Recently, during a lively discussion on credentials for yoga therapists, leaders in the field were debating over what was needed: “More anatomy!”... “Competency in medical terminology!”... “What about Ayurveda?” One prominent teacher cut through the cross talk: “Well, then there is lineage and transmission.” The room went silent. People perked up in their seats. There was a palpable sense of awe in the room as the teacher spoke with humble reverence of receiving transmission from his teacher.

In the world of yoga teachers and yoga therapists, some would consider lineage and transmission as the ultimate teaching credentials, but what do these terms actually mean? For some practitioners and teachers, these concepts can have a lofty, rarified quality, often providing the haves with an inflated sense of authority and power and leaving the have-nots with a feeling of insufficiency and lack of confidence. Others dismiss lineage and transmission as outdated concepts and unscientific hocus pocus. Yet these concepts have been used within spiritual traditions for thousands of years as a way to protect the authenticity and strength of the teachings and to sustain the student–teacher relationship. They are an integral part of the rich spiritual heritage of India. But we need to ask ourselves, what is their relevance in the West today—particularly as it relates to the contemporary student–teacher relationship and our work as yoga therapists? Can these concepts be helpful, or do they lead to more confusion than benefit?

Some Historical Context

In the yoga tradition, the ancients relied heavily on parampara, oral transmission of the teachings passed down from teacher to student through hierarchical lineages to support a student’s spiritual evolution. In the Vedic tradition, the shishya, or disciple, often stayed with his or her guru as a family member, ensuring the continuation of the teachings, undiluted, from teacher to student, generation to generation. Often this was from father to son. A key aspect of this ongoing relationship between teacher and student is that the student, over time, comes to embody the teachings that the master conveys through tutelage. At a certain point in this process, the teacher recognizes an inner ripening of the student as a way to authenticate the student’s readiness to teach. Buddhist traditions also rely heavily on lineage as a way to legitimize the teachings and evaluate the authenticity of individual teachers, teachings, and practices. The instruction to dig one deep well, rather than several shallow ones, is often used in these traditions as a metaphor for staying with one lineage and one teacher, drinking deeply from one source rather than superficially skimming the surface of many. Spiritual dabblers need not apply.

The Mirror of Relationship

Amy Wheeler, a yoga therapist with a PhD in educational psychology, describes the Bhrguvalli Chant (from the Taittiriya Upanishad), an instructive dialogue between teacher and student. “The student comes to the teacher, the teacher should never hunt down the student.” The teacher asks the student to reflect on questions such as, “Who am I?” and “Why am I here?” and then gives teachings that support the student’s further reflection. The student is thirsty and comes with his or her own burning questions. This thirst is “a thirst for transformation, not a thirst for information.” According to Wheeler, the emphasis in this model is not on the student or the teacher but on the relationship itself, which acts as a mirror to support the student’s development, providing opportu-
nities for students to bump up against their edges and see where they are awake, where they are asleep, and how they can grow.1

This ancient model contrasts sharply with the contemporary yoga marketplace, where often the teacher actively seeks out students and much of the teaching is devoted to information, rather than transformation. In the spirit of our consumer culture, yoga students may be encouraged to gobble up teachings in mini-workshops and buffet-style conferences and then regurgitate the material before it has been fully digested and assimilated, often in the service not of the student’s development but of the teacher’s livelihood. Today, sacred teachings once available only to serious initiates can be downloaded in seconds. Branding has become the new lineage, where leading teachers require devotion to their trademark, and if students want to teach, they must go through multiple levels of training and stay true to the brand in order to be able to use the name—or risk being not just outcast, but sued.

In this milieu, the contemporary version of the student–teacher relationship can easily degrade into ego-building endeavors by both teacher and student that are devoid of the sacredness and depth of its intended context—what Tibetan teacher Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche aptly described as spiritual materialism:2 At its best this can create confusion; at its worst it does serious harm. Rather than helping students awaken, it may actually put them further to sleep.

Clearly, there is a need for the teachings to be offered within the context of our contemporary culture in a way that reflects the needs both of those practicing and those teaching. Can we honor the roots of tradition and allow for skillful innovation? Perhaps there is a middle way?

Finding the Middle Way

In the traditional guru/disciple relationship, the function of the guru is to remove the darkness (ru) of ignorance (gu) of our true nature. As David Frawley writes, “The guru mirrors back not our image as a bodily identity, but the pure consciousness hidden deep inside us. This self-mirroring process radically changes the idea of who we are and reveals our true nature. This is the true meaning of seeing the guru, which is the same as seeing your true Self.”3

How does the guru/disciple relationship translate into the contemporary teacher/student relationship? Or does it? While some of the language that is used is the same (lineage and transmission), there are some distinct differences. If we are seeking to learn basic yoga postures, meditation, and deep relaxation, a good teacher or books or DVDs can lead us toward better health and a clearer mind. But for those seeking the deeper transformation of yoga, the support of an experienced and skilled guide who will help us to become aware of our ingrained, conditioned patterns that limit our perception, who can help us mature spiritually, is likely needed. While some may come to self-realization spontaneously, without the support of a teacher, this is rare. And, when it does happen, there is often a period of integration that requires the support of a seasoned guide.4

In the field of yoga therapy, the lines between guru/disciple and teacher/student get blurred. In our contemporary milieu, a yoga therapist is often part teacher, part healer, and part spiritual guide. As yoga therapists, if we are indeed attending to the multi-dimensionality of the human being, not just to their back pain but also to their psychological, physiological, emotional, and spiritual conditions, it is essential to examine the student/teacher relationship in a sophisticated, down-to-earth, and discerning way. Below are some further reflections on the student-teacher relationship that may provide some guidance in navigating these difficult issues.

Is There a System of Checks and Balances and Ongoing Support and Guidance for the Teacher?

If we acknowledge our humanness and the potential for self-delusion, both as practitioners and teachers, we must recognize that we all have our blind spots. It is important to have someone or something to be accountable to. Mariana Caplan, PhD, a professor of yoga and psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies and author of Halfway Up the Mountain: The Error of Premature Claims to Enlightenment (1999; Hohm Press) recommends, “Having a system of checks and balances, an active/interactive peer feedback for teachers; have someone body in a mentoring function that’s further along in your teaching than you are. It’s important to consciously create structures, whether in the traditional model or modern therapeutic support model.”5

Having a wider community of peers who are practitioners and teachers that we see regularly who are willing to give us honest feedback can also be very helpful. They can see how well we are actually living our yoga—walking the talk—in our day-to-day life and relationships. A community of peers who are committed to their own and each other’s authenticity and evolution—a friendly and mutually supportive sangha—is a valuable part of tradition that we may want to keep.

What is Being Transmitted?

As a student, whether a yoga therapist or yoga therapy client, it is important to examine the teachings being passed on to you.

• Have the teachings been tested over time? Not through scientific research, which can be helpful, but tested in the laboratory of human living by serious practitioners and teachers over time? Have the teachings evolved to reflect the experience and needs of those practicing today or are they dogmatic and rigid?
• On the other end of the spectrum, are they a hodgepodge of un-integrated, partial teachings? Are the teachings...
transmitted through a lineage that is inherited through blood (father to son) rather than recognized or earned?

- Is there a clear distinction between exoteric teachings (more public) and esoteric (secret/only for initiates) teachings?
- If there are secret teachings, does this create an inner circle of “special” students at the expense of alienating others? And is what is being transmitted free of agendas around money, sex, and power?

Although in some lineages transmission is a direct energetic transfer of spiritual information from guru to disciple, transmission can also be understood on a more personal level. Many of us have had the experience of being in nature and accessing our essential presence simply through our connection to the ocean, the trees, the sky. We may also have experienced a sense of spaciousness and deep peace simply by being around another person whose heart is open. Does a spontaneous experience of transmission in this sense, whether from nature or another human being’s presence, require lineage? This also points us toward the inner teacher—our own capacity to understand and integrate the deeper truths, whether through one lineage or a variety of teachings that speak to us as individuals and inform our practice, our teaching, and our lives. Perhaps to some degree our direct experience is more important than a thorough but merely intellectual understanding of any one lineage in our capacity to facilitate another’s healing.

In the absence of a single lineage, can one determine the validity of one’s understanding and ability to transmit deep and transformative truths by the results in the student/client? Is there a place for judging the tree (the teacher) by its fruits (the student)?

Who is Transmitting?
In its purest form, transmission within a lineage can be a direct link to universal human truths that transcend differences of ethnicity, religion, gender, and age, helping us to bridge our divinity and our humanity. However, while the teachings themselves may be pure, the filter through which they are transmitted is often not—and the teachings can be influenced by all of the above. In the yoga tradition, the filter of gender can particularly be an issue as virtually all of the lineages represented in the contemporary yoga and yoga therapy worlds descend through men, while the majority of practitioners are women. Still today, the primary teachers in positions of authority are men. If you were to take a seat in the audience at any large yoga therapy event and look up to the podium or panel, you will see mostly men. Take a seat at the podium, looking back to the audience and you will see a room primarily filled with women. Over 82% of contemporary yoga practitioners are women and IAYT membership is almost 85% female. When the experience of the person transmitting the teachings is markedly different than the person receiving the teachings, whether it be related to gender, ethnicity, age, religion, sexual orientation, economic status, or otherwise, a lot can get lost in translation—the way the teachings are being shared may not accurately reflect the needs, values, and interests of the those practicing. As teachers and yoga therapists, can we preserve the teachings and make them more directly accessible, freer of their patriarchal and hierarchical origins? And, as students, it may be wise to choose teachers who are closer to our own experience or who have specific training and expertise that helps them relate more easily to our own challenges and personal struggles.

Ahimsa
“The role of the teacher is vested with huge responsibilities and equally satisfying rewards. This transformative role can never be fully realized without a safe and sacred environment in which the integrity of both the teacher and the student are sustained.”

—Donna Farhi

This foundational teaching for healers and teachers is worth including here. Examining our motivations and intentions, looking closely at how we treat each other—and how we live our lives—both as students and teachers is essential. Whose interest is the teacher serving, the student’s or his or her own? Also, be aware if there is a history of corruption or abuse within the school or lineage in which we want to study, and if there was, is there transparency as to how it was handled? It is vitally important that as students and the wider community of yoga practitioners,
we ask ourselves if we are giving away our own power to the teacher, or turning a blind eye when there is unethical behavior on the teacher’s part, in service of our own needs, whether they be personal, financial, or otherwise. Ongoing abuses of power can only exist in a community that allows it. Clear ethical guidelines with accountability are key to any school or spiritual community, particularly when there is a power differential as with the student/teacher relationship.

As teachers and yoga therapists, can we preserve the teachings and make them more directly accessible, freer of their patriarchal and hierarchical origins?

Does the Teacher have some Psychological Training?
As Mariana Caplan points out, “Nowadays, with a huge prevalence of scandals in the yoga world—more than in other spiritual worlds—it’s important to recognize someone can be a master in one area like asana, but not be integrated in other areas.” Caplan is pointing to the lack of psychological integration in both teacher and student that can lead to using spiritual ideas and practices to sidestep or avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks. John Welwood calls this spiritual bypassing, using “the goal of awakening or liberation to rationalize premature transcendence: trying to rise above the raw and messy side of our humanness before we have fully faced and made peace with it.”

The student–teacher relationship brings up complex, often misunderstood issues, including projection, transference, and counter-transference. Expecting the teacher to be infallible, confusing the guru with God, or wanting him or her to be the perfect father or mother that we never had, can be a setup for serious disappointment. For both teachers and students, a basic understanding of the psychological issues that may arise on the path and in the student/teacher dynamic can go a long way in avoiding unnecessary suffering and confusion.

Honoring our Teachers
If we avoid diluting or distorting the teachings and practices ourselves by offering them prematurely, or in contexts that don’t convey their full sacredness and depth, we are honoring the teachings. But how often do we honor our teachers? Traditionally, before study commenced, the teacher and student would chant together, honoring the lineage of teachers before them. Taking a moment to credit our teachers when sharing what we have learned from them supports a respectful honoring of the source and models for our students to do the same. Notice if those you choose to study with include this simple practice in their own teaching.

Personal Practice and Integration
Only by cultivating a consistent personal practice and integrating our deepest contemplative insights into our daily lives—really understanding how this helps us navigate the human condition: our anxiety, financial woes, depression, and relationship challenges—will we fully integrate the teachings in a real and embodied way. This is, after all, where the rubber meets the road—in our relationships, in our work, in how we relate to the world around us, and in what we bring to our clients. Conceptual knowledge can only take us so far. As teachers and yoga therapists, our personal practice and life experience can be the source of some of our deepest wisdom, allowing us to relate to others authentically and compassionately.

Yoga is a living, evolving tradition; it has been changing and adapting over thousands of years and continues to evolve as I write this today. This is a complex subject with historical, cultural, and personal overlay, so I am raising more questions than offering answers, but it is my hope that in doing so, it will encourage deeper reflection as we move forward in this field. YTT

May we be protected together.
May we be nourished together.
May our roles be clear during this time.
May we create strength among one another.
May our study be filled with brilliance and light.
May there be respect, humility, and complete understanding.
May there be no hostility between us. Om peace, peace, peace.  

References
1. Personal conversation with Amy Wheeler.
6. Personal conversation with Mariana Caplan.
7. Recent symposium on yoga and medicine (http://medicalyogasymposium.wordpress.com). Out of thirteen headline speakers on opening day, two were women. Out of seven presenters at the 2013 Yoga Therapy Summit (http://yogatherapysummit.com), five were women. Note that IAYT has been proactive in creating more gender balance in the most recent SYTAR events.
9. Personal email exchange with Kelly Birch.
12. Poetic translation of the traditional teacher-student mantra Saha Navavatu, which is also know as a peace chant or Shanti Patham.

Author’s Note: Some of the ideas in this article were influenced by personal communications with my teacher, Jennifer Welwood.

Janice Gates, a practicing yoga therapist for over twenty years, trains and mentors yoga professionals and health care practitioners through her Somatic Yoga Therapy Programs. Janice is past president of the board of IAYT, has written widely on yoga and yoga therapy, and is author of the pioneering book Yogini: The Power of Women in Yoga. Direct correspondence to janice@janicegatesyoga.com.

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