Perspective

The Ethics of Yoga Therapy

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The first thing we need to decide as teachers and Yoga therapists is not the content of what we teach, but rather the relationship we are going to have with our students and clients.

Yoga therapy, like all relationships in teaching and serving, is based on a trusting relationship between two people. Regardless of the type of work, that relationship is the foundation of all that follows.

I have given a lot of thought to what I value in the student-teacher relationship, and I have found there to be three basic principles that shape my ethics and work.

First and foremost, I value the concept of safety. I mean a very specific kind of safety that guarantees the client will be safe from my using the relationship for any end other than Yoga therapy. I will not attempt to get my needs met by the client, but instead will focus on protecting and meeting the client’s needs.

When boundaries between the therapist and the client are unclear, the person who inevitably loses is the client. Her needs cannot be met if I am busy securing mine. I have found that in the long run, it is just easier to be clear in my role: I am not there for any other reason than to serve the client. I am not there for my financial, social, or sexual gain. This attitude creates the ethical context I support in Yoga therapy and in teaching Yoga.

However, I do feel it is my job to challenge the client. I am here to support the client, but also to “stir the pot up” a bit so that the client examines his or her physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual health. It may not be possible to remain safe and to grow at the same time. But this “challenging” is about connecting with clients in such a way that they challenge themselves, in their own time and way, based on their intuitive knowledge of self. The situation is not about me challenging a client to live up to my expectations of him or her.

The second principle I hold dear is to remember the importance of mutuality in relationships. I do not enjoy relationships that are based on the myth of “power over.” Every human being has a great deal of power in the world. If I believe that somehow I am the only powerful person in the Yoga therapy relationship because I am the “teacher” or “Yoga therapist,” I am not living in reality. Anyone who has raised children has learned that you cannot “make” a teenager clean up her room. You can only make her wish she had. The only real way human relationships work is by mutuality in a spirit of mutual consent.

I may know a little more about Yoga than the client, but I am no more powerful than she. I cannot make the client practice, I cannot make the client listen, I cannot make the client “get better.” All I can do is to respect what I have found to be a fundamental truth of the universe: what changes people is when they choose to change. Therefore, my job is to express in words and actions my understanding that the student/client is indeed as powerful as I am in the relationship, and to create an environment that inspires the client to choose to learn.

Finally, I hold as precious the fact it is not really possible to teach anyone anything. People do learn, but it is not from being taught. Rather, we all learn from opening to experience and translating that personal experience into what we call learning. A quote I like for its humor and truth is the definition I once heard of a college lecture: the process by which the professor’s notes get transferred to the student’s notes without going through the mind of either. I can certainly give someone information, but I cannot teach experience. What one experiences, one knows in the only way that is important in life: from the inside out. Knowing from the inside out is what all spiritual teachers have told us is the root of the state of Yoga.

How I behave in my life, and in my Yoga classes or Yoga therapy sessions, is based on these three values. I have found that I like how I feel inside when I am guided by these val-
ues. I have also found that I like the kind of relationships I have when I act from these values. Finally, I like the kind of world I create around me when I act from these values. This is the essence of ethical behavior.

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