

LESSONS IN CLARITY: A YOGA TEACHER'S REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED

By Jaymie Meyer

"You're not Lucy. I hate you!" That was the greeting Jaymie Meyer received when she took over another teacher's Yoga class for the blind and visually impaired. It was the beginning of a wonderful learning experience for Jaymie as a person and growth as a Yoga teacher.

For the past three years, I have worked as a Yoga teacher in a special program. In addition to having mental health issues, the clients are visually impaired or blind. The stated goals of the program are:

"Helping clients to develop better understanding of their illness, enhancing their ability to cope and deal with stresses in their lives, decreasing isolation, preventing psychiatric hospitalization, preparing them for entry into vocational and rehabilitation programs, introducing them to educational, recreational and social community resources."

When this weekly teaching position opened, my first instinct was to jump at the challenge. I had regular experience teaching an Integral Yoga mat class in New York City, and I had also worked with private clients. I knew that, if I accepted the assignment, I would need to learn how to adapt asana practice for the chair as it provides spatial awareness and security to the blind.

After my initial enthusiasm ebbed, I realized that I had no experience with the blind, not to mention individuals with emotional or developmental problems. Truly, my only contact with the blind was the empathy and respect I extend as a fellow human being—offering a wide berth on a city avenue so as to avoid a person's cane, helping a blind individual cross the street, and giving up a seat on the bus.

All of a sudden, I had to relate to the blind and teach them. Little did I know how much my notions of their limitations would be challenged, or that I would soon be learning as much as I taught.

In preparation for this position, I drew heavily on all aspects of my Integral Yoga training, particularly the asana sequencing as taught by Sri Gurudev. Hatha Yoga cardiac therapist Nirjala Heriza explains in her book, *Dr. Yoga*, that the Integral Yoga sequencing is specifically designed "to maintain and restore the harmonious balance of the *chakras*," which in turn helps to promote healing and overall well-being. In addition to the sequencing, my Raja Yoga training was instrumental in giving me the confidence and authority to handle a number of confrontational situations.

At my first class, it became clear that the clients resented that Lucy, the previous teacher, had left. They

were quite vocal in expressing their disappointment. Five minutes into the first session, Sally, who is partially sighted, said, "You're not Lucy. I hate you!"

Instinctively, I knew that I needed to practice *ahimsa* (nonviolence), especially in the face of hostility, but it wasn't easy. I felt my face flush and my body tense. I took a deep breath and said, "I'm not Lucy and I'm not trying to be, but I am trying to do my best. If you give me a chance, maybe we can work this out." She wanted none of it and stomped out of the room, slamming the door.

The room was silent. Finally one student spoke up and offered an apology for her classmate. We returned to the centering and three-part breathing techniques that begin each class. It wasn't long before we were interrupted by Glenda, who is partially sighted. As she entered the room and approached an empty chair, she tripped on someone's cane. She cursed loudly and kicked the cane. It went sailing through the air, and landed clear across the room.

I had been warned that she could be a problem. I was also advised that I could choose to have a disruptive student removed at any time. I began to wonder if I'd made a mistake accepting the position. It was quite a conundrum. I wasn't afraid, but I did feel frustrated.

Teaching at a Yoga institute—or privately—felt like a piece of cake compared to this. But I had a choice. I had studied the path of Yoga, and here was a real-life situation putting me to the test. *Ahimsa* and *satya* (truthfulness) were essential. I also wanted to practice *karuna* (compassion). Who was the student here, anyway? And who was the teacher?

While I felt it essential to be firm, I wondered if this approach would make the situation better or worse. I took a deep breath and said, "Glenda, what you just did is not okay. It is totally unacceptable. That cane wasn't put there to trip you. It was an accident. Yoga is nonviolent. If you want to stay in this group, you must play by the rules. Would you like to stay or leave?"

Glenda thought about it for a moment. Perhaps she was used to being removed, or perhaps she wasn't used to being given a choice. We sat quietly and waited for her to respond. When she spoke, she said that she would like to

remain with the group. The pressure in the room decreased. That day, Glenda turned a corner, and we began to build trust within the boundaries of the student-teacher relationship. In fact, from that moment forward, I felt that I began to build a certain trust with all the students.

Three years later—much to everyone's surprise—Glenda has become the equivalent of the class leader. She sets up the chairs before I arrive, escorts people who are less-sighted than her to the restroom, and flies out of her seat to flip the cassette tape when the music stops during class. Glenda's actions are more aligned with cooperation, support and kindness.

Sri Gurudev taught us that the goal of Integral Yoga is to have an easeful body, a peaceful mind and a useful life. Glenda is embodying those aspects; in a word, she is living her Yoga. Her seemingly alchemical transformation isn't magic at all. Rather, it is a tried and true method that blossoms with discipline and patience.

I quickly discovered yet another essential ingredient for teaching the visually impaired. Clear verbal communication is vital, as you obviously cannot rely on physical demonstrations to get your point across. Standard yogic terminology can sometimes be confusing. This was the case one time when we were practicing chin mudra, a yogic finger lock.

While the majority of the students knew and understood what they were doing, a newcomer who was most attentive brought both hands to his chin. When I realized that the new student was simply following my words and literally holding his chin, I explained the correct position. Together, we had a chuckle about the misunderstanding, and I thanked him for helping me to be a better teacher. Awareness of every word and concise communication are two of the greatest gifts that I have received from teaching the blind.

Even when you are spot-on specific with your words, sometimes a student may need a gentle touch to guide them. I believe it is essential to ask permission to touch. This is especially essential when teaching the blind, because they may not realize how physically close you are and you could easily startle them.

What has been most eye-opening for me is how curious the blind are in exploring deep relaxation (Yoga nidra), breathing practices (*pranayama*) and meditation (*dhyana*), all vital components of the Integral Yoga technique. In my experience with sighted students, there is less of a natural proclivity to "go inside" and explore stillness. Partially sighted or blind students are already predisposed to an inner world and have a degree of comfort in exploring that realm. The time spent practicing these techniques has deeply benefited these clients.



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David, a three-year veteran of the class, put it best when he said, "At night, when I do Yoga, it puts me to sleep. I lay on the bed and it's like I'm on clouds. When morning comes, some people need a 'cup-of-coffee'; my wake-up call is a cup-of-Yoga." The administrator who oversees this program acknowledges that practicing Yoga has helped the clients deal with the myriad difficulties in their lives, including being able to relax and control disruptive impulses.

I am grateful to be a part of the Integral Yoga lineage. Yoga, I believe, is a universal language with the potential to benefit all—regardless of physical or emotional challenges. If you have a breathing body, you can practice Yoga. Limitations might curtail the style or type of practice you can do; but, ultimately, Yoga is an inside job. Perhaps that is why the blind, with their rich inner world, take to it with such enthusiasm and joy.

Disclaimer: All names of individuals have been changed to protect privacy.

Jaymie Meyer is a certified Integral Yoga and stress management instructor teaching at work sites, universities, health clubs, the Integral Yoga Institute and to individuals. She is also a professional spokesperson and professional member of the National Speakers Association, the International Federation of Public Speaking and an award-winning member of the Graybar Toastmasters Club in New York. As a spokesperson, she has toured nationally in industrial shows for AT&T and Canon. For more information about Jaymie Meyer, please visit: www.ResilienceForLife.com