

I'm Not a Yoga Therapist Anymore!

by Leslie Kaminoff

As I enter my 30th year as a Yoga teacher, and the 25th year of full-time employment doing Yogabased work with individuals, I've just recently figured out something that I consider to be vitally important: I no longer wish to known as a "Yoga therapist."

This bit of clarity is largely due to the opportunity I've had to bounce ideas off my colleagues at IAYT and attendees at SYTAR, so it seems fitting to share this perspective in the pages of this journal. The process of producing a written summary based on repeated discussions with teachers, students, and friends is very familiar to me. It's what I did 10 years ago when I started the email newslist e-Sutra with the following post:

I have been personally engaged in countless discussions [about standards for Yoga teachers and therapists] for at least the past seven years. In those seven years, my fundamental views about certification standards have not changed, although my arguments supporting those views have become simpler and clearer with each new discussion...I will now present to you what I hope will be a clear and persuasive overview of my position.

When I first wrote that, the topic was the establishment of national certification standards for Yoga teachers, which culminated in the birth of the Yoga Alliance. IAYT's recent ongoing dialogue about the scope of practice and definition of Yoga Therapy is an extension of this debate. In my view, the fundamentals underlying both issues are identical, and can be summed up by the following question: "How can we define our professional activities in a way that preserves our freedom to conduct our relationships with our students in a manner that honors the core principles of Yoga?"

To fully explain my answer to this question, a little personal history will be necessary. Back in 1993, when the certification dialogue was just starting, I was serving as vice-president of a nonprofit group called Unity in Yoga, and I was the principal author of the following official position statement:

- We enthusiastically support the ongoing dialogue addressing higher personal, professional, and ethical standards for Yoga teachers and therapists.

- We are in support of a process that results in the establishment of Yoga as a respected personal and academic pursuit, and any certification or accreditation that may result.
- We are, however, opposed to the establishment of any entity that assumes the authority to license or regulate Yoga teachers as professional practitioners and to enforce its standards on the Yoga community.

Against my objections, Unity in Yoga's executive board decided to release only the first two sentences—an action I saw as a critical error. Shortly thereafter, I resigned from Unity in Yoga. Four years later, I witnessed another group of Yoga teachers make a similar error in collective judgment just before I resigned from the ad hoc committee that turned into the Yoga Alliance when it acquired Unity in Yoga's non-profit status.

The error is this: It is not enough to say that you are supporting and establishing high standards for Yoga teacher training and certification. That's the easy, obvious part. You must also state clearly, consistently, and defensibly what you are not supporting, on ethical grounds. Yoga ethics are very clear on this point. The teaching concerning what we should avoid (yama) is presented before the teachings about what we should pursue (niyama). Furthermore, the very first injunction is ahimsâ, the avoidance of doing harm. In the context of professional standards, what exactly must we avoid harming? The process of teaching Yoga. What is the vehicle for this process? The student-teacher relationship.

Therefore, the professional "yama" I adhere to is "I avoid engaging in any action that will lead to third-party interference in the student-teacher relationship." My "niyama" is "I support and protect through my actions the sanctity, integrity, and freedom of the student-teacher relationship."

Those statements are the core of my ethical and practical values as a practitioner, and it would be impossible for me to overstate their importance in my life. They reflect fundamental principles that tell me which actions to avoid, and which to pursue. Without consciously identifying those principles and validating their truth through my life's experience, I could easily become lost and confused. My actions could proceed from fear and ignorance, and I could end up doing harm to myself, my students, and my profession.

The value of my original 1993 statement on standards has been repeatedly confirmed for me, and I continue to vigorously stand by it, with one

exception. In the first sentence, I used the phrase “Yoga teachers and therapists.” I now realize that this phrase is redundant, confusing, and potentially harmful. As the title of this piece implies, I am stating for the record that I no longer wish to be known as a Yoga therapist. I have come to the conclusion that my continued use of the term would misrepresent the nature of my work, both to the public and to myself, and would violate the professional ethics I’ve outlined above.

This does not in any way mean that I intend to stop doing my job. In fact, I will be able to work far more effectively, having identified my actual job title: “Yoga educator.” In retrospect, I realize that from the moment I taught my first group âsana class until the present day, I’ve always had the same job. I’ve just been doing it more effectively by learning how to better tailor the teachings to individual needs. I used to unquestioningly assume that my education in anatomy, biomechanics, bodywork, physical rehabilitation, and philosophy granted me the right to call myself a therapist. But, in fact, it just turned me into a highly-educated Yoga teacher.

By understanding that a “Yoga therapist” is nothing more than a very good Yoga teacher, I can eliminate the troublesome word “therapy” from my job description. I no longer need to define what I do beyond stating that I educate people about how their bodies and minds can be more fully integrated through the use of breath, posture, and movement. Even when I employ touch as part of that process, it is only for the purpose of educating, not fixing.

Why is the word “therapy” troublesome? Let’s start with the dictionary.

Judge for yourself which definition is closest to what we do:

- Therapy (from the Greek *therapeutikos*, to attend or treat): treatment intended to relieve or heal a disorder; relating to the treatment of disease or disorders by remedial agents or methods...
- Educate (from the Latin *educere*, to draw out): to train by formal instruction or supervised practice; to give intellectual, moral, and social instruction to someone; to provide information...

I submit that even the most highly skilled and experienced Yoga “Therapist” does not “treat disease...by remedial agents or methods.” This is the province of a medical system, whether it’s allopathic, naturopathic, or Ayurvedic. Yoga is not a medical system. Yoga is a set of principles that show us we are interconnected, multidimensional beings composed of body, breath, and

mind. These teachings suggest strategies for identifying and reducing obstructions that can occur in any of these dimensions. When obstructions (klesha) are reduced, it is the human system itself that reestablishes a healthy balance. We simply show people how to make more space (sukha) in their bodies so prâna can flow more freely. It's the body's own resources that do the healing. In other words, the teacher doesn't heal the student, the teachings do. This is my definition of Yoga therapy - it's Yoga applied to the individual.

As Yoga educators, we must constantly remind ourselves of and preserve this essential truth by minding our yama and niyama.

We must not attempt to integrate ourselves into mainstream healthcare delivery by posing as a new therapeutic profession. Not only will this take us further from the truth of who we are, it will create destructive turf battles with established fields like physical therapy, massage therapy, dance therapy, and so on.

We must not seek third-party reimbursement (de facto regulation) for our services, which are very affordable compared to medical treatment. If we are concerned about under-served populations, we are free to charitably offer our skills to them. This will be vastly easier to do without health insurance bureaucrats dictating our rates while wasting our time filling out their paperwork.

Most importantly, we must not seek out or surrender to government control (licensing) over our precious and unique field. This would be a betrayal of our students, who have sought us out precisely because we are outside the mainstream. After all, Yoga is ultimately about freedom. How can we represent that freedom if we allow ourselves to be co-opted by an oppressive system?

How then do we reach all the patients and doctors within mainstream healthcare who desperately need our skills? My answer is that we already are.

All across the world, we Yoga educators are sharing our vital work in every area of healthcare delivery by virtue of what we do best: connecting with people. This sharing will only grow exponentially as more doctors, nurses, administrators, and business people become our students, transform their

lives, and advocate on our behalf. If we continue to take a strong stand for our own freedom as educators, we can have nothing but a positive influence on everyone. This is especially true for those working and being treated within mainstream healthcare, whose freedoms have been severely eroded by the destructive aspects of a system that's forgotten to honor above all else the practitioner-patient relationship.

Is some form of government regulation of our field inevitable? Perhaps we can't avoid it forever, but consider this: would you rather be answerable to the authorities as a healthcare provider, or as an educator?

Lastly, committing ourselves to the educational/academic model reveals perhaps the most important area we should be pursuing: the institution of undergraduate and graduate Yoga training programs at the university level. There is no reason on earth why serious students shouldn't be able to acquire bachelor's, master's or doctorate-level training in any and all aspects of Yoga. A university-based Yoga program would unite in an unprecedented way many existing departments: anatomy, kinesiology, physiology, anthropology, philosophy, psychology, religion, Sanskrit, to name just a handful. The majority of the necessary resources are already there. All that's missing is a staff of experienced Yoga teachers to design and administer the Yoga training.

Think of what a valuable resource a full-blown Department of Yoga would be to a university! Students, teachers, and administrators in every department would benefit from the availability of ongoing, high-level, campus-based Yoga training. If we really want to be more accepted by doctors, there is no better way than to teach them Yoga while they're still in medical school.

I guarantee that the first university with the vision to create a degree program in Yoga would be deluged by applications from highly motivated, deeply-committed students. It's a cherished dream of mine to see this happen in my lifetime—perhaps soon enough for my younger sons to take advantage of it.

This brief piece does not permit me to explore all the implications of my view, and I am well aware there are a great many (including what the “T” in

IAYT might be changed to). I sincerely hope a lively dialogue will emerge as you consider the possibility of re-identifying yourself as what you truly are: a Yoga educator. I'd love to hear from you.

In closing, I salute the leadership of IAYT for their enlightened stewardship of our field, and for their open-mindedness in allowing my ideas to appear in their journal. The fact that you are reading this is ample evidence of their commitment to a truly open dialogue, and I am deeply honored that they have welcomed me into this forum.

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