I
n the West, Yoga is identified as something that supports an individual’s quest for healing. Anthropologist Joseph S. Alter writes, “Yoga occupies an important place...in the modern world of medicine, self-help therapy, and public health.” Many people first try Yoga because they believe that it will help them in some way. For example, an ongoing study of Yoga practitioners in Australia reports that 70% of individuals began Yoga for health or fitness, 59% anticipated its benefits for stress and anxiety, and 18% were seeking help with a specific medical or health concern.2

It is critical that Yoga professionals become aware of the expectations that this cultural perspective on Yoga creates. What does it mean, for example, if someone attending a Yoga class expects Yoga to relieve them of chronic pain or depression? There are important issues of safety, boundaries, accessibility, and accountability to be considered.

Because I teach group Yoga classes, and because my research has focused on Yoga teachers, my exploration will center on the classroom and the teacher-student relationship. However, the implications of this exploration and the issues are applicable to any Yoga profession, including one-on-one Yoga therapy.

Physical Safety

Yoga therapist Matthew Taylor argues that the growing public awareness of Yoga’s health benefits can result in “more at-risk or medically fragile individuals seeking instruction.”3 This is reflected in my own experience teaching at a local YMCA, where Yoga classes are free to all members. A number of individuals who attend my classes are elderly or have severe medical conditions that put them at potential risk in a Yoga class. The institution is functioning under the cultural assumption that Yoga is healthy and safe. Additionally, it is under pressure to maintain full classes, another factor which Taylor cites as being responsible for increased numbers of injuries sustained in Yoga classes.

However, in my training, I have been cautioned (reasonably so) to avoid teaching individuals who have serious injuries or health conditions in a general group setting. This creates a sort of conundrum. The teacher is teaching in a public space, where classes are at a general level. The institution invites all community members to attend, which includes members who may have medical conditions the teacher is untrained to deal with. The institution, with the focus on having full classes, makes safety an issue of paramount concern for the teacher and students, and demands honesty on the side of both teacher and student.

In this context, there is a greater risk of injury if the student does not disclose injuries or health concerns, if the teacher is not honest about the limitations of his or her understanding of an issue, or if the teaching environment makes it impossible to check in with new students before class and provide sufficient personal attention in class.

Should Yoga teachers and Yoga therapists be held to the same standard of conduct as doctors?

Adolf Guggenbuehl-Craig, a Jungian psychiatrist and author, points out that clients often imagine that therapists have “access to secret [or otherwise inaccessible] knowledge which will enable him [or her] to solve all of life’s problems.”4 [p. 38] The Yoga student may also project abilities onto the Yoga teacher that he or she may not have, and imagine that the teacher has the ability to resolve the issues or problems that motivated the student to come to class. The student could be either direct or indirect with, and conscious or not conscious of, this belief or wish.

If the teacher asks about the student’s intention in coming, he or she may be able to gain some insight into the student’s assumptions or beliefs about Yoga. But it also can create in a student’s mind the expectation that the teacher can and will now address all of the student’s specific needs. If the student assumes that the teacher is capable of dealing with a particular concern, and the teacher is, in fact, incapable of dealing with it, the student may be put at risk. The student may fail to take precautions to insure his or her own safety in this situation.

How We Share What We Know

If a teacher knows how to help with a particular need, the next question is: How is this done? Let me share a personal story that highlights a number of important considerations about how to share what one knows. I have had problems with on-and-off pain between my shoulder blades for years. I have had many interactions about this pain with various teachers. I often received questions in response to my questions about this problem. “What do you think the reason is?” or “What have you discovered about the back pain?” In general, I found this to be an effective and empowering way of interacting. It pushed me to make my own discoveries and trust the power of my own knowledge and experience.

However, if someone has specialized knowledge about how or why a particular pain is being experienced—for example, understanding of the human structure and the ability to observe postural habits—then withholding this information could be considered withholding potential relief from a student. A doctor who chooses not to inform a patient about his or her condition and does not make recommendations that could prevent harm or alleviate suffering might be considered negligent. Should Yoga teachers and Yoga therapists be held to the same standard of conduct as doctors? Or should Yoga professionals not offer diagnoses and prescriptions in the same way that medical practitioners do?
THE POWER SHADOW
There is potential in the context of Yoga professions, as in any helping or healing profession, for what Guggenbuehl-Craig calls the “power shadow” to work in subtle ways. The teacher’s intentions and motivations must be examined very closely. In working with students or clients who seek relief and who believe in a teacher’s ability to help them find it, it may be easy, as it is in the role of any therapist/helping professional, to step into the role of savior. One must look closely at the intention behind the choice to either withhold information or to provide advice to someone who is seeking it. What sorts of implications are present in each possible route? What might the experience be for students who are told what is best for them, versus being encouraged to find out for themselves? What might the implications be if a student feels that information is being withheld, or if, indeed, it is being withheld? By what means is the knowledge of the Yoga teacher or Yoga therapist measurable, and how can he or she be held accountable for his or her knowledge and methods of dissemination?

INFLUENCE
Issues of influence and power create safety concerns in the Yoga classroom, as well as questions about the integrity with which an individual transmits the method he or she teaches. For example, teachers are often unaware of how they influence students through nonverbal communication.

It is often said that our students will mirror our habits. To illustrate this, consider a simple example from my experience as a teacher. I hyperextend many of my joints, which means that when I stretch my arms to the sides, my habit is to roll my shoulders back so that my arms then come behind my torso. I often know that I am demonstrating this habit because students push their arms behind their bodies. In this way, what I see is a reflection of what they see in me, rather than a reflection of what they understand to be the essence of the method. The essence of the method that I am teaching becomes filtered through how it appears on my particular body. Students’ bodies, and how students respond to instruction and demonstration, are deeply intertwined with the teacher and the teacher’s issues—in this case, my physical issues. This dialogue between the teacher’s body and the students’ bodies happens whether or not the participants are aware of it.

Physical habits are just one type of habit teachers communicate without conscious intention. Other habits and ways of seeing or doing may be cultural, psychological, or familial, to list a few. A teacher who fails to notice the interactive nature of teaching cannot take responsibility for his or her role in a relationship.

In other cases, what a teacher says may not match how students interpret the teacher’s behavior and expectations. A respondent to an online research project I conducted describes the following experience in the classroom: “A lot of teachers push students like me [a 59-year-old, Caucasian, middle class, heterosexual woman, and Zen Buddhist priest] beyond what I can do. I have injured myself in Yoga classes. Even if a teacher tells students to back off if they need to, they frequently make one feel as if they need to push harder. I think it’s important for teachers to recognize the power they have, and try to just show the exercises without trying to control students. I know it’s hard.”

THE RELATIONAL ASPECT OF TEACHING
Guggenbuehl-Craig writes, “To encounter a person creatively means to weave fantasies around him, to circle his potential.” [p. 45] It is inevitable that this occurs in the teacher-student or therapist-client relationship. As B.K.S. Iyengar writes, “Teachers should not act as technocrats only; but they have to develop a humane character and mix that humanness with their techniques.” Teachers cannot assume that having learned a technique in training is sufficient; they must be aware of the human relationship and interaction with each student, each day.

It is critical that teachers and therapists ask themselves: How do I come to perceive my students’ abilities, weaknesses, and needs? How do I recognize understanding or misunderstanding in students? What methods of perception and analysis do I use as a teacher or therapist? The choices we make as teachers, and the way in which we envision our students progressing, are also important places to look at closely. Our vision will be through our own perceptual lens, and is not foolproof or omniscient. We must seek to become aware of our biases and unique perspectives, and how this influences our way of seeing students. This has relevance to interpersonal relations, as well as our perspectives on and experience with mental health, body issues, sexual orientation, emotional concerns, class, gender, race, and all lived experiences.

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ACCOUNTABILITY IN YOGA PROFESSIONS

Discussing or evaluating power issues in a classroom is difficult because most of us bring good intentions to our teaching. This allows us to take issues of safety, privilege, and power for granted. However, how we interact with students and choose to disseminate or withhold knowledge can create unsafe situations.

At a time when I was seeking to create more space in the classroom for people’s own situations, I saw how even an attempt to let students discover their own experiences has the potential to harm. In the tradition in which I am trained, it is advised that menstruating women do not practice certain poses, such as twists, inversions, and backbends. In my own practice, I have found it to be valuable advice, which aligns with my physiological experience when menstruating and practicing.

However, at one point, I decided that it should be up to the students whether or not they chose to follow these rules for practice in my class. At one point, a long-time student asked if she should do certain poses we were doing because she was menstruating. I told her that I did not recommend it, and that I was trained to say no. However, I invited her to make her own decision. She chose to practice the backbends and ended up feeling very nauseated. It may have been important for her to discover this on her own. However, it was also irresponsible of me, from one perspective, to not be more adamant about what I knew about the practice. This may be a relatively harmless example. But one can imagine more complex and threatening situations.

CONCLUSIONS

As Guggenbuehl-Craig writes, the drive for power is “given freest rein when it can appear under the cloak of objective and moral rectitude.”[p. 38] It is imperative that teachers take seriously the idea that their “present values are not the only or final ones,”[p. 4] and that their intentions, motives, and actions are embedded in a cultural context that lends a particular flavor to the ways they share knowledge. Teachers must engage in ongoing critical thinking about how they come to ideas about a student’s capacities and needs. Simply recognizing that this is important is not enough. Teachers must engage in conscious thought and reflection if Yoga communities are to create safe space for students from diverse backgrounds and experiences.

TRACI M. CHILDRESS is a long time Yoga practitioner, writer, and teacher. She is also a Program Coordinator at Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York. She has a master’s degree in Health Arts and Sciences. Contact: tracichildress@gmail.com.

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