

# community

## Yama Drama

A class of teens uses the ethical principles of yoga to bring about positive changes in school and at home.



**YOGA IS GRADUALLY WORKING** its way into high schools across the country, doing good things for a population suffering from record levels of obesity and stress. But while most teachers use yoga to get their students fit and focused, Jodi Falk, an Iyengar and dance teacher at Pioneer Valley Performing Arts Charter Public School in South Hadley, Massachusetts, decided to go a step further. After a month of leading her teens in postures and breathing, Falk introduced them to yoga's five *yamas*, or ethical principles. These central pillars—*ahimsa* (nonharming), *satya* (truthfulness), *asteya* (nonstealing), *brahmacharya* (presence and total commitment), and *aparigraha* (nongrasping)—come from Patanjali's Yoga Sutra, written around the second century CE.

Falk asked her students to apply one *yama* to their daily lives for two weeks and then write a short essay about their experiences. She also made it clear that while change might be the result, it wasn't necessarily the goal. "Many of the students began to see the benefits of reviewing their thoughts and actions," she says. "But the goal was to see how many times these principles are called

for in our lives. The choices they make after noticing that are theirs."

Falk said the students were immediately intrigued and asked questions like, "When I go to mosh dances, we bump into each other and hit each other purposely. Is that violent?" or, "Is it greedy if I don't share food with someone who needs it when I need it too?"

While not everyone took the exercise seriously, a few had deep experiences. One student who had been required by the state to attend anger management classes chose to focus on *ahimsa* and wrote about watching anger arise. The teen noticed how many times his mother called him "ugly" or "worthless," and how often he agreed with her. But he also saw how much his girlfriend supported him, and wrote a story about coming to her aid when she was being hassled by a guy. He wanted to defend her violently, Falk says, but he applied *ahimsa* and restrained himself.

A student with a neurological disorder that has impaired her memory and vision chose *brahmacharya*. ("Brahmacharya" is often translated as "celibacy," but can also be interpreted as "commitment.") The student wrote about how it helped her focus in class and made her realize she wasn't living up to her potential. "In this way," Falk says, "she was able to overcome her limitations." JAIMAL YOGIS

Yoga's age-old ethical principles may provide help and guidance for stressed-out teens.