the hero's journey and the metamorphosis of the caterpillar into a butterfly reveal a cyclical nature that can be understood as a reference to experiencing big life transitions. As captured in many myths, a completed cycle is continuously repeated in different circumstances. As one ending is marked, a new journey begins (Campbell, 2008).

Ratliff (1989) indicated that a transition "occurs when we enter into a time of personal change where we are passing from one condition or state to another" (p. 14). Bridges (2001) distinguished between change and transition, defining *transition* as "the process of letting go the way things used to be and then taking hold of the way they subsequently become" (p. 2). The nature of change, however, often includes the unknown along with fear and resistance (Mongelluzzo, 2013); therefore, change and transition are both similar and different. As a case in point, Bridges (2001) added, "Transition is the way that we all come to terms with change" (p. 2), and Ratliff (1989) explained how transitions are opportunistic times for growth and transformation. Closely resembling the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly, *transformation* (2020) is defined as a striking alteration in appearance, character, or circumstances. As a transition, the caterpillar's metamorphosis is a metaphor for a human's transformative experience.

Having ascertained that change is unavoidable and grief often accompanies loss, I am inspired to explore a means of supporting people through significant life transitions by creating a transformational experience for them. As a student of depth psychology and a yoga therapy practitioner who recently came to understand the significance of polyvagal theory (PVT) to human mental health, I want to know how depth psychology and yoga can work together to support the growth from transition to transformation. As the title indicates, I believe that big life transitions are gateways for transformation. I hope to demonstrate that yoga practices can be used to create a safe container and supply self-regulation. The symbol, metaphor, and active imagination of depth psychology can deepen the experience of transition to transformation.

### **The Integration of Polyvagal Theory (PVT) in Transformation**

As I learn more about depth psychology, I understand more about how people's relationships and reactions through symbol, metaphor, and active imagination to the challenges, changes, and transitions they face.

This article demonstrates how the combination of yoga and depth psychology can move individuals through life transitions in a supportive, transformative way. The theoretical framework for this demonstration relies on PVT, the assumption that the vagus nerve, the longest of the cranial nerves, has an impact on many parts of the body that relate to physical and mental health (Porges, 2017). Although bidirectional communication between body and mind has been noted historically by the Eastern cultures of India and China, Western science has only recently recognized this connection, integrating somatic therapies into the field of mental health (Levine, 2010).

Porges explained that PVT “provides an understanding of how treatment models not only need to respect bodily feeling but also the need to support physiological states that optimize the ‘positive’ attributes of the human experience” (2017, p. 51). PVT has recently become of interest in the therapeutic professions because it focuses on social connection, fight or flight, and shutdown, three conscious or unconscious actions related to trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), relationships, dissociation, and body language (Puder, 2018).

Of interest to psychologists, Porges (2017) explained the relevance of PVT to social engagement systems. PVT consists of a “somatomotor component and a visceromotor component” (p. 26). The pathways of these components relate to the muscles of the head and the face and the regulation of the heart and bronchi (p. 27); social engagement systems develop from these relationships through their initial functions of coordinating “sucking-swallowing-breathing-vocalizing” (p. 27). Most important to the mental health and therapeutic community is the fact that “atypical coordination of this system early in life is an indicator of subsequent difficulties in social behavior and emotional regulation” (p. 27).

PVT considers breathing as relevant to the appropriate function of the polyvagal and subsequent social engagement system (Porges, 2017, p. 32). Consequently, “yoga practices involving breath [are] functionally a yoga of the social engagement system” (p. 32) in that such practices involve the neural pathways to and from the brain, the breath, and the head and facial muscles.

Sullivan and Erb elucidated these PVT concepts to include a discussion on *gunas* (2019). A *guna* is “an element of reality that can affect our psychological, emotional and energetic states” (Burgin, 2019, What is a guna, para. 1) that can bring the individual closer to the “universal truth of oneness” (What is a guna, para. 1). Burgin (2019) described the three gunas as follows: (a) *tamas*, “a state of darkness, inertia, inactivity, and materiality”; (b) *rajas*, “a state of energy, action,

change, and movement”; and (c) *sattva*, a state of harmony, balance, joy, and intelligence” (Qualities of the Three Gunas, paras. 1–3).

Sullivan and Erb (2019) described the neuroscience of PVT and then explained how that relates to the three gunas by balancing *tamas* with *rajas* to achieve *sattva*. Most critical to this transition is the autonomic nervous system (ANS), which incorporates the sympathetic nervous system (SNS), mobilizing the body’s systems to meet any and all demands, and the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS), promoting “growth, healing, and restoration” (p. 104). Combining SNS’s *fight or flight* response and PNS’s *rest and digest* response enables the body’s homeostasis (p. 104). The ANS therefore communicates self-regulation throughout all body systems in response to “inner and outer stimuli” (p. 105). According to Sullivan and Erb, “The idea of regulation, and more accurately self-regulation, indicates the conscious ability to maintain stability of the system by managing or altering responses to threat or adversity” (p. 105).

The ANS allows individuals to respond to “psychophysiological challenges or adversity, . . . [and self-regulation has] concomitant effects for physical, psychological and behavioral health” (Sullivan & Erb, 2019, p. 106). The vagus nerve carries the bidirectional communication between the ANS and body parts via interoception, the understanding of how the body is feeling on the inside (p. 110). According Dana (2018a), the ANS “is made up of two main branches, the sympathetic and the parasympathetic, and responds to signals and sensations via three pathways, each with a characteristic pattern of response. Through each of these pathways, we react ‘in service of survival’” (p. 1). The three pathways from the vagus nerve—ventral (social engagement system), sympathetic (danger, unease, fight or flight), and dorsal (“shutdown, collapse, and dissociation”)—working together, result in a feeling of well-being (pp. 3–8).

In summary, Porges (2017), Sullivan and Erb (2019), and Dana (2018a, 2018b) determined that PVT is important to social engagement, self-regulation, breath, and homeostasis. Sullivan et al. (2018) also supplied the rationale for this investigation.

### **Rationale of Polyvagal Theory and Mental Health**

Sullivan et al. (2018) mentioned that “current proposed frameworks of yoga-based practices focus on the integration of bottom-up neurophysiological and top-down neurocognitive processes” (p. 1). These authors demonstrated “how PVT can be conceptualized as a neurophysiological counterpart to the yogic concept of the *gunas*, or qualities of nature” (p. 1), as described by Burgin (2019). PVT, they contended, is now used to “connect neurophysiological patterns of autonomic regulation and expression of emotional and social behavior . . . [to better understand] human behavior, stress, and illness” (p. 1). PVT provided the theoretical framework for exploring how big life transitions can enable yogic and depth psychological approaches to transformation.

Sullivan et al. (2018) indicated that “PVT posits that through these neural platforms particular physiological states, psychological attributes, and social processes are connected, emerge, and are made accessible to the individual” (p. 3). Similarly, according to Weintraub (2004), through frequent practice of yoga:

[A person can] restore the body and mind to a steady state of well-being [and] must also practice regularly. The very *commitment* [to] the practice can begin to diminish depressive symptoms. . . . [Yoga] is adding the element of what psychologists’ call “self-control” - the ability to be actively involved in the healing process. (pp. 59–60)

PVT therefore supports the use of yoga for overall health and well-being. In addition, Sullivan et al. (2018) made the argument for combining yoga and psychology through PVT for mental health:

The attributes of the gunas of yoga and the neural platforms of the PVT, while not the same, are reflected in one another. As such, working with gunas and neural platforms that underlie physical, psychological and behavioral attributes, provide a methodology for the application of yoga practices for facilitating systemic regulation and resilience. (p. 13)

### **Combining Ancient Yoga Practices and Depth Psychology to Deepen Meaning**

Why combine ancient yoga practices and depth psychology? The rationale for integrating these two apparently different perspectives is that both actually encompass similar traditions. For instance, both recognize the continuous cycles of life that exist in nature, the constancy of change, the aspects of the person that are unchanging, and the ability of both client and therapist to witness it all. Yoga and depth psychology also support the elements of loss, grief, death, and renewal that accompany the life cycle. In an interview, Hollis (2010) commented:

Depth psychology is an effort to facilitate the relationship between the conscious world and the unconscious world so that we are not at odds to produce a dialogue that is deepening your conversation with the meaning of your own journey.  
(1:52–2:08)

Hollis added that people should seek a sense of meaning and purpose in order to address the needs of their soul. Frankl (1946/2006) described the search for meaning:

Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a "secondary rationalization" of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own will to meaning. (Frankl, 1946/2006, p. 99)

Transitional experiences require effort to adjust both the mind through depth psychology and the body through yoga. Desikachar (1995) explained that "another classic definition of *yoga* is *to be one with the divine*" (p. 6). Through repeated yoga practice, the individual is supported to connect to an unseen, yet undeniable source that is evident in most perspectives on spirituality. It is this aspect of yoga that enables people to deepen a sense of trust in something bigger than themselves, fostering flexibility and adaptation (Desikachar, 1995).

Yoga is also about "the idea that something changes" (Desikachar, 1995, p. 79). The change that causes a transition predisposes the individual to seek meaning for the transition, and yoga enables people "to change something about themselves: to be able to think more clearly, to feel better, and to be able to act better today than they did yesterday in all areas of life" (p. 79). At the same time, depth psychology supports bringing the unconscious to the level of consciousness. PVT serves as a guide to the combination of depth psychology and yoga to produce a program to support clients through a transition that results in their transformation.

## Literature Review

“Who are you?” said the Caterpillar. . .

“I—I hardly know, Sir, just at present,” Alice replied rather shyly. “At least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have changed several times since then.”

Lewis Carroll, 1865/1997

The literature review discusses four basic topics pertinent to this exploration: (a) transitions, (b) yoga, (c) depth psychology, and (d) the relationship of PVT to yoga and depth psychology.

**Yoga.** The system of yoga originated in India thousands of years ago (Desikachar, 1995; Desikachar, Bragdon, & Bossart, 2005). Its core elements include self-investigation, self-transformation, and self-realization (Desikachar, 1995). Desikachar noted, “Yoga is one of the six fundamental systems of Indian thought collectives known as the darsana. *Darsana*. . . means ‘sight,’ ‘view,’ ‘point of view,’ or even ‘a certain way of seeing’” (p. 5). Moreover, although yoga can be defined in many ways, its content is universal, concentrating on how individuals can make desirable changes in their lives. Desikachar, Bragdon and Bossart (2005) explained how “these [core elements of yoga act as] tools [to] address all dimensions of the human system: body, breath, mind, personality and emotions” (p. 17).

Desikachar et al. (2005) identified the four basic principles that underlie the teaching of the yogic healing system. First, “the human system is a holistic entity” (p. 17), and its parts are regarded as multidimensional, interrelated, and inseparable from each other. Further, consistent with PVT, “the health or sickness of any single dimension affects the other dimensions, and vice-versa” (p. 17). Second, each individual is unique; the uniqueness is respected in the lack of a one-size-fits-all approach to yoga practice. Next, yoga is aimed at self-empowering individuals, enabling them to “self-resource” in their healing journeys (p. 17). Finally, “the quality and state of a person’s mind is crucial to healing” (p. 17). This integrated view of the yogic healing system supports the healing of the entire being by slowing down breathing and thinking and acknowledging and connecting the individual to wholeness. This system does not pathologize the person, and its intent is to return the person to a whole, balanced state (Desikachar et al., 2005; Miller, 2015).

The best way to explain yoga is to refer to *The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali* (Dass, 1999), an ancient text. The eight components of yoga, delineated in Sūtra 2.29, create a path for leading life in a meaningful and purposeful way (Desikachar, 1995):

1. Yama, our attitudes toward our environment; 2. Niyama, our attitudes toward ourselves;
3. Asanas, the practice of body exercises; 4. Pranayama, the practice of breathing exercises;
5. Pratyahara, the restraint of our senses; 6. Dharana, the ability to direct our minds; 7. Dhyana, the ability to develop interactions with what we seek to understand; and 8. Samādhi, complete integration with the object to be understood. (Dass, 1999, p. 174)

*The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali* (Dass, 1999) also contains pearls of wisdom that plant the seeds for the psychological texts of yoga (Desikachar, 1995; Miller, 2012). For example, in Sūtra 2, *yoga* is defined as “*yogasgcittavrittinirodahah*” (Desikachar, 1995, p. 149), meaning “Yoga is the ability

to direct the mind exclusively toward an object and sustain that direction without any distractions” (p. 149). Dass (1999) translated it as “the cessation of the fluctuations of the mind” (p. 5). Most important to this thesis is pranayama, the practice of breathing exercises, because PVT also covers breathing.

**Pranayama.** Yogic breathing requires practice. According to Miller (1994), “Regular practice of pranayama is like putting money into the bank—it develops a reserve of health, energy, and vitality upon which we can draw long after we’ve finished our practice” (p. 85). The derivation of the word *pranayama* is *prana*, or breath, as a life-giving source of energy and vitality that emanates from within the body (Desikachar, 1995). Support for pranayama from the medical field came from Brown and Gerbarg (2005a): “Although the scientific exploration of pranayama by Western medicine is in its infancy, these breathing techniques have the potential to relieve anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, chronic pain, and many stress-related medical illnesses” (p. 189). In addition, pranayama impacts the polyvagal system through ANS by adjusting imbalances in the ANS; therefore, the practice can influence a range of mental and physical ailments (Brown & Gerbarg, 2005a, 2005b; Sovik, 2000). Finally, maintaining consciousness of breath is critical to success with pranayama (Desikachar, 1995).

**iRest® Yoga Nidra meditation.** In 2003, Miller (2015) was invited by the Walter Reed Army Medical Center to investigate the effects of *yoga nidra*, deep relaxation or yogic sleep, on patients with PTSD. Through this effort, he developed a practice he called “Integrative Restoration: iRest® Yoga Nidra” (p. 2). The term *yoga nidra* comes from two Sanskrit words: “*Yoga*: the view, path, and means by which you experience your interconnection with yourself and all of life [and] *nidra*: changing states of consciousness, such as waking, sleeping, and dreaming, which include sensation, emotion, thoughts, and images” (p. 18).

iRest® is “an educational practice that focuses on health and healing at all levels of your life: physical, psychological, and spiritual” (Miller, 2015, p. 19). Miller encourages the experience of being, “a nonverbal inner knowing” (p. 34), enabling participants to notice and acknowledge *what is* in each moment (p. 44). iRest® Yoga Nidra recognizes that the world is perceived through all five senses, and the body “registers every sight, sound, smell, taste, emotion, thought, or image as sensation” (Miller, 2015, p. 52). When these sensations are digested through iRest®, the body and mind “can return to their natural state of health, wholeness, and well-being” (pp. 63–64), thereby creating a safe container for deep healing, relaxing, experiencing wholeness, and reducing suffering.

**Research on yoga.** Researchers have discovered the efficacy of ancient yoga practices that support current findings of top-down and bottom-up approaches that integrate body and mind (Miller, 2015; Sullivan et al., 2018). As a case in point, Sovik (2000) commented, “Yoga has been practiced for managing stress and employed in the treatment of such stress-related illnesses as heart disease, asthma, cancer, chemical dependencies, anxiety disorder, and depression. It is also recommended for preventative healthcare” (p. 491). Due to positive findings related to wellness based on yoga practices, yoga teachers and therapists entered the mainstream as professionals in 1989 as a result of the establishment of the International Association of Yoga Therapists (IAYT, 2019).

IAYT (2019) “supports research and education in yoga and serves as a professional organization for yoga teachers and yoga therapists worldwide. Our mission is to establish yoga as a recognized and respected therapy” (Our Mission, para. 1). As a case in point, IAYT (2012) defined *yoga therapy* as “the process of empowering individuals to progress toward improved health and wellbeing through the application of the teachings and practices of yoga” (para. 1). In

support of yoga therapy in the mainstream, McCall and Taylor (2017) reported that yoga therapy has been expanding into the conventional U.S. healthcare system. The reason, they believe, is the common thread in yoga therapy that offers new ways to improve health with self-care lifestyle practices:

Consumers of yoga therapy learn new ways of improving their health in these encounters, often leading to behavioral changes in self-care, but also generating new demands on how they consume conventional care and the expectation of their other healthcare providers. (p. 118)

Consistent with McCall and Taylor's report, yogic practices are a holistic way of self-regulation to manage inevitable stress that people experience physically, emotionally, and mentally (Desikachar, 1995). Yoga invites the individual to be present, to become and bear witness to the person's own experience, while opening up the portals for conscious choice rather than facilitating only reactive protective measures.

Studies on the effectiveness of yoga and its relationship with health have been conducted worldwide. For example, Franklin, Butler and Bentley (2018), investigated the physical postures of yoga practices as mitigators against depressive symptoms even as life stressors increased. Franklin et al. considered three components of yoga: (a) physical postures (asana), (b) breathing methods (pranayama), and (c) meditation (dhyana). Questionnaires were completed by 186 adults about the relationship or impact of these three yoga components on an assortment of life stressors and psychological symptoms. The only component that emerged as significant was asana. In another case, Roche (2018) explained yoga as a self-regulation process:

From a psychotherapeutic point of view, the cessation of suffering could be explained as the result of a process of self-regulation based on the development of self-awareness. It proposes that yoga practice promotes an embodiment process, providing the integration of the organism's systemic unit: brain, body, and environment. This integration process could be the central mechanism of affective self-regulation. (p. 16)

Roche's finding has implications for the use of yoga as it relates to PVT, which is largely a function of self-regulation.

### **Depth Psychology**

The creator of analytical or depth psychology Jung (1957/1970) claimed, "The existence of an individual consciousness makes man aware of the difficulties of his inner as well as his outer life" (p. 157, para. 340). Hollis (2010), explained that a depth psychological perspective brings in concepts and practices that work with unconscious content:

Depth psychology is an effort to facilitate the relationship between the conscious world and the unconscious world, so that we are not at odds with ourselves, and to produce a dialogue that is deepening your conversation with the meaning of your own journey. (1:50–2:09)



Hollis added that soul “has to do with that part of our lives which is in search of meaning and is seeking to enlarge itself in the world” (2010, 2:53–3:00).

A depth perspective invites the integration of image, symbol, metaphor, myth, and active imagination as portals for deepening meaning and purpose of experience. Chodorow (1997), for example, explained a Jungian approach to using image: “The image has everything it needs; allow the meaning to emerge from it” (p. 14).

**Image and myth.** The idea of image extends to myth: “A mythological order is a system of image that gives consciousness a sense of meaning in existence, which [does not have] meaning—it simply is” (Campbell, 2004, p. 6). Similarly, fairytales are less culture-specific and clearly mirror the basic patterns of the psyche (Franz, 1996). Myths and fairytales give people access to deeper meaning in life and inspire energy to move forward (Campbell, 2004, 2008; Franz, 1996). Campbell (2004) noted, “The myth must carry the individual through the stages of life, from birth through maturity through senility to death” (p. 9).

Campbell (2004) asserted that “myths work their magic through symbols” (p. 47) that come from a constant set of collective, unified experiences, common to all humans. These experiences create *Elementargedanken*, “the unchanging motifs of the world culture” (p. 49). The butterfly is such a symbol that often represents the soul in many cultures, and the soul is seeking reincarnation (Walker, 1988). The butterfly, the shape-shifting metaphor used in this thesis to represent the transformation that results from transition, offers the hope of renewal or rebirth as it emerges from a metamorphic death, similar to what the person feels during the second phase of a big life transition (Bridges, 2001, 2004; Ratliff, 1989).

**Symbol and metaphor.** The metaphor used in this thesis is the transition and transformation of an egg to a caterpillar to a cocoon or chrysalis to a newly formed butterfly. The egg is circular, representing the cycle of life, among many other things. For instance, Leeming (2005) described the egg as “a symbol of pre-differentiation, differentiation being the essence of the creation of anything. The egg contains within itself male and female, light and dark, all opposites in a state of union” (p. 184).

The symbol of the egg also connects to the concept of potentiality: “It is a pre-creation chaos waiting to become cosmos” (Leeming, 2005, p. 185). Similarly, life transitions begin from change, which initiates the cycle of an ending and a new beginning. According to von Franz (1972), “We can easily recognize in [the egg] the motif of preconscious totality. It is psychic wholeness conceived as the thing that came before the rise of ego consciousness” (p. 229) or any kind of dividing consciousness (Leeming, 2005, pp. 183–184). The caterpillar that emerged from the egg depended not only upon its struggle to build its strength to break free from its chrysalis, but also upon its development of wing power and circulation to expand its wings and fly free (Jabr, 2012). Moreover, metamorphosis is “the profoundest sort of physical change—and the inescapable symbol of resurrection” (Caspari, 2003, p. 45). The challenge of the transition lies in the *chrysalis*, the portal for transformation.

Woodman (1984/2014) explained that the shadow, in Jungian terms, personifying part of the unconscious personality, becomes conscious through the process of transformation. Woodman contended that the psyche seeks wholeness (butterfly), but, with a good deal of energy, the shadow pushes itself forward (from the chrysalis) for recognition. The shadow material surfaces and is integrated as a change in personality and an increase in energy as the transition transforms the shadow.

Chodorow (1997) indicated that “many fundamental concepts of Jung’s analytical psychology come from his experience with active imagination” (p. 3). Active imagination is “a

dialogue you enter into, some ways it is similar to dreaming, except that you are fully awake and conscious during the experience” (Johnson, 1986, p. 138). The images that appear are symbols “representing deep interior parts of ourselves” (p. 138). Through active imagination, according to Johnson:

We actively try to bring up the undiscovered parts of ourselves from the unconscious so that we can integrate them into our conscious functioning. It is the level at which we are trying to become acquainted with the unknown, inner parts of ourselves. (1986, p. 200)

The image-producing function of the psyche is imagination, and it is an opening to the unconscious and the person’s inner world (Chodorow, 1997). The form the active imagination takes can be an “expressive medium,” “bodily movement,” “painting, drawing, sculpting, weaving, [or] writing” (p. 8). Bringing up repressed experiences or emotions, active imagination can “pull the different parts of you together that have been fragmented or in conflict; it awakens you powerfully to the voice inside you; and it brings about peace and cooperation between the warring ego and unconscious” (Johnson, 1986, p. 141). By personifying what needs to be brought forward, active imagination integrates the parts of the psyche that may fall apart as a result of a transition.

### **Polyvagal Theory and Trauma**

PVT relates to yoga, in particular, in relation to the body’s pervasive systems, especially breathing. Medical professionals have recognized the value of the language of the nervous system to help patients make an esoteric practice such as yoga become more tangible to the public (Sullivan, 2019). Like other forms of mind-body therapeutic practices, yoga therapy can help shift body, mind, and behavior from the ANS platforms of PVT (Sullivan & Erb, 2019).

According to van der Kolk (2015) heart rate variability is a reliable measure of ANS functioning, “a measure of basic well-being” (p. 269). Sullivan and Erb (2019) similarly commented about the relationship of yoga to PVT for the “regulation and resilience of the autonomic nervous system for the cultivation of well-being” (p. 104). In addition, body-based therapies, such as yoga, explore physical sensation and can discover “the location and shape of the imprints of past trauma on the body” (van der Kolk, 2015, p. 219). Dacher (2016) contended, “If we follow the path of an automated life, there is little flexibility in dealing with life’s challenges” (p. 4).

Trauma negatively impacts the ANS and therefore comprises a depth psychological component related to PVT. Dana (2018b) indicated that trauma and the nervous system are linked, and van der Kolk (2015) noted that “after trauma the world is experienced with a different nervous system” (p. 53). Some people perceive a big transition as traumatic.

### **Transitions**

Life moves from beginning to end, but transitions move from the end of one thing to the beginning of another. Consequently, transitions sometimes ask people to look at life from a different perspective (Bridges, 2004). Bridges discussed five aspects of the natural ending experience. First is disengagement, being separated from what’s familiar. Second is dismantling, unplugging from old and familiar worlds that defined the person when the transition began. Third is disidentification, “breaking [the] old connection to the world and taking apart the internal

structures required by those connections” (p. 116). Next is disenchantment, the limbo state between two worlds of what is so and the way it was, and last is disorientation, not knowing what is up or down.

Any type of transition may seem huge to any individual; however, certain losses are generally considered big life transitions. Wolfelt (2003) explained that grief is not a disease; however, it does represent a reaction to a big loss such as death, divorce, financial devastation, or the birth of a child with severe disabilities. In turn, that loss results in a major life transition for the loved one(s) left behind. Effects can include feelings of fear and disconnection (Wolfelt, 2003). Somatic impacts of transition challenge the ANS to function properly, making the individual feel threatened and unsafe (Dana, 2018b; Porges, 2017; van der Kolk, 2015).

Bridges (2001) contended that two paradoxes exist within transition: the willingness to change and the need to protect oneself from the change. This is akin to the Jungian concept of holding the tension of the opposites as expressed by Woodman (2011):

Because we reject our own humanity, we reject what Jung calls the shadow side. We push that down into the unconscious, and the minute we do that, we start to project it out onto someone else so someone else has to carry our darkness. We must now begin to own our own darkness. (6:37–7:30)

Myths can function as support during times of transition because they speak the language of the soul through language, image, and symbol, facilitating the meaning making needed to help a person through a transition (Campbell, 2004, 2008). According to Campbell (2004), myth offers “reconciliation with gratitude, with love, with recognition of the sweetness. Through the bitterness and pain, the primary experience at the core of life is a sweet wonderful thing” (p. 4). Bridges (2004) described transitions as comprising a neutral zone:

This was a time “between dreams” in which fundamental chaos of the world’s beginning welled up and obliterated all forms. It was a place without a name—an empty space in the world and the lifetime where a new sense of self could gestate. (p. 133)

Through myths, fairytales, images, symbols, and active imagination, the suffering individual can move through the mystery of the necessary transition and maintain hope and connection with the world. Myths also serve a moral purpose, as they often contain a lesson to be learned, again offering meaning to the transition (Campbell, 2008). Myths and fairytales, in particular, can provide a roadmap through life, a treasure chest of stories that tell of traveling through the many paths of life’s transitions (Campbell, 2004). Depth psychology offers the transformative tools to help people through their big life transitions.

Many authors cited in this literature review agreed that putting some thought and effort into navigating a change, a passage, or a transition is a productive and worthwhile investment of time and energy (Bridges, 2001, 2004; Campbell, 2008; Dacher, 2016; Ratliff, 1989). Further, in the context of PVT, yoga and depth psychology appear to have a place in working with people in their transformation instigated by big life transitions. In summary, Dana (2018b) asserted:

Whether an isolated traumatic incident or recurring traumatic events, trauma and the autonomic nervous system are linked. Without ongoing opportunities for people to be

anchored in systems of safety . . . the ability of their autonomic nervous systems to engage, disengage, and reengage efficiently is impaired.  
(pp. 17–18)

A program of yoga using the tools of depth psychology such as myths, fairytales, images, symbols, and active imagination can combine to have a positive effect on the person moving through a big transition. Like the caterpillar, the individual can transform into a butterfly.

### **Clinical Applications**

When people are sitting in a realm of uncertainty experiencing the lack of safety that comes with immense change, having a model or roadmap to follow helps them define and understand the process of the phases of transition, permitting the normalization of the experience of transformation. The program *Transitions: Portals of Transformation* and its accompanying model aid both the client and the clinician to move forward within the framework of metamorphosis to facilitate the anticipated transformation.

Depth psychology encourages the use of metaphor, symbols, and active imagination to deepen the meaning and purpose of a situation or feeling (Johnson, 1986). Moreover, transitional cycles in life invite tension to surface, invoking unconscious and shadow content. Many people tend to suppress this unconscious material, although it may be rich with wisdom. Active imagination practices in the program offer an outlet for this content to emerge and be integrated. According to Johnson:

Through Active Imagination it becomes more and more clear that the images that appear in imagination are in fact symbols, representing deep interior parts of ourselves. Like these dream images, they symbolize the contents of our unconscious. Because these interior beings have “minds of their own/” they say and do things that are new to us—startling, often enlightening, sometimes offensive to our egos. (p. 139)

Often, fear and resistance shut down the gateways to the unconscious and deeper knowledge, disallowing its full integration into the psyche.

**Transitions: Portals of Transformation** The program, *Transitions: Portals of Transformation*, proposes four phases, or portals, of transition that mirror the four stages of metamorphosis of the egg, to the caterpillar, to the chrysalis or cocoon, to the butterfly. *Transitions* include the following four portals: (a) Change, (b) Adjustment, (c) Surrender, and (d) Emergence. As a group, the portals are designed to bring consciousness to change and transition to further support the process of transformation. In the program the description, symbol, goals, and practices for each portal are clearly delineated and will benefit the clinician who might wish to follow the program. Some of the reasons for the portals are explained in the next section, and it should be noted that the amount of time spent in each portal, or phase, is irrelevant to the progress supported by each one. In addition, the boundaries of the portals may blur as the person moves forward from transition through transformation.

**Selection of portals for the program** First in the program is the Portal of Change. Ratliff (1989) and Bridges (2004) identified the first phase of transitions as endings; therefore, the client must acknowledge an ending in the reality of the transitional situation. Consequently, the Portal

of Change is designed to help the individual to be present and increase awareness; to assess the impacts of the change through all five *koshas*, or “the total expression of the human personality from the grossest to the subtlest dimensions of existence” (Saraswati, 1998, p. 53); and to evaluate future impacts and secondary changes. The general practices in all four portals are as follows: (a) pranayama practice, (b) asana practice, (c) iRest® Yoga Nidra, (d) journaling, and (e) ritual. The yoga practices are important; as a case in point, Franklin et al. (2018) found that “the asanas of yoga may have stress-reduction benefits that decrease psychological distress even in conditions of increased life stressors” (pp. 877–878).

The combination of yoga and depth practices creates a roadmap with sacred pauses throughout the day, making space for ritual to further support the opportunity of creating meaning and purpose in the transitional experience. Informed by PVT, the pauses are designed for inner reflection, allowing the creation of the body as a safe container. Weintraub (2004) noted, “Yoga seems to affect all areas and systems in the brain through biochemical reactions . . . thereby balancing the autonomic nervous system” (p. 14) and providing a sense of safety and stability when external factors may be fluctuating. The metaphor for the Portal of Change is the egg that goes from pre-creation to creation “as a symbol of resurrection” (Ferber, 1999, p. 38).

Another depth psychology practice is creation of ritual. At the close of each portal, creation of ritual is encouraged and supported. At the end of the cycle of the first portal, the Portal of Change, a ritual was suggested to help the individual to normalize the transition or change experience in order to prepare for the second portal, the Portal of Adjustment. As in the other portals, the students are encouraged to take an inventory of themselves to note how the transition or change is impacting them. In each portal, the inventory is based on a series of questions appropriate for the phase of transition.

The Portal of Adjustment, the second phase of the *Transitions* program, moves from dealing directly with the change to finding ways to adapt, adjust, and accept the change. Metaphorically, the individual is now in the caterpillar stage, having emerged from the egg in the first portal. With all its energy, the caterpillar is now consuming huge amounts of food to prepare for the next stage of the metamorphosis, shape-shifting. According to Elizabeth Caspari (2003), an art therapist specializing also in the mythology and natural life of animals: “Because of its remarkable capacity for changing form, the caterpillar symbolically can represent transformation, development, and growth in the human being or, in Jung’s terms, the process of individuation” (p. 54). In addition, “the caterpillar signifies the remarkable, creative potential within the human being, out of which, like the butterfly/moth, a sense of soul is born” (p. 54). In the Portal of Adjustment, the individual, like the caterpillar entering the chrysalis, confronts any discomfort that may surface in response to change.

With curiosity as a theme, the three main goals in the Portal of Adjustment are to increase flexibility, decrease resistance and attachment for surrender, and identify resources to self-regulate. The continued reorientation to find safety in a world of uncertainty may impact ANS by triggering a stress response. This, in turn, activates the SNS neural platform, which may then lead to emotional reactions such as anxiety, anger, depression, insomnia, and PTSD (M. Sullivan, personal communication, January 8, 2020; Sullivan & Erb, 2019). The yoga tools of pranayama, asana, and iRest® Yoga Nidra support self-regulation by using the body as a resource to create a doorway to safety. In this period of adjustment, repressed unconscious content may bubble up to the surface: “The incorporation of unconscious materials must continue until, finally, the conscious mind reflects the wholeness of the total self” (Johnson, 1986, p. 6). By integrating such material through the Portal of Adjustment activities, the client may find healing.

In the Portal of Adjustment, shapeshifting was key as the egg of the first portal turned into a caterpillar on its way to becoming a chrysalis or cocoon. The third phase in *Transitions* is the Portal of Surrender, requiring the individual to surrender fully to the change or transition that has happened or is occurring. Continuing the metaphor, in this stage, the caterpillar goes inward, encasing itself in the chrysalis in preparation for the full metamorphosis (Jabr, 2012). This phase can literally be a down time, where people experience depression, having given up because anger and bargaining are no longer effective strategies for coping with the transition. Full surrender to the transition is critical.

A chrysalis may be viewed as a safe haven where the caterpillar can morph at its own pace, turning its attention inward. The Portal of Surrender therefore has as its goals the following: (a) ensuring a safe container through yoga practices and the therapist-client relationship so that the person is ready to do deeper layers of work with the unconscious; (b) persisting in deepening the meaning of the experiences through personal narratives and symbols; (c) decreasing resistance and attachment to access surrender, obtaining a sense of a safe container through ritual and the relationship to the body; and (d) continuing self-regulation practices and expanding awareness with extra attention to the parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) for healing.

From a depth psychological perspective, Woodman (1984/2014) explained in a podcast entitled “Chrysalis: The Psychology of Transformation” exactly what she believes happens in the chrysalis:

It’s the twilight zone between three worlds—past, present, and future, the precarious world of transformation within the chrysalis. Part of us is looking back, yearning for the magic we have lost. Part is glad to say goodbye to our mucked-up past. Part looks ahead with whatever courage we can muster. . . . When you have left your past life, you have no idea what’s ahead, and you’re just trying to hold things together in the middle. Part is excited by the changing potential, and most sit still, not daring to look either way. Individuals who consciously accept the chrysalis . . . recognize that it comes with every new spiral of growth. Its suffering is the suffering of paradox (10:08–11:31).

The chrysalis, then, is the in-between space.

In the space of the chrysalis, holding the tension is necessary to give way to a larger possibility. Woodman (1984/2014) discussed this phenomenon:

It is the people who are splayed in a chrysalis who are in trouble. Stuck in a state of stasis, they clutch their childhood toys, divorce themselves from the reality of their precious circumstances, and sit holding for some magic that will release them from their pain into a world of light. A make-believe world of childhood innocence. Rather than take responsibility for their own lives and rather than challenge growth, they cling to the rigid framework they have constructed or that has been assigned from birth and attempt to stay fixed. (13:16–14:02)

Woodman (1984/2014) then turned to the fear related to the cultural loss in the chrysalis:

Another reason for fear in the chrysalis lies in our cultural loss of containers. Our society’s emphasis on linear growth and achievements alienates us from the cyclic pattern of death

and rebirth so that when we experience ourselves dying, or dream that we are, we confuse the symbolic and actual worlds. Primitive societies were close enough to the natural cycles of their lives to provide containers through which the members of their tribes could experience death and rebirth.

(18:25–19:06)

The Portal of Surrender, the third phase of *Transitions*, takes place in the metamorphic space of the chrysalis. In this space, people are asked to surrender and shed a layer of themselves, metaphorically dying. As already noted, Woodman (1984/2014) verified the importance of the container. Jung called this *temenos*:

Temenos: A Greek word meaning a sacred, protected space; psychologically, descriptive of both a personal container and the sense of privacy that surrounds an analytical relationship. Jung believed that the need to establish or preserve a temenos is often indicated by drawings or dream images of a Quaternary nature, such as mandalas. The symbol of the mandala has exactly this meaning of a holy place, a temenos, to protect the center (Purrington, 2020, paras. 1–3).

The *Transitions* program ensures a safe container, temenos, integrates yoga and depth psychology practices to restore a sense of safety in the Portal of Surrender and beyond.

To honor and respect the participant's safe container, yoga practices in this portal are of an inward nature, fostering curiosity about and focus on the entire being: physically and deep within. The most valuable yoga practice in this portal is iRest® Yoga Nidra (Miller, 2015), which supports the PNS and opens the doorways between the conscious and the unconscious mind.

Repressed and unresolved feelings and emotions, stored in the unconscious, give rise to physical and mental unrest. There are many feelings and emotions we don't want to be with. We refuse them when they come uninvited into our environment. When they arise, we move away often with reactivity and defensiveness. (Miller, 2010, p. 53)

Another supportive aspect of iRest® Yoga Nidra practice is its work with inner resources, or “a place of refuge within you” (Miller, 2015, p. 15), revealing “your *complete wholeness*” (p. 37). Through this practice during a big life transition, especially in the Portal of Surrender, people may experience well-being, serenity, joy, vitality, and purpose and meaning in life (Miller, 2015). This is the portal in which to surrender or let go of past beliefs, patterns, identities, or circumstances.

In the fourth and final phase of the *Transitions* program, the cocoon opens, and the butterfly takes wing. This is the Portal of Emergence. This portal has three goals: (a) to recognize growth, lessons, and accomplishments; (b) to continue to self-resource through yoga practices; and (c) to identify means of outward expression for that which was birthed. In this portal, the transformation is being finalized through capstone yoga and depth psychological practices. This portal also requires some adjustment:

Most people come into analysis because they are floundering. Life has lost its meaning. They are experiencing themselves as caterpillars crawling along often quite successfully, but some deep intuitive voice is whispering, “There is something I'm missing. I need a

cocoon. I need to go back and find myself.” Now they may not quite realize that when caterpillars go into cocoons, they do not emerge as high-class caterpillars, and they may not be prepared for the agony of transformation that goes on inside. Nor are they quite prepared for the winged beauty that slowly and painfully emerges but who lives by a very different set of laws than a caterpillar (Woodman, 1984/2014, 32:18–33:22).

The emergent butterfly has been impatient in the cocoon; therefore, some adjustment is required.

The final portal in the butterfly’s journey is well-earned because the struggle outside the chrysalis is real, and flying requires work (Woodman, 1984/2014). The ritual of emergence incorporates expansion in the preparation to take flight along with renewal. The first three portals supported this path toward transformation, and the journey has altered the individual’s being and perspective. Through this new lens, the person is empowered to move forward in life.

Clinicians should note that although the four portals have been completed and the transformation has occurred, the journey may not be over for some clients. Following completion of the *Transitions* program, participants are encouraged to continue their yoga practices, applying what they have learned to their renewed lives. These individuals should also consider continuing in a therapeutic context with a licensed therapist who understands depth psychological practices, the value of yoga, and PVT. Through active imagination, for instance, “one sees, for a brief time, a glimpse of the true unity, beauty, and meaning of life” (Johnson, 1986, p. 217). The client-therapist relationship is also valuable to the individual who has emerged as a butterfly because “it takes two to witness the unconscious” (Poland, 2000, p. 15). In addition, the therapeutic relationship supports and reinforces safety within a container.

Although the transition has now transformed the person, the individual needs to continue to move forward beyond the instigating change. The roadmap was followed, and the destination was reached. The egg became a caterpillar that developed into a cocoon, and a butterfly emerged.

### Summary

Loss requires transition, and the progression of transition to transformation assists the mind and the body to move forward following such an important change. In wondering how polyvagal theory (PVT) fit into the transformation process, I developed a program entitled *Transitions: Portals of Transformation* that includes yoga and depth psychology to assist clients through transition from loss through transformation. I also followed the cyclical nature of the metamorphosis of the egg to the caterpillar to the chrysalis or cocoon to the butterfly as a metaphor for the program.

Yoga is about change (Desikachar, 1995), and depth psychology, among other things, is about the human being’s search for meaning (Frankl, 1946/2006). The change required of a transition related to loss influences physiological, emotional, and behavioral states (Sullivan & Erb, 2019) that can lead to anxiety, depression, insomnia, PTSD, stress, trauma, or triggers for past traumas, impacting the efficacy of the vagus nerve (Dana, 2018a, 2018b; Porges, 2017; Sullivan & Erb, 2019; van der Kolk, 2015). Big life transitions are therefore portals to transformation, much as the egg morphs into a butterfly.

### Conclusions

The cycles of birth and death that exist in all of nature are inescapable, and these transitions follow people throughout their lives. People are constantly changing, dying, being reborn, and



shapeshifting. Understanding this cyclical nature may support individuals to find greater meaning and purpose in their lives as they experience such transitions. Further, such transitions can also illuminate the shadow content located in the unconscious, creating the opportunity for integration.

As I continue to investigate and work with the combination of yoga and depth psychology, I hope to develop a workbook to help clients and clinicians follow the program with greater fidelity. It may also be possible to offer the program through an online platform as well as in person. For the therapist, *Transitions: Portals of Transformation* offers the opportunity to explore the continuous movement of emotions, thoughts, and sensations that surface through challenging moments and circumstances. In addition, the clinician can support the client to stick with the program and maintain both yoga and therapy as natural parts of the healing process and continued self-study.

Finally, big life transition may be exemplified by the metamorphosis of a butterfly, where the egg required change, the caterpillar needed adjustment, the surrender expected to need a cocoon, and the butterfly emerged with wings and ready to fly. Thus, the transition led to transformation.



Figure 1. Metamorphosis: From egg to butterfly. By Christiana Ulwelling

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