

Adjustments and the Use of Touch for Yoga Teachers

It used to be perfectly acceptable for yoga teachers to not only touch their students but to hit, stand and jump upon them. Things have come a long way since this photo of Krishnamacharya standing on the stomach of one of his students outside his Yoga Shala in Mysore, 1934.¹ He later softened his teaching, but the legacy of fearless bodily contact remained and was passed down to at least two of his famous disciples – Patabhi Jois, upon whose stomach Krishnamacharya is standing, and BKS Iyengar.



In recent years, things have changed. Revelations of inappropriate touching by yoga teachers have hit the Elephant Journal and other on-line publications in droves. This photo of Patabhi Jois has generated a lot of conversations, such as:

- What the ****?
- This photo is photo-shopped!
- Why did the students remain silent for so long?
- The Guru has feet of clay and is just an opportunist dirty old man.
- Oh, but he would do the same to men – his genuine intention was to adjust. Nothing sexual was intended ...'

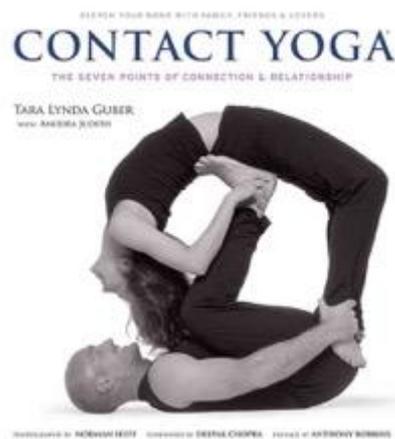


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¹ <http://krishnamcharysaoriginalashtanga.blogspot.com/2015/01/inversions-krishnamacharyas-head-and.html>

² <https://www.elephantjournal.com/2009/09/when-do-yoga-adjustments-cross-the-line/>

We now have policies regarding inappropriate touching of students ie. Nothing outside the area which would be covered with a swimming costume. We can all probably recall teachers who have been guilty of inappropriate touching in the past, but if they are intelligent they will have stopped this by now. There are certain schools of yoga in which adjusting the students is implicit to the style – Ashtanga, for example. But there are tactful ways around this matter. Gregor Maehle, for example, places a thin towel on the student's body before offering any physical adjustment. And it used to be acceptable practice for an Iyengar teacher to pick a student up by the legs in Sarvangasana. There was nothing inappropriate intended at all – just the desire to help the student experience an uplift. It was a far cry from Bikram Choudhury coercing students into having semi-consensual sexual relations with him. And Contact Yoga and Acro Yoga of course are all about pair-work support – and people do go to those classes knowing what to expect.



It used to be quite normal, about twenty or thirty years ago, to include pair-work in yoga classes. Though some of the practices were decidedly unwise, the touching was not at all inappropriate. It was not ³really recognized that some people simply do not like to be touched. There is even a word for this: Haphephobia – possibly due to previous assault or PTSD. It is a condition which triggers panic attacks – not the psychological effect they were hoping for when they came to the yoga class.⁴ And there is a condition called Allodynia which means the sufferer feels pain upon being touched.

Not all adjustments are physical, of course. We can give verbal instructions to change things and we can demonstrate what not to do and what to do ... but the truth is that some

³ <https://www.google.com/search?q=Contact+YOGa&ie=utf-8&oe=utf-8&client=firefox-b-ab>

⁴ <http://www.yogabuzz.org/blog/please-dont-touch-trauma-consent-mat/>

people – those who are more kinaesthetic learners – respond best to a gentle touch. You, as the teacher, may be saying the same thing in different ways, over and over: 'Lift up the instep of the right /leading foot/of the foot closest to the window/bring your knee over the ankle/press the base of the big toe into the mat' etc. The student is in Virabhadrasana and their knee is keeling inwards but they don't seem to hear you. You give a light touch to the knee and suddenly everything straightens out. They immediately respond. The inner knee lives. The student has been reminded that a muscle exists. Whew. But – did that student fill in a consent form?

We need to find sensitive ways in which to obtain students' consent for being touched. This could be done with a consent form. It could be done by asking students who don't want to be touched to raise their hands while in Savasana at the beginning of the class so they don't feel self-conscious about other people seeing. It could be done through informal discussion outside the class. Most importantly, it needs to be done because we don't know if people hold trauma in their muscle memory and we want our classes to be a safe space for everyone. We don't necessarily need to purchase a set of chip-flips (or flip-chips) ⁵ but we can all find creative ways to allow our students an opportunity to graciously opt in or out, as they choose. Everyone learns in their own way and, though some students love to be touched – we need to respect personal space.

At the end of the day, Hatha Yoga is an individual path which we all do for different reasons. Even if the whole class has chosen to opt in to 'physical assists' (the American term for hands-on adjustments), we cannot assume that everyone will respond in the same way. A beginner has no idea where they are going and, though a physical touch may be sufficient to remind them of which is their right foot, there is no point encouraging them – with however light a touch – to move on to something they simply don't know.

BKS Iyengar may have regularly kicked students in the kidneys while they did Ardha Dhanurasana or whacked them out of their handstands; but that was what you got. Nowadays Instagram can have the same effect: wanting to be like those bendy goddesses in their slinky yoga gear, many a student has been happily subject to a 'deep assist', hoping their Instagram photos would reveal the ultimate benefits.

⁵ <https://www.yogaflipchip.com/>

Things will change. We need to observe our students and to guide them appropriately. Often it is better to encourage individual proprioception by offering astute suggestions or by using blocks or balls against the body to create a sense of positive resistance. We can offer practices which encourage students to unlock the tense areas of their bodies and strengthen the lax areas. We can offer praise and encouragement to help them to stand secure on their own mat. Self-realisation is a solitary path and the more we can do to encourage autonomy in our students' practice, the better. We don't have to be psychic to know that asanas give off an energetic aura, and it's easy to tell if a person is coming from their ego or their heart. As teachers we can guide and assist them towards a genuine experience – but the experience is all theirs. Untouchable.

