On Consent and Agency

By Theo Wildcroft
The development of modern yoga as a practice, a calling, a profession, and even an industry has involved a number of radical innovations from its pre-modern antecedents. Most readers will be more or less aware of the changes in practice that this entailed. It is less common to reflect on the radical changes in pedagogy necessary to make the shift from individual gurus with a handful of students, most of whom practiced in isolation, to classes and workshops with groups of students practicing side by side, breath by breath, watched over by a teacher.

Everything we might think of as necessary to the teaching of yoga today is a modern invention. This includes detailed instructions offered at the point of practice and the narration of practice as a whole. It also includes every framework of good and bad postural alignment, and, by extension, the entire practice of verbally correcting or physically adjusting students.

As a result, whether in a group class focused on asana, a long workshop on pranayama and meditation, or a one-to-one therapeutic session, questions of authority, agency, and consent are the complex context to everything we are trying to achieve together.

In the past few years, I have had the privilege of training yoga teachers and therapists at all levels and for diverse roles, from 200-hour teacher trainings, to ongoing professional development courses, to therapeutic trainings. Often students come to training courses looking for clear models of assessment and practices for effective intervention: the kind of solid, useful tools we can pull out to help a client with this issue or that.

Navigating consent is about much more than a verbal—or written—contract.

But the more real-world work that a graduate takes on, and the more challenging situations they face, the more valuable our understanding of the therapeutic relationship itself becomes. The relationship between student and teacher, client and therapist, is in many ways the fulcrum of success or failure in the therapeutic process.

Consent, ethics, and boundaries are in fact worth reflecting on for every interpersonal relationship in yoga: teacher to student, trainer to trainee, employer to employee, and peer to peer.

Some Principles of Consent
Consent is dependent on agency. For many of us, yoga can be a gentle aid to maintaining health and even happiness, but it is also a space in which we can explore our experiences and attitudes to bodily agency and autonomy. This is important because most of us were educated and raised in spaces where our bodily autonomy was routinely denied. Most readers will be able to recall as a child being scolded to sit up straight, to stop fidgeting, or to ask before using the bathroom. The yoga professionals among us have likely realized that many people simply aren’t sure what to choose when multiple options for practice are offered. Students and clients alike can be invested in doing the version of the practice that they feel is the most advanced or the most difficult. There is a lot of striving in yoga spaces, often with the aim of trying to be the “best” practitioner possible.

There are few therapeutic spaces in which people can explore what it might mean to choose and to navigate autonomy over their bodies. With the right methods, yoga therapy, as a practice of personal empowerment, can be one of them.

Consent is about communication and context. Consent is also dependent on free and open communication: It is compromised by assumptions or implicit conventions. Consent is further dependent on context: It is a process of negotiation not just between two people but with their past histories and cultural norms.

I was once in a large yoga workshop where I asked the senior teacher for a little advice about a specific posture. What I expected was a short and intimate conversation in which I explained the issue I was having and the teacher responded with a few tips and ideas to try. Instead, the teacher gathered the whole group—well over a hundred participants—and chose to use this as a demonstration moment. He instructed me into the pose, then physically adjusted me into the “optimal” shape, smiled at the group, and moved on as the applause broke out and before I had even exited the posture. I was left with no understanding of how the pose had been achieved, and thus no learning or development. In that workshop, in that moment, I was most struck by the thought that
I and the teacher were working from such radically different intentions that my request and his response might as well have been in different languages. He assumed I cared most about “achieving” the pose, but in fact I was only interested in learning more about how my body moved.

Sometimes clients are asking for advice. Sometimes they are asking to be corrected or assisted. It’s important to know which. But above all, whatever the practice or posture, it’s important to remember that the people we are negotiating with when we verbally instruct or physically assist them are the clients themselves—and not the ideal version of them that we might be focused on achieving.

Meet people where they are.
A yoga charity that I met with once was very proud of its work with refugees. They had a mixed program in which participants got yoga classes, food, and help with filling in paperwork, all at the same time. As a former youth and community worker, I found myself wondering a couple of things: Do you know for certain why those participants are coming to your sessions? Are they choosing to practice yoga or is the practice the price they pay to access more practical and pragmatic support?

When I trained in community work, we were taught to meet people where they are. If you want to improve the lives of a marginalized population, go to where they are, find out what is important to them, and then figure out how you can help them achieve it. This, too, is a good principle when considering consent in therapeutic spaces. Yoga is, as we know, a holistic practice. Students and clients frequently come to the practice for one reason but stay with the practice for other reasons. Often, they start yoga for tangible reasons and then fall in love with the practice for intangible ones.

But if someone comes to you for ease in their lower back, it is vital to keep that intention at the heart of what you offer. Let clients discover the other benefits of the practice at their own pace, in their own time.

All behavior is communication.
Some of the best, most fulfilling, and effective therapeutic work I have ever done is with profoundly disabled children and young people. One young man that I worked with weekly for years was non-speaking and had a reputation for behavioral issues. If he had a bad day leading up to our session, he might scratch my arms, and I would acknowledge his frustration calmly while also asking him to use “kind hands.” If he wasn’t able to refrain from hurting me, we ended the session. In this way we negotiated a therapeutic path together.

One day, he came into the session as usual, his sinuses streaming with a virus of some kind. After a few minutes in which it was clear he wasn’t really in the mood, he reached forward, put my props in my bag, kissed me on the cheek, and walked out without a glance. Although totally nonverbal, his communication could not have been more clear.

If a client or student is regularly late, if they fidget and can’t settle, if they chatter inconsequentially, they are telling you something even if they aren’t aware of it. That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t have boundaries on student behavior—I don’t usually allow clients to kiss me on the cheek! But it does provide vital context in navigating the therapeutic relationship together.

Movement is our mother tongue.
Behavior is communication because, as dancer-turned-philosopher Maxine Sheets-Johnstone stated in her book The Primacy of Movement, “Movement is our mother tongue.” So, therefore, is touch. Navigating consent is about much more than a verbal—or written—contract. Consent is in the amount of eye contact a client is making. Are they catching or avoiding your eye more than usual? Do they look away when you wander near? Consent is embedded in your prior history together. Do you make a point of remembering whether they like to be assisted and how and when? Even when you have asked someone whether you can assist them, and they have agreed, are they resisting the touch? Has their breathing changed? Are they relaxing into the support or resisting it?

I have worked, with care and over the long term, with a few clients who had very little independent movement and no speech at all. In these cases explicit verbal consent to move their bodies was impossible, but consent was still at the heart of our practice together. We worked slowly, repeating movements in increments in response to their muscle resistance, their breath, and their eye contact.

I realized that the mundane realities of everyday life for such clients involved a lot of movement without consent. There simply isn’t time to work slowly when someone needs changing or bathing or feeding. Yoga was one of few times in which they could explore what felt good in their bodies at their own pace.

Consent as a Practice
It’s important to remember that communication is never perfect. Humans can be clumsy. We can forget. It is worth also remembering that the most effective therapeutic approaches are often those that are iterative and gently experimental. These approaches are open to change and individualization. They work best when the therapist is not overly invested in being the expert and is open to being wrong. Yoga therapy can provide the perfect space to practice and learn about consent and agency. Unfortunately, it can also easily become a space where consent and agency are overridden for the supposed benefit of the client.

We have hopefully all heard the idea that consent should be informed, ongoing, and enthusiastic, but we less often hear that consent is a practice—something in which you can build skills rather than an arbitrary, binary, or fixed state. Consent is not the mere preliminary to teaching, any more than agency is only the prerequisite to practice as a student. It is at the heart and center of what we do together.

Start by considering the phrase “informed, ongoing, and enthusiastic” from a yoga perspective. Does the student understand what the practice is designed to achieve? Do they know why you want to assist them and what you hope to teach them? Have you checked in, from
time to time, to see that the client still has enough physical energy and mental concentration to continue? Is their movement, their posture, their behavior suggesting something that their words are not yet telling you?

Next, in the journey to where the client currently is, meet with a pause. Take a beat in which you can both orient to what you are about to do together. Leave enough time to back out in the moment between the agreement to assist and the touch itself. In that time, each side can untangle a little of the prior history that influenced their choices. In that time, each can turn their full attention to the moment of contact.

In truth, to me this can be one of the most precious and illuminating moments in teaching and therapeutic work.

Communities of Care
I invite you to consider this: How receptive are you to another’s physical responses as you reach out to them? Is there a moment’s pause to allow another to pull away? Can you feel a “no” and a “yes” and a “maybe” when you move the arms of clients? Is there a clear intent to honor and respect another? Is there a pause? Are you seeking rather than assuming a response? Is your touch firm and gentle, with clear intent?

That doesn’t mean consent practices can’t be playful. I have had students withdraw consent at the last moment to make me laugh. I have had children with few personal boundaries demand hugs and clamber over me without asking. It is vital in this work to know where one’s own boundaries lie. Consent is a practice we must turn inward by asking: Is this the right context for me to be working in? Would this client be better served by another therapist? Is this student asking more than I am willing to give? Am I working too hard or pushing myself too far?

As we move cautiously and unevenly beyond a global pandemic that isn’t over for everyone, it is more important than ever to communicate about our own personal and professional comfort zones. How comfortable are we now when getting close to others—and when, how, and how close? Some students will be clinically vulnerable. Some clients will have been isolated and lonely. Many of us need a little more time to figure out how close we want to be to friends, colleagues, strangers, and crowds.

These uncertainties are an opportunity to refine our understanding of consent and agency together. We can use these moments to teach not just with informed consent, but to also teach toward increased self-awareness, self-reliance, and self-agency. We can invite clients to learn to make informed choices and celebrate them when they choose to say no as often as we do when they say yes to what we are offering. We can begin to create not just systems of gentle health and well-being, but communities of care and resilience in which we provide the space and the tools and set the tone for clients and students to do their own healing, in their own time, by their own agency.

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