

The Practice of Teaching: Circles of certainty and critical consciousness

by Norman Blair

“When you see something that is not right, you must say something. You must do something.”

John Lewis, American civil rights leader

Many different experiences. Many different opinions. Many teachers. Many styles. A good place to start discussing ethics and practice of teaching is some basics. A priority in all teaching has to be student safety, accurate information and listening to others through dialogue and feedback. Practitioners have to be protected and learn how to protect themselves from teachers who are damaging.

As teachers, we hold more power than we might think. With power comes responsibility and also the necessity to ensure that we are sufficiently resourced to deal with the inevitable peaks and troughs of teaching. Practitioners put their trust in teachers; there is a requirement for teachers to be grounded, clear and balanced.

Yes, some teachers are like Marmite: you either love them or loathe them. Yes, some students will greatly appreciate a teacher and some students will strongly dislike the same teacher. For that same teacher, some students readily respond and some students reactively reject. While accepting these truths, basic standards must be stated.

NOT ACCEPTABLE

It is not acceptable for teachers to belittle students (as much as it is not acceptable for teachers to injure students). It is not acceptable for teachers to be aggressively rude to students. It is not acceptable for teachers to significantly overpromise (such as stating that a particular practice guarantees lifelong health and happiness for everyone). Teachers definitely can be intellectually stimulating yet simultaneously breaching boundaries or making a practitioner feel energetically

confused by their behaviour. We need to be careful that teachers are not given a pass simply because they seem to have some bright ideas.

It is not acceptable for an Ashtanga teacher trainer to brush Pattabhi Jois’ abuses under the carpet as “strong adjustments”. Nor is it acceptable for a teacher’s bullying and manipulation to be excused on the basis that they are “not neuro-typical” or “that’s just the way they are” or “they have done so much good” or “they are a maverick”. This is excusing abusive behaviour. And of course we are all human; certainly at times I am grumpy or have low energy levels or have a bad day. Allowing ourselves these difficult experiences is an important part of being a good teacher. Ensuring these difficult experiences do not have substantially negative impacts on our teaching is an important part of being a good teacher.

SIGNALS TO PAY ATTENTION TO

Using the images of red light (Warning! Stay away and tell someone) and amber light (worrying and keep an eye out), here is a list of signs to look out for if there are any concerns about a teacher. You may experience these from the teacher or students who seem devoted and unquestioning. Some of these signs are expanded on below.

WARNINGS SIGNS (RED!)

- Poor boundaries between teacher and students
- Continually criticising other teachers (especially when the critic is vigorously promoting themselves)
- Sweeping statements and language that baffles rather than clarifies
- Encouraging unquestioning belief with comments such as “no-one will understand this”
- Having approaches that are prescriptive and dictatorial (such as “it must be done this way”)
- Extravagant claims that are unsupported by evidence (such as saying a practice has a 17,000-year lineage or is “a much-called-for scientific revolution” without presenting any peer reviewed papers)
- Saying something such as “the only thing I have in common with other teachers is that we breathe and have a body”
- Not having a peer group (other teachers of similar experience)
- Offering quick fixes
- Presenting techniques that seem to be more important in themselves than clarity and accuracy
- Making medical claims without any qualifications or supporting peer-reviewed information
- Rejection of dialogue that challenges
- Having an approach that allows adoring praise whilst actively resisting any feedback that questions
- Creating an ‘inner circle’ or ‘special students’ with obvious favouritism, leaving others feeling less worthy, less capable
 - It is, of course, human for teachers to have ‘favourites’ but the foundation of skilful teaching is inclusivity — making sure that *all* students feel included
- ‘I just thought it was me’: participants having these or related experiences, eg “there must be something wrong with me”
 - If you feel ‘wrong’ at the end of a class, it could be more likely that this is about the practice or the teacher than you yourself.

- Encouraging competitiveness amongst those around the teacher and discarding of others who may probe the teachings
- Aggressive selling of particular products so that rather than a practice that could be helpful, it is more like the pyramid schemes of multi-level marketing: “a controversial marketing strategy for the sale of products or services... at least 99% of people who join MLM companies lose money”¹
- Lack of agency
 - An Ashtanga practitioner of more than 20 years experience said to me about that system: “In Mysore you had to promise not to practice other forms of yoga... When I modified the sequence to help specific students with specific needs, I was asked ‘Do you think you know better than the guru?’ It was suggested to me that I should stop teaching if I didn’t follow the rules. The practice was completely controlled, you had to stick to the exact sequence and only do what teacher said. There were unspoken rules and inner circles. If you did something else, that was ‘not yoga.’” Some senior Ashtanga teachers have repeatedly stated that it is a bad idea for practitioners to try other styles of yoga.
- Emphasising the ‘special qualities’ of the teacher (such as they are “controversial”) which excuses unacceptable behaviour
- Using particular techniques such as hypnotism without informing students

WORRYING SIGNS (AMBER)

- *A refusal to listen*
 - I remember a teacher telling me that it was important to be successful. When I replied, saying that I felt reasonably successful and that I was relatively content with what I had got, the teacher did not listen and instead continued to plough their own opinionated furrows. They had certain views and were not prepared to listen to experiences that contradicted their view.

- *Inflation of personal biographies, name dropping or bragging about well-paid teaching gigs for corporate clients or wealthy individuals*
Doing well is great — but there is no need to loudly brag. A teacher loudly blowing their own trumpet is perhaps worrying. This can be inflated grandiosity. A question can be: Why are you trying to impress?
- *Using the royal ‘we’ when speaking of themselves*
As an example, when talking about their own personal view, a teacher said to me: “That’s not what we think.”

ROCKING THE PEDESTAL: QUESTIONS TO ASK

Charismatic teachers who are ungrounded can become manipulative gurus. Charismatic sellers who are unsupervised are a danger to other people. Offering salvation through one technique or one weekend or one pose is virtually always a falsehood. To say it simply: a lie.

In my personal experience, people offering these quick fixes are far better at selling products than aiding sustained change. And if a teacher advertises dramatic shifts in short periods of time (whether it is through ayahuasca, breathwork, meditation, group therapy), then almost every time, this so-called solution is unsustainable.

These too are all warnings signs of a teacher potentially placing themselves on the pedestal that can then become problematic. One way of clarifying whether a teacher is on a pedestal or not is through questions, such as:

- What is your teaching training and who are/have been your teachers?
- Do you receive mentoring / supervision?
- Do you welcome questions?
- Are you comfortable in saying “I don’t know” when questioned?
- Do you agree with offering options in practice?
- What are your sources of being sustained as a practitioner and a teacher?
- Do you play / dance / hug trees?

Ask one, some or all of these questions and then notice how they respond: dismissively and abruptly or openly and sincerely?

It is very appropriate to ask a teacher if they receive mentoring/supervision, a process that can help to ground the charisma that allows a person to stand up in front of a group of people. It can be the literal ballast that ensures that their balloon does not get too close to the sun (because if that happens, the balloon can burst).

Being up there can at times be exhausting. When we are exhausted, we are more rigid, more fragile, more defensive. Plus the fact is that we can open a Pandora’s box with our teaching. Many people are wounded and sometimes what is being taught can open these wounds further — rather than help their healing. It is essential that as teachers we receive guidance and support.

Saying “I don’t know” is an indispensable skill for us as teachers; too often too many teachers might try to busk an answer or boast about what they know instead of acknowledging the truth of our limited experience; this can be dangerous for practitioners. Someone once asked me when I was teaching a course: “How do you remember all these details and all our names?” I thought for a moment — and then in the spirit of non-busking and non-boasting, I responded: “Notes.”

Being comfortable in offering options is absolutely vital. One long-term teacher wrote to me: “I remember early on in my Ashtanga teaching days I was teaching *Parsvottanasana* and offered no alternatives (!) to how the postures should look. And a student said: ‘If I can’t get the palms of my hands together, could I put the backs of my hands together or hold my elbows?’ It was a ‘lightbulb moment’ and I said ‘What a great idea!’”



The question of how teachers are sustaining themselves is crucial. Are we as teachers trying to do too much? I certainly have done that: taught too much and then felt drained, eventually realising that this was unsustainable. For myself, sustainers include connecting to nature (daily walks), eating well (porridge in the morning and not eating late in the evening), love and support from friends (the sangha of community, the feedback from peer group), regular practising (knowing that a little a lot is better than a lot a little).

Another of my sustainers is knowing why I teach. For myself, this is less about workout yoga or industrial yoga or performance yoga and more about yoga of ease, yoga of intimacy, yoga of awareness. In terms of my own teaching lineage, I mention teachers such as Sarah Powers, Alaric Newcombe and Judith Lasater. For mentoring, I regularly see a supervisor (who used to be my psychotherapist).

If a teacher never plays, whether it is dancing or hugging trees or singing silly songs or never does something simply for the love of it rather than getting it right, for me these are worrying signs. Play is a way of taking ourselves off our pedestals: making ourselves human rather than someone super-special, ordinary beings rather than extraordinary.

FRAUDS

A good question is why do we believe the frauds? I have believed a fair few frauds in my time. Frauds can be convincing — and I can be trusting and, at times, gullible. I could believe that the moon is made of cheese (or standing on your head can change the world) if the person telling me this is convincing enough. The truth is that many of us want to believe and want to belong. Looking for something new as a way to realise these wants is an understandable and, in many ways, a positive approach. Feeling a bit lost is also a common experience — especially in 21st-century society — and so our searching can be ungrounded.

But we need to make sure that these truths do not mean that we overlook a teacher being disrespectful and exploitative. That we do not ignore our own doubting whispers. The reality is that there are innumerable wounded birds

and sadly, plenty of predators (who are also wounded in their own ways). These are the crooks and the charlatans, confidence tricksters with bids for money or power or sex — or all three. The aftermath of their deception is the challenge of not completely throwing out the baby with the bathwater. Because a teacher has seriously breached boundaries, this does not mean that all of what they have been teaching is invalid. It is a skilful process to separate the teacher from the teachings; it is not readily done and it can take a long time.

Being high up on pedestals is neither healthy (for teachers or students) nor sustainable. Peter Deadman, a practitioner and teacher for more than 40 years, wrote:

gurus...because of their own vulnerability, social ineptness and stunted emotional intelligence, create a world where they stand alone at the top of their little hill and have no peers to tell them when they're talking rubbish, nobody to bring them down a peg or two, nobody to help them laugh at themselves, nobody to relieve the loneliness of their elevated status.²

Maybe for some there is deep insecurity that makes them long for the limelight and to feel like a guru. Maybe for some there is a loving of the attention that they receive as a yoga teacher and then they get lost in the spotlights. One conclusion after Peter Deadman's four decades plus of practising was this: "I have learnt untold amounts from many teachers but I have no illusion that they are other than variously flawed human beings...It left me profoundly allergic to the guru game."³

PEDESTALS AND PASTS

Frequently, these pedestals are built on unstable sands. Practices that require silencing of participants and marginalising of dissent are not firm foundations for sustainability and longevity. I believe teaching is less about the person upon their pedestal, less about acolytes and much more about empowering practitioners. It was Paulo Freire in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* who contrasted "circles of certainty" with "critical consciousness". He described 'critical consciousness' as education that serves as "the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and

discover how to participate in the transformation of their world”.⁴

Of course, we all have our pasts; it is our pasts that make us who we are now. It is helpful (and sometimes necessary) for our pasts to be known. Hiding or rewriting our past can be a warning sign. Examples of my own past include a two-week stint at HMP Wormwood Scrubs in 1986 (I was innocent of the charges); a long history of radical political activism (which includes numerous arrests); taking a substantial quantity of drugs in the past (I still continue to occasionally smoke cannabis); and my brother had significant mental health issues (which culminated in his suicide in 2018).

We are all created from our childhoods and our pasts. One consequence of protecting ourselves as children can mean as an adult there is a turning down of alarm bells and ignoring warning signs. Old habits die hard even as the conditions have changed. Many of us have at least some familiarity with such childhood experiences and their adult consequences.

ASPIRATIONS

As teachers, we could aspire towards this: the teacher who “instead of being the ‘sage on the stage’, functions as a ‘guide on the side’, facilitating learning in a less directive way” (Alison King, a professor of education).⁵ This means that participants are less passive, more active. Instead of merely regurgitating information, participants become more confident and more knowledgeable. There is greater interaction in the learning so that participants are “critical thinkers and creative problem solvers.”⁶ There is greater agency for participants; less devotee / follower / disciple and more equality / dialogue / emancipation.

We all make mistakes. I have injured practitioners through unskilful adjustments (fortunately, no broken bones, which unfortunately has occurred with other teachers). I have unthinkingly repeated points that subsequently I realised were not true. We all benefit from feedback. One useful piece of feedback that I received after a workshop was that I laughed too loudly at my own jokes. Another recent example: a twenty-something came up to me

at the end of class and said “That was sick”. Now that made me smile.

A good friend who also teaches yoga told me after a class: “Norman, you do not have to be such an entertainer.” Ouch. Good friends such as her are worth much more than their weight in gold. I can be arrogant and full of myself; there is a long way to go for me personally before I can follow this advice from the *Tao Te Ching*.

The sage avoids extremes, excess, and complacency...Not bragging...Not boasting...⁷

Do your work, then step back — the only path to serenity.⁸

A teacher wrote to me after revelations about Richard Miller (a founder of I-Rest Yoga Nidra).

“I am sad that I continue to read about teachers who have done a lot of good with their teaching being reprehensible on a personal level. I am unsure as to how far we should go in discarding one on account of the other...none of us is God or has god-like powers that enable us to fully discern any other human being’s actions or intentions. We are increasingly quick to accuse and much slower to forgive.”

It is undoubtedly true that, as an example, I-Rest and Richard Miller’s work have done a lot of good for a lot of people (especially among the military veteran communities). And yet what we model as teachers is so important. For example, are our boundaries floppy, rigid or appropriate? Making mistakes is very human; those without sin can cast the first stone. This is more about discussing and supporting than excluding and condemning. How can we learn if we just condemn?

THE POWER OF TEACHERS

An equation for the therapeutic encounter (which does include yoga classes) is that the process of change comprises 50% of what the client/student/practitioner brings and 10% the specific technology of the therapy. The remaining 40% is about the relationship

between therapist/teacher and the person. 40% is a substantial amount: four times more than the actual technology of therapy. Remember that earlier line: “As teachers, we hold more power than we might think.”

When we think that someone has all the answers, this means we are subscribing to an individualistic theory of knowledge. The teacher knows best. By having a broader community (rather than being the one up on a pedestal), there is a more social theory of knowledge, thus less hierarchical and less striving for perfection.

An aspiration is that our knowledge as teachers is in the service of facilitating healthy, trusting and constructive relationships that enable participants to learn and to grow. A long-established teacher wrote: “teaching is a caring about others profession. That is it really! The teacher ego or guru status is totally unhelpful and often dangerous.”

I wish that learning is beneficial for all of us. If we are to uphold ethics and integrity in our practice and our practice spaces, we need to take this seriously. This is making safety our priority. Essential foundations are clarity and openness; encouraging channels of feedback that are appropriate and workable. Rather than inner circles, in-group speak, secrecy, what is needed is inclusivity, accessibility, transparency.

As well as being clear-eyed, it is important to be positive. However messy situations can become, there are always pearls in the wreckage. Lessons can be learnt. It is up to us to shape how yogaland works and what it looks like. It can take a long time to find who we are as a teacher. To be at ease with teaching and to be aware of our abilities, our

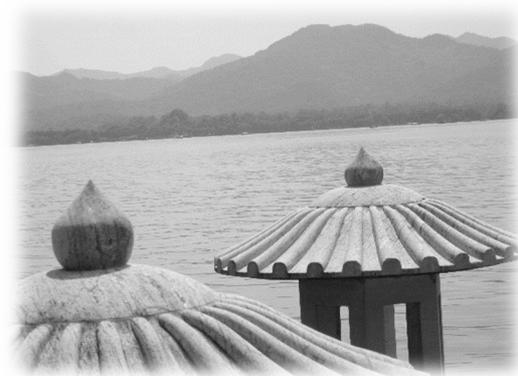
weaknesses, our strengths. To have the confidence to clearly see the warning and worrying signs — and the confidence to name them and cleanly challenge them.

In our practice of teaching, cultivating this critical consciousness can be a process in which we become better teachers; so that we are sufficiently resourced, ethically grounded, skilful guides.

Norman Blair

5 September 2021

With great thanks to those who gave advice and comments on this article. Feedback is a wonderful way of learning and is always welcome (especially when it is uncomfortable). I am not pretending that this is easy (both giving and receiving feedback)...



¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Multi-level_marketing

² Peter Deadman. 2020. *Finding My Way: memoirs and short stories*. Self-published, 113.

³ Deadman 2020: 113, 112.

⁴ Paulo Freire. 2000. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum, 34.

⁵ Alison King. 1993. ‘From Sage on the Stage

to Guide on the Side’. *College Teaching*. Winter. 30-35.

⁶ King 1993: 35

⁷ Gia-Fu Feng (tr). 1989. *Tao Te Ching*. Vintage, chapters 22, 29.

⁸ Stephen Mitchell (tr). 1988. *Tao Te Ching*. HarperCollins, chapter 9.