



Training Ground

From Student to Teacher

by Sava Alcantara

photography by Jasper Johal

By some estimates there are more than twenty million people practicing yoga in the US. As more students fill studios and experience the transforming power of asana practice, teacher training programs have cropped up to handle the demand as more people sign on to learn how to teach this ancient practice.

How does one teach others how to teach yoga? The answers are as many and as varied as the schools of yoga and their hybrids that exist today.

In addition to the importance of studying anatomy, asana, philosophy and the Sanskrit language, there is also the responsibility of cultivating healthy relationships between students and teachers. Establishing these relationships and learning how to navigate the practice room will often provide a direct opportunity for a teacher to practice the yamas and niyamas. As students experience their own physical and emotional shifts, how can a teacher be sensitive to these changes?

I asked several teachers to discuss what they do to create healthy relationships with their students and how they help those who are training to be teachers to do the same. “I think there’s a bigger question, which is, what does it mean to be a yoga teacher in 2004 in the US?” says Judith Hanson Lasater, PhD, PT, president of the California Yoga Teachers Association (CYTA) and founder of Yoga Journal.

“We are not in India where the spiritual tradition of yoga is understood. We are not living in ashrams. We live in a totally different environment. We have to decide if what we are doing is a teaching profession, or an art, or is it a calling?”

Judith, a physical therapist and mother of three, began teaching yoga in 1971 at the local YMCA in Texas. After teaching for three months, she stopped and returned to school to fill in what she saw as gaps in her knowledge of the practice.

“I don’t think we’ve answered the question. We don’t have national standards, for instance. We know what a doctor is or what a physical therapist is and they each have to pass a licensing exam, but if you ask ten people what a yoga teacher is, some might

say 'swami,' and some might say, 'an aerobics teacher.' We bear a lot of responsibility but we have not created a clear vision of what a yoga teacher is.

"Here is the paradox: on the one hand, we want to be treated like professionals in 2004. We want to be recognized as professional yoga teachers or health professionals in the widest sense. Most teachers would be unhappy if they were paid \$25 to teach a class when they have spent thousands of dollars on training. We want to have it both ways: we want to have professional benefits and fees, but sometimes we don't want to pay the professional costs, like avoiding personal and sexual entanglements with our students."

Judith, who studied with B.K.S. Iyengar and helped found the Iyengar Institute in San Francisco says she sees four types of teachers: "Some are leaders who go through the paces as if they are doing their own practice and the students just happen to be there. A teacher is someone who individualizes the practice and shapes it to a particular student. A master is someone who uses the practice to help you learn about your life. A guru doesn't teach you anything—the guru is the message. You show up and being in his or her presence, you absorb the teaching. Most of the 'teachers' I see are leaders; some are teachers, a few are masters and very, very few are gurus." Given that, Judith says she sees a big difference in those who have studied with the masters directly. "There is a group of people in the US who have been trained directly by B.K.S. Iyengar, or Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, or by Swami Satchitananda. They've had direct transmission in that they've gotten the form and tradition of the practice directly from the masters. "We don't like tradition, but I'm sorry, there's a certain undiluted wisdom in traditional teachings. Our cultural imperative was to break free from Europe and other countries, to create something new, but there's something missing: it has to do with the lineage and it has to do with the spirit of the tradition. "I'm not in the space of saying it's right or wrong. I'm saying there is a connection with the living lineage that has a power beyond knowledge—it is direct experience." Regarding the teacher/student relationship, Judith says it is a matter of establishing appropriate boundaries that foster respect and trust.

"What is your intention? If you put the welfare of the student first, you need to make a very clear boundary. Students will project onto you an idealized version of [who you are]. Being able to stand in these projections with respect requires maturity. You neither believe the projections nor manipulate them.

"I say, be friendly with your students, but don't be friends with them because your 'stuff' can get in the way. I don't want to be friends with Mr. Iyengar, whom I studied with for years. I don't want to hang out with him. I don't want to be distracted by that kind of relationship.

"Even with my husband, when he is in my class, I will still ask his permission before giving him an adjustment by saying, 'may I touch you?' That makes it very clear that I'm in the teacher role and he's in the student role."

"The job of a good yoga teacher starts with perceiving the students who may come to him or her as divine beings," writes Sharon Gannon, who is co-founder and co-director of Jivamukti Yoga in New York with David Life, her husband. Both replied in writing for this story.

“When, as a teacher, you have the student’s spiritual enlightenment as your focus, the appropriate boundaries arise automatically.

“A teacher should always strive to be sattvic, which means in this case, to keep enlightenment (theirs and the student’s) as the only goal.

“Satsang, to be attached to the truth or God, is the only appropriate relationship for a student and teacher. Only elevated thoughts, words and activities should transpire between them. Anything else is really a waste of time for both.”

Sharon and David, who have studied with Sri K. Pattabhi Jois in India, will conduct their next teacher training at the Omega Institute in New York in the spring of 2005. Included in their training will be study and discussion of tethical considerations in teaching.

“It is important to be aware of the sexually charged nature of a yoga class and a yoga center,” writes David. “This atmosphere is a given with a general ‘touchy-feely’ environment, revealing clothing and books with titles like, Tantric Love Making. Beyond the legal questions, there is need for dialogue, rules and open engagement of transgressions before they become emotionally or legally challenging.

“If the goal of yoga–samadhi–is the focus of a yoga class, these other issues fade away. It is the clear delineation of the reason for practicing that balances the attention toward the body and toward the soul. Selection of words that are uplifting, music that is inspiring and an emphasis on disciplined and ethical alignment create a healthy environment, while sexually charged music, talking and jokes do not create a clear intention.”

“We are not yoga teachers: we are people who create an environment where people can access the teacher within themselves,” says Bryan Kest, founder of Power Yoga in Santa Monica.

“My job is to create the right environment so you can find your own teaching. You are going to learn from your own actions. If you benefit from your actions or if you don’t, you are responsible for the consequences of your actions.

“I believe all the knowledge we have is within us and we have a tool called yoga to quiet ourselves to access that knowledge.”

Bryan, who lived in India with Pattabhi Jois for a year and began his Ashtanga practice twenty years ago, says that while Jois was an important teacher, he counts Buddhist teachings, Paramahansa Yogananda, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Jesus, Buddha and Sai Baba all as equally important influences that inform his practice and teaching today.

As to how he interacts with students, Bryan says he does what he feels is appropriate and that he would not do anything to harm the student/teacher relationship.

“People are coming to you for yoga instruction, so that is your first duty and you are going to do your job, but that doesn’t necessarily bar other kinds of relationships. I met my best friend in my class ten years ago and ten years later, he is still my best friend and he still comes to my class.

“There are no rules: every situation is different. I hate to have something set in stone. If integrity and intention is there, that’s what matters.” Bryan acknowledges that while he may be open to a romantic relationship with a student, it would be unusual.

“There is a gray area. I don’t want to say that I wouldn’t date a student and later my soul mate walks into the room and I’m barred from that. At the same time, the joy of a sexual experience is not worth losing a student or ruining a friendship. There is no way I would compromise the sanctity of my yoga class to have a sexual experience later.”

“It’s essential to remember that there is a power imbalance between the student and teacher and it’s that intrinsic imbalance that makes it important for the teacher to remember it is a professional relationship first,” says Dr. Raphael Gunner, a clinical psychologist, who has taught at Yoga Works in Santa Monica and wrote his doctoral dissertation on issues of boundaries and transference in such relationships. He continues to teach students privately.

“The teacher carries more responsibility in watching over the relationship. That doesn’t mean the teacher can’t help the student cope with emotional issues or attend a party where that student is present, but the professional relationship supersedes the friendship.

“If you understand what your responsibilities are as a teacher, you’ll stay within clearly delineated boundaries and, of course, you aren’t going to go on a date with a student.”

“When Yogi Bhajan came to the West in 1969 he said, ‘I came to create teachers, not gather students.’ I never say ‘my’ in teaching. They are not ‘my’ students—they are students of Kundalini Yoga,” says Gurmukh Kaur Khalsa of Golden Bridge in Los Angeles.

“Teaching has to be totally for service and not self-gain and that comes from Grace. I’ve been teaching for thirty-five years, as certified through Yogi Bhajan,” Gurmukh says. While Yogi Bhajan no longer trains people directly, he has trained senior teachers who now train others in centers around the world.

“We, as Kundalini yoga teachers, take this oath: ‘I am not a man, I am not a woman, I am not a person, I am not myself, I am a teacher,’” says Gurmukh. “We say this to ourselves at the beginning of every class. And then we ask that all students join us in the mantra, Ong Namo, Guru Dev Namo, which means ‘I bow to the Creative Force of the Universe, I open myself to the Divine Wisdom within and without.’

“It sets the precedent as to why we are there and what we are to deliver: these sacred teachings. Our purpose is to deliver the student to himself—not to the teacher. We are there to inspire the students.”

With regard to training, Gurmukh says, “We teach exactly in the sequence of each kriya as given by the master of Kundalini yoga. For instance, if there are twelve postures in a particular set and a particular kriya, we do not mix them up, add or subtract. Kundalini yoga is a science, just as $2 + 2 = 4$, to bring a specific outcome.”

Bikram Choudhury, founder and president of Bikram Yoga College of India in Los Angeles, says he had to change his method of teaching both his regular students and his teacher trainees to suit their temperament and the culture in which they live.

“In yoga there is something called guru shisya prampara. You know what a guru is; shisya is disciple and prampara is tradition. This is the relationship between the guru and disciple. Any Indian guru and disciple will understand this, but the Western world will never understand it. It doesn’t make sense to the Western world, so we don’t even try.”

Bikram, who began studying yoga in India at age four with his guru Bishnu Ghosh, went on to fashion a sequence of twenty-six asanas that bears his name.

“The only relationship I create with my students is I do a job: it is very technical and very practical and they feel good and believe in me and that’s why I do it.”

For Bikram, the master and the teaching seem to be inseparable. “I brainwash them. If they do these twenty-six exercises every day, they have to feel good and they cannot have any physical, emotional, [or] psychological problems.”

Central to learning how to teach Bikram’s brand of yoga is learning what is called the Bikram dialogue, or distinct details for each asana. Teacher trainees must learn this dialogue in order to teach Bikram yoga. “I [have used] the same [teaching] dialogue for forty-five years. [Before the dialogue], I used to train one teacher in ten years, but in twenty years, I [would] have only two teachers, so I use the dialogue,” he says. Because many of his students came to him following extreme emotional or health-related problems, he found most were unable to concentrate and complete the practice. By following the Bikram dialogue, he found students were able to benefit from the practice.

“It’s like mathematics, physics, or biochemistry, but you have to follow the technique exactly. If you come to my class and concentrate and do your best, even doing just five percent of it, you will get one hundred percent of the benefit,” he says.

Regarding boundaries in the practice room, Bikram says he does not believe in hands-on adjustments for asana practice.

“(Teaching) here I decided that teachers cannot touch people in class. You cannot touch people: the moment you touch someone, it’s a lawsuit.

“That’s also why the [teaching] dialogue is so important, because by using it, you can put people’s minds in one track so they are not confused. When you listen to the dialogue, it’s a form of concentration. It’s a meditation and it’s amazing.”

Bryan Kest of Power Yoga says that he will do hands-on adjustments, but not nearly as many as he did twenty years ago.

“I didn’t make a decision to do less of them, it just happened naturally. Maybe if you have 180 people (in a class), that’s just what happens. I just changed; I just stopped pushing myself so hard, so why should I push them (students)?”

Bryan says the few adjustments he might make are minor. “The only thing I might do is put a finger [to an area of their body] where I want to bring their awareness, but ninety-eight percent of the time I won’t touch someone. If I want them to lengthen their spine, I’ll put my finger on the sternum and say ‘lift from here.’”

Sharon Gannon and David Life of Jivamukti believe in hands-on adjustments but they, like Judith Hanson Lasater, advise extreme caution and sensitivity. “Obviously, there are many issues here,” David writes. “The teacher sits in the driver’s seat and can manipulate others by granting or denying adjustments. Students can become dependent on those ‘touches,’ seeing their own self-worth as an aspect of the attention given to their body from the teacher.

“It is the responsibility of the teacher to give democratic and appropriate assists to the people who can benefit from this approach.” “My own teacher, Sri K. Pattabhi Jois says, ‘without touching, progress is very slow, with touching progress comes very quickly’,” writes Sharon. Judith likens the teaching process in the practice room to teaching a child. “Everything has a boundary: if the cells in your body didn’t have a boundary, you would die,” says Judith.

“When you are raising a child, you reflect back a boundary: you help them create a healthy boundary of self and non-self. With a student, by saying, ‘may I touch you?’ or by saying, ‘are you willing to try shoulder stand?’ you continue to throw back to them the learning. You are helping students create a habit of how to be self-referential.

“Healthy teaching always starts with the intention. What is the intention? Is it to teach a student how to do trikonasana or to teach them to develop self-inquiry so they can lead rich, full, meaningful lives?

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