

DONNA FARHI

# TEACHING YOGA

EXPLORING THE TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIP



RODMELL PRESS  
BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA, 2006

formative role can never be fully realized without a safe and sacred environment in which the integrity of both the teacher and the student are sustained.

### SUTRA 1.13

The practice of yoga is the commitment to become established in the state of freedom.

## WHAT IS A YOGA TEACHER?

Yoga is a centuries-old spiritual tradition, science, and art that proceeds from the knowledge that all life is interconnected. When we perceive ourselves to be cut off, alone, or separate from life, we suffer. As a consequence of our false perception, our actions in the world may be ignorantly misguided, causing unnecessary pain to ourselves. Yoga tells us that we can disentangle ourselves from this morass of suffering and also prevent suffering for others by recognizing that there is no “one” and no “thing” that is separate from us. We achieve this unitive state not through blind faith or mechanical observance of rituals but through a no-nonsense practice of the eight limbs of Yoga (Ash-tanga Yoga). The eight limbs consist of moral codes for living ethically (*yamas* and *niyamas*), somatic practices (*asana*) that bring us into the truth of our embodiment, and breath awareness practices (*pranayama*) designed to resyn-chronize our individual rhythm with the primordial rhythm of the universe. Through consistent practice over a lifetime, we learn to recognize what is really important and to let go of impermanent objects and transient thoughts and emotions (*pratyahara*). Through this recognition of what really matters, we learn to concentrate our mind and life (*dharana*) on those things that are of lasting value. With practice we learn to maintain our equanimity in the most difficult of circumstances (*dhyana*) and thereby liberate ourselves to reach our highest potential (*samadhi*). As wonderful as all this may sound, Yoga is not a spiritual tradition suited to theorists or those who are inclined to reclining

positions. Yoga is for those who have discipline, tenacity, and devotion. It is a pragmatic science where everything is tested and verified through direct experience.

To comprehend the special dynamics that occur between a Yoga teacher and a Yoga student, it is crucial to understand the unique nature of the subject being taught. Yoga is not simply information that the teacher carries and disseminates separate from herself, to be left in the classroom or studio at the end of the workday. What is being taught is a state of being, a way of living, which by necessity is intrinsic to the character of the teacher. In the study of Yoga, the teacher can lead the student only as far as she has gone herself. She can point a light only into places that she herself has been willing to go. She can empathize with the student's spiritual quest, and the issues that may arise during that quest, only because she herself has embarked on such a journey. For this reason, it is difficult to separate the professional life from the personal life of a Yoga teacher. How can a way of life and a state of being be turned on and off at whim or divested when it is convenient to do so? To truly embody the essence of the teachings of Yoga they must, as Patanjali suggests in his Yoga Sutra, be practiced as "universal moral principles, unrestricted by conditions of birth, place, time, or circumstance" (Sutra II.31).<sup>1</sup>

While it is normal in many professions to distinguish between professional behavior and behavior that is permitted in personal life, the profession of teaching Yoga does not permit such convenient bifurcation. The underpinnings of the Yoga tradition have to do with leading a moral life in which our actions are congruent with our values. When we remove the conservative overtones that now surround the word *morality* and consider morality as behavior that reflects a reverence for life, we come closer to the true meaning of morals. After all, everyone wants to be treated with fairness, kindness, and respect. This is only possible when our actions are guided by sound moral principles.

Regardless of the particular style or tradition of Yoga we may be teaching, all Yoga traditions share a common value: that the essential nature of each

individual is intrinsically whole, good, and free. The yogic precepts for ethical living, the yamas and niyamas, are emphatic declarations of this inherent goodness, which is apparent whenever the illusion of separateness falls away. The yamas are constraints that we observe in relationship to the world. These are the practice of compassion for all living things (*ahimsa*), commitment to the truth (*satya*), not stealing (*asteya*), sexual propriety (*brahmacharya*), and not coveting or grasping (*aparigraha*). The niyamas are concerned with our relationship to self and how we live when no one else is watching. The niyamas are an important testing ground for whether our private and public lives are congruent and that we walk our talk. The niyamas consist of the practice of purity and cleanliness in body, mind, and speech (*shaucha*), contentment (*santosa*), disciplined use of our energy (*tapas*), self-study (*swadhyaya*), and surrender to God or to the higher Self (*ishvarapranidhana*). Our infinite nature is characterized by the expression of the yamas, or “outer observances,” and the niyamas, or “inner observances,” when it is emancipated from the confines of the limited identity of the individual.

Patanjali tells us that our true nature consists of these ten qualities of goodness. When we are centered within our true nature, these qualities shine forth. Because of their central importance, the yamas and niyamas are listed as the first two of the eight traditional limbs of Ashtanga Yoga practice, and adherence to these observances precedes and supersedes all other practices. Given Patanjali’s logical and systematic presentation of the Yoga Sutra (196 aphorisms that delineate the process of becoming whole), we can be assured that it is not by happenstance that these observances are given such a prominent position. The precepts range progressively from a scrutiny of how we relate to others to an intense investigation of the state of our inner life. Often seen as a list of dos and don’ts, or interpreted as a series of commandments, the yamas and niyamas are actually *descriptions of a nature that has been freed from the illusion of separateness*.

These inner and outer observances are often referred to as the inner and

outer “restraints.” What we restrain however is not our inherent badness or wrongness but our tendency to see ourselves as separate. It is this tendency that causes us to act outside our true nature. When there is an “other,” it becomes possible to do things like steal, because we falsely believe that what happens to another is not our concern. But when there is a sense of unity, who is there to steal from but ourselves? When we feel connected to others, we find that we are naturally compassionate (*ahimsa*), and that the first yama of not harming is not something we strive to be but something that we are. *Ahimsa* is usually translated as “nonviolence.” Unfortunately, in Western culture the word *violence* is associated with extreme versions of behavior, such as physical violence and killing. But this precept calls us to look at nonviolence from the broadest perspective, from the quality of our thoughts and words to our everyday interactions with others. The practice of compassion encompasses the broader meaning of *ahimsa* as an attitude of nonharming to all sentient beings. We see the essence of ourselves in the other and realize that the tenderness and forgiveness we so wish to have extended toward us is something that all humans long for.

The second yama, truthfulness (*satya*), is based on the understanding that honest communication and action form the bedrock of any healthy relationship, community, or government. When we feel connected to the vastness of life and are confident of life’s abundance, we are naturally generous and able to practice the third yama, not stealing (*asteya*). This yama expresses itself through generosity and open-heartedness. The fourth yama, sexual propriety (*brahmacharya*), tells us to use our sexual energy in a way that makes us feel more intimate not only with our partner but also with all of life. When we are connected to our Divinity, how can we use another for our own selfish desires or hurt another through our inability to contain our desires? Finally the fifth yama, not grasping (*aparigraha*), tells us that letting go of all our embroidered images and identities is a sure way to realize the open nature of the heart. We are told that, even if identities and roles are a necessary part of our everyday

life, when we recognize them for what they are, they need not encumber us, and they can never be a true reflection of our absolute nature.

The inner observances, or *niyamas*, act as a code for living soulfully. They tell us that when we are true to the highest expression of ourselves as humans, we live with purity (*shaucha*). With a body that is healthy and a mind that is clear, we are more able to practice the second *niyama*, contentment (*santosha*). We find that all we need lies within the moment, even if that moment is difficult. This contentment arises out of a realization that no matter how sticky and difficult life can be, when we stand in our center, our inner self remains essentially untouched. To remain centered in this awareness takes discipline and enthusiasm, and thus the fire or heat of spiritual practice (*tapas*), the third *niyama*, becomes a way of constantly clearing our slate of the daily residue that can color our perceptions. All these practices require and encourage self-reflective awareness (*swadhyaya*), the fourth inner observance. The turning of awareness inward reminds us time and again that the authentic life we are seeking is as close as our nose. Finally we can accomplish and live as an expression of all these attitudes when we celebrate the very fact of our aliveness and surrender to life and to God (*ishvara pranidhana*).

The Yogic precepts are valuable guidelines for living when considered as a whole. Just as the limbs of a baby grow in relation to each other, the eight limbs of practice grow out of the body of the precepts. When we take a single precept and separate it from the support and context of the other precepts, we will be unable to clearly perceive an issue from its broadest perspective. Not-lying (*satya*) must be balanced by not-harming (*ahimsa*). There are occasions when telling the truth, especially when it is intended to punish, is an act of violence, and should therefore be censored. The desire to lead a contented life (*santosha*) is not accomplished through complacency and sloth but rather through the context of discipline (*tapas*). These counterbalances can activate the process of an internal process of inquiry in determining rightful and wrongful behavior.

As anyone who has attempted Yoga practice knows, it is a many-layered process fraught with challenges, distractions, and roadblocks. We are likely to encounter our worst fears, our most ingrained false beliefs, and our most frustrating self-destructive habits. As Yoga teachers we attempt, through whatever understanding we have gained from our own experience, to act as ushers for the student's fiery process of transmutation. It is our task to ensure a safe and effective context for this process to occur, using skillful means to ignite and sustain the fires of transformation, and providing ongoing support and recognition of the student's intrinsic wholeness, regardless of where they are in the journey. Perhaps this last is most important of all, because when we feel truly seen and recognized we experience profound healing.

In a sense it is through the mirror of the teacher's search for and commitment to his own authenticity that the student gains permission for her innate being to shine forth. Yet the teacher will undoubtedly fail at times; this is part of being human. What is most important is that the teacher has a sincere aspiration and deep commitment to the ethical precepts. All people can and will make mistakes, and both teacher and student need to accept this fact. A teacher who fails, recognizes the mistake, and makes every attempt not to repeat the mistake is demonstrating a groundedness in his own humanity while aspiring to the highest possibility. In admitting a mistake, he is expressing a truth about where he is in his own journey. The balancing of the two polarities of humanity and divinity within the teacher's internal process is an important mirror for the student's process. If the teacher presents a glittering rendition of himself that does not accurately reflect his faults and foibles, or if he denies or attempts to cover up his mistakes, the student may experience alienation from her own shortcomings. Of course the recognition of human limitations is not an excuse to behave badly or a justification (as in "He's only human") when the individual has no intention of changing his behavior. Being human is not a loophole.

If we profess to be teaching Yoga, which is a science and art of living, we

must practice that way of living ourselves. If we wish only to teach poses or postures, it would be better to call what we do by a name other than Yoga.

#### SUTRA I.40

The sovereignty of the mind that is settled extends from the smallest of the small to the greatest of the great.

### YOGA TEACHER AS MENTOR

Because of the special nature of the role of Yoga teacher, the more mature or experienced teacher takes the role a step further and acts as a mentor. In Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*, the mentor acts as an advisor to Odysseus in his ten-year attempt to return home to Ithaca after the Trojan War. Odysseus's adventure, characterized as it is by hardship, setbacks, and seemingly endless wanderings and near triumphs ending in disappointments, is an apt description of the yogic path.

A mentor is someone who, through her wisdom and experience, sees who we are and has a strong desire to facilitate the blossoming of our fullest capacities. When does a teacher become a mentor? When a teacher has gained the absolute trust of the student, and this feeling is mutual, the relationship between teacher and student becomes very close. Both parties become invested in the most positive outcome, with the student seeking advice and gaining insight that can often only be drawn from such a senior source. The transition between viewing the teacher as an instructor and as a mentor may take place unconsciously, but once this transition has been made there is usually an unspoken recognition and appreciation for the preciousness of the relationship. How precious a gift it is when anyone, whether friend or mentor, recognizes another's unrealized potential and is sincerely invested in the manifestation of that potential in a healthy and life-giving way.

A mentor draws forth what is in the student's imagination and helps him to

guest teacher may be required to project his voice for up to six hours a day during an intensive, and in longer trainings to sustain this activity for a week or more. This places a severe demand on any voice, and it is unnecessarily exhausting. When projecting into a large room, you also can use only a limited range of expression, which I've found does not allow the kind of subtle inflection I might want to impart to an instruction during meditation or while leading Corpse Pose (Savasana). Hosts need to be aware that intensive teaching is quite a different animal from a regular hour-and-a-half class taught in a smaller room, and they should ensure that amplification is available.

### SUTRA 11.36

When we are firmly established in truthfulness,  
action accomplishes its desired end.

### ETHICAL CLASS STRUCTURES

How many university professors would be able to successfully teach their courses if students from all levels (from those with no experience to graduate students) attended the same course? Would a university lecturer attempting to cover a specific curriculum allow anyone at any time to drop in and waylay the class with questions that clearly showed their lack of prerequisite study? Imagine a professor trying to teach a course in advanced genetics to students who had not so much as attended a basic chemistry course. This is the situation that Yoga teachers face when working at many Yoga centers worldwide.

To offer sound teaching, we need to look seriously at the structure of Yoga classes. When a class is open to an endless stream of casual drop-in students, some with serious physical injuries and health conditions, we can neither honor the needs of those vulnerable students nor, as important, meet the needs of the devoted regular students who wish to progress in their practice. When classes are open to anyone of any level, and students can enter a class at any

time, the students who suffer most are the ones who have made the greatest commitment. Each time a beginning student enters a public class, a teacher may be required to drop the level of the class to the lowest common denominator to maintain safety. This is one of the most commonly discussed problems in teacher-training programs, and struggling to offer a better class in a structure that is inherently unsound is like bailing water from a boat without repairing the leaking hole. To remedy this situation, I strongly believe that Yoga classes should require preregistration, with at the very least a certain number of fundamental classes required as prerequisites for any student wanting to attend an open class. There are tremendous advantages to this structure, including:

- The teacher now has the ability to build information cumulatively, having determined the skills he wishes to teach within a particular course time.
- The cohesive structure of one group of students allows the teacher to familiarize herself with the needs of those individuals. Additionally, because students are not allowed to casually drop in, the needs of those registered remain foremost.
- The students are required to make a commitment. Many centers believe this is not possible, but in my experience of running a center and changing from open classes to registered courses, the students expressed gratitude for learning discipline and being required to stay with something they knew to be beneficial. The center almost tripled its income due to the popularity of these courses.
- The teacher and the center have a guaranteed income for a particular course. Whether students then attend all the classes is their decision, while the teacher, having made the commitment, is rewarded regardless.
- The teacher is able to witness an improvement from the beginning to the end of the course. Being able to see and appreciate tangible results is essential for career satisfaction, and this experience of accomplishment is a crucial factor in career longevity.

- ▣ Centers develop strong reputations from offering sound instruction to their students. In the case of one center, word-of-mouth about the small class numbers and excellent courses allowed the center to radically reduce its advertising budget, and subsequent courses began to fill, many with waiting lists.

Such consideration for the integrity of the structure of classes should also be extended to workshops and intensives. In my own contractual requirements, I almost always request that there be no partial attendance for a weekend or weeklong intensive. I have experienced firsthand what happens, both as a teacher and as a participant in workshops, when students are allowed to enter a course midway. Frequently the material confuses such students because they have not been privy to important foundation material, and their questions interrupt the presentation of the material. There is also a certain group bond and intimacy that forms during a retreat, a container that allows people to feel safe in exploring vulnerable aspects of their integration. When a newcomer arrives, no matter how nice the person may be, the container is compromised, because trust in that individual has not been established. Unfortunately, if the teacher is not judicious about who she allows into a class and when, she may end up giving more energy and attention to the drop-ins than to the students who made the commitment to be there the whole time. It is tempting for workshop hosts to allow such partial attendance for financial reasons, but this often undermines a cohesive learning environment.

On certain occasions allowing a person to drop in to a class may be appropriate. Sometimes a longtime student who is very familiar with my work requests entry to a single class. On other occasions a student visiting from overseas or who may be in the region for only a few days asks to attend one of my ongoing Yoga classes. On other occasions, as in a retreat, I have asked the students' permission for a newcomer to visit or observe a class. Generally however I discourage drop-in attendance because even someone observing a class can cause members of a group to feel uncomfortable.

Creating and sustaining ethical class structures is one way that teachers can provide a cohesive container for their students. When a teacher isn't clear about the boundaries necessary to uphold a sound class structure, students unconsciously register this lack of a clear boundary, and predictably some test the limits. A lack of clear boundaries can manifest in chronic student lateness, students missing classes and demanding refunds, and even students leaving class early. If the teacher is the least bit unclear about her terms, or changes the terms at the least provocation, she leaves herself and her students open to a "leaky container," that is, one that cannot support powerful teaching.

Students do need to realize that Yoga teachings are a profound gift, and that teachings are not offered on their terms alone. Teachers have a right and an obligation to make their terms clear. They are entitled to make their own requirements of students and to teach contingent upon those terms. When a teacher or center fails to make its terms clear, students are given no guidance and so form their own ideas about what is permissible.

Recently, while I was on a teaching tour of the United States, a number of center directors expressed their dismay at a new phenomenon. Students are coming for the active portion of the classes only and are rolling up their mats and walking out before the quieter floor work and relaxation portion of the class at the end. It was interesting to see the varied responses to this distressing phenomenon. Some centers immediately instructed their teachers to make it clear to students that to attend a class they had to attend the whole class, and others posted signs to make this clear to the students. This sent an unequivocal message that a code of conduct existed and adherence was required to receive these teachings. Other centers simply allowed the behavior to go unchecked and hoped things would change, leaving both teachers and students in a quandary of confusion. Again the most dedicated students attending the class had their experience disrupted time and again by people leaving at whatever time suited them. This is clearly not a good way to express appreciation to a loyal community of students.

## SUTRA II.46

The posture of the body during the practice of contemplation and at other times, as also the posture of the mind (or attitude to life) should be firm and pleasant.

### CLASS LEVELS

Both teachers and Yoga centers have a responsibility to offer clearly designated class levels with clearly defined content. Following on the previous discussion about class structure, this is unlikely to be possible when students of any level are allowed to attend any class of their choosing. Teachers need to screen participants carefully to determine an appropriate level, as new students are often incapable of determining this for themselves. Many believe that the one class they took ten years ago, or their brief experience with a television Yoga series or video, qualifies them to attend an intermediate or advanced class. More important than the actual logistics of setting up a class schedule and advertising for specific classes is that the teacher actually teaches to the level advertised. In this regard Yoga centers hiring teachers have a responsibility to ensure that teachers are working within safe parameters, especially when teaching absolute beginners. Unfortunately many teachers, especially young ones, may feel pressured to deliver a more advanced or more rigorous class than would be wise for the participants because they anticipate that this may garner them greater popularity. This is an unfortunate dilemma, with students often wanting to work at a level that is entirely unsuited to their ability, and teachers succumbing to this perceived pressure. Many center directors have privately shared with me that they have had to remove the word *beginner* from advertising brochures because it has become an affront to the Western mind to be considered a beginner at anything! The expectation of instant gratification, whether this is from the acquisition of material possessions or the acquisition of skills, is a fairly recent cultural phenomenon, one that undermines the rich-

ness of experience that comes from a long-term commitment to any endeavor. Yoga teachers and centers can either serve or challenge this cultural pathology.

While it is simply not possible for a teacher to tailor a class perfectly to meet the needs of every individual, I like to use what I call the 90 percent–10 percent rule. If 90 percent (and hopefully more) of the class seems to understand and be able to integrate the material, I sense that I'm working within a window of optimal learning for the group. There will always be people who come to a class with their own agenda, who are not ready to understand the material, who simply don't connect with the teacher personally, or for whatever reasons fall outside this optimal window. We should be concerned however when a significant percentage of the class is floundering to meet an unrealistic standard set by the teacher. When the teacher and only a few others can successfully practice what is taught (or, as is more often the case, strain to keep up and practice beyond their ability), it is likely that the class is more about stroking the teacher's ego than about serving the students. This kind of showing off can have dire consequences: students asked to do movements and practices that they have no foundation or conditioning for may become seriously injured. When an advertised class level and the actual class taught bear no resemblance to each other, then teachers and centers put vulnerable students (many of whom will feel too intimidated to adjust a practice or come out of a pose before others) at extreme risk of injury.

Teachers should not teach material that they have not yet integrated within their own practice and embodiment. We should teach what we know, and teach what we practice. When a teacher works from theory, rather than from information based on and tested through his own direct experience, the teaching is likely to be unsound. It is unlikely that the teacher will truly know how to help the student, because he has not gone through all the necessary steps to attain mastery. It would not be unethical, however, for a teacher to teach material that he has fully mastered but no longer practices. We might compare this to the ballet mistress who knows a movement from years of per-

sonal practice and is now passing on that knowledge in her later years when she can no longer do the movement. The difference here is that at some point the information was mastered.

As a teacher you need to ask yourself about your motives when you feel a pressure to teach beyond the level of the group present. Do you fear losing students to a more demanding teacher? Do you feel a need to prove your own ability and to “strut your stuff” to obtain recognition for what you have accomplished and perhaps as a vehicle for rising up a career ladder? Is there an imagined or real concern that teaching to the level present will not hold the student’s attention and thereby jeopardize your standing and employment at a center? Do you need to stroke your own ego by having “advanced students” doing “advanced practices”? All these motives need to be examined. I advise young teachers, who often feel under tremendous pressure to deliver more advanced material in order to keep their jobs, that it would be better to supplement your income from some other source than to go against your own values. English critic, editor, and author Cyril Connolly said, “Better to write for yourself and have no public, than to write for the public and have no self.” This is good advice for Yoga teachers. I do believe that ethical teaching is eventually rewarded by strong and devoted students, and a teacher is more likely to maintain the integrity of her work if she does not feel under financial pressure to make her livelihood solely from teaching.

As you can see, the issues of charisma, ambition, and fame and the issue of ethical class structures and levels are intimately and somewhat messily related. Whenever a teacher or center is under strong pressure to meet high overhead costs, there can be an equal temptation to lower standards so that the bottom line is determined by financial concerns alone. Similarly when a teacher, especially a teacher trying to establish his career, is pressured to make a livelihood solely from teaching, there can be the temptation to teach in a way that undermines essential values. For teachers, I advise having dual careers, at least in the beginning. Having some other way of making a living

allows you to feel less pressured and thereby removes the temptation to lower your teaching standards.

## ETHICAL INQUIRY: A CLASS TO SUIT THE CONDITION

Clarise came to me after a serious car accident in which the vehicle had rolled, leaving her with a broken scapula and ribs and a sense of fragility about her physical capacity. After receiving medical treatment, she was still unable to lift one of her arms above shoulder height, which, she was told, was “perfectly normal.” Not satisfied with the limitations of such a diagnosis (which, it is important to point out, was her conclusion, not mine), she came for an initial screening to attend a special-needs Yoga course. It was determined during this private session that a group class would jeopardize her safety, so she began attending a weekly special-needs Yoga class, designed to accommodate four to eight students, with two circulating teachers. The classes were designed around simple movements and postures and were conducted at a very slow and gentle pace that could easily accommodate the stops and starts resulting from the need for one-on-one individual alterations and adaptations. Because all the students required such attention, they were empathetic to such digressions.

After many weeks of steady progress, and now able to lift both arms triumphantly over her head, Clarise graduated to a group class. Over the years she began attending retreats and intensives and deepening her understanding of Yoga. For many years after her initial attendance at the special-needs class, Clarise expressed her appreciation for the work, stating that “there was no way I would have been able to attend any normal Yoga class after my injury.” Clarise's story should give us pause to consider how we might accommodate individuals who lie outside the parameters of normal class structures. Consider whether there is a need for such a Yoga class at your center. ■ ■

## ETHICAL INQUIRY: SUBSTITUTE TEACHERS.

This inquiry was contributed by a colleague.

“A couple of years ago, a Yoga teacher who was newly qualified took over one of my morning classes. All the students were women between fifty-five and seventy years of age and needed gentle movement. The new teacher apparently was not able to adjust her teaching style to the requirements of the students. It was only by chance that I met one of the women a few months later, and she told me that the new teacher had made them do a seated forward bend and went around physically pushing her weight down on the students to get them ‘further’ into the position. From what I was told, none of the students had refused or complained. By the time I was told, the new teacher had left the area and I had no way of contacting her.”

Do you have a policy about substitute teachers and a protocol for communicating the needs of the groups they will be leading? Consider ways of determining the best way to hand over a class to another teacher, whether for one class or as a permanent arrangement. 🌿 🌿

### SUTRA II.36

One who shows a high degree of right communication, will not fail in his actions.

### HOW WE COMMUNICATE WITH STUDENTS

Yoga teachers communicate with their students in many ways.

While one teacher may prefer to work exclusively with spoken instructions, another may use physical touch and adjustment as a major part of her teaching repertoire. Most Yoga instructors combine demonstration (both by the teacher and with students as models), spoken instructions, and physical

adjustments. All modes of communication demand sensitivity toward the student's experience. In the following sections we explore how to demonstrate respect for the student's process.

First, however, a brief note about authority. A teacher is a teacher because he commands a greater depth and breadth of knowledge of a subject than a student. However, there is always more for the teacher to know and other points of view that are valid. Students can and do contribute their own knowledge to the teacher's information base and to the other students. Authority in a subject should not be confused with an authoritarian attitude, in which the teacher becomes fused or solidified around the identity of "one who knows." This kind of authority is almost always accompanied by a dismissive attitude toward a student's perceptions and discoveries, as well as defensiveness when challenged by any question or conclusion that does not tally with that of the teacher. Students gain confidence when led by teachers who deserve authority. Such teachers never need to demand respect because it has been earned through the quality of their work. When a teacher takes an authoritarian position, the energy invested in presenting a facade of certainty tends to eclipse the more important messages that may be communicated in teaching. Authority that is engendered through authentic and skillful teaching never requires an arrogant stance because the students have granted the authority. A teacher's authority is transmitted through all the forms of communication used, whether demonstration, words, or touch.

#### SUTRA II.47

[Asanas] are mastered when all effort is relaxed and the mind is absorbed in the infinite.

### ADJUSTMENTS AND TOUCHING

Depending on the Yoga tradition, style, or method, and also the personal and professional predilections of the teacher, physical touch may be an integral

part of the teaching method. When used correctly—that is, with sensitivity and respect—touch can be an invaluable teaching tool, especially for those students who learn primarily through their kinesthetic sense. Throughout the years, I have progressed from never asking permission to touch students, to asking only if it was an intimate part of the body, to recently making it a practice to always ask permission before touching a student. At first I was reluctant to adopt this practice because I felt that it would obstruct the flow of my classes. However, to my surprise, asking permission, such as “May I touch you? or “May I use touch to suggest another way of working?” often accompanied by “Would you be interested in trying something different?” has resulted in a number of unexpected pluses:

- ❁ The creation of a “pause” during which both the teacher and student are allowed to choose whether they wish to touch or be touched, and whether they are willing to try something new.
- ❁ The rallying of both the teacher’s and the student’s full awareness to the process. Rather than being taken by surprise, the student can ready himself to be receptive to this information. In the case of the teacher, the pause may allow her to act more sensitively and deductively rather than making habitual or thoughtless adjustments.
- ❁ The acknowledgment that a student’s mere presence in class does not constitute permission to touch her.
- ❁ The recognition on the part of the student that she has a responsibility to maintain whatever boundaries are necessary for her to feel safe and respected. In this teacher–student paradigm, the mode of communication is shared.
- ❁ The acceptance that there are times when a student, for whatever reason, does not want to be touched.

A teacher should never continue to touch a student if the student has expressly asked him to stop. This is particularly important when the teacher is

helping a student improve her range of motion in a posture. Some horrific injuries have been incurred within our profession, most of which could have been prevented had the teacher been working within a horizontal mode of communication rather than an authoritarian or dictatorial vertical mode. When a teacher stops listening with her hands and works with a process of assumption rather than deduction, touch will rarely be effective and can be extremely injurious. These injuries might also be prevented if students realize that they have the right (and to some degree the obligation) to tell the teacher when an adjustment is too much, too painful, or inappropriate.

Also, however difficult it may be, it is important for the student to report back to the teacher if she has been injured. Such a report is unlikely to occur however if the teacher has taken the attitude that he is beyond reproach. This can have far-reaching consequences for both student and teacher. The teacher is unlikely to learn about his mistakes. When a student feels unable to approach the teacher directly, she will likely speak about the incident to other people, which can undermine a teacher's reputation. This however should not be the foremost reason for a teacher being open to feedback. The willingness to consider that a mistake was made, to make amends to the student if possible, to learn from the mistake, and to prevent such an occurrence from happening again are not likely to happen if the student is afraid of giving feedback. Learning from such mistakes can considerably expand a teacher's field of knowledge and thus contribute to sounder teaching in the future.

Students are generally forgiving and are willing to work with a teacher to heal an injury sustained in class. Often minor injuries are not caused by the teacher but are the result of either a preexisting condition or the student trying something for the first time, such as going up into a Handstand (Adho Muhka Vrkasana) and falling. Both student and teacher can discuss the possible cause of the injury, and the student can be made aware that he holds a responsibility to make decisions that involve risk.

## SUTRA II.36

When there is firm grounding in the perception of what is, or of truth, it is seen that an action and reaction, seed and its fruits, or cause and result are related to each other; and the clear vision of intelligence becomes directly aware of this relationship. (Or, one's words are fruitful.)

### THE POWER OF WORDS

As important as the touch that we use (or don't use) in our interactions with others are the words we choose and the manner in which they are delivered. The meaning of a word can be powerfully altered by the volume and the tone of voice used in its delivery. Most important, we should keep in mind that words that might otherwise have a neutral meaning can be amplified to stunning proportions in the student's mind by their having been spoken by someone important to her.

The radical way in which a student can receive a teacher's words was underscored for me during a recent Yoga teacher training. In this part of the training, the teacher trainees were to instruct each other in small groups, and faculty were to sit in on each group and give feedback about the instruction. I noticed that many trainees froze and faltered the moment they became aware that I was observing their classes. Even when I delivered positive feedback to one trainee, it could have a devastating effect on another if she felt that the feedback she received was not equally glowing. During this most vulnerable part of the training, I realized that almost any comments on my part were bound to be amplified in the student's mind a hundredfold. Therefore I decided not to be present in the early sessions and had the teaching assistants sit in on them. They were instructed to wait until all the trainee's peers had given their feedback and not to add anything verbally unless there was something crucial missing. Not surprisingly, constructive critique offered by their peers was received with little affront or upset. This experience heightened my

awareness of how even the most positive comment in the wrong context might leave a student feeling discouraged. We might consider then how the subtlest hint of sarcasm or harshness in tone of voice could be destructive to a fragile student.

But speak we must! It is important that our language reflect the kind of healthy relationship with self we wish to facilitate in the other. When a teacher yells instructions, or uses words that evoke a punitive relationship with the self, he is setting up a violent model for the student's own internal dialogue. Many years ago I attended a class at a Yoga conference with a teacher whose language seemed more suited for a military academy. She coarsely instructed us to "cut" our muscles to the bone, "push" ourselves to the limit, and finally advised us to "shove" ourselves up against the wall in a Handstand (Adho Mukha Vrksasana). This instruction to "shove" myself left me so disconcerted that I quietly rolled up my mat, excused myself with a terrible headache, and for the first time in what must have been thousands of classes, I left. I had spent too many years generating a healthy relationship with myself to want to shove myself anywhere!

More subtle is the way in which language, by its very limitations, can separate the person from the action, increasing rather than decreasing a sense of dissociation from the body. Notice the subtle differences in these instructions:

"Stretch your muscles to the limit." Or, "Invite your muscles to open."

"Push with the arm to twist the spine further." Or, "Keep the arm stable and as you exhale feel for the moment when the spine is ready to rotate."

"Breathe in for four counts." Or, "Allow the breath to enter for four counts."

Notice that in the first instruction, there is someone doing something to somebody, thereby setting up a separation between mind and body. In the second instruction, the action originates from the inside, and the actor and the action are unified. Also notice that the second instruction in each case asks

the student to make an internal inquiry rather than simply obey a command.

Through careful use of language, we can invite the student to access her own internal reference point and to encourage her independence. The teacher's commitment to facilitate this independence is part of the ethos at the heart of Yoga.

Finally there is one word noticeably missing from many Yoga teachers' vocabulary: sorry. When we make a mistake, when we speak impatiently or more harshly than we intended, it can be a powerful moment for the teacher to apologize and for the student to receive that apology. When a teacher apologizes, it is an act of respect for the student. It is also a means of expressing not only our regret but also that we hold ourselves to the same standard of behavior that we expect from our students. Admitting a mistake is a way for a Yoga teacher to express his honesty with where he is in his journey. It is also a way to prevent unnecessary hurt and future resentment. It's a simple word, and while it can take great humility to say it, this magical utterance can be healing for both teacher and student.

## SUTRA II.30

Yama comprises:

1. Consideration towards all living things, especially those who are innocent, in difficulty, or worse off than we are.
2. Right communications through speech, writings, gesture, and action.
3. Non-covetousness or the ability to resist a desire for that which does not belong to us.
4. Moderation in all our actions.
5. Non-greediness or the ability to accept only what is appropriate.

## CODES OF ETIQUETTE

Those that question the impact that one individual can make in the world have never been in bed with a flea! Such is the disruptive influence that even one