Towards Ethical Praxis in Yoga Instruction: Synthesizing Historical and Academic Inquiry for Practical Application

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Towards Ethical Praxis in Yoga Instruction: Synthesizing Historical and Academic Inquiry for Practical Application

by

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A Master’s Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Divinity at Harvard University

Supervised by Professor Dan McKanan
For all beings in all places, may we know safety and freedom.
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Statement of Purpose

This project was inspired by my lived experience as a student and teacher in the yoga industry and the way in which I both benefitted and was harmed by questionable ethical practices. I first started teaching yoga when I was 16 in New York City. As a young person, the first time I taught a yoga class was one of the first times I experienced my voice as one that was worth listening to. It gave me a platform and context for connecting with, and potentially helping, people. I connected with many people who changed my way of living and being and was able to truly find a sense of belonging and community. I was also harmed by the very specific cultural image of a “yoga instructor” I was sometimes expected to fulfill. In addition to the ways I experienced harm personally, I witnessed many people around me suffer at the hands of pervasive abuses of power. These abuses of power were often rooted in larger forms of cultural and structural violence, as I will later discuss. How is it possible to reconcile the harm caused by the yoga industry with the benefits gained? Are the abuses of power that occur in the yoga industry bound to the context in which they occur?

On some level, this duality of healing and harm that I experienced is what brought me to Harvard Divinity School and inspired me to pursue this path of study. Most of my time at Harvard Divinity School has served the purpose of exploring the questions my lived experience left me with and trying to bridge the divide between the insights I received from this academic exploration and the communities I have been part of. Some courses that have contributed to this include “Alternative Spiritualities in the United States,” “Introduction to Hindu Spiritual Care,” and “Change, Trauma, and Spiritual Resilience.”

In addition to attempting to bridge the divide between theory and practice of Modern Postural Yoga, this project dives into the history of Modern Postural Yoga, in part, in order to understand if the abuses of power I witnessed and experienced are bound to cultural context or whether there is something inherent to the practice itself that produces them. In the communities I was part of, there was always a lack of a clear set of ethical guidelines that met the complex needs of Modern Postural Yoga culture. Additionally, I experienced a clear divide between the academic study of Modern Postural Yoga and its history and what is taught in yoga teacher trainings. In my own training, the only ethical guidance I received was not to sleep with my students. While I generally do believe that is good advice, the truth is, living with integrity involves navigating ambiguity and is often more complicated than a simple list of dos and don’ts.

My hope is this project will begin to bridge the divide between what happens in academia and what happens in yoga studios. By exploring the ethical intricacies and complex and contested history of Modern Postural Yoga, my aim is to create a framework that both aligns with the rigor of academia and is accessible and useful for the practitioners and teachers of Modern Postural Yoga. In so doing, my hope is to contribute to and help facilitate the creation of a more ethical and inclusive environment for practitioners and teachers alike. Ultimately, I envision a space in which both teachers and practitioners can create a felt and embodied experience of safety and freedom.
History of Modern Postural Yoga

Part of being an ethical instructor includes relaying information that is true to the best of our knowledge. The way in which we frame the history of yoga changes both the scope of the practice and who has the power to define and claim it. There are different ways to frame the history of yoga; many yoga teachers allude to yoga being an “ancient” practice that is thousands of years old. I believe this is because the *Yoga Sutras* are a couple of thousands of years old. However, are the *Yoga Sutras* discussing what we, in the West, are calling “yoga”? The framing of what yoga truly is, where it begins and where it comes from has many ethical and social implications. The following is a brief history intertwined with questions of power, meaning, belonging, and the quest for immortality through the attainment of “perfection.”

The word “yoga” comes from the Sanskrit root *yuj* which has many different meanings including “to yoke or join, to make ready, arrange, employ, apply, to offer, perform, to insert, to appoint, to command, to turn or direct or fix or concentrate (the mind, thoughts) upon.”1 Given the vast list of definitions, none of which include anything about postures, it is difficult to say whether or not the *Yoga Sutras* are discussing the same “yoga” that is practiced in the West today. S.K. Arun Murthi, Professor of philosophy of science and Indian philosophy, argues that the *Yoga Sutras* are incompatible with, what I will call, Modern Postural Yoga. He writes:

“Given this incompatibility, it is very difficult to reconcile Patanjali’s yoga sutra with modern postural yoga, even though the practitioners of postural yoga take it as a foundational text. [...] The only link is the incongruous presence of the word ‘yoga’ here[.]”2

Ultimately, he argues that the link made between Modern Postural Yoga and the *Yoga Sutras* is fabricated in order to create the illusion of an “ancient” lineage. The antiquity of yoga seems to be an important part of its appeal to the West. Not only does the West search for practices that have the allure of a supposed timelessness but we seek practices that are both timeless and scientifically viable. Hence studies into the medical benefits of yoga or the instrumentalization of yoga for modern aims like weight loss, productivity, etc.

Professor Murthi is not the only scholar to have made such claims. In his book chapter “Yoga, Brief History of an Idea,” Professor David Gordon White writes:

But what were India's ancient yoga traditions, and what relationship do they have to the modern postural yoga that people are practicing across the world today? In fact, the yoga that is taught and practiced today has very little in common with the yoga of the YS (Yoga Sutras) and other ancient yoga treatises. Nearly all of our popular assumptions

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about yoga theory date from the past 150 years, and very few modern-day practices date from before the twelfth century.³

Ultimately, White seems to suggest that yoga is a practice that has been constantly reinvented over time and that most of this transformation has occurred in the recent past. This calls into question claims about an eternal practice that has persisted throughout time.

While it is possible that modern postural yoga was, for instance, developed and passed down via an oral tradition, there is no textual evidence for this. If we do look to place the origins of modern postural yoga into an “authentic” Indian context, (that has a textual evidence to support it) perhaps, the closest we can get are the Nath Siddhas, a Shaivite sect who did practice postures as part of their alchemical practice as documented in texts like the Hathayogapradipika, a 15th century Sanskrit manual on hatha yoga and the Gheranda Samhita, a text whose dating is contested but dates back either to the 13th or 17th century as per Professor Mark Singleton and Professor James Mallinson’s research respectively.

In discussing the Hathayogapradipika, Mallinson explains that: “The purpose of Svātmarama, the Haṭhapradipikā’s compiler, was to lay claim to this new synthesis for a broad tradition of Śaiva siddha schools. In this he was entirely successful, although the parameters of the tradition he invoked were subsequently narrowed, with haṭhayoga’s originators coming to be identified with the first gurus of the then fledgling Nāth (Siddha) sampradāya.”⁴

According to Professor White “siddha means ‘realized, perfected one’ a term generally applied to a practitioner who has throughout his practice realized his dual goal of superhuman powers and bodily immortality.”⁵ White explains that: “As a proper noun, Siddha becomes a broad sectarian appellation, applying to devotees of Siva in the Deccan (Mahesvara Siddhas), alchemists in Tamil Nadu (Sittars), a group of early Buddhist tantrikas from Bengal (Mahasiddhas, Siddhacharyas), the alchemists of medieval India (Rasa Siddhas) and, most especially, a mainly north Indian group known as the Nath Siddhas.”⁶

The Siddhas are situated in the broader mix of Indian Tantrism and have endured longer than the tantrikas, maintaining their visibility in the Indian religious landscape.⁷ Hindu Tantrism vanished as a significant religious sect a number of centuries ago which White attributes both to

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⁶ White, David Gordon. The Alchemical Body, 2.
a tarnished reputation and to its inaccessibility to the vast majority of people in India.\textsuperscript{8} In contrast, the Siddhas offered a path accessible to the ordinary person by rejecting the elitism of earlier Tantric schools. Additionally, the distinctiveness of Siddha practice offers the intersection of ordinary and mystical life as a site of transformation.

Mallinson adds that: “The techniques [of the Naths] may differ [from those of Tantric schools], but the results of hatha yoga are the same as those of tantric rituals and yoga: supernatural powers (siddhis) and liberation (mukti). In contrast to the usual conceptions of tantric liberation, however, the latter can be achieved while alive, in a body immortalized by means of hatha yoga.”\textsuperscript{9} Additionally, Mallinson explains that unlike in the practices of tantric schools, in the practice of \textit{Hatha yoga},

The only external aid necessary is a guru qualified to teach hatha yoga’s practices. There is no need for tantra’s elaborate initiations, nor the secret mandalas and mantras passed down within occult tantric lineages, nor elaborate ritual paraphernalia, including the infamous pañcamakāra or “five Ms”: madya (“wine”), māmsa (“meat”), matsya (“fish”), mudrā (“hand gestures”), and maithuna (“sex”).\textsuperscript{10}

In that way, Hatha yoga provided the same results as the practices of tantric lineages, but in a way much more accessible to the common person. Furthermore, the Siddhas had a clear emphasis on the concrete. White writes: “Siddhas, yogis and alchemists that they are, have always been technicians of the \textit{concrete}: specialists in the concrete transmutation of base metals into gold and the concrete transformation of mortal, aging man into a perfected, immortal superman, masters of the natural processes rather than mere victims or bystanders to them.”\textsuperscript{11}

The \textit{Hatha Yoga Pradipika} itself expresses the accessibility described by White in that it says: “Whether young or old, very old, sick or feeble, one can attain perfection in all the yogas by practicing.”\textsuperscript{12} It continues: “Neither by wearing the garb of a siddha, nor by talking about it (is perfection attained). Only through practical application does one become a siddha. This is the truth without a doubt.”\textsuperscript{13} In his commentary, Mukhtibodhananda adds: “everybody is eligible to practice hatha yoga and attain self-realization.”\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{8} “The man on the street could not recognize himself in its discourse.” White, David Gordon. \textit{The Alchemical Body}, 7.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{11} White, David Gordon. \textit{The Alchemical Body}, 7-8.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid, 143.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
While the exact alchemical and physical practices the Naths did may not be the same as those practiced in a Modern Postural Yoga class, in some ways, the intentionality remains the same: the transmutation of a mortal, imperfect body, into an immortal, perfected one. In the modern imagination, yoga and, perhaps, “healthism” in addition to modern movement culture more broadly serve as a ways to deny the aging process. In her book *What We Don’t Talk About When We Talk About Fat*, Aubrey Gordon explains:

Closely linked to both anti-fatness and ableism, healthism posits that health is both a virtue and a moral imperative. [...] ‘Healthism includes the idea that anyone who isn’t healthy just isn’t trying hard enough or has some moral failing or sin to account for.’ [...] As ‘wellness’ replaces ‘dieting’ as a way of talking about weight loss, understanding healthism is key to pulling apart the ways in which size and health are used to write-off people who don’t or can’t perform health.15

In the “healthist” imagination those perceived as healthy are both morally superior and are envisioned as having escaped death.16 This process of attempting to immortalize the physical body mirrors the alchemical practices of the Nath Siddhas. Both modern physical culture and the alchemical practices of the Siddhas have the same end goal: the attainment of a kind of perfection which alludes to a being that is more than human and, ultimately, immortal. This brings me to a question that I mentioned in my introduction to this project: are the social inequalities and power imbalances present in the yoga community today simply reflective of modernity and the social issues that accompany it or bound to the very principles that underpin the practice itself? What is the “perfection” of the Naths and how does it compare to the “perfection” of the “healthist” imagination?

Verse 72, Chapter 2 of the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* says: “Perfection of hatha yoga is achieved when there is leanness of the body, tranquil countenance, manifestation of the inner sound, clear eyes, diseaselessness, control of bindu (semen/ova), active digestive fire and purification of nadis.”17 While there is some mention of “leanness” in the verse itself and a discussion of “dissolution of fat” in the commentary, the ultimate aim appears to be the attainment of immortality (“even death can be controlled”).18 While the quest for perfection here is expressed through spiritual terms such as the rising of kundalini energy through the sushumna and purification of the nadi, the central aim does not appear to differ much from the aim of “healthism” as Gordon presents it. Does the spiritual language and ontological framework “perfection” is entrenched in change its “healthist” essence?

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16 Additionally, “healthism” reflects neoliberal values by placing the moral responsibility of health on the individual, ignoring systems that exclude certain groups of people from access to resources that facilitate the creation and maintenance of health.
18 Ibid.
In order to address this, we must briefly look at the origins of fatphobia and thinness as an indicator of “perfection.” In *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fatphobia*, Sabrina Strings places the origins of fatphobia in the early 19th century\(^{19}\) and presents anti-fatness as primarily a Western phenomenon. While this suggests that the Naths likely weren’t perpetuating anti-fat bias in their writing, there is evidence that modern postural yoga originated in the late 19th century (around the same time Strings places the origins of fatphobia) as I will now discuss. It is important to recognize that there is a gendered element to anti-fat bias that lends itself to the perpetuation of patriarchal structures in yoga culture, though it is often a female dominated space.

Some scholars place the origins of Modern Postural Yoga in the 19th century, such as Professor Andrea Jain who writes: “By modern yoga, I refer to the yoga tradition that began to emerge in the nineteenth century and developed as a consequence of encounters between European and American metaphysicians and participants in physical culture, Indian yoga gurus, and modernity.”\(^{20}\) In *Tracing the Path of Yoga*, Professor of Philosophy and Religion Stuart Sarbacker makes a similar argument writing that:

The formulation of modern and anglophone forms of yoga in late nineteenth to early twentieth-century India was deeply informed by the vast influx of European physical culture, medicine, philosophy, and spirituality during the colonial era in South Asia. However, the foundation for the development of modern yoga can be found in premodern practices and principles, especially in medieval haṭhayoga and tantric yoga traditions and in widely disseminated philosophical and practical formulations of yoga such as the aṣṭāṅgayoga framework. The success of yoga in Europe and in the Americas, in turn, transformed yoga in India, helping bring about a “yoga renaissance,” one that culminated in yoga’s status as an iconic representation of India itself.\(^{21}\)

While Sarbacker seems to agree with Jain in that he would also attribute modern yoga to the late nineteenth century encounters of Indian cultures with that of America and Europe, unlike Jain, Sarbacker sees a throughline between the Naths and Modern Postural Yoga. This pivotal moment in history, the interaction of Western physical culture and metaphysics with Indian yoga gurus and philosophy is integral to understanding the formation of what is now Modern Postural Yoga. While the philosophies and practices of the Naths surely inform modern yoga practices, Western physical culture and the rise of “modernity” are deeply embedded in the foundations of modern yoga and the cultural trends that accompany it.


In his paper “Yoga, Eugenics, Spiritual Darwinism in the 20th Century,” Professor Singleton writes:

There is little doubt that the modern international physical culture movement (which began in Europe in the mid-nineteenth century and reached its peak, arguably, in the 1930s) exercised a profound effect on the shape of Yoga today. Alter, in somewhat iconoclastic fashion, has argued that Eugene Sandow, the father of modern bodybuilding, had a greater influence on the form and practice of modern Yoga than either Aurobindo or even Vivekananda.22

This brings the Nath’s authority on the subject of Modern Postural Yoga into question. In citing Atler’s argument that Sandow had a greater influence on the form and practice of Modern Postural Yoga than either Aurobindo or Vivekananda, he brings into the question the notion that Modern Postural Yoga’s roots should be attributed to Indian sources alone.

As Jain and Sarbacker note, the modern history of postural yoga can be placed around the late 19th century. In her article “The Siren Song of Yoga: Sex, Spirituality, and the Limits of American Countercultures,” Professor Natalia Petrezela writes:

By the 1890s, Indian visitor Swami Vivekananda openly promoted yoga “for consumption by the wider world” as a way to counter sectarianism and foster self-awakening, but notably not as physical exercise. In the early 1900s, midwestern entrepreneur Pierre Bernard, known as “The Great Oom,” opened tantra clinics from New York City to Chicago, promoting a loosely defined “Asian body of beliefs and practices” to direct divine energy “in creative and emancipatory ways”—many of them sexual—to achieve “full self-acceptance.”23

Swami Vivekananda and Pierre Bernard are two of the most influential figures in the history of postural yoga in the West. Vivekananda’s promotion of yoga at the World Parliaments of Religion in Chicago in 1893 is one example of the practice being openly shared in the West by Indian guru figures and Pierre Bernard’s appropriation of mainly South Asian practices is an example of how these Eastern practices were also extracted by Westerners. Both these figures demonstrate different ways this popularization occurred and how it wasn’t simply unidirectional but, rather, a result of mutual dialogue.

We can also consider how part of the attribution of Modern Postural Yoga to Indian sources is a result of Hindu nationalism in India and the weaponization of yoga as Indian for

Hindu nationalist aims. In her paper “Choreographing Tolerance: Narendra Modi, Hindu Nationalism, and International Yoga Day,” Professor Anusha Kedhar writes:

Yoga has largely benign, benevolent associations with health, harmony, spirituality, unity, and flexibility. This has prevented many from seeing how it, too, has become an instrument of violence and marginalization by the Hindu right. I suggest that Modi has capitalized on yoga’s associations with harmony and flexibility to distract from his administration’s divisiveness and authoritarianism. Yoga has allowed Modi to choreograph an image of himself, and by extension the Hindu state, as flexible (i.e. accommodating) yet strong, peaceful yet powerful.24

In discussing the weaponization of yoga as a mask for violent political gains, Kedhar sheds light on part of the reason for the reclamation of yoga on the part of the Indian government. However, Hindu nationalism is not the only beneficiary from the depiction of yoga as an Indian and Hindu practice. The association of yoga with Hinduism contributes to its perceived ancient mystique and spiritual complexity. This presentation is often employed by the yoga industry to sell an inauthentic image of what yoga is and capitalizes on the allure of exoticism.

In summation, Modern Postural Yoga’s roots have a complicated and contested history. It is difficult to attribute the practice to any one source alone and it is important to keep in mind who benefits from different representations of history. While there are aspects of the practices that are rooted in older Indian traditions, yoga as it is practiced today, is largely based on an evolution of the practice that has occurred over the last 150 years or so, as many scholars discussed here have shown.

Furthermore, the proliferation of the practice is a result of both Indian gurus and teachers coming to the West and promoting the practice as well as Westerners going to India and extracting different practices that they later brought to the West, such as Swami Vivekananda and Pierre Bernard most notably. As Atler suggests, physical culture has had as much of an effect on modern postural yoga as “ancient” Indian traditions, if not more so. This convoluted and opaque history is directly related to the difficulty in defining modern postural yoga. Is it a spiritual practice, an exercise regimen, or something in between?

I am of the view that a large part of what yoga is is related to the individual practitioner’s approach, something which can evolve over time. I would reject the claim that “spiritual yoga” is superior to “physical yoga” and, as Professor Jain does, take each form of yoga as legitimate on its own grounds and not because of a connection to some ancient lineage. This is a brief history of postural yoga as I understand it and is not to be taken as ultimate truth. I want to underscore the importance of “situatedness”25 and positionality in the production of knowledge and the way

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25 See Donna Haraway’s “Situated Knowledges.”
in which certain representations of history are adopted by the mainstream narrative. I would highly recommend doing your own research and creating your own understanding of the practice and its history.

Suggested reading:


Ethical Considerations for Yoga Instructors

There are many different ways to conceive of yoga instructors: fitness instructors, spiritual guides or even gurus, we are sometimes confided in like a therapist or priest, so there are many different roles we are asked to play without necessarily having the training to play those roles. Given the multitude of roles yoga instructors are asked to play, where can we seek ethical guidance? Most of the roles I offered come with regulating bodies and rules that help with ethical discernment, although this does not necessarily preclude people in those roles from crossing ethical boundaries. In this manual, I will offer some of the ethical considerations yoga instructors might keep in mind given their multifaceted role and unique authority. As part of these considerations, I try to examine the source of some of these issues. While the source of these power imbalances is often outside of the yoga community, they are simultaneously perpetuated within it.

It is well worth considering why many people chose to become yoga instructors to begin with: is it a way to give back? Does it come from wanting to emulate and embody the teachers we’ve had? Is it a way to go deeper into our own practice? Is it to build community? Is it to share the wisdom we may have gained? Or, does the appeal come from the hope of fulfilling a very specific cultural image of who a yoga instructor is (usually a young, thin, white woman)?

In my own decision to pursue teaching all of these different considerations played some role, consciously or unconsciously. Rather than making judgments about what a “good reason” to begin teaching is, I think it is useful to acknowledge that there are many different reasons that bring people to yoga instruction, and to take these different motivations seriously. If I could go back to my own training, I wish I had been told to take my role as a community leader more seriously and that I had been given guidelines around what it means to hold space and curate an experience in a way that doesn’t perpetuate harm.

In thinking about potential ethical frameworks for yoga instructors, I have often come across teachers who will reference the yamas and niyamas (ethical rules and restraints) from the Yoga Sutras. However, this relies on (in my opinion) a fabricated link between postural yoga and the text. The Yoga Sutras are much older than modern postural yoga as Mallinson and Singleton have shown. In addition, modern postural yoga has been greatly influenced by Swedish gymnastics and bodybuilding practices which means that it likely has never had the “authenticity” that many yoga instructors present it as having. While it is tempting to draw on a text that has authority as ancient and presumably tied to the “authentic” teachings I don’t believe the Yoga Sutras are able to fully engage with the complexities of living in the modern world.

While I have separated this manual into different topics for ethical consideration, all of these different areas influence one another and should not be looked at in isolation. It is

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27 “Above all else, as the pioneering yoga scholar Mark Singleton has shown, the system of Swedish gymnastics created by P.H Ling (1766-1839) profoundly influenced the development of Western physical culture in general, and modern postural yoga in particular.” Mclaughlan, Scott. “A Brief History of Modern Yoga.” The Collector, 22 Nov. 2022, https://www.thecollector.com/history-of-yoga/.
impossible to discuss gender dynamics without discussing power more broadly, it is impossible to discuss power without discussing race, cultural appropriation, colonialism and so on. In separating these different issues into sections, I don’t mean to imply that they are fundamentally separate. Many of these issues extend beyond the context of a yoga class. In addition to making personal evaluations and trying to live and teach in an ethical way, it is essential to address our potential complicity in these larger structures.

Galtung, often referred to as the “father of peace studies,” separates violence into three categories: direct, structural, and cultural (which, of course, work in tandem). While we have most agency over our complicity in direct violence, as leaders of a community, yoga instructors are uniquely positioned to address cultural violence and, through that, work toward structural change. Cultural violence, as Galtung defines it, “represents the existence of prevailing or prominent social norms that make direct and structural violence seem “natural” or “right” or at least acceptable.”

In the yoga community, some common examples of cultural violence are evident in rhetoric such as variations of “suffering is a choice,” “people get what they deserve,” “you create your reality,” language that implies one’s physical capabilities are reflective of their personality (or soul) or that their experiences of racism or poverty are self-inflicted. Given how common this language is in the yoga and wellness space, it comes up multiple times throughout the course of this manual. While this rhetoric may be empowering to some, it fails to take into account larger structural issues and perpetuates the neoliberal ideal that the individual is the maker of their own destiny when, the truth is, individual successes and failures are influenced by a variety of different factors (including structural inequity). While it isn’t the responsibility of any one person to induce a cultural shift, yoga instructors, as community leaders, both set the tone around what kind of language and rhetoric is acceptable and have the responsibility of setting boundaries around what kind of discourse is not acceptable in the studio (intervening when necessary).

In order for structural change to occur, beyond just ethical guidelines, there need to be systems of accountability. While Yoga Alliance accepts complaints regarding sexual misconduct, harassment, and other ethical breaches, there is no system of accountability embedded within it. Ultimately, without accountability, there can be no justice and without an ethical system there can be no boundaries or guidelines by which people can be held accountable. My vision for this section of the project is to produce a set of contemporary ethical guidelines for yoga teachers to consider.

At the same time, I want to recognize the pressure to embody “perfect” ethics. In my experience, the quest for perfection can often preclude our ability to recognize our limitations and address them in a meaningful way. I am reminded of a John Steinbeck quote, he writes: “Now that you don’t have to be perfect—you can be good.” It is the very acknowledgement of our limitations, our imperfection, that grants us the opportunity to do better. Surely, I have made

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mistakes here. Surely, you will make mistakes. I am less interested in this guide producing a set of “perfect” ethics, rather, my hope for it is to open up windows for inquiry and the questioning of the status quo.

I am approaching this work not only as a scholar but as a teacher and practitioner within the yoga community, which can be a challenging and complicated position. It is my hope that this manual will serve as a starting off point for further development and inquiry based on every reader’s own experience and positionality, each of which carries its own kind of embodied knowledge and wisdom.
Inclusivity

In the spirit of facilitating and creating a truly inclusive yoga community, it is important to address factors like race, ethnicity, gender, age, ability, size, and socioeconomic status in order to create an environment where everyone feels seen, valued, and supported. Access to healthy food and spaces to move are becoming increasingly inaccessible to the vast majority of the American public and, as yoga teachers, we play a role in dismantling these barriers.

As Petzela notes in her book, Fit Nation: The Gains and Pains of America’s Exercise Obsession, eighty percent of Americans live in a “fitness desert” defined as an area without a park within a half mile radius. Yoga classes are becoming increasingly expensive and, therefore, inaccessible. There is an insidiousness to this inaccessibility because of how being perceived in a certain kind of body can unlock greater social-economic possibilities. Beyond the financial inaccessibility, there is also the aspect of whether or not the studio feels welcoming to a particular person, whether the class is accessible to different fitness levels, age groups, and people of different race and ethnicities as well as the general diversity of the clientele.

In her article “Stretchy and Tense” Elizabeth McKibben writes:

This shaming of some bodies and idealization of others is but one of the deep contradictions in which the yoga industry is enmeshed. Messages of empowerment mask the exclusionary nature of white feminist neoliberalism. […] Representing yoga based on normative standards of whiteness and affluence enacts exclusion in yoga practice. Expensive clothing, classes, and homogeneous “yoga bodies” exclude poor, big-bodied, disabled, men, and women of color from yoga’s potential well-being benefits.

There are many different factors that contribute to inaccessibility in the fitness space including body shaming and the presence of white feminist neoliberalism as McKibben discusses. Similarly, in Fit Nation, Petzela writes: “bodies—like homes, bank accounts, neighborhoods, and the number of diplomas on the wall—are yet another marker of socioeconomic inequality.” McKibben and Petzela clearly elucidate the ways in which questions of inclusivity, anti-fat bias, race, gender, and class go hand in hand.

I want to be careful not to perpetuate neoliberal ideologies by placing the responsibility of structural change onto individuals; these structural issues (such as inclusivity and

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accessibility) can only be addressed through increased access which is closely related to questions of race and class, as I will discuss. However, as community leaders, yoga instructors have a crucial role to play in shifting cultural attitudes that impact who feels welcome in the yoga space. One way to do so is to not assume that we know what someone is entering the room with: what kind of knowledge or experiences they may or may not have had. Approaching each student with an attitude of genuine curiosity rather than judgment is one way to make your classroom a more accessible space. While this is one way in which we, as individuals, can have an impact, this lack of inclusivity is reflective of a larger social issue.

On a structural level, it is important to advocate for BIPOC, queer and gender nonconforming folks, and people of diverse socio-economic backgrounds to have access to teacher trainings through scholarships. By advocating for, and ultimately providing, the opportunity for people from diverse communities (who desire to teach) to have access to yoga trainings this both changes who is in the room during the training itself, which may raise issues and questions that may not have been raised otherwise, and allows for increased representation in yoga in addition to increased access to yoga if and when those teachers share the practice with their communities.

Questions for Contemplation/Exploration:

What does it mean for a yoga class to be inclusive? What kind of people are in my classes/the classes I take? What kind of assumptions do I make about someone’s yoga/fitness experience (or lack thereof) based on their background or positionality? Who was in my yoga teacher training? Who wasn’t?

Suggested reading:


*Self-help in the 'age of responsibility' denies unequal realities*

Body Neutrality, Anti-Fat Bias, and the Cult of Thinness

In her book, *Cultish*, linguist Amanda Montell writes: “In the U.S., we are taught to fetishize self-improvement. Fitness is a particularly compelling form of self-improvement because it demonstrates classic American values like productivity, individualism, and a commitment to meeting normative beauty standards. The language of cult fitness helps connect aspects of religion-like devotion, submission, and transformation-to secular ideals like
perseverance and physical attractiveness.” In the spiritualization of secular ideals, physical attractiveness becomes not only something to strive for, but, troublingly, an indicator of who is more “spiritual.” Beauty is conflated with proximity to the divine and becomes a currency of power.

In her book The Beauty Myth, Naomi Wolf writes: “the fear-of-fat aspect actually changes the way the brain works. Women caught in it are subjected to classic, long-established forms of thought control.” Crucially, Wolf underscores the connection between the emphasis on female beauty and the maintenance of the patriarchy. She writes: “A cultural fixation on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty but an obsession about female obedience.”

Wolf argues that the cult of thinness shares with cults three building blocks:

“Cults follow an authoritarian structure. Dieters follow “regimes” from which they must not deviate.[…] Cults preach “renunciation of the world.” Dieters give up pleasure in foods, they avoid eating out, restrain their social lives, and withdraw from situations in which they might face temptations. […]Cult members believe that they alone are “gifted with the truth.” Women with weight obsessions ignore compliments because they feel that they alone know just how repulsive is the body hidden from view. […] Self-denial can lock women into a smug and critical condescension to other, less devout women.”

Wolf adds: “For reprogramming to be successful, the case must be made to the cult escapee that what she has undergone is “real and powerful,” while assuring her that the craziness came from without.” Given that all women are subject to indoctrination into the “cult of thinness,” it is important to be extremely careful about perpetuating anti-fat rhetoric as well as language and behavior that glorifies thinness without invalidating the way in which thinness, and attractiveness more generally, is a form of social power.

Yoga instructors are in a unique position to set the tone regarding the way students relate to their own bodies. As yoga instructors, it is our responsibility to examine our own biases and how they may manifest in our language, teaching style, and interactions with students. Since postural yoga is so focused on the physical body, and exploring what is possible with the body, it is fertile ground for the manifestation and internalization of anti-fat bias as well as the development of eating disorders and the perpetuation of the cult of thinness. In fact, many students begin practicing yoga with the intent of improving their physical health and changing their bodies, which often includes the desire to lose weight. A question to consider is that of how

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36 Ibid, 122-123.
37 Ibid, 128.
to respect these student’s pursuits without perpetuating anti-fat rhetoric and, simultaneously, recognizing the ways in which the desire to lose weight, for example, is rooted in larger questions of power.

There were times in my own training where I heard things like “if you can’t do this pose you have too much around your midsection.” This kind of rhetoric is damaging because it insinuates that certain people will never be able to do a pose until their body changes in some way and that being able to do a certain pose increases your spiritual value. One way to combat this rhetoric is to pay attention to the way in which, as an instructor, you frame modifications or variations of postures. For example, instead of framing “easier” versions of postures as preliminary steps to the more “advanced” variations, affirming that each variation is valuable in its own right. For many different reasons, there are some people who will never be able to “achieve” certain expressions of postures and it is important not to perpetuate hierarchy based on able-bodiedness. An important part of creating a non-hierarchical relationship to postures and different types of bodies is emphasizing the importance of process over results when it comes to the practice of yoga postures.

Questions for Contemplation/Exploration:

When did I get indoctrinated into the cult of thinness? Do I treat people differently based on their physical appearance? Do I measure my self worth based on my own physical appearance? Do I treat people I am attracted to with more respect/care/humanity? Do I view weight loss as an accomplishment? Why or why not? Do I believe that being able to perform a yoga pose (or not) is a reflection of someone’s character/personality? Why or why not?

Suggested reading:

The Politics of Desirability.


Diet

Given the precarious history many people have with diet culture, I strongly advise against making blanket dietary recommendations. In particular, I would be especially careful about moralizing about food and presenting veganism, for example, as a way to “purify” or “detox” the body. If you do choose to give dietary recommendations, ask yourself: why do I feel compelled to tell people how to eat? What kind of knowledge do I have about this particular person’s body? It is important to note that every person is unique and just because one person benefits from a particular way of eating doesn’t mean another will.

Additionally, I would frame recommendations around diet as a kind of personal experiment. How do you feel when you eat in this way? I think the language of “how do you feel if you…” is useful outside of the context of diet as well. For instance, when adjusting postures instead of commanding a student to move in a particular way, asking something like: “how does it feel if you…” This can be a helpful way to guide the student back to the sensations in their body and give them the option to say: “That actually doesn’t feel good in my body.”

Ultimately, I would be very careful when making recommendations around diet and might avoid making recommendations at all, if possible. If a student does approach you and ask about diet specifically, I would recommend asking them what they are looking for in doing so. If they are curious about diet with the motivation of losing weight, I would remind them that I am not a dietitian and that they might consider asking their doctor or going to an expert for an assessment. Part of maintaining integrity as a yoga instructor involves knowing where your jurisdiction ends and when it is appropriate to refer students to other kinds of practitioners like doctors, physical therapists, psychologists, etc.

Questions for Contemplation/Exploration:

Which ways of eating feel best in my body? Are there foods I deem inherently “bad” or “good”? Why? Am I aware of how my food connects to the larger networks I am part of? What do I consume other than food (such as media)? How does it make me feel? What does my role as a yoga instructor include?

Suggested Reading:

Ep 5 - Vegans Killed Yoga - Yoga Is Dead

Gender, Power Dynamics, and the Cult of Beauty

While yoga is largely marketed as a practice for women, many of its historical founders have been men. Additionally, in some Indian lineages, many women were prohibited from practicing and male yogis were advised to avoid the company of women. While this is far from yoga culture today, some of the patriarchal practices embedded in older traditions have been
carried into the present. While the majority of practitioners are female (80%), the discrepancy in male practitioners of yoga and male yoga teachers is one illustration of how while yoga is a space dominated by women, men still have significant social power.

In her article “The Siren Song of Yoga: Sex, Spirituality, and the Limits of American Countercultures,” Professor Petrzela writes:

[M]any Americans who responded to what Cosmopolitan in 1972 called the “siren song of yoga”—especially the white women who came to comprise the majority of practitioners—[…] interpreted and experienced yoga as a mechanism for upholding patriarchy and other hierarchies.  

In her book Fit Nation she adds: “Yoga […] was a means to satisfy dominant gendered ideals while only gently resisting them. On one hand […] in “our car-and-cocktail-party culture,” even ten minutes of yoga at home could extend women’s “young and trim” years and delay the inexorable social death of being “old and flabby.” Yoga is sometimes presented as a means by which women can continue to fit into a very specific image of beauty that caters to the male gaze. The insinuation that women should practice yoga because of how it will make them more valuable to men, is just one other illustration of the power men hold in the yoga space.

In The Beauty Myth, Naomi Wolf writes: “‘Beauty’ is a currency system like the gold standard. Like any economy, it is determined by politics, and in the modern age in the West it is the last, best belief system that keeps male dominance intact.” What would it mean to create a culture (in yoga, in the world) in which women are truly empowered instead of expected to uphold an image of “beauty” that ultimately keeps male dominance intact, as Wolf writes. Crucially, Wolf acknowledges that the issue is not simply that “less beautiful” women suffer because of the imperative to be beautiful, all women suffer because of it. She writes: “You do not win by struggling to the top of a caste system, you win by refusing to be trapped within one at all.”

While I am not suggesting that men should not be yoga instructors or practice yoga, I think it is important for there to be a recognition of the different power imbalances that can exist between people of different gender identities. Perhaps, one possible solution could be to make

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43 Ibid, 290.
classes available that are exclusively available for women and gender nonconforming people. However, it is important to note that just because a space is free from male presence, does not mean it is inherently feminist or free from patriarchal ideals. There are cases in which women uphold patriarchal power structures by policing each other (perhaps, rooted in the self-policing women are taught from a young age). I have heard about cases in which female instructors are told that they would be scheduled for more classes if they dressed in a more provocative way (by other female instructors), which essentially translates to being told to dress for the male gaze.

In her book, Wolf later adds that: “The beauty myth is always actually prescribing behavior and not appearance.” To be subversive in the context of hegemonic gender dynamics does not necessarily require looking a different way, it entails acting in a different way. For example, to avoid engaging in self-surveillance as well as the surveillance of other women. Wolf writes: “Female thinness and youth are not in themselves next to godliness in this culture. Society really doesn’t care about women’s appearance per se. What genuinely matters is that women remain willing to let others tell them what they can and cannot have.” I wonder if, in the case of the instructor being told how to dress, the issue wasn’t truly whether or not she dressed provocatively but whether or not she would be obedient.

In concluding, Wolf writes: “The real issue has nothing to do with whether women wear makeup or don’t, gain weight or lose it, have surgery or shun it, dress up or down, make our clothing and faces and bodies into works of art or ignore adornment altogether. The real problem is our lack of choice.” To what extent does yoga culture prescribe and/or perpetuate a patriarchal cultural image of what it means to be a yoga practitioner or teacher? To what extent do women truly have the freedom to make choices about their own bodies in the yoga community? I believe these questions are closely tied to questions of agency. Given that most women have grown up in a world that idealizes a very specific image of beauty, how much agency do we really have in the decisions we make about our own bodies?

It is also important to take an intersectional approach which means acknowledging the way in which white supremacy is deeply connected to the patriarchy and recognizing how they function together. In their book White Women: Everything You Already Know about Your Own Racism and How to Do Better; Regina Jackson and Saira Rao write:

If white womanhood is a house, your need to be perfect is the foundation. Being perfect is the key to your happiness, to your success, to your very existence. [...] The foundational principle of perfection in a white supremacist society like ours is rooted in whiteness. [...] Of course, white skin alone doesn’t render you perfect, but without it, you have no chance. White skin is a necessary but insufficient ingredient of perfection. [...] Your endless quest for perfection is a trap. You will never be pretty enough. You will

44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid, 272.
never be thin enough. You will never be smart enough or successful enough or rich enough.47

The Nath Siddha’s alchemical quest for perfection, which I describe in the history section, is easily co-opted by the white woman’s quest for this unattainable, foundationally racist, perfection that Jackson and Rao describe. They write: “White women have the luxury of self-hatred because of their white privilege. Black, Indigenous, and other women of color cannot afford self-hatred; it is too much, on top of the hatred the rest of the world has for us.”48 They later add: “Antiracism work depends on your acknowledging your imperfections, namely how you have been born into and nurtured by a white supremacist society.”49 I elaborate more on antiracism work later in this manual but I want to make explicit the connections between the patriarchy and white supremacy culture and acknowledge that the idealized image of beauty that Wolf refers to is, predominantly, a white image of beauty.

The yoga community is a site of the formation of many young women, myself included. More seasoned yoga teachers serve as role models for newer teachers and come to represent an image of what it means to be a yoga teacher. As I have mentioned, I am hesitant to prescribe individual solutions for structural issues, however, I do think individuals contribute to the formation of culture, particularly those in leadership positions. I believe it is possible to model a relationship with one’s body and yoga practice truly rooted in joy and an embodied sense of safety and freedom.

Wolf explains that the reason that the “beauty myth” is so useful, is its divisiveness.50 The antidote, she suggests, is for women to have honest conversations about our experiences. Noticing whether there is space for honest conversations about insecurities or the pressures to embody a particular image of what a yoga instructor (or woman) should look like may be reflective of whether the community we are part of perpetuates this divisiveness or counters it. As community leaders, perhaps, we can advocate for and create spaces for teachers and/or students to have conversations around the pressures they may feel to fit into a specific image of what they think they should look like and what would need to happen for that burden to be lifted, at least in the context of the studio.

When you are teaching, your voice is the one setting the tone. I think with the cult of beauty in particular there are ways to draw attention to how it may be internalized in a gentle, maybe even humorous, way. A practice I have found helpful and have heard suggested in yoga classes is drawing attention to, and even gently making fun of, the tendency to compare ourselves to others, to wish for our bodies to be different than they are, and the belief that these

48 Ibid, 200.
49 Ibid, 64.
desires are unique to us. For example, asking people to notice if they are comparing themselves to the person next to them (in a way that recognizes that act’s humanness) and guiding them back to the sensations in their own body. In addition to shifting away from comparison, I have found it helpful to cultivate a sense of gratitude for what the body is able to do rather than what the body looks like.

Ultimately, I see these tools as helping to facilitate the creation of an embodied sense of safety that seems, to me, foundational in creating a community of women that don’t feel that they are competing (with each other, with themselves) to have their humanity acknowledged. The way in which women are instilled with a sense of scarcity, often in relation to male attention, which then leads them to compete with each other must be annihilated for this sense of safety to exist. The tone set in a yoga class needs to be one of acknowledging every person’s inherent worthiness and value without qualification. Without the understanding that every person has inherent worth, without the understanding that we are not in competition, there is no foundation for community building.

Additionally, in considering gender in the context of the yoga community it is important to recognize trans, non-binary, and queer experience. Some of the language commonly used to describe energy in the subtle body has a gendered element (such as ida and pingala, the solar and lunar energies in the body, are often characterized as masculine and feminine). By making claims that essentialize gender into this polarity, ways of being that transgress the masculine/feminine, male/female, binary are overlooked. This could lead to some people, such as trans and non-binary folks, feeling disregarded, unvalued, or even objectified (if, for instance, they are presented as having “transcended” duality). In terms of creating structural change, it is important to advocate for gender diversity and queer representation in yoga trainings through scholarships. I could see yoga classes specifically for genderqueer and LGBTQ+ people more generally being helpful in creating spaces that feel safe and welcoming.

Questions for Contemplation/Exploration:

Why does the percentage of male yoga teachers far exceed the percentage of practitioners? What would it mean to create a space that truly is for all kinds of people, regardless of gender identity? What is the difference between a space that upholds hegemonic gender ideals and one that empowers women? When have I felt an embodied sense of safety and freedom?

Suggested Reading:


**Xenofeminism:**

*When Feminism Is White Supremacy in Heels*

**Racial Justice and Healing**

Yoga is often posited as a system of healing at an individual level, but so much of the pain that many individuals contend with is imposed through systems of discrimination that are enacted upon groups of people. One example of this is systemic racism. Rather than looking at healing the effects of racism solely within the individual body, ultimately it is something that needs to be healed in the social body.

In *My Grandmother’s Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*, Rehmaan Menakem writes: “White-body supremacy is always functioning in our bodies. It operates in our thinking brains, in our assumptions, expectations, and mental shortcuts. It operates in our muscles and nervous systems, where it routinely creates constriction.” In so doing, Menakem argues that white supremacy is necessarily an embodied experience. As a system of self-regulation, perhaps, yoga can help to undo some of the embodied harm caused by racism and other forms of discrimination. Describing racism as an embodied experience elucidates the need for it to be healed at both individual and collective levels.

Recognizing racism as deeply intertwined with other forms of marginalization based on identity is crucial in looking at it in an intersectional way and understanding that individuals may experience racism differently based on a variety of social factors. As I will later discuss, the cultural appropriation embedded in the commercialization of yoga can contribute to racial trauma and this only underscores the need for cultural competency and sensitivity within wellness practices.

Central to racial justice and healing is the necessity to create wellness and yoga spaces that are both inclusive and conducive to community healing. One example is the creation of affinity spaces for BIPOC to both practice yoga and discuss their experience in the wellness space (such as a specific class for BIPOC taught by a BIPOC instructor). Additionally, yoga trainings should provide scholarships for BIPOC, as I discussed in the section on inclusivity; this

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both actively contributes to diverse representation and increased access to yoga for a wider range of people. These trainings should address the systemic lack of access to wellness and fitness practices certain communities experience and the ways in which the perpetuation of white supremacy culture in yoga (such as “microaggressions”) actively keeps these spaces predominantly white.

I see the whiteness of wellness culture as closely linked to the way in which yoga and wellness spaces perpetuate the quest for perfection that many white women pursue, a perfection for which whiteness is a prerequisite, as I mentioned in the section on gender. This quest for perfection is based on the myth of meritocracy, which is basically the idea that people get what they deserve (“meritocracy, as a potent blend of an essentialised notion of ‘talent’, competitive individualism and belief in social mobility, is mobilised to both disguise and gain consent for the economic inequalities wrought through neoliberalism.”). Perpetuating the illusion of a meritocracy through language like “we create our own experience” or “suffering is a choice” is harmful and erases the experience of marginalized communities. While framed as empowering, who exactly is this rhetoric meant to empower? Who does it keep in power?

Jackson and Rao write:

The primary message of self-care and self-improvement gospel is that you alone are responsible for your own happiness. It’s meant to be empowering, but it negates the huge impact that systems and structures—outside of our control—have on our personal fates. The toxic positivity of white wellness says that “success is 99 percent attitude and 1 percent aptitude,” but this ignores the reality of systemic racism. A positive attitude cannot end the oppression Black, Indigenous, and brown women experience.

Examining how this “wisdom” can be damaging is important. It is especially important to recognize the way in which this rhetoric can facilitate “spiritual bypassing,” which Rao and Jackson define as “a series of moves rooted in “spirituality” that white people make in order to avoid discussing the brutal realities of white supremacy.” (e.g. “manifest your way to happiness,” “everything happens for a reason,” “we have to stop dwelling on the past and move forward.”) The problem with spiritual bypassing is that it presents a version of “spirituality” in which one person can be liberated while another person is not when, in reality, liberation is a communal act. My liberation is interdependent with yours.

55 Ibid, 250.
A “spiritual liberation” that distills the freedom of the individual from that of the group is not liberation at all but, rather, a system of anaesthetization. Ultimately, “it implies that [...] Black, Indigenous, and brown women are somehow bad—lesser or weaker—because we refuse to deny or erase our own pain.” It is crucial to acknowledge that spiritual bypassing does not just discount the experience of BIPOC folks, it actively enforces the oppression of BIPOC. The quest for liberation is often presented as the very motivation for the practice of yoga. The idea that individual liberation can exist in isolation is a lie sold to us by neoliberal spirituality and it needs to die; the illusion that if we work hard enough we, alone, will be free is an illusion. Our freedom is deeply connected to the freedom of others.

Making sure there is diverse representation in the spaces we are in is just the beginning of addressing racism in the wellness and yoga space. It is crucial to deeply question our own complicity in these structures and acknowledge that BIPOC actually have an epistemic advantage over white folks and to value BIPOC experience as a form of knowledge. Finally, I would recommend that studios (and maybe even individual teachers) find ways to invite feedback in a meaningful way. This would likely need to be anonymous so that people feel free to share their experience and to what extent the studio, or particular teacher’s class, feels safe.

Questions for Contemplation/Exploration:

How can embodied practices be used for racial justice and healing? What is our responsibility as instructors and community leaders to foster social change? How does our positionality affect our embodied experience? Am I complicit in perpetuating white supremacy culture? How does it feel to benefit from white supremacy? How do I envision liberation?

Suggested Reading:


Ep 1 - White Women Killed Yoga

Colonialism

As a method for self-regulation, yoga could potentially be used as an anesthetic for those who live in a settler colonial society to cope and become more comfortable with the state they live in and its history of genocide (in America, for example). Instead of allowing it to be used to pacify people from making real change in the world, as yoga teachers, we have a responsibility

56 Ibid.
to not only acknowledge this history, but to acknowledge that it makes sense to be uncomfortable with the West’s history but that should not justify ignoring it or turning a blind eye to injustice.

In her book *Peace Love Yoga: The Politics of Global Spirituality*, Professor Andrea Jain asks:

Is it possible to combine yoga, mindfulness, or other spiritual disciplines, discourses, or institutions, and their peaceful, loving, liberating gestures, with righteous anger and revolutionary, disruptive political action? If so, how could people sustain and broaden the rise of global spirituality as resistance, while rejecting the rationality underlying neoliberal capitalism?57

I think part of using spiritual discipline to disrupt social hierarchies and structures that actively harm others is using these practices to help ourselves and our students become more comfortable with the experience of discomfort and anger. While yoga is typically envisioned as a “peaceful” practice, what does it mean to be peaceful in the midst of injustice?

In their chapter on “Decolonising Yoga” in the Routledge Handbook for Yoga and Meditation, Shameem Black writes:

If we conceptualise yoga in hopeful terms as a practical philosophy of transformation that promotes an expanded apprehension of reality, one of the most exciting possibilities is that yoga can give us the tools for better constructive critique. Postcolonial studies is well known for its ability to expose injury and injustice. It is less well known for its ability to articulate a viable way forward. Yoga alone is unlikely to decolonise habits of thought and action. But, enmeshed with analysis and activism, it offers the possibility for embodied critique.58

Black suggests that yoga alone is incapable of providing the change necessary for a post-colonial world, but sees it as a useful tool to be used in tandem with analysis and activism. Ultimately, I think it is important to see the capacity for yoga practice and culture to be used to both inspire change and encourage the maintenance of the status quo. As yoga instructors, we are uniquely positioned to envision and guide our students and larger community towards a post-colonial world. A necessary step in working towards this involves self-reflection regarding our own social positioning and the ways in which we benefit from and/or are harmed by colonialism.

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New age spirituality often goes hand in hand with neoliberalism and white supremacy culture in that it alludes to a world in which “people get what they deserve.” (i.e a meritocracy, as I discuss in the section on racial justice) This idea of a meritocracy is easily paired with the concept of necropolitics which describes ideologies and practices that dictate who deserves to live and who deserves to die within a particular society. Using language like “everything happens for a reason” can imply that certain people must die and that it is part of a “divine plan.” As spiritual leaders, there are ways to facilitate meaning-making without enacting this kind of spiritual bypassing.

The first step is validating what someone is experiencing and taking responsibility if warranted. Secondly, it is important not to force someone to create meaning out of a painful experience. Lastly, it may be helpful to frame whatever meaning is made as having been created by the person experiencing it rather than inherent in the situation. For example, say someone shares about the passing of their friend. Instead of responding with a platitude like: “They are in a better place now.” Or “Everything happens for a reason.” Maybe trying something like: “I am so sorry to hear of the passing of your friend. I can’t imagine what that must be like for you. How have you been coping?” This framing acknowledges the immensity of the pain of that person’s experience, validates it through expressing empathy, and frames any meaning made (or not) as coming from the person experiencing the situation. Additionally, ending with a question leaves space for the conversation to continue as opposed to using a cliche phrase that will likely shut down the conversation from continuing.

Ultimately, colonialism is a structure that extends beyond individual responsibility and agency. Recognizing the way in which we may have internalized colonial or white supremacist rhetoric is just the beginning of addressing our complicity. If we consider the ultimate goal of spiritual practice to be the liberation of all beings, it becomes evident that activism is an integral part of that liberation.

Questions for Contemplation/Exploration:

How is social change fostered? How do I deal with discomfort? What is my/my inherited relationship with colonialism? How have I been harmed and/or how have I benefited from colonial structures?

Suggested Reading:


Cultural Appropriation

When I first started studying religion about 4 years into teaching yoga, it started to dawn on me: yoga is a religious and spiritual practice. I didn’t know much about where it came from at the time but I went to my boss with this realization, I remember saying something like “doesn’t yoga come from South Asia?” And she responded: “Yeah, I guess so.” She had been teaching for 10 years at the time. In some ways, I was wrong, yoga doesn’t just come from South Asian religious traditions, it draws on Swedish gymnastics, Indian bodybuilding and military practices, etc.

In my time as a yoga instructor, Hindu (and sometimes Buddhist) religious practices were regularly rebranded and sold as “spiritual” and made readily available to a non-Hindu audience. This ranged from the enactment of puja ceremonies which were said to burn karma to the invocation of the Gayatri mantra in the beginning of yoga classes to prayers to Hindu gods all the while failing to mention the religious and cultural context for the development and practice of these rituals. The use of these practices also functions as a way to manufacture an experience of antiquity and authenticity that alludes to a historical spiritual authority and fabricates religious authenticity.

In her book *Stealing My Religion: Not Just Any Cultural Appropriation*, Professor Elizabeth Bucar writes:

This history of yoga is a story of inventing authenticity, rather than excavating an original source. But it is still an important history for us to learn. It includes moments when various stakeholders promoted specific yoga practices, often as strategies to preserve asymmetrical power dynamics, by disconnecting them from larger cultural and religious contexts to make them more valuable to British colonialism, Indian nationalism, and, finally, American wellness culture.  

The process of dissociating religious practices from their religious origins in order to make them marketable is the essence of cultural appropriation. Through this process individuals benefit from these practices without being subject to the social cost that the people from the communities the practices originate from are subject to. Yoga is unique in that it both culturally appropriates and fabricates religious authenticity (another reason to study its history).

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In her book *Peace Love Yoga: The Politics of Global Spirituality*, Professor Andrea Jain writes:

This reflects a sanitization of cultural practices—appropriate only those parts of others’ cultures that can be cleansed of unwanted or unpopular cultural baggage. For global consumers to widely appropriate religious images or practices, they need to be rendered spiritual in the sense of being free of unwanted cultural baggage, reflecting only prevailing spiritual trends and not traditional understandings, orientations, or commitments. Although many spiritual entrepreneurs, corporations, and consumers might resist critical reflection on these matters, preferring instead to speak of their spiritual products as if they represent static essences that can be seamlessly transmitted from one consumer-practitioner to another, transmission is far messier and usually does not take place between social equals.\(^{60}\)

As Andrea Jain notes, the sanitization of South Asian religious practices makes them free of unwanted cultural baggage, cultural baggage that is often used to discriminate against people from the regions these practices are appropriated from. Given the interaction between the South Asian roots of postural yoga and the influence of the West on the physical practice, I am not sure whether it can be considered a practice that strictly belongs to those of South Asian origin. However, blatantly Hindu practices like puja ceremonies, deity worship, and mantra invocation are surely in the domain of cultural appropriation. Is it better to teach a yoga class that is entirely cleansed of these practices or whether it is better to include them and cite their origins? Ultimately, every teacher brings their own positionality and teaching philosophy to their class but I do believe it is important to carefully examine yoga’s messy and contested history in order to make sound and ethical choices.

Informing students about yoga’s mixed cultural heritage and avoiding making false claims about its antiquity is just the beginning of addressing cultural appropriation. Inviting people of South Asian origin involved in the yoga community to speak at training and share their experience with yoga in the West could help illuminate the ways in which cultural appropriation alienates people from the very cultures it borrows from and ways to make the yoga space safe for all people.

Questions for Contemplation/Exploration:

Is it possible to borrow from other cultures in a responsible way? Should “yoga” be called yoga? Is yoga strictly a South Asian practice?

Suggested reading:


**Sexual/Romantic Boundaries**

When I was completing my teacher training, the only real ethical guidance I received was not to sleep with my students, something I later saw as deeply hypocritical given the person who was giving out that advice. As a general rule, I do believe it is good advice.

However, it is important to consider the real possibility that a student and teacher might develop a romantic relationship and think about what an ethical relationship between a teacher and a student could look like should one develop. It is important to recognize that every student-teacher relationship has its own power dynamic and that there may be cases where a relationship may develop relatively unproblematically and others where it will be extremely important to consider whether, given the power dynamic, both people are truly in a position to give consent (for instance, a student who has taken a teacher’s class once vs. a student who has been taking classes with a particular teacher for years).

Many studios have rules against these kinds of relationships developing. Ideally, the student-teacher relationship can remain one of mutual respect, clear boundaries, without any kind of sexual or romantic entanglement. In any case, if a romantic relationship does develop between a teacher and student, in my view, it should be: a) initiated by the student, b) the teacher should immediately refer the student to another teacher and, c) regardless of how the relationship unfolds, the student-teacher dynamic should no longer be an option going forward.

**Questions for Contemplation/Exploration:**

Is it ever appropriate for a yoga teacher to date a student? In what cases might a power dynamic prevent someone from being able to truly consent to a romantic relationship?

**Suggested reading:**


**Touch**

Allowing students space and autonomy to request and/or decline touch is important for a number of reasons and can be healing to those who have not been given a choice around touch in the past. In order to cultivate a practice of touch that feels safe and welcome from those receiving
it, it is important to reflect on and decide what kind of model of consent you would like to employ. This section explores different models of consent in the context of a yoga class.

Touch within the context of a yoga class can be difficult to navigate and requires thoughtful consideration. While there are some benefits to hands on adjustments, not everyone feels comfortable receiving (or giving) them. Some teachers choose not to perform hands-on adjustments at all, while others perform them regularly. Ultimately, this is up to every teacher’s own discretion and teaching philosophy. While touch can be beneficial to some students, it may be triggering for others. Recognizing that touch can be both beneficial and triggering, if a student expresses that they would prefer not to be touched it is important to be respectful of their choice and, ideally, refrain from taking such choices personally.

Taking time to speak with each student individually in order to better understand their past experiences and relationship with touch is an important part of obtaining consent and understanding other ethical issues that may be part of that particular teacher-student dynamic. In the process of obtaining someone’s consent, a question that is important to consider is that of what it means to be capable of giving consent. Recognizing the power dynamic between teacher and student, it may feel difficult for some students to set boundaries around touch. Making it clear in a larger class that this preliminary conversation is an essential part of setting appropriate boundaries is key (as is making yourself available for such a conversation). Below I list a few models of consent to consider as well as the benefits and limitations of each.

Questions for Contemplation/Exploration:

Is touch always beneficial? When is touch harmful? Should touch be avoided entirely? What do different models for consent look like? What does a good model for consent contain? How do you respond to touch in the context of a yoga class? If you plan on using touch as a teaching modality, which model of consent do you see yourself taking on? How and when can we expect people to be capable of giving consent? What does informed consent look like in this context?

Examples of models for consent:

Consent cards: students put an object on their mat to indicate they would like to receive a hands on adjustment.

Asking students to signal if they consent to touch: asking students in a discreet posture, like child’s pose, if they consent to touch by raising their hands, putting a hand on their head, etc.
Asking for permission: Before touching a student, ask “is it okay if I touch your [insert body part here]?” (Note: Just because a student consents to one adjustment, does not mean they consent to all adjustments.)

Ongoing conversations: Ongoing conversations with students before/after class about how they feel about receiving touch, what is welcome and what is not, any history of injuries. In my view, this is the ideal model.

Suggested reading:

The Ethical Yoga Part 1: Touch & Consent In Yoga
Here Are Good Ways Yoga Teachers Manage Touch and Consent - The New York Times
Yoga Adjustments Tread a Fine Line of Personal Space - The New York Times

Trauma-Informed Teaching

Part of accessibility and inclusivity involves taking a trauma-informed approach to teaching or, at minimum, ensuring that there are classes accessible for people with a history of trauma. Additionally, having resources to refer students to such as psychologists or yoga therapists is essential. One way to make classes more trauma informed (other than taking into consideration other aspects of this manual like the section on touch) is approaching students with a general sense of curiosity about their background and past experiences, and avoiding making assumptions about what people may be experiencing and what is possible in their body on any particular day. Framing different postures as suggestions rather than demands is one way to create a space which both accommodates different levels of experience and creates a less hierarchical space, one in which it is not the teacher giving commands and students abiding by those commands. Rather, it is a space in which students are checking in with themselves about what is possible in their body on any particular day and listening to that. In this way, the authority is shifted from the instructor to the student.

I think it can be helpful to remind students that they are ultimately the highest authority on their own bodies. Additionally, framing different cues and postures as suggestions and giving alternatives can reduce student injuries because they are listening to their own bodily needs and not attempting to perform postures that may not be safe or accessible in their bodies. This is just scratching the surface of what it means to be a trauma-informed teacher and I highly recommend reading further as well as, if possible, taking a trauma-informed teacher training. These trainings typically provide tools for working with people with a history of trauma including specific language that can be triggering and more appropriate language to use instead.

Questions for Contemplation/ Exploration:
What does it mean to be trauma sensitive?

Suggested Reading:


Herman, Judith Lewis. *Trauma and Recovery*. Pandora, 2015.

Legitimacy/Authenticity of the Practice

The authenticity of a practice is often thought to determine said practice’s legitimacy and whether it has real spiritual value. In her book *Peace Love Yoga*, Professor Andrea Jain writes:

The juxtaposition of neoliberal spirituality against religion, I think, is a framework based on the faulty commitment to the demarcation of authenticity. The dichotomy between authentic and inauthentic often lets certain religious complexes, and their complicity in neoliberal capitalism, off the hook too easily, while demarcating other religious complexes, such as commercial yoga or mindfulness, as false religions or corruptions of *real* religion. In other words we should offer up strong critiques of neoliberal spirituality without slipping into the reduction of it to mere commodifying practices or marketing discourses.\(^61\)

In essence, Jain suggests that while Modern Postural Yoga may be a commercial practice, this does not necessarily diminish its authenticity or the authenticity of the spiritual experiences its practitioners may have. Jain continues: “Consumer culture has not replaced religion; rather, new religious forms and products have emerged in the context of global consumer culture.”\(^62\) Rather than thinking of consumer culture as a replacement for religious practice as other scholars have done, Jain urges us to see these new religious practices as legitimate in their own right.

In terms of actionable steps, one thing yoga instructors can do is to avoid fabricating yoga’s authenticity by referring to ancient texts or describing it as part of a lineage it doesn’t really belong to. Allowing the practice to exist on its own terms without needing to manufacture legitimacy through historical lineage is essential.

Another element to consider in the question of authenticity and legitimacy is who has the authority to determine what is a spiritual practice and what is not. In the United States and Canada, Yoga Alliance functions as a regulating body for what kinds of trainings and teachers are “certified” and which are not. Seriously questioning Yoga Alliance as an authority on what is

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\(^62\) Ibid, 99.
and isn’t yoga, who is and isn’t a yoga instructor, is crucial. Certification is often a process that “turns insiders into outsiders” and manufactures legitimacy.

Questions for Contemplation/Exploration:

Is modern postural yoga a “real” spiritual practice? What does it mean for a spiritual practice to be “authentic”? Who benefits from certification practices? Who is harmed by them?

Suggested Reading:


Ep 6 - 200 Hours Killed Yoga - Yoga Is Dead

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Works Cited


