



WORKING GROUP PAPER

Code of Conduct

APRIL 2019

#YAstandards

In 1999, in its role as a voluntary, member-based organization serving yoga schools and teachers, **Yoga Alliance (YA)** sought to ensure and preserve the quality of yoga education and practice by establishing and disseminating standards for the education of yoga teachers and by maintaining a registry of teachers who met these standards. In 2018, **YA** launched a review of its standards, calling it the **Standards Review Project (SRP)**.

One result of the **SRP** is this collection of eight collaborative, condensed, and edited working group papers to which key yoga stakeholders for **YA** and for the yoga community at large contributed. These papers represent the recommendations by each working group of the best practices for the standard, or key inquiry area, in question. There is one working paper for each; what follows is the working group paper on the notion of a [Code of Conduct](#) in yoga.

CODE OF CONDUCT UPFRONT

Yoga Alliance (YA) chose Code of Conduct (CoC) as one of its eight areas of inquiry because a Code of Conduct lays the foundation for safe yoga education of the highest quality and integrity.¹ YA asked the Code of Conduct Working Group (CoCWG):

- ***How should ethics be applied to yoga teaching today?***
- ***How are the gifts of yoga better served when supported with a solid ethical foundation?***

The CoCWG ultimately anchored its discussion in the ideas of *ahimsa* (non-harming), *satya* (truthfulness), accessibility, inclusiveness, and equity. Nearly every aspect of the CoC, the group believed, was either an attempt to avoid harm or to create honesty or clarity. Using these concepts, the CoCWG:

- Defined the relationship between yogic values and modern values as they pertain to consent
- Explored the role of the yoga community in adhering to a YA-approved CoC, including the promotion of politically neutral and inclusive language
- Examined YA's role in establishing and promoting yogic norms in all relationships across the broad spectrum of the yoga community
- Attempted to define the most appropriate type of romantic or sexual relationships between a yoga teacher and a student in the context the community-wide, yogic CoC

YA (could) help RYSs train RYTs to adapt their practices for students of all abilities and body types.

¹ Please see the [Integrity Working Group Paper](#) for more information on the topic of Integrity in yoga.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Asking the question the group said YA itself must answer—that being whether YA is a morally governing body even if it does not officially regulate—the **CoCWG recommended a revised and expanded YA-approved CoC** that, among issuing other guidance, would provide:

- 1) The yogic definition of right to consent and touch
- 2) The right balance between yogic values and modern values; inclusive language choices; trauma sensitivity; and a yogic definition of yogic teacher/student relationships
- 3) Additional language to expand the scope of the CoC to address the activities of those in the yoga profession to include a commitment to “developing strong ethical principles in their professional and personal lives”

The CoCWG... anchored its discussions in *ahimsa* (or non-harming), *satya* (or truthfulness), accessibility, inclusiveness, and equity.

BACKGROUND AND REFLECTION

The CoCWG felt many issues were relevant and vital to YA’s updated and modernized CoC and also said more discussion is needed by YA and in the yoga community. The group summarized main issues before offering suggested language and other solutions for the new CoC.

YOGIC VALUES + MODERN VALUES

The CoCWG discussed a “north star” value for the CoC but did **not** resolve to use Patanjali’s *yamas* (ethical rules) as core values for yogic conduct. Support for using the *yamas* was based on both the simplicity and power of these ethics to stand the test of time and on the fact that these values are the most widely known by the YA community. Pushback against using these values was that YA would potentially be reinterpreting the *yamas* for its own benefit and changing their meaning by virtue of highlighting the *Yoga Sutras* above other yoga texts.

Lack of resolution in this discussion reflected the CoCWG’s belief that this topic would need to be part of a larger debate.

ACCESSIBLE AND INCLUSIVE VALUES AND LANGUAGE CHOICES

While a new CoC should prioritize accessible and inclusive social values more than previous YA Codes of Conduct, some in the CoCWG advised making “politically neutral” language choices and demonstrating actions around inclusion given that certain language (such as that in anti-discrimination laws) doesn’t actually describe what discrimination looks like in practice.

THE SCOPE OF THE CODE

The CoCWG discussed specifically how the scope of the Code relates to personal conduct outside a teacher’s professional behavior. The group asked whether people could file a grievance against a teacher because of an action committed by that teacher that they deemed professionally or personally unethical. Should someone’s online communications, for example, be held

to the same standards as their conduct in the classroom? The CoCWG suggested this additional language for the CoC:

Yoga teachers should be committed to developing strong ethical principles in their professional and personal lives, and this should be understood as intrinsic to their practice and teaching.

There was no resolution here, as a question for the group also remained: What makes someone’s personal online content part of their public role as teachers?

SOLUTION

DEFINING CONSENT

While the CoCWG agreed that obtaining consent before touching a student was essential for a yoga teacher, the group disagreed about the level and definition of consent defined by YA. The group’s suggested values and definitions of consent were:

Affirmative Consent: a knowing, voluntary, and mutual decision among all participants to engage in an activity and, in this case, an instructional activity. Consent can be given by words or actions as long as those words or actions create clear permission regarding willingness to engage in the instruction. Silence or lack of resistance in and of itself does not demonstrate consent.²

Explicit Consent: can be given verbally, in writing, in gesture, or via another consent indicator. Silence or lack of resistance in and of itself does not demonstrate consent. The CoCWG believed YA is correct to recommend the use of “consent chips,” presented to students on arrival to the class and which the students can use to communicate easily whether they consent to being touched during the course of instruction.

Ongoing, Enthusiastic, and Informed Consent:

- **Ongoing Consent:** the idea that giving of consent is an ongoing process. If someone has offered consent at one time, that does not necessarily carry over to later in a class or to another day. Each time a teacher approaches a student to touch that student, consent must be given by the student.
- **Enthusiastic Consent:** the empowerment of students to respond to requests for consent clearly and specifically. In other words, if a student is asked for consent and does not respond, their consent has not been given.
- **Informed Consent:** some students may not understand what they are agreeing to when being asked for consent. It is the duty of the teacher to be clear so that students are appropriately approached and asked. The question, “may I give you an adjustment?,” is not enough information. The teacher needs to describe the adjustment they want to give in enough detail for the student to make the most informed decision at that time.

YA (could) assist RYSs and RYTt in recognizing and examining how language, teaching style, and class content can interfere with accessibility and create an environment where students may not feel included, welcomed, or safe.

² Language adapted from the New York State “Enough is Enough” Bill S5965, 2015.

TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS

Teacher-Student Orientation

The CoCWG discussed the power differentials in teacher-student relationships, and some advocated for a greater emphasis on student empowerment in the background and purpose of the Code, extending the idea of empowerment to all elements of yoga. Imbalance of power can lead to ethical violations on the part of the teacher, the CoCWG noted, and it is the teacher's duty and responsibility to teach that transformation is the student's own and no one else's.

Romantic Relationships

The CoCWG agreed that romantic relationships must be forbidden between a yoga Trainer and a Trainee during training, but the group debated whether this ban would be carried into all teacher-student relationships. The group said this is an issue for more debate and discussion.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EDUCATION, STANDARDS, AND RESOURCES

The CoCWG offered suggestions for additional educational content on the topics that follow that YA could create, encourage widely, or insert into the CoC while also reinforcing it across other standards and in YA-approved curricula. The group particularly emphasized the importance of trauma sensitivity training for yoga teachers and recommended YA provide education on this topic and/or include it in the CoC. Please see the [Core Curriculum](#), [Inclusion](#), and [Teacher Qualifications](#) Working Group Papers for more conversation on this topic.

Accessibility, Body Image, and Implicit Bias

Many in the CoCWG wanted YA to increase its efforts to promote diversity, accessibility, inclusivity, and equity. The group suggested these standards could feed from other Working Group Papers into the CoC. For the Inclusion inquiry in particular, the group recommended that YA:

- 1) Define terms such as "discrimination" and educate teachers on the lack of inclusion in yoga, possibly using an online course called, for example, Accessibility, Body Image, and Implicit Bias³
- 2) Assist Registered Yoga Schools (RYSs) and Registered Yoga Teachers (RYTs) in recognizing and examining how language, teaching style, and class content can interfere with accessibility and create an environment where students may not feel included, welcomed, or safe
- 3) Help RYSs train RYTs to adapt their practices for students of all abilities and body types; the CoCWG recommended formal training in adapting practices to make the RYSs' teaching accessible to seniors or people with disabilities or larger bodies

Touch and Consent Education

The CoCWG recommended that this complicated topic requires the creation of educational content that would a) clarify yoga history of implied consent and b) explain best practices for the transition to an environment of explicit consent. Please see the [Core Curriculum](#) Working Group Paper, Appendix A, "Hallmarks of Ethical Classrooms," for more information on this topic.

Resources

The CoCWG felt that YA could create a system of listing resources around its CoC. These resources are listed in the Bibliography.

The CoCWG recommended that this complicated topic (of touch and consent) requires the creation of educational content that would a) clarify yoga history of implied consent and b) explain best practices for the transition to an environment of explicit consent.

³ Title is CoCWG's.

ADVISORY GROUP

Our heartfelt thanks go to the following Advisors who spent much time and energy meeting, discussing, debating, and resolving issues on YA's CoC to the benefit of YA's membership. The Advisors were:



SANTIBA CAMPBELL



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TAMARA JEFFRIES



MELANIE KLEIN



OCTAVIA RAHEEM



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BIBLIOGRAPHY

The CoCWG assembled initial resources below and recommended the following approaches for YA to assemble further resources (and perhaps publish them) to the benefit of the YA community and the yoga community more widely. This glossary could be either:

- 1) Organized in a way that prioritizes works by emphasis/importance in order of:
 - a) Foundational works that have stood the test of time
 - b) A diversity of perspectives on a given issue where appropriate
 - c) Produced materials in-house that YA has vetted thoroughly; Or
- 2) Consider carefully any item on the list given its potential “blowback” and be prepared to issue a best-standard statement on the item or issue

The CoCWG suggested also that such resources could be placed elsewhere on the YA website rather than linking them only to the Code.

Animal Welfare

Adams, Carol J. *The Sexual Politics of Meat: A Feminist-Vegetarian Critical Theory*, 1990 and 2015.

Brueck, Julia Feliz (ed.). *Veganism in an Oppressive World: A Vegans-of-Color*.

Ko, Aph and Syl Ko. *APHRO-ISM: Essays on Pop Culture, Feminism, and Black Veganism from Two Sisters*. Lantern, 2017.

Nibert, David A. *Animal Oppression and Human Violence: Domesecration, Capitalism, and Global Conflict*. Columbia, 2013.

Taylor, Sunaura. *Beasts of Burden: Animal and Disability Liberation*. The New Press, 2017.

Books, Autobiographies, Practitioners

Goldberg, Natalie. *The Great Failure: My Unexpected Path to Truth*. Harper One, 2004.

Shozan, Jack Bauer. *Single White Monk*. Shambhala, 2017.

Books, Miscellaneous

Broad, William J. *The Science of Yoga: The Risks and the Rewards*, 2012.

Iyengar, B.K.S. *Light on Life: The Yoga Journey to Wholeness, Inner Peace, and Ultimate Freedom*, 2005.

Jain, Andrea. *Selling Yoga: From Counterculture to Pop Culture*, 2015.

Kornfield, Jack. *A Path With Heart: A Guide Through the Perils and Promises of Spiritual Life*, 1993.

Kramer, Joel, and Alstad, Diana. *The Guru Papers: Masks of Authoritarian Power*. Berkeley, California: Frog Books, 1974, 2009.

Pyles, Loretta. *Healing Justice: Holistic Self-Care for Change Makers*, (2018)

Yang, Larry. *Awakening Together: The Spiritual Practice of Inclusivity and Community*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2017.

Buddhism, Ethics

Fronsdal, Gil. "[Virtue Without Rules: Ethics in the Insight Community](#)".

[Spirit Rock Teacher Code of Ethics.](#)

[Spirit Rock Ethics and Reconciliation Council.](#)

Buddhism, Sex Scandals, Media

Butler, Katy. "[Events are the Teacher: Working Through the Crisis at San Francisco Zen Center.](#)" *Coevolution Quarterly*, 1983.

Butler, Katy. "[Encountering the Shadow in Buddhist America.](#)" *Common Boundary*, 1990.

Buddhism, Sex Scandals, Practitioners

Senauke, Alan (ed). "[Safe Harbor: Guidelines, Process, and Resources for Ethics and Conduct in Buddhist Communities](#)"

Buddhadharma. "[Confronting Abuses of Power.](#)" 2014.

Tricycle Magazine. "[Sex in the Sangha...Again.](#)" Fall 2013.

Edelstein, Scott, and Hunter, Mic. *Sex and the Spiritual Teacher: Why It Happens, When It's A Problem and What We Can All Do.* Wisdom Publications, 2011.

Buddhism, Sex Scandals, Academia

Bell, S. "[Scandals in Emerging Western Buddhism.](#)" pp. 230-242. *Westward Dharma: Buddhism Beyond Asia.* Prebish, C.S. & Baumann, M. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002.

Gleig, A. "[The Shadow of the Roshi: Sex, Scandal and Secrecy in American Zen Buddhism.](#)" 2015.

Kaza, S. "[Finding Safe Harbor: Buddhist Sexual Ethics in North America.](#)" *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 24: pps 23-35, 2004.

Prebish, C. "[Journal of Buddhist Ethics 20.](#)" pp 375-400 from *Mahayana Ethics and American Buddhism: Subtle Solutions or Creative Perversions?* 2013.

Buddhism, Social Change, Organizations

AN OLIVE BRANCH

[Buddhists for Racial Justice](#) and <https://northamericanbuddhistalliance.org/resources/>

Buddhism, Zen, Ethics

[San Francisco Zen Center](#)

[Rochester Zen Center](#)

[Soto Zen Buddhist Association](#)

Description: EBCM has been at the forefront of diversity and inclusion work in meditation-based convert Buddhism and has been called the most "diverse sangha in America" and has (They are insight heavy but also run yoga classes and have other Buddhist lineages teachers, mostly Zen)

Website: <https://eastbaymeditation.org>

East Bay Meditation Center (EBMC)

EBMC Diversity and Inclusion resources:

EBMC Diversity Practices:

[EBMC's Agreement for Multicultural](#)

[EBMC's Accessibility Policy](#)

[POC resources](#)

[Ethics, Restoration and Resolution Process, Policies and Procedures](#)

<https://eastbaymeditation.org/resources/ethics-restoration-resolution/>

<https://eastbaymeditation.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/ERRDocument.pdf>

EBMC's Practice Groups:

[Every Body, Every Mind sangha](#), [POC Sangha](#), [Dharma in Motion](#), [Alphabet Sangha](#)

Trauma & Trauma-Informed Yoga

Emerson, David, and Hopper, Elizabeth, MD. [Overcoming Trauma Through Yoga: Reclaiming Your Body](#), 2011.

Jones, Suzanne E. ["Mindful Touch: A Guide to Hands-On Support in Trauma-Sensitive Yoga,"](#) 2017.

Levine, Peter A. [Waking the Tiger: Healing Trauma](#), 1997.

van der Kolk, Bessel, MD. [The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma](#), 2015.

van Dernoot Lipsky, Laura and Burk, Connie. [Trauma Stewardship: An Everyday Guide to Caring for Self While Caring for Others](#), 2009.

White Awake

<https://whiteawake.org>

A number of white awareness Buddhist groups are forming using White Awake as their foundation.



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YOGA ALLIANCE & THE YOGA ALLIANCE FOUNDATION

Founded in 1999, Yoga Alliance is a member-based, non-profit organization that serves yoga schools and teachers across the globe, providing a world-recognized, best-in-class credential and unifying its members around a shared ethical commitment. In addition, YA delivers a strong value proposition to its members through community-building initiatives, educational resources, advocacy efforts, and social impact programs. Its sister organization, the Yoga Alliance Foundation, supports leveraged impact and direct service programs that expand the reach of and participation in yoga.