

Yoga Ethics

by Paul Fox

First, a short story.

Jim (not a real person) found that becoming a yoga teacher had turned his life around. He discovered that his natural athleticism and long hamstrings meant that practicing even advanced yoga postures was relatively easy for him. So he gave up a high pressure sales job he hated and became a full time yoga teacher at studios in London. Jim was a good looking single man and his daily yoga practice honed his muscles, tightened his abs and brought him glowing health. He felt more alive and more powerful than he ever had before, and this made him irresistible many of the women in his class. They gathered around him before and after class like bees around a honey pot, and he could take his pick. Over a two year period he had a string of affairs with students, and was having the time of his life.

This tale is, of course, fiction. Most yoga teachers would find the behaviour of our make-believe character at least distasteful, and some would say that Jim has failed to respect professional boundaries, undermined the student-teacher relationship and is unfit to teach. But, whatever your opinion on this particular scenario, there is a very wide spectrum of views on what is and what is not ethical behaviour amongst yoga teachers.

Internationally, over the past twenty years, there have been several instances of well known yoga teachers being thrown out of their organisations for sexual misconduct, emotional abuse or other unethical behaviour. As a result, many yoga groups have tightened procedures, particularly if they work with children, because of child protection legislation.

As previously discussed in Yoga Magazine, yoga in the UK remains completely unregulated at a national level. Anyone can set themselves up as a yoga teacher. There is no equivalent of the General Medical Council, which could call unethical yoga teachers to account and, if necessary, strike them off a national teaching register.

However, there is regulation of teachers within the various yoga organisations that train the majority of UK teachers.

The Iyengar Association of the UK has a highly organised system for ensuring appropriate behaviour by its teachers. It has an Ethics and Certification Committee that hears complaints and, if necessary, strips individuals of their right to describe themselves as Iyengar teachers. The association is taking a further step this year by trademarking the name Iyengar and also trademarking a new logo called a Certification Mark. Only teachers approved by the organisation, and who maintain their ongoing professional development, will be permitted to use the Certification Mark on their literature.

Philippe Harari, a leading member of the Iyengar Association of the UK, told Yoga Magazine that the organisation's main concerns in terms of ethics fall

into three categories. Firstly, teachers must not act in a way that might injure or endanger a student; secondly teachers must not be offensive in terms of being racist, sexist or touch students inappropriately; thirdly teachers must not mix methods. Philippe Harari says the third point is designed to preserve the purity of Iyengar's teachings. "It is part of the yoga tradition that you can't pick and choose. You accept a guru and teach what they have taught you. It's not that we're saying we are right and that other approaches to yoga are wrong, but once you have chosen Iyengar yoga it's a complete system and you must stick with it." One teacher recently released a video entitled "Iyengar Yoga" but included practices on the tape that were not part of the Iyengar tradition. The teacher was given the choice to withdraw the video or no longer use the name Iyengar. The video was withdrawn.

The Iyengar Association is not primarily concerned with sexual ethics, although Philippe Harari says that if the organisation received a complaint about a teacher behaving inappropriately, or putting sexual pressure on a student, then it would be investigated and action taken.

The biggest yoga teacher training organisation in the UK and the governing body for yoga is the British Wheel of Yoga. As well as teaching the ethical basis of yoga in its teacher training course, the Wheel also has a wide-ranging Code of Practice. All teachers are obliged to abide by the code, which demands safe teaching, honesty, professionalism and respect for students. Nothing specific is mentioned about sexual misconduct, but the code does state that "Teachers are responsible for setting and monitoring boundaries in keeping professional relationships with their students".

The Chair of the BWY's Education Committee, Hilary Macrae, says that yoga teachers are in a very special position. "The yoga student may well have come to yoga with personal difficulties, looking for someone grounded whom they believe can help them. It is easy to take this trust and abuse it, particularly in the context of opposite sex teaching. This is usually misconduct by male teachers as they are teaching classes that are nearly all female".

For some other yoga organisations operating in the UK, the approach to ethics is less formal. At the Mandala Yoga Ashram in Wales, up to 30 teachers are trained every two or three years. The qualification is highly respected and recognised by the British Wheel of Yoga as equivalent to the BWY teaching Diploma. The organisation provides a grounding in ethics by involving student teachers in the life of the Ashram, so that they imbibe its culture, energies and values.

During the annual two-week residential intensive, that is part of the teacher training course, practical ethics are tackled through role play. Swami Krishnananda, from the Mandala Yoga Ashram, says the purpose of the role play is to explore different scenarios, including student-teacher sexuality. "We try to make students aware that we live in a real world and these things can happen. Teachers can be put on a pedestal and there is a lot of responsibility that comes with that".

Swami Krishnananda says that the importance of developing Awareness is stressed throughout the course. “We tell our trainees to try to be aware of anything unusual with students and to try to nip it in the bud as soon as possible. We also emphasise clarity. That means being clear about boundaries. And teachers need to be clear within themselves about where they are coming from so that they’re not being pulled off their path or tempted. We also encourage teachers to resolve problems as quickly and clearly as possible. If problems can’t be resolved then they may need to look at other options, such as asking a student to find another yoga class”.

At the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centre in London, all the teachers are volunteers who offer their services free of charge as part of their Karma Yoga (selfless work offered for spiritual development). Swami Sivananda set out a strong moral basis in his approach to yoga and Swami Krishna Devananda, the current Ashram Director in London, says the traditional Yamas and Niyamas inform everything that is done at the centre. “People who teach here have a strong sadhana (spiritual practice). They practice meditation and live by the principles set down by Swami Sivananda. We are very clear about what can be taught in classes, and this is conveyed during our teacher training. We also support our teachers by regularly going into classes to help them develop”.

In the United States, where legal action against yoga teachers is more common, codes of ethics are taken very seriously. The California Yoga Teachers Association has a Code of Professional Standards which states that “All forms of sexual behaviour or harassment with students are unethical, even when a student invites or consents to such behaviour”. The Association also urges teachers to show extreme caution if they choose to enter into a personal relationship with a former student. The Yoga Research and Education Centre, another international yoga body, also publishes Ethical Guidelines for Teachers. It too bans any sexual harassment of students, and additionally advises teachers to seek the advice of their peers if they are considering entering into a relationship with a former student.

Here in the UK, it’s clear that the vast majority of yoga teachers do recognise that they must respect clear boundaries between themselves and their students, and realise that any failure to do so would be an abuse of power. But, as with all ethical questions, there are grey areas. Occasionally, a teacher might develop a close personal bond outside class with a student or former student. Things happen in life between consenting adults and there’s a common view that it would be unwise to condemn behaviour without knowing the full facts.

No doubt, the debate around this particular moral maze will go on. It is, of course, an important subject, deserving serious consideration. But even here there are some lighter moments. One well known yoga teacher with a reputation for having a string of beautiful girlfriends over the years was being discussed by some of his students. “Is he still with Loretta?” (not her real name) one asked. “No”, said the other, “Jane is this year’s girlfriend; Loretta was last year’s