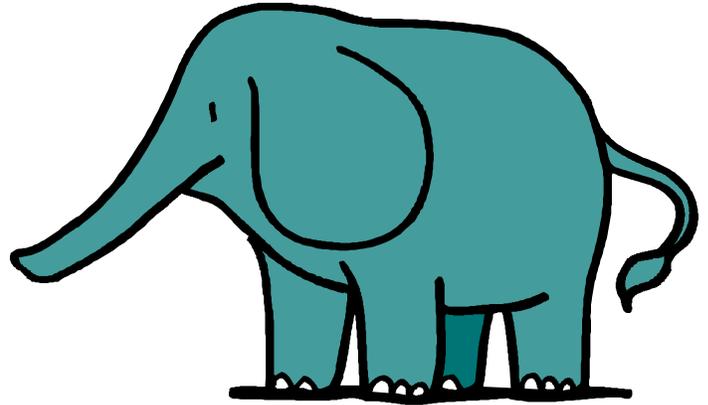


THE SHADOW SIDE OF YOGA

Illusions of a Yoga Teacher

Jon Burras



Pardon my rather naïve lack of respect. But is there a monstrous white elephant in mauve leotards dancing around this yoga studio waiting to sit on anyone who is awake enough to notice? Do you not all see it? Are you content to practice your yoga while dancing around it and the enormous mess that it leaves behind?

Any business, family, organization, or community, is only as functional as the members who support it and the leaders who help to guide it. Functionality is classified as all its members getting their needs met and everyone is respected equally. While someone might have the absolute last word power is used to help guide a groups' mission, not to conquer its individual members. As there are different levels of hierarchy and position no one is subjugated under another's absolute authority and rule. Everyone, including those at the top of the power pyramid, is responsible for his own actions and the respectful treatment of others.

While this idea might seem like some kind of grand illusion it seems that much of the yoga community has forgotten about some of these rather simple principles.

Authoritarian systems have been around for a very long time now. Kings and queens were allowed to rule with absolute authority. Dissent was looked at as confrontation and one's life could be imperiled if caught challenging the rulers of the land. Popes and religious figures cherished the same authoritarian domination. Challenging the religious rulers often branded one as a "heretic" and suffered the certain fate of burning at the stake in front of the entire town.

While there are many loving and supportive yoga teachers there seems to be a trend in outdated beliefs about power. The yoga world holds very little difference to these antiquated ruling systems. Challenging the absolute authority of the yoga teacher is labeled as "resistance". A student who is resistant becomes as problematic as a heretic was in the religious scenario.

While yoga initiated from the Indian subcontinent the Indian society is anything from functional and democratic. Women's rights are sub-par with that of the male. There is still a large class distinction. Only the higher class can enjoy the fruits of this lifetime. Those who are burdened with being born in the lower classes are told that their rewards could come in the next lifetime if they are good this time around. This authoritarian emphasis becomes transferred to the practice of yoga.

The problem with an authoritarian based system is that it encourages us to mistrust ourselves and place our trust in the authority figure. We start to lose our relationship with our own feelings and sensory experiences. Instead, we pass our guidance on to an authoritarian person outside of ourselves. As we grow older this early childhood loss of self-trust continues to grow. We continue to seek out authority figures to turn our power over to and disempower us.

Any position of authority, including that of a yoga teacher, often becomes a parental figure to us. We are accustomed to surrendering our power and trusting in the authority of the teacher. A teacher can either teach with respect and kindness or use his position of power to teach with abuse and disempowerment.

Unfortunately, the yoga world has become filled with many teachers and leaders who exemplify this errant misuse of power. Classes are often used to hold students hostage under the rampage of the teacher. Scolding and vilifying students often becomes the teacher's primary objective. Many yoga teachers rise to levels of power just like an army general that eliminates his competition.

There is a myth that the yoga class is a sacred bubble where only pure thoughts and actions exist. This magical thinking often leads one to deny what she really sees happening. In reality, a yoga class only reflects and enlarges beliefs and practices that occur outside of class. For instance, a "control freak" in his normal life does not let go of control while teaching a yoga class. That behavior characteristic only becomes magnified during class. Someone who shames and scolds others in her waking life will do the same thing as she leads her students through the yoga process.

When we use language of violence we are engaging in our shadow side that is still immersed in violence. An authority figure who attempts to overpower his students, hits his students to increase his performance, or yells at or calls names to a student only reflects this shadow side at work. Most likely he is just mimicking behavior that he experienced from an authority figure, perhaps a parent or teacher from his past.

Teachers of Eastern principles have hidden behind the fancy language to protect them from loss of power. They use terms like "crazy wisdom" or "holy madness" to justify their abuse practices. By labeling his erratic behavior as crazy wisdom the teacher can easily manipulate an audience of students who are versed in obedience and acceptance of the teacher's behavior.

I have heard of yoga teachers who lock students in a heated room and will not let them out. The teacher will scold the student for not being able to stand up to the test. Some teachers will not let a student in the classroom if she arrives a bit late. The teacher might feel that his authoritarian power is lessened if he does not maintain a tight control over the environment.

Other teachers have been known to verbally abuse some students with name calling and belittling. Shaming a student who is not emotionally or physically up to the challenge is also quite common. This is just the tip of the iceberg. Physical assaults are also common, as some teachers will hit students to make them perform like a circus animal.

A yoga student explained to me how she was embarrassed and shamed during a particular yoga class. The yogi instructor had indicated that he wanted everyone to come up into a handstand. The student, a beginner, did not feel that she was ready for a handstand. She kindly transferred that information to the teacher. In response, the yoga teacher proclaimed in front of the whole class, "I should take you over my knee and spank you!" The student was shamed and embarrassed in front of the entire class for trusting her own instincts.

Yoga teachers have been added to the list of the holy untouchables. Their words and actions are thought to be beyond reproach. It is magically believed that a yoga teacher has your best interest in mind when he scolds you or calls you names. It is magically believed that a slap behind the ear is "holy wisdom". The general consensus is that the teacher knows what is best for you and you had better just put up with his unusual tactics if you want the knowledge of the teacher.

A recent flurry of sexual scandals in the Catholic Church reveals that the untouchable "holy men" might be hiding a secret underneath their lengthy robes. Before this business environments

were rocked with one sexual harassment scandal after another as authoritarian abuse issues came to light.

The yoga teacher is no different. Numerous sex scandals involving spiritual teachers have come to public scrutiny in the last couple of years. Just because someone is wearing an orange robe or can demonstrate a gymnastic yoga pose does not necessarily mean that they have done their psychological homework. In fact, there is a good chance that the yoga teacher has been practicing rather rigorous gymnastic poses but knows very little about himself and his psychological makeup. This training is not a common practice in the yoga world.

Essentially, we are talking about the history of power. How is power used? Is power shared or is power used to dominate? A psychologically mature yoga teacher will help students to find their own way to self-empowerment. A yoga teacher still stuck in his unaddressed childhood issues of power will use her power to dominate the will of the students. Those who have the power make the rules and create the language in order to keep the power intact.

Many positions of authority require an in depth psychological profile before that person is allowed to work at that particular job. Police officers, firefighters, and even priests are required to submit to a scrutiny of psychological evaluations. But the yoga teacher is still immune from such questioning. Thus, every personality quirk and shadow will be revealed while he performs his teaching. He is free to roam a yoga studio while still practicing his childhood baggage. Only his students do not know if it is a part of his shadow coming out or, as the teacher explains, his “holy wisdom”.

As we once yearned for approval from our parents we often continue this trend into our adult years. As students of yoga our yoga teachers often become these parental figures that we seek out to reassure us that we are safe in the world. Yet what makes a teacher qualified to guide us through this process? When learning to be a yoga teacher psychological evaluations are rarely, if ever, given. Most yoga teachers are very athletic and gymnastic in their own skin. But the lack of psychological maturity becomes the root of the power abuse conflict.

Abuse is abuse, no matter what form it may come in. Those in power often claim to dominate others and claim that it is for their own good. Often a teacher’s abuse becomes rationalized as a lesson or test for the student. In reality, it is often because the person in power needs to stay in power and these tactics are an attempt to keep power. When a teacher is not allowed to be questioned then it is easy for abuse to set in.

In the *Nine Stages of Spiritual Apprenticeship*, Greg Bogart writes about one yogi’s abusive practices. “One supposedly great yogi actually used to fondle students during classes-sometimes while they were lying prone with their eyes closed relaxing at the end of class-an inexcusable violation of personal boundaries.”

Yoga is one of the few environments when a stranger can come up to you and put her hands anywhere she pleases. There are few restrictions when it is assumed that the teacher’s touch is intended for the development of your yoga practice. These tender guiding hands can be instrumental in helping us to feel how to make that next shift in our body. But used inappropriately these fondlings are often confusing and abusive. Where do teachers learn how to touch a student? There is almost an open door policy that a teacher can do anything that he pleases. If he is not clear with his intention then the touch becomes a way for the teacher to get his needs met at the expense of the students.

What makes a teacher a teacher and a guru a guru? Only when a teacher has completed a significant amount of his own family of origin work is he ready to be a teacher. Western psychological beliefs herald themselves on supporting and strengthening the individual self. Eastern

mythologies attempt to dissolve the self and merge it into the authoritarian figure. When united together there is often conflict. In many instances, the yoga student may actually be quite a bit more psychologically mature than the yoga teacher who focuses on just Eastern mythologies. When this occurs the teacher's tactics and motivation often become challenged.

Here are a few guidelines that students might follow in their yogic journey. Do not assume that the teacher is necessarily any more emotional mature than you are. Watch her behavior and see if it feels right. Respect yourself as well as your teacher and fellow students. The yoga environment only becomes as functional as those who wish to be functional themselves. And finally, report abuse or conflicting messages to higher ups. Only by bringing to light behavior that undermines a student will things begin to change.

As yoga becomes more popular in the West the merging of ideologies will continue to occur. Teachers will not be allowed to profess pure Eastern concepts without first doing their psychological homework and respecting the rights of the individual student. Until then the shadow side of the yoga teacher will continue to be reflected behind him.

Resources:

The Nine Stages of Spiritual Apprenticeship, Greg Bogart
1997, Dawn Mountain Press, Berkeley, Ca.

The Guru Papers; Masks of Authoritarian Power, Joel Kramer and Diana Alstad,
1993, Frog, Ltd., Berkeley, Ca.

Nonviolent Communication; A Language of Compassion, Marshal B. Rosenberg,
Ph.D., 1999, PuddleDancer Press, Encinitas, Ca.

Jon Burras is a certified yoga therapist and certified Bodymind therapist. He is also a champion for the rights of self-empowerment and believes in letting nature be the strongest guide.