CREATING A CULTURE OF CONSENT
through yoga practice

By Tobias B. D. Wiggins

To touch and be touched is not an uncomplicated matter. There is something immediately profound and tender about physical proximity to another being. Touch takes trust and elicits vulnerability; it is the vulnerability of two people connecting, of one letting the other into the private space of their own body.

In most Western yoga studios, physical adjustments from the instructor have become a taken-for-granted part of the practice. And like other customary practices, it sometimes becomes difficult to question its normalization. In other words, it can be most challenging to dispute “the way things are,” to disagree with a set of unspoken rules that govern a studio space or larger community.

Some people crave the deepening or alignment that can come from the steady and knowledgeable hands of an yoga instructor, while others - perhaps those whose have survived trauma, who are socially marginalized, or who live with chronic pain - might have more mixed feelings. In reality though, everyone’s desire to be touched can change day to day, and even from moment to moment.

Many yoga communities have begun to recognize how social and political issues impact our personal practice - including discussions about how cultural appropriation, capitalism, racism, body positivity, and feminism all transform yoga spaces. As a holistic and embodied movement, the physical components of teaching asanas must also then, consider the politics of consent.

Consent has been discussed in many venues, but is mostly tied to feminist movements that challenge naturalized sexual violence and slut shaming, while also supporting survivors of assault. But discussions about consent reach far beyond sex, to thinking about agency more broadly, and our right to say “yes,” “no,” and to change our minds in any situation. From feminism we’ve learned that consent cannot be implied; consent cannot be assumed from the absence of a “no,” as it requires an active “yes” that can be revoked at any time, without shame.

Because Western yoga spaces carry the taken-for-granted notion that adjustments are desirable, yoga instructors can also face regular pressure to give them. This includes the subtle message that if they do not give expert physical assistance, they are not a “good enough” teacher. The uncertainty about how to actually get reliable consent to touch students may create additional stress.

A yoga teacher may try to ask the student out-loud during a class: “can I offer you an adjustment?” But for many reasons this question restricts an easy, straightforward response. The teacher might already be so close to touching the student that saying “no” feels hard, there may be concern that saying “no” in a public space to a generous offer is rude, or the student may not believe that a “no” is really possible. And because of these and other restrictions, students might be given an unwanted adjustment, one that perhaps carries negative emotional or physical ramifications.

This is why creating a culture of consent is so essential for yoga studios. In a larger social world where consent is not seen as normal or natural and where rights to bodily autonomy is often questioned, it
can feel embarrassing, challenging, or even impossible to articulate needs (or worse, if you do articulate your needs, they aren’t heard!). Many facets of Western culture often teaches us that we do not know our bodies and mind - in fact we are encouraged to disconnect. Which is, of course, antithetical to a practice of mindfulness through yoga, but still present in a yoga practice taken/ up by the West.

Creating a culture of consent in a yoga studio is about much more than asking permission to touch each other. It’s about actively challenging a social world that tells us we don’t know ourselves and our bodies, that renders self-care suspect, and encourages us to push ourselves past our limits. Crafting a culture of consent means valuing our many different identities and histories, with the knowledge that those identities and histories are an intimate part of “showing up” in our practice through body, breath, and movement. It’s about normalizing conversations about boundaries, self-love, and choice.

Touch is important. It is also a beautiful part of yoga - allowing someone who has committed a part of their life to the practice, to impart their knowledge through physical connection. This is why tools like consent cards, which allow students to flip between a “yes” and a “no” during their practice, are so essential. These cards are becoming more common in studios across North America, including their introduction in Toronto by Christi-an Slomka and Jamilah Maiika in May 2013. Other local studios have been following suit, including Union Yoga’s upcoming launch of their cards in July 2017. Slomka shared in an interview the year of their release:

“We can’t always know what someone has been through and if touch may be a trigger (especially when it comes without consent). Rape and sexual abuse can continue unchecked in a culture that doesn’t value consent. By demonstrating that consent is important to us, I believe we may be able to empower a shift in culture. Ultimately consent helps us to cultivate a safer space.”

By including these cards, yoga instructors communicate a vital message to their students. Consent cards, if well integrated into a studio’s culture, highlight that their community prioritizes informed choice, accountability, and student’s agency regarding their own bodies. It allows everyone to develop self-awareness, empowering both teachers and students in the processes of offering and receiving adjustments. Most importantly, it is through having these conversations, with each other, that we can continue to build the types of healing communities we truly need to thrive.

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