

Ethical Guidelines for Yoga Teachers

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

As an integrated way of life, Yoga includes moral standards (traditionally called “virtues”) that any reasonable human being would find in principle acceptable. Some of these standards, known in Sanskrit as *yamas* or “disciplines,” are encoded in the first limb of Patanjali’s eightfold path. According to Patanjali’s *Yoga-Sûtra*, this practice category is composed of the following five virtues: nonharming (*ahimsâ*), truthfulness (*satya*), nonstealing (*asteya*), chastity (*brahmacarya*), and greedlessness (*aparigraha*).

In other key scriptures of Yoga, further moral principles are mentioned, including kindness, compassion, generosity, patience, helpfulness, forgiveness, purity, and so on. All these are virtues that we connect with a “good” character and that are demonstrated to a superlative degree in the lives of the great masters of Yoga.

Thus, it seems appropriate for contemporary Yoga teachers to endeavor to conduct their lives in consonance with Yoga’s moral principles, particularly because teachers have a great responsibility toward their students and should be expected to reflect the high moral standards espoused in Yoga. At the same time, we must acknowledge the complexities of our contemporary society, which make it necessary to appropriately adapt the moral standards originally designed for the conditions of pre-modern India. Also, we need to take into proper account the looming environmental crisis by adopting a sustainable lifestyle.

The following guidelines are put forward as a reasonable adaptation for our modern situation, which also takes proper cognizance of the wisdom contained in the heritage of Yoga.

1. Yoga teachers understand and appreciate that teaching Yoga is a noble and ennobling endeavor that aligns them with a long line of honorable teachers.
2. Yoga teachers are committed to practicing Yoga as a way of life, which includes adopting the fundamental moral principles of Yoga and making their lifestyle environmentally sustainable (“Green Yoga”).
3. Yoga teachers are committed to maintaining impeccable standards of professional competence and integrity.
4. Yoga teachers dedicate themselves to a thorough and continuing study and practice of Yoga, in particular the theoretical and practical aspects of the branch of Yoga that they teach.
5. Yoga teachers are committed to avoiding substance abuse, and if for some reason they succumb to chemical dependency agree to stop teaching until they are free again from drug and/or alcohol abuse. They will then do everything in their power to remain free, including being fully accountable to a support group.
6. Yoga teachers especially embrace the ideal of truthfulness in dealing with students and others, including accurately representing their training and experience relevant to their teaching of Yoga.
7. Yoga teachers are committed to promoting the physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual wellbeing of their students.

8. Yoga teachers, especially those teaching Hatha-Yoga, will abstain from giving medical advice or advice that could be construed as such, unless they have the necessary medical qualifications.
9. Yoga teachers are open to instructing all students regardless of race, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, and social or financial status.
10. Yoga teachers are willing to accept students with physical disabilities, providing they have the skill to teach those students properly.
11. Yoga teachers agree to treat their students with respect.
12. Yoga teachers will never force their own opinions on students but rather will appreciate the fact that every individual is entitled to his or her worldview, ideas, and beliefs. At the same time, Yoga teachers must communicate to their students that Yoga seeks to achieve a deep-level transformation of the human personality, including attitudes and ideas. If a student is not open to change, or if a student's opinions seriously impede the process of communicating yogic teachings to him or her, then Yoga teachers are free to decline to work with that individual and, if possible, find an amicable way of dissolving the teaching relationship.
13. Yoga teachers agree to avoid any form of sexual harassment of students.
14. Yoga teachers wishing to enter a consensual sexual relationship with a present or former student should seek the immediate counsel of their peers before taking any action. This is to ensure that the teacher in question is sufficiently clear about his or her motives.
15. Yoga teachers will make every effort to avoid exploiting the trust of students and their potential dependency, and instead encourage students to find greater inner freedom.
16. Yoga teachers acknowledge the importance of the proper context for teaching and agree to avoid teaching in a casual manner, which includes observing proper decorum inside and outside of the classroom.
17. Yoga teachers strive to practice tolerance toward other Yoga teachers, schools, and traditions. When criticism has to be brought, this should be done with fairness and with focus on facts.

The above ethical guidelines are not exhaustive, and the fact that a given conduct is not specifically covered does not imply anything about the ethical or unethical nature of that conduct. Yoga teachers always endeavor to respect and to the best of their abilities adhere to the traditional yogic code of conduct as well as to the laws current in their country or state.

For a more detailed account of Yoga's moral teachings, see Georg Feuerstein's book [Yoga Morality](#) (2007).

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