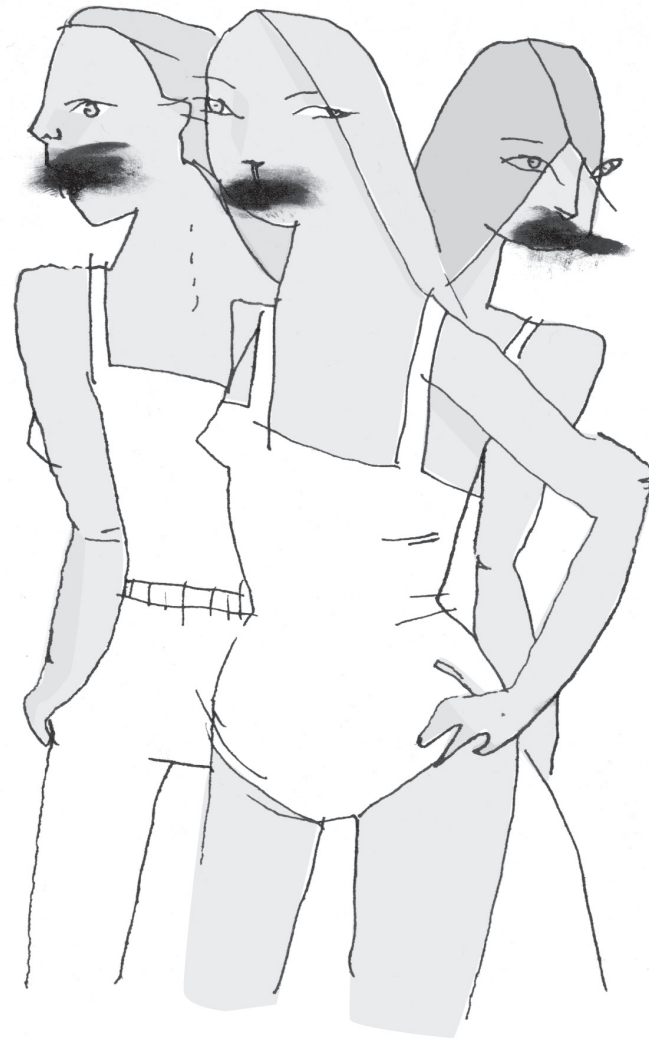


# questionable



# conduct

Is the yoga community turning a blind eye to ethical transgressions in the classroom? Who will draw the line when the boundaries between sex, power and yoga are blurred?

From 1995 to 2001, Susannah Bruder taught at the California studio of a world-famous yoga teacher (whom I'll call Y.T.). Bruder, a former competitive distance runner, established a solid teaching career and even acquired Y.T.'s prime-time classes when his travel schedule burgeoned. In January 2001, a distraught female student told Bruder she'd just ended a three-year affair with Y.T. Upon discovering his extensive, well-hidden history of sexual liaisons with students, Bruder encouraged him to rethink his behaviour.

She tried to arrange an all-staff counselling session on professional ethics and, when asked, she answered students' questions candidly. But other teachers snubbed her efforts, insisting Y.T.'s affairs were a private marital issue. Once a key member of Y.T.'s inner circle, Bruder found herself ostracized by her

closest colleagues. Y.T. abruptly terminated her from his staff in October 2001.

As an avid yoga student, Bruder's story intrigues me: Why was she the only teacher who challenged Y.T.? No one would tolerate a teacher who steals students' money or who falsely advertises his training. But when it comes to sex, many ignore questionable conduct. Bear in mind, by "questionable conduct," I'm not talking about teachers hooking up with non-students, with former students or with other teachers. I'm talking about chronic, exploitative behaviour with current students.

For the past year, I've been mulling over the meaning of ethical yoga teaching: What's wrong with consensual sex between teacher and student? Should codes of conduct be established? Do teachers have a responsibility to confront an

by luci yamamoto

illustrations by mélanie baillaigé

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exploitative colleague? Sex always spurs controversy, and juxtaposing sex and yoga only amplifies the debate. I claim no conclusive answers, but through months of interviews and observations, I find the following thorny issues worth consideration.

From ancient times, spiritual seekers have struggled to balance sex with spirituality. The archetypal sacred quest entails not only rejection of material possessions and rigorous study of texts and teachings, but also celibacy. Sexual restraint connotes self-control – a way to rise above indulgence and attachment to sensual, earthly pleasures. In yoga, the *yamas*, or restraints, in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras – *ahimsa* (non-violence), *satya* (truth), *asteya* (non-stealing), *aparigraha* (non-greed) and *brahmacharya* (sexual restraint) – are considered basic ethical guides.

*Brahmacharya* traditionally meant celibacy, based on the belief that loss of semen leads to death, while its retention promotes vitality. But yoga was always meant for both ascetics and laypeople. Thus, most modern yogis interpret *brahmacharya* to mean monogamy or moderation. The relevant measure might be the

level of consciousness underlying one's behaviour. According to Judith Hanson Lasater, a physical therapist and yoga teacher since 1971, *brahmacharya* literally means "walking with God." Thus, the essential requirement, she says, is to use sexual energy "in a way that respects the divinity in oneself and in others."

But as yoga has proliferated into a mainstream phenomenon, the question of celibacy seems archaic. The 5,000-year-old philosophy of yoga, transplanted in the twenty-first-century West, has become unabashedly commercialized, glamorized and sexualized. Here, yoga is commonly regarded as an exotic workout option. Even in Berkeley, California – a left-leaning college town with a long-standing yoga community – brand-new studios now bear hard-body messages, with ads proclaiming: "Look great naked."

Donna Farhi, an internationally known yoga teacher and author, says, "The nexus of attention around the body and the image of the body is damaging." When she was a student, she says, no one cared what you wore to class. Today, clingy, skimpy yoga fashion has become *de rigueur* to many women. The anything-goes atmosphere at yoga studios starkly contrasts with that at Zen Bud-

dhist meditation halls. After sitting in group *zazen* one summer afternoon, a senior student discreetly approached me and said, "We don't allow shorts in the *zendo*. It might be distracting to others."

The emphasis on the body – and on sexuality – is not inherently detrimental. But it can trigger confusingly intimate dynamics between yoga teachers and students. The problem, according to many close observers, is the imbalance of power that exists between the two, akin to that between doctor and patient, professor and student, therapist and client, spiritual leader and disciple.

In light of this imbalance, Lasater and Farhi stress the importance of maintaining a safe space for yoga students. Serious students are often drawn to yoga because they want to transform their worldview and to reconnect with their inner selves. During the process of expanding their mental and physical boundaries, they can become vulnerable. They might idolize their teacher or grow dependent on the camaraderie at the studio.

To explore the issue, I attend a few of Y.T.'s classes in September 2002, four months after Bruder's story became

public. A teacher since the mid-1980s, Y.T. has a ready smile and an unfussy, guy-next-door demeanour that puts students at ease. Whether he's sharing his latest musings and a quote from Nietzsche, or he's leading a strenuous *asana* sequence, it's hard not to like him.

Y.T., more than most teachers, blurs the lines between teaching and socializing – often hanging out with students after class or inviting them to predawn practice sessions at his home. During an interview over dinner, he tells me he's felt betrayed by people he'd considered friends. Gradually I realize that by "friends," he's referring to his students.

When I broach the topic of power imbalance, he says, "I've never felt more powerful than my students." Regarding his affairs with students, he insists neither party was dominant – and he would not find "weak" women attractive, anyway. However, he adds, some power disparity is inevitable. "If the two people in every couple had to be equal, there would be no couples."

But I doubt a teacher-student type of hierarchy exists in most romantic relationships. In yoga classes, students tend to seek attention from the teacher – not necessarily sexual attention, but recognition, encouragement, advice, or simply an *asana* adjustment. Farhi says students often regard their teacher as therapist, healer, guru, friend, parent, or any archetype that suits their needs – and often without the teacher's realization. "It never ceases to amaze me," she says, "when even the most casual students sometimes tell me, years later, 'You held my life together.'"

A handful of yoga organizations have established clear codes of conduct. For example, Lasater, president of the California Yoga Teachers Association, says the CYTA code prohibits all forms of sexual behaviour between teachers – male or female – and current students. Granted, such rules remain unenforceable because the yoga profession has no official board or bar to certify teachers.

But others question the sweeping scope of specific rules. W. Hunter Roberts, a San Francisco-based author and counselor educated in moral theology, says rules might apply to exploitative cases, but they sometimes cast too large a net, banning potentially valuable encounters. She's leery of defining acceptable sexual relationships in strict terms, such as marital monogamy. Further, where do rules end? Not long ago, sex between homosexuals and interracial marriage were taboo.

The real issue, Roberts says, is "whether teachers take advantage of their position and a student's trust for their own immediate gratification." Actually, teachers such as Lasater are in no way advocating far-right restrictions on sex. In fact, Lasater proposes a bottom-line inquiry akin to Roberts': Whose needs are on the table? The teacher's or the student's?

When the Y.T. story made front-page news, I was blasé at first. I'd already known his reputation. Besides, I was jaded by the absurd fixation on Bill and Monica and on all celebrity sex lives. Imagine my loss if I'd boycotted the masterpieces of every unfaithful writer, actor or musician! But Y.T.'s behaviour soon disturbed me. He's a

yoga teacher, earning millions off his idealized family-man image. At a bookstore, I skimmed his recently published book, dedicated to his wife, who poses in elegant photographs throughout the pages. Where is the *satya* – the truth – in these images? I wondered.

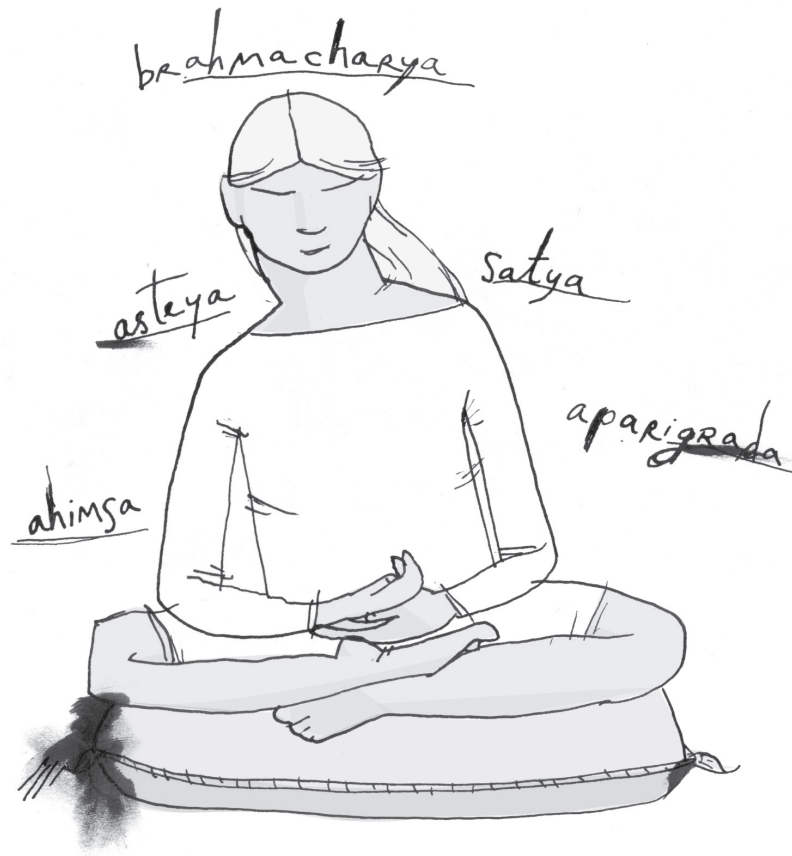
So, face to face over a cup of tea, I ask Y.T.: "Isn't your wife hurt by your affairs?"

"Have you talked with her?" he says. "Do you know our agreements? You are making assumptions about me and my marriage."

I admit he is right. To me, it is hypocritical to pursue clandestine affairs while starring in a Valentine's Day magazine spread with his wife. To me, a string of estranged lovers represents neither *brahmacharya* nor profound sexuality, no matter how liberated he thinks he is. But my *satya* is not superior to his. Any criticism of his choices must stand on universal, not personal, truths.

In ensuing interviews, I look for universal truths that might apply to any way of life. I meet Ramanand Patel, a disciple of B.K.S. Iyengar who has taught yoga internationally since 1964. "Such behaviour might not be unethical per se, because ethics change from time to time," Patel says of Y.T., a former student of his. "Over the history of human life, social rules have constantly changed. But if anyone is hurt, I don't care what the ethics say. It is wrong."

The fundamental inquiry might be whether *ahimsa* – non-violence – is violated in sexual relationships between teachers and students. Lasater also emphasizes the importance of this foremost precept: If we act in accordance with *ahimsa*, we are already practising *satya*.



In violating absolute rules, Patel says, “You might think you’ve gotten away with it because you’re such a clever hot shot. But what’s really happening is that your intelligence is working against you – and you don’t see it.”

With no regulatory body for yoga teachers, opposition to unethical behaviour currently comes only from direct, individual efforts. For example, Farhi gives keynote speeches at major teacher-training conferences on the sanctity of the teacher-student relationship. She also presses influential yoga magazines, conference directors and studio directors to ensure that their affiliated teachers are practising ethically. “If teachers no longer receive invitations to teach at national conferences and prominent studios,” Farhi says, “they’ll get a clear message that

their behaviour has real consequences.”

Several teachers, including Lasater, decline invitations to teach at yoga centres that include colleagues known to exploit students. Farhi, deeply conflicted about attending events alongside such colleagues, says sometimes the more powerful action is to go. “Boycotting conferences or studios is a two-edged sword,” she says, “because by not going, there’s no one to offer a different point of view.”

To me, the most striking aspect of the Y.T. case is not his behaviour but that of his staff. They all adopted a “code of silence” and turned Bruder, who spoke out, into the wrongdoer. But such loyalty to a dominant leader is not uncommon. In 1994, Amrit Desai was forced to leave the well-known ashram he founded, Kripalu Center in the Berkshires, after his followers

acknowledged he’d been sleeping with disciples despite preaching celibacy. But his departure came years after the woman who initially spoke out was branded a liar and banished from the community. At San Francisco Zen Center, Richard Baker, dharma heir to renowned leader Shunryu Suzuki, had sex with subordinates for years before other priests finally confronted him in 1983. Yvonne Rand, an ordained priest, was an integral member of Zen Center until she led the movement to oust Baker and ended up publicly scapegoated and cast out from the group.

To explain her continued affiliation with Y.T., one teacher says, “I try not to judge or control others. It’s self-righteous to tell others how to live, and I’ve worked hard to move away from that kind of thinking.” But, according to Lasater, automatic acceptance of some-

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one's misconduct ("He's only human!") might be dubbed "idiot compassion" – forgiveness without discrimination.

Teachers have thanked me for researching this topic, for "carrying the torch." Many are weary of being crusaders. Many express frustration about the resistance to change despite decades of protest. "Unfortunately, I have found very little consensus or clarity in the yoga community on the issue," Farhi says, "so unethical behaviour continues unchecked."

Ultimately, students must learn to trust their judgement and to protect themselves. Their qualms might prove groundless, but if they exist, they deserve attention. Likewise, teachers must uphold their own standards regardless of a colleague's seeming authority. Indeed, such self-inquiry is the crux of yoga.

The more I study yoga, the more I appreciate its subtler aspects. As a beginner, I considered *Tadasana* (the Mountain) the simplest pose – nothing more than standing on two feet. Now I've learned from senior teachers that

the opposite is true: *Tadasana* is the sum of all poses. One teacher once said, "If you have a perfect *Tadasana* from the outset, you need not practise yoga."

Upon meeting Bruder, I witness another subtlety of yoga in her integrity. She was true to her principles despite opposition. Integrity is a quality often invisible. It is easy to admire a teacher's stunning *asana* practice, but it takes deeper awareness to discern a teacher's character. Still, this quality is obvious in yogis like Bruder who are clear about their role and responsibility as teachers.

In January 2003, Bruder led a whale-watching retreat in Magdalena Bay off the Baja coast. "Dozens of gray whales surrounded our boat," she says, "so close we could touch them." Whales sometimes attack humans for killing their calves, but these were friendly. "They can forgive," Bruder says, "and they can sense those who mean no harm."

Likewise, Bruder is learning to forgive and to spot colleagues who genuinely respect the yoga precepts.

When people commend her courage for standing her ground, she welcomes the support but shrugs it off. To her, no extraordinary courage was necessary. To confront the crisis – a teacher's harm to students and to himself – came naturally. ॐ

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**resources:**

Buddhist Peace Fellowship, an international group that fosters socially engaged Buddhism, produced *Safe Harbor*, a booklet on ethics and right conduct. [www.bpf.org](http://www.bpf.org)

For more information on the California Yoga Teachers Association visit: [www.yogateachersassoc.org](http://www.yogateachersassoc.org)

Judith Hanson Lasater is the author of *Living Your Yoga: Finding the Spiritual in Everyday Life*, and *Relax and Renew*. [www.judithlasater.com](http://www.judithlasater.com)

Donna Farhi is the author of *The Breathing Book* and *Yoga Mind Body and Spirit: A Return to Wholeness*. [www.donnafarhi.co.nz](http://www.donnafarhi.co.nz)

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