

Yoga and Ethics in High School

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In the past three years, I have taught yoga classes to students at the Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter Public School, in addition to my job as Dance Director. This school already is an open environment; the students are generally interested in the arts (although as a charter school we have a lottery instead of an audition admissions procedure) and the Pioneer Valley in Massachusetts is known for its larger-than-national-average proportion of left-of-center thinkers. This allowed me to teach yoga as an holistic discipline, meaning not just as a series of steps and poses, but as a way of thinking and being in the world that is many thousands of years old.

As the primary dance teacher, I know about the power of movement as a form of release, fun, self-empowerment, practice in discipline, and psycho-physical integration. I also know that focusing on each form that is taught in our school: ballet, modern, jazz, African, break-dance, funk, tap, choreography, Labananalysis for actors and dancers, among others, can sometimes compartmentalize

the movement learning into specific skills for specific actions. Teaching yoga as an holistic discipline allows me to do two important things: teach from a perspective that opens my own mind to new possibilities existing outside my dance knowledge, base and reach a larger population of students that might not find themselves inside a dance studio but who wish to connect to their body-minds.

Although yoga can produce a limber, strong, and centered body, the actual goal of yoga itself can be found in the English translation of its name—union. Yoga is a way to achieve a unified being—unified in body, mind, emotions, and spirit. It isn't very yogic to embody the poses, or *asanas*, with presence and calmness, to challenge oneself with humility and compassion, and then leave the studio and commit road rage, verbally abuse your fellow classmates, or on the other side of the spectrum hide yourself and your talents from others due to fear or lack of confidence. Yoga is a practice that makes its practitioners more humane, calm, powerful, and insightful. Yoga, according to author and yogi Stephen Cope, is about the "twin pillars of clear seeing and calm abiding,"¹ being able to see clearly oneself and one's actions and thoughts, and also to create equanimity and compassion about oneself and one's actions and thoughts.

One of the pathways toward union that yogis practice is called the *yamas*, or ethical principles. Here we get into tricky territory in a public school, yet due to the open-mindedness of my administration and colleagues, I decided to plunge in and teach these principles in an interactive way. The following is an outline of this unit of the course, and some of the reactions of the students who partici-

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pated. This unit follows weeks of doing the poses, or *asanas*, and breath techniques or *pranayama*. Toward the end of the course I also have them do a karma yoga (service through action) project in their community.

Yamas and Character Education

The yoga class is focused primarily on postures and breathing techniques, but two weeks in the cycle of 15 are spent learning about the five main ethical principles and how they may create new awareness and changes in our lives.

In class, we take as a starting point an article written by Judith Lasater in *Yoga Journal* called "Beginning the Journey."² This article frames the yamas in contemporary, practical ways. Students read the article, and usually pretty lively discussions follow: "Does practicing non-violence mean I can't get angry at my sister?" "Is it greed if I don't share food with someone who needs it when I need it too?" and, on a more charged note, "When I go to the mosh dances, we bump into each other and hit each other purposely. Is this violent?"

Students choose a *yama* that they wish to "work on" for two weeks and then record in a journal the resulting awareness and actions that arise. For instance, they note when the desire for violent thought arises, whether it is toward themselves or others, consider their options, and write down the results. Just noting when it arises may be all it takes for thoughts to shift. Another student may see that *asteya*, non-stealing, as Lasater explains can also mean not stealing from yourself, not hiding your talents or needs. She may decide to go ahead and practice her piano or take the risk of auditioning for the school musical and give herself the gift of fulfilling her potential. The five *yamas*, in contemporary re-working, are: *ahimsa*, non-violence; *asteya*, non-stealing; *satya*, truth-telling; *bramicharya*, presence and total commitment; and *aparigraha*, non-greed.

I stress to the students that becoming aware may or may not result in change, but it is the first step. The goal is not necessarily to change, although many of the students begin to see the benefits of reviewing their thoughts and actions. The goal is to see how many times these ethical principles are called for in our lives. The choices they make after noticing that are theirs.

Some Results

A young woman in my class, working on *ahimsa*, or non-violence, noted how many times she was nasty to her sister. She decided to try to be nicer, or at least walk away instead of producing verbal

venom. She began to actually like her sister more and had more positive interactions with her.

A young man, who has been sent in the past by the state to anger management classes, also chose *ahimsa*. He watched the ways anger arose in his family and wrote about how many times his mother called him "ugly" or "worthless" and wrote about how he at times agreed with this estimation. He then wrote about how much his girlfriend supported him and how he came to her aid in a touchy situation with another male adolescent. He talked about how he wanted to act violently toward this teen and about how he stood up for her without becoming violent. He had not yet made the leap between his familial belief system and his anger, but he had begun to see how he could correct his own actions.

Another young woman suffers from a neurological disorder and is often afraid of physical challenges. Her illness sometimes causes weaknesses in visual-spatial relationships and working memory. Taking the class itself was a lesson in *asteya*, not stealing from her potential, and she focused on *bramicharya*. Traditionally this *yama* was translated as celibacy, and in Lasater's article it is revised as presence, doing what you are doing now, in this moment, and nothing else. (In sexual matters this would mean being faithful to your partner in thought and deed.) This young woman used *bramicharya* as staying committed and focused to her work in the class, not giving up or getting anxious. She, in this way, helped to overcome her real and perceived physical limitations.

In no way were any changes the students felt easy and obstacle-free. Yet they saw it as a process and a new way of looking at their world. There certainly were those students who did not invest themselves as much as others, but overall the work seemed valuable.

What For?

After eight years of teaching dance full-time in high school, and ten years before that of teaching dance in university, conservatory, and private settings, I have come to realize that even with the wonderful vehicle of movement, the content that I teach takes second place to the how, the why, and the what for of what I teach. What good is knowing how to do a really amazing leap or well-aligned plié if the student is angry, unloved, scared, or anxious? The body is a perfect vehicle to notice, breathe into, accept and change these places inside ourselves and to find ways of doing so appropriately in community.

A good dance class can also address the issues behind the form, the dancer from the dance. I have

found that the emphasis that yoga places on the proper action in the community allows me to open the students to these ideas as a natural part of the form.

The end of the semester brings our karma yoga project. Karma means "action," and karma yoga is the practice of doing an action without the thought or need for reward. This project changes every semester. Sometimes the students make a commitment to do a certain action, like cleaning up the area around the school. Sometimes our whole class does a project, like teaching a yoga class for the local senior citizens with disabilities.

Although it is certainly important to note that

I am not a therapist and I have the support of the school guidance counselor when needed, the seeds of understanding, compassion, and insight that this practice seems to have brought to these students shows me that perhaps this is one step toward helping our nations' teens, a vulnerable group at best, develop skills far beyond the traditional classroom.

References

1. Cope S: *Yoga and the Quest for the True Self*. New York: Bantam Books, 1999. p. 122.
2. Lasater J: Beginning the journey. *Yoga Journal* November/December 1998. pp. 42-44.

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