

Perspective

***Ahimsâ*: The Ethical Foundation of Yoga Therapy**

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No one would argue with the premise that *ahimsâ* (non-violence) is one of the most basic ethical principles of Yoga, and thus of Yoga therapy. As Yoga therapists, we are in the profession of healing. We would never intentionally cause harm to anyone with whom we are working—that is a given. But there are many subtle and unintentional ways to do damage: implying that there is something wrong with the student that needs to be fixed, creating a hierarchy between therapist and student that creates dependence or self-doubt, not acknowledging our own feelings of irritation or dislike toward a student and letting them manifest in our interactions, or simply being overly results-oriented.

One particularly insidious example of causing suffering is to inadvertently blame the student for his or her condition or lack of progress. Blaming the student, or saying things that lead the student to blame him- or herself, is a danger any time we are dealing with the idea of a mind-body connection. On the one hand, the idea that thoughts and feelings facilitate healing can be empowering. On the other hand, this idea can easily become distorted into the harmful message that a person wouldn't have cancer if they had expressed their anger, or that they wouldn't have an autoimmune condition if they had a more positive outlook on life.

Scientific research may have demonstrated a relationship between certain personality traits or behaviors and specific diseases, but these relationships do not manifest exactly the same for everyone. There are simply too many variables at work for us to be sure that if a student didn't have a "Type A personality," or hadn't eaten so many french fries, he wouldn't have had a heart attack. Furthermore, my duty as a Yoga therapist calls me to evaluate whether it might be potentially harmful to say anything about what I believe to be the cause of the current condition. Feelings of guilt, inferiority, or incapability *caused by me as the therapist* are damaging to my student's psyche and to our healing relationship.

As a Yoga therapist, I must also evaluate my beliefs around *karma* and the idea that everything happens "for a reason" or so we can "learn from them." These, again, lay fault with the student for her illness, the death of a loved one, giving birth to a child with special needs, and for any other challenge the student faces. It doesn't matter whether or not I think these principles are true, or if they have helped me or other people. In the context of therapy, my only question is, "Will this idea help this person in this moment, or will it undermine his or her healing and sense of self?"

Often, it is a matter of paying attention to the words and phrases we choose. Consider the difference between saying, "The universe is trying to send you a message," which implies, "If you weren't so slow or stupid, this wouldn't have happened," and saying, "I'm sure there is something we can learn from this rotten situation," which validates the student's experience, and turns the attention to the present moment and provides hope.

Even "inspirational" stories of people healing through the power of positive thinking, prayer, or changing their emotional habits can lead to self-recrimination. For those in the midst of their own most difficult struggles, these stories of hope and optimism can actually make the situation more overwhelming. Rather than honoring a student's personal experience and journey, they leave many people wondering, "If that person can do it, why can't I?" Students may feel they should be healing more quickly and more completely. They may think that if only they worked harder or could be different somehow, they too could be just like the person in the story. This self-blame is causing suffering, not relieving it. Again, the only question should be, "Will this story help this person in this moment, or will it undermine his or her healing and sense of self?"

Finally, a common practice that has the potential for blaming the student is that of giving "homework." There

are many conceivable benefits to homework. It can help create continuity between sessions, encourage ownership in the healing process, promote personal responsibility, and increase the total amount of time spent with Yoga's healing practices. These potential gains, however, don't result from simply assigning homework, but from homework assignments being completed, which does not always happen. We have all experienced the dread of going to an appointment with a doctor, physical therapist, psychotherapist, or other healing practitioner when we have not done what we were "supposed to." Is this what we want for our students?

In a culture where most of us seem to struggle with feeling OK about ourselves, our students will likely take their inability to complete their homework as just one more piece of evidence of their inadequacy. In some cases, they may be even tormented by guilt, like a family that came to us recently for help with their five-year-old severely developmentally delayed daughter. The parents told us with tremendous sadness that "if only" they had done the homework given to them by another therapist, their daughter would be walking and talking. I am sure this is not the result this therapist had intended; I am also sure that this is not helpful in any way to the parents or child in this situation.

Homework assignments must be given with awareness of who the particular individual is and what is going on in his or her life. Denial of reality is not *ahimsa*. For many people, coming to a weekly session is a huge commitment and step toward healing. We don't want to discount this as not-good-enough because we think they "should" do more. Someone with severe depression, for example, doesn't need even the merest suggestion that they are not living up to expectations, which simply reinforces thought patterns they already have. The practice of *ahimsa* necessitates that we look for strengths and capabilities and build on these. If we choose to assign homework, we must ask ourselves: Why? What do we hope to gain? Is this the only way to accomplish our goals? What are the ramifications of providing this assignment? How will I respond if my student does not complete it?

The deepest expression of *ahimsa* is to completely accept our students exactly as they are, as whole humans in the context of their lives as they are, without judgment. It is our ethical duty as Yoga therapists to convey to our students

that there is nothing wrong with them. In order to do this, we must be in a constant process of self-examination, striving to understand our own beliefs, habits, and patterns. We must be as thoughtful about the words we choose and the ideas we express as we are about any poses or breathing we might plan for a session, so that we do not add blame to the suffering our students already experience.

Questions for contemplation:

- Do I think it is true that people "bring it on themselves?" Do I believe that about some people or some conditions, but not others?
- Do I feel bad if a student isn't "making progress" or "getting better?"
- How comfortable am I with pain and suffering? Do I feel the need to comfort, to fix, or to make someone feel better, or can I simply be with it?
- Do I overtly or covertly blame in order to create separation and assure myself that this can't happen to me?
- How comfortable am I with not knowing? Do I feel pressure as a therapist to know or to explain?
- How do I cultivate a partnership with my students in which they can question me and express differing opinions and difficult feelings?
- Do I feel that a student's ability to follow through on homework reflects their dedication to Yoga, to me, to our work together?
- When a student doesn't complete homework, do I consciously or subconsciously blame him or her if we are not making progress?
- When I say something, can I imagine a variety of ways it might be interpreted? Can I use my own experience with blame and self-blame to notice blaming words, beliefs, or situations?

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