

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 (Ashtanga 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 resynchronize 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.3 1).

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 (*santosha*), 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 retrain 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 (ishvarapranidhana).

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.

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 define what may appear vague and illusive. A mentor assists the birthing of the student's dreams, visions, and hopes, and most important, *what the student has not yet dared to imagine*. A mentor moves the student from disbelief to belief and in the process continually affirms the student's self-worth. In the best possible scenario, a mentor passes on the torch of her knowledge while at the same time encouraging the student to become his own person. Ultimately the mentor is the embodiment and mirror of the student's own wisdom nature, pointing the student toward his inner teacher, known in the Yoga tradition as the *atman*. The *atman* is a latent and effulgent source of wisdom that is only fully liberated when we begin to trust in our own direct insight. A true mentor does not cultivate the student's dependence on her insight but facilitates the student's trust in his own inner promptings. This is the beginning of independence and true freedom.

One of the characteristics to look for in a mentor is someone who takes great pleasure in the smallest improvement in her student. This satisfaction is completely altruistic and is an expression of the Yoga teacher's self-sufficiency and self-realization. A mentor expresses the third *brahmavihara* (quality of heart) (see Sutra I.33), which is to see and celebrate the good in others and celebrate another's success as your own. This quality of heart becomes firm in those whose own ego is stable and balanced. The teacher's own identity structure is secure and is not dependent on putting the student in an inferior position. When a teacher does not have this healthy ego structure, she may express envy, jealousy, or covert anger when a student's progress surpasses her own development. Commonly such a teacher will attempt to knock the student down a notch or two by undermining his confidence. Obviously this benefits neither student nor teacher. A student who later became a Yoga teacher described to me how her own teacher exhibited dismay when she expressed a desire to attend a Yoga teacher training. The teacher exclaimed, "You! Why would you consider attending a Yoga teacher training?" Such was her humiliation in the face of such opposition that she shelved her plans to attend a training for many years. This student is one of the most intelligent, enthusiastic, and disciplined I have encountered and a clear candidate to become a Yoga teacher, so I can only surmise that her former teacher felt threatened by this student's accomplishments. Likewise, if a Yoga teacher cul-

tivates a particular student because of what the teacher might gain, either personally or professionally, through increased status or financial reward, the relationship will always be tainted by the teacher's desire to complete herself through the student.

Ethics and Ethical Behavior

While the moral precepts presented by Patanjali in his Yoga Sutra offer us a system of values, each is presented as a skeletal structure open to individual interpretation. We flesh out the sutras through practice and our direct experience born from taking (or not taking) certain actions. The brevity of Patanjali's descriptions of the moral precepts has, unfortunately, given rise to a great deal of liberty being taken in their interpretation. There is no clear consensus within the Yoga community as to what constitutes ethical and unethical behavior. So what can other professions offer us in their interpretation of ethics?

In *The Ethics of Caring: Honoring the Web of Life in Our Professional Healing Relationships*, Kylea Taylor defines the terms: "Ethical behavior is reverence for life demonstrated by right relationship to another." Jesus said it even more simply in urging his followers to "Do unto others as you would have them do to you." "Rachel Naomi Remen in her article *On Defining Spirit* says that 'ethics is a set of values, a code for translating the moral into daily life.'"

Taylor suggests that, besides considering ethical standards, one also needs to be operating from what she calls an "internal locus." When our internal locus for ethics is fully engaged, we will continually understand what is ethical in a particular situation, with a particular person, at that particular time and place. For instance, it might be ethical to physically hold someone who is grieving and has asked to be held. The same behavior might be unethical if a student has expressed romantic interest in us, and close physical contact is likely to confuse the student further. Similarly it might be ethical to invite a student to lunch to discuss his difficulties in a training course, and it might be unethical to accept an invitation to go to dinner with a student if the invitation appears to be a sexual overture.

While an internal locus is crucial, the external locus provided by a code of ethics, whether this be the yamas and niyamas or a code set down by a professional organization, is also important. The external locus gives us a structure from which to consider our actions and a starting point from which to ask important questions. The external locus provides a center, a group, an organization, or a community with a clear consensus about shared values. The external locus, especially when it is part of a prerequisite agreement (as when a Yoga teacher signs a contract to work at a center), helps to prevent serious deviation from ethical behavior caused by personal interpretation or manipulation of an agreement to suit the individual, especially when those deviations are selfishly motivated. The external locus also gives those in a leadership role a clear contract with employees, which may be used as a starting point for discussion or used to break the agreement when conditions are not

met. A code of ethics, such as those of educational, medical, and psychotherapeutic professions, also allows a professional body to act as clearinghouse for ethical concerns and complaints, so they can be handled in a responsible way. When no clear agreement exists (as is true in many contemporary Yoga centers), directors leave themselves open to their employees radically deviating from the values they hold for their center and their students.

Still more important, the external locus provides a context for considering what is ethical and a platform for the deeper inquiry required when considering the internal locus. For instance, because I know it is unethical to steal, that may inform my decision-making when setting fees and may ensure that I cover the material I agreed to cover in a class. The external locus (not-stealing) gives me a starting point for engaging a deeper process of discernment, so that I might waive fees for a student with serious medical problems, while insisting upon prompt payment from financially able students. If I inquire more deeply, I might decide that waiving a fee for someone in great need prevents me from stealing, while asking students to pay fees promptly prevents them from engaging in a form of stealing. Further inquiry may show that fees provided by financially able students help to support the less fortunate. The external locus of a code of ethics provides a window into the deepest and broadest perspective on what it means to live an ethical life.

When we are not certain whether a behavior or course of action is ethical, we might ask ourselves these questions

- Would I like to be treated in this manner myself? How would I feel if this happened to me?
- How will I feel about this later? Am I comfortable telling others or having others know about my actions?
- Has this behavior in the past required me to betray, lie, or practice any other form of subterfuge or cover-up? Would I be likely to act untruthfully in the future if I repeat this behavior?
- Is this action likely to create suffering for me or another person, either in the short term or the long term?
- If I were a student in this Yoga class, how might I perceive the actions of my teacher? For instance, if you were a student in an intensive and noticed that the teacher gave one particular student more attention than anyone else or shared every meal with a student, might you feel that the teacher is displaying favoritism? Might you suspect that the teacher is hoping to develop a personal relationship with that student? As someone who paid the same fee to attend the course, would you feel that you had been treated fairly?
- Is there a discrepancy between my stated value and the way that I feel about that value? For instance, your stated value may be that you do not give refunds for class cards that are not used by the expiration date, but when you have to enforce this you feel guilty. What shift, either in your stated value or within yourself, would allow you to feel an agreement between your external action and your internal process?

