



RESPECT



Abou Ben Adhem

Abou Ben Adhem (may his tribe increase!)
 Awoke one night from a deep dream of peace,
 And saw, within the moonlight in his room,
 Making it rich, and like a lily in bloom,
 An angel writing in a book of gold: —
 Exceeding peace had made Ben Adhem bold,
 And to the Presence in the room he said,
 “What writest thou?” — The vision rais’d its head,
 And with a look made of all sweet accord,
 Answer’d, “The names of those who love the Lord.”
 “And is mine one?” said Abou. “Nay, not so,”
 Replied the angel. Abou spoke more low,
 But cheerly still; and said, “I pray thee, then
 Write me as one that loves his fellow men.”
 The angel wrote, and vanish’d. The next night
 It came again with a great waking light,
 And show’d the names whom love of God had blest,
 And, lo! Ben Adhem’s name led all the rest!

—James Henry Leigh Hunt (1784-1859)

He was an essayist, poet, and critic who lived his life on the brink of financial ruin, but was helped by the poet Shelley, among others. He once spent two years in jail for writing a libelous article about a prince.

In May of 1969, our family went to Sri Aurobindo's Ashram in Pondicherry, India, to see The Mother and receive her blessings (*darshan*). In India, Sri Aurobindo is considered one of the greatest spiritual masters. The Mother had become the spiritual head of the Ashram after Sri Aurobindo's passing and was a mighty spiritual force in her own right. We were eager to meet her for the first time. I was ten, my brother Jehangir was five, and my brother Phiroze was just three.

"Men are respectable only as they respect."

—Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

When the house that he and his wife had lived in for 37 years burned down, his friends sent them to Europe and Egypt on vacation. While they were gone, the neighbors paid for and supervised the rebuilding of the Emerson home!

My parents wanted us to stay in a comfortable place. Knowing that most of the guesthouses were of the "bare bones" variety, my parents attempted to make reservations at a high-quality guesthouse managed by a man named Reg. Though my parents had heard a number of not-so-flattering stories about Reg's eccentric and volatile nature, his guesthouse had a sterling reputation, and the food served there was legendary. Reg had once been a world-renowned chef.

When my parents asked to book a room, they were told that children were not permitted, and no exceptions could or would be made. Apparently, Reg considered children to be noisy, disruptive, and disrespectful. Despite my parents' polite and repeated requests, Reg was adamant about his policy. Finally, one of the Ashram's administrators interceded and spoke with Reg, requesting that our family be allowed to stay at his guesthouse as a personal favor to the administrator. Though Reg initially refused even this request, ultimately he acquiesced to the wishes of this highly esteemed senior member of the Ashram.

Reg was a short, stocky Hungarian with a handlebar mustache and long white hair. His fiery temper and gruff manner may have been due, in part, to the brutal treatment he had suffered as a prisoner in the Second World War.

"Respect is love in plain clothes."

—Frankie Byrne (1922-1993)

Byrne was an Irish radio personality who dispensed advice on matters of romance on her show *Dear Frankie*. Though she seemed to have all the answers for others, it was revealed after her death that she had had a thirty-year affair with a married man, and had given up their baby for adoption. She died of complications from alcoholism.

When we arrived, Reg was curt and businesslike. He explained the rules of the guesthouse to the letter. Lunch was served precisely at noon, while dinner was served promptly at eight. The doors would be locked at ten, and we would not be allowed entry after that. Above all, the guesthouse was to be kept spotlessly clean, and no shoes were allowed inside. Reg forcefully emphasized that all shoes had to be left in the foyer, and only bare feet were allowed beyond the door's threshold.

Being Zoroastrians rather than Hindus, we did not then have the practice of removing our shoes at the doorstep to our house (though I can't imagine living any other way now!). We were accustomed to running in and out of our home and our rooms without giving a thought to our footwear or lack of it.

The next day, all five of us went to visit Sri Aurobindo's *samadhi* (the final resting place of his body). That afternoon, my parents decided to go back to the *samadhi* with just me, so they left the younger boys to play in Reg's large garden. The garden had high walls around it and was well protected. The boys knew that they were not allowed to be noisy or disruptive.

As time passed, my young brothers became hungry. They decided to go upstairs to our room to get the snacks that my mother had left for them. When they reached the threshold, they realized that they did not know how to untie their shoelaces!

They stood there and waited for what must have seemed like an eternity. Finally, their hunger overcame their patience. They both got down on their hands and knees, and started to crawl across the wide, long entryway toward the staircase on the highly polished wooden floor. They were careful not to let their shoes touch the floor and mar the perfect surface. As it happened, Reg was on his way to the dining chamber and

"There is no respect for others without humility in one's self."

—Henri-Frédéric Amiel (1821-1881)

Amiel's *Journal Intime* is recognized as a masterwork of self-observation without undue self-analysis. He once wrote, "Analysis kills spontaneity. The grain once ground into flour springs and germinates no more."

spotted the boys.

“What are you two doing?” Reg demanded. The boys froze, and then quietly said that they were going to get some snacks.

“But why are you crawling?” Reg asked forcefully.

Jehangir replied, “Because no shoes are allowed to touch the floor, and we don’t know how to untie our laces, and we are very, very hungry.” As the boys then crawled up the staircase, Reg stood and watched in silence.

When we returned to the guesthouse, Reg was hardly recognizable as the gruff man we had met just the day before. A smile beamed from his face, and he welcomed us with gentleness and kindness.

When my parents asked about the boys, Reg replied with tears glistening in his eyes, “Your boys!”

My mother, suddenly alarmed, asked, “What happened? Are they okay?”

Slowly, Reg explained with a trembling voice how the boys had acted with such respect for his wishes, and how deeply this had touched him. He kept repeating, “The boys . . . they crawled! The boys, they crawled on their knees!”

From then on, there were no rules for the Palkhivala family at Reg’s guesthouse. Reg told us many times, “Anytime you want to stay at my place, you and your boys are welcome. Anytime!” Over the next few years, Reg became quite a good friend, and we spent many delicious days at his immaculate guesthouse. Respect! How sweet is thy reward!

“Any religion or philosophy which is not based on a respect for life is not a true religion or philosophy.”

—Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965)

Although he had distinguished careers in music and theology, he dropped both at the age of thirty to study medicine and become a doctor. He built a hospital in Africa where he practiced medicine during the last four decades of his life.

AWAKENING RESPECT

*A*ren’t we all a bit like Reg, craving the respect of others, while carefully withholding the warmth of our humanity in the meantime? And aren’t we, again like Reg, domineering when we fear that others are not going to honor our wishes? Don’t we then command others to obey us in overt and subtle ways, or simply refuse to interact with them? Yet when we feel we have been treated respectfully, isn’t our capacity for respect magically awakened? Something deep within us melts, and without any effort to do so, we become more respectful toward others.

Respect works wonders. Respect makes humanity blossom. Indeed, respect makes the humanity in us blossom. Only respect can bring real peace to the world. How can we awaken and develop this essential quality of respect?

Respect is care. Respect means caring for ourselves, for others, for things, and for our planet. Therefore, to develop our capacity to give and receive respect, our central practice must be to vigilantly observe ourselves as we speak and act, and ask ourselves whether our words and actions are being respectful to our own self, to other people, to material objects, and to the earth that is our home.

Do I respect *myself* enough to discover my dharma, fill each moment with it, and live a meaningful life? Do I respect my *body* enough to eat only healthful, organic food and do my yoga practice every day with purpose and joy? Do I respect my *mind* enough to nourish it with inspiring thoughts and spiritual poetry? Do I respect it enough to give it both silent rest and creative exercise — that is, stillness and freedom from thought

“I care not so much what I am to others as what I am to myself. I will be rich by myself, and not by borrowing.”

—Michel de Montaigne (1533-1592)

He popularized the essay as an art form, and is considered a powerful influence on many subsequent nonfiction writers. He openly stated, “I am myself the matter of my book.” Shakespeare had Montaigne’s essays in his library.

“For those who are always courteous and respectful of elders, four things increase: life, beauty, happiness, and strength.”

—The Buddha, *The Dhammapada*

“To have a respect for ourselves, guides our morals; and to have a deference for others, governs our manners.”

—Laurence Sterne (1713-1768)

A British novelist and clergyman, he wrote his most famous work, the influential comic novel *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, during a time when he was plagued by tuberculosis, his wife was seriously ill, and his mother had just died. Though the book is funny and exuberant, he later wrote that every sentence “was written under the greatest heaviness of heart.”

as well as opportunities to think a new thought, ponder, and imagine? Do I respect my *soul* enough to go within my heart and listen to its suggestions for my life? Do I respect my *spouse* enough to do something loving and kind each day? Do I respect *others’ freedom* enough not to impose my ways, my beliefs, or my religion upon them? Do I respect others enough to allow that they might be right and I might be wrong? Do I respect my *home* enough to keep it clean and organized? Do I respect *Mother Earth* enough to appreciate her bounty, to never spray artificial pesticides and synthetic fertilizers upon her bosom?

We desperately wish to receive respect from others, but do we give it? Do we live it? Do we deserve it? We may think, “Nobody listens to me. Nobody understands. Nobody respects me.” But then we ought to ask ourselves, “Whom do I truly listen to? Whom do I sincerely try to understand? Whom do I genuinely respect?” We cannot expect to get something from the world that we are not consistently giving. Only a respecting person is worthy of being respected.

RESPECT THYSELF

*R*espect emerges from within. The wanton disrespect we sometimes show toward things and others is really just a manifestation of our lack of self-respect. When I do not respect myself for who I am, how can I respect you for who you are? When I don’t feel worthy, I feel compelled to make you feel unworthy, or make you make me feel worthy. When

I lack self-respect, I inevitably crave respect from others, becoming either the tyrant who commands people to look up to him, or the whining child who constantly complains that he is not getting enough attention.

How do we develop self-respect?

Self-respect grows by striving to do all that we have explored in the previous chapters — graciously living our *dharma* with *feeling*, attentively manifesting the *wisdom* that waits within, and cheerfully living with *integrity* in response to the *truth* of each moment. Even if we don’t often succeed, we begin to value our life and realize we are worthy of our own respect.

Cultivating self-respect is largely internal work, a process of exploring and transforming our lack of respect. We must look inside ourselves and honestly search for what is unkind and rude. We then must ask: Why do I feel unworthy enough to be unkind, disrespected enough to be rude? How can I transform these feelings rather than merely suppress them? By asking such questions sincerely, and then humbly listening to our own intuition, we will be guided toward transformation.

Though the work of building self-respect is from the inside out, it is also from the outside in. As we find ways to respect other people and things, we simultaneously find more ways of respecting our own selves.

As we learn to respect who we are, others will instinctively respect us. However, the moment we become egoistic, their respect will fade, for they will only see the ego working overtime. Self-respect is naturally imbued with humility.

Respecting one’s self, then, is not the same as thinking

“Self-respect is the cornerstone of all virtue.”

—Sir John Herschel (1792-1871)

He was an astronomer, mathematician, chemist, inventor, and photographer. Herschel coined the term photography. He also named four moons of Uranus (his father, William Herschel, discovered the planet in 1781) and seven moons of Saturn.

“Some people have so much respect for their superiors they have none left for themselves.”

—Peter McArthur (1866-1924)

McArthur was a Canadian writer and poet who wrote lovingly about farm life. He spent the first twenty years and the last sixteen years of his life living and working on the same farm in Ontario.

of oneself first. Respect for self should not be confused with self-serving hedonism and careless self-absorption — “doing whatever I want to do.” That is bondage disguised as freedom. Respect is actually the opposite. When I am respectful, I am present and fully aware of what effect I am having on others. With such awareness, we cannot have ego, and vice versa. It is only when we don’t know our true selves that the demands of our ego override sensitivity toward others. One who doesn’t know himself thinks only of himself; one who truly knows himself thinks of everyone. It takes enormous self-respect to humbly and genuinely bow before another.

*“All things are God’s body,
so I treat all things with
respect.”*

—Hafiz (or Hafez) (c. 1320-1388)

The great Persian poet composed more than half of his poems when he was in his sixties, during the last eight years of his life. While his earlier poems spoke of his desire for the Beloved, his last group of poems described his union with the Beloved.

RESPECT FOR THE VEHICLE

Self-respect also means respect for the body, the vehicle in this brief, mortal adventure. To respect the body is to simultaneously respect the Divinity that lives in the body. So I neither violently overstretch my body nor lazily understretch it, because both are ways of being disrespectful. Zealous overstretching causes injury, while lethargic understretching prevents growth. Respect lies in encouraging my body to extend its limits as well as in holding back so that I do not hurt myself.

Our ego often forces us to test the respect we have for our bodies. For example, when our overachieving ego demands that we do a difficult pose because everyone else in class is doing it, do we try so hard that we no longer respect the body and its limits? Or does our poor-me ego give it up as impossible, showing no respect for the body’s urge to grow?

AS IF THEY WERE YOU

I was brought up with a cultural respect for my family, my teachers, my elders, and God. When an urge to speak or act disrespectfully toward a person came up, I would imagine that person being my father or my brother, and the urge would dissipate. Whom do you respect deeply? Imagine everyone to be that person. Would you be violent toward your own mother or father? Aren’t we simply a part of one global family?

Once self-respect is established, the next practice is to treat all things as if they were you. When you slam a car door or carelessly drop your coat on the floor, consider: How would I feel if somebody treated me this way? This question helps us become more respectful toward things, and thus even more respectful to ourselves. Leave everything a little better than you found it. Treat all material objects with utmost respect.

What is missing in the modern world is the realization that everything and everybody has value, that each atom in the universe has a place. We must treat all with care. Each vibrant human being, each wild jumping salmon, each warm blanket, each ticking clock, each trembling green leaf has its purpose in the cosmic scheme. Even the man who has forgotten his smile, the fish that is left to rot, the tattered blanket that offers no warmth, the clock whose tick is spent, they all serve a purpose. No less a scientist than Carl Sagan once said, “If you remove one atom from the universe, the entire universe will collapse.” He meant it as a scientific fact. Everything has its place.

At Yoga Centers, we instruct our students to take off their shoes as they enter, and not to talk to each other while the

*“Three things in human life
are important: the first is
to be kind; the second is to
be kind; and the third is to
be kind.”*

—Henry James (1843-1916)

James was a prolific American novelist and brother of the famed psychologist William James. He overcame a stuttering problem by making a practice of speaking slowly and deliberately.

“Let every man be respected as an individual and no man idolized.”

—Albert Einstein (1879-1955)

Einstein did not agree with physicists who tried to understand the universe through statistical analyses and the probability of subatomic events. He once famously said, “God does not play dice with the universe.”

“This is my simple religion. There is no need for temples; no need for complicated philosophy. Our own brain, our own heart is our temple; the philosophy is kindness.”

—The Dalai Lama (1935-)

Despite winning the Nobel Peace Prize in 1989, which recognized his lifelong efforts to create world peace, he claims, “I am just a simple Buddhist monk — no more, no less.” He begins meditating at four o’clock each morning.

teacher is talking. We also ask them to fold their mats and put them away in neat piles, put the props away in a carefully organized manner, and clean up any mess they make in the restroom or basin. Though beginning students may wonder why we make all these requests, as they begin to grow on the path of yoga, they realize that they are cultivating the ability to respect. Though they may have initially thought that putting carefully folded blankets into straight piles was a waste of time, later they realize that when they do it, they are respecting not only the blanket but also the person who is going to pick up that blanket next. When we care for the next person, we feel valuable to others and a part of a community. We feel that we have, in a small way, left the world a better place than we found it. Indeed, most of our environmental catastrophes would not exist today if people in power would respect the fact that each thing has value and everything has a place.

Why does a Montblanc pen feel so different from a cheap drugstore version? Why does a Stradivarius sound vastly superior to the violin at the neighborhood music store? It is the amount of intention and care that went into its making. When we care for the material, when we treat it with respect, the material gives back to us correspondingly. When we respect anything (whether it be a car door, our home, or a shirt), it will last longer and function better. This is also true of people. When I respect my wife, she is kinder to me. Likewise, with loving care, a fruit tree will bear us sweeter fruit.

On the other hand, when we do not respect our clothing, it becomes dirty and torn and cannot keep us as warm. If we do not respect other people, they will not be willing to help us when we are in need. If we do not respect the planet, it will not remain habitable. Thus, respect begets

a smoother life. Yet, do not respect because you will attain these results, but because you know that being respectful helps you grow as an individual. Eventually, we respect for no reason, but just because that is who we are.

BEING PRESENT

*I*t is impossible to be respectful without being present, or present without being respectful. Make a practice of being present, of feeling what is going on, and pausing before speaking or acting. You will now become aware of what is about to happen. You will know what you are about to say, and you can change your words before they come out of your mouth. You will know what action you are about to take, and thereby modify it to be more respectful. Most of the time we live from habit, and being present is its exact opposite.

Practice the art of conscious, graceful movements while doing everyday tasks. To do this, you must be present within your movements. When you take your sweater off, you will no longer fling it to the floor, and after you finish stirring a pot of soup, you will place the spoon carefully on the counter. When we consciously and gracefully move our bodies, we are present and in control. Therefore, respect is inevitable.

On the other hand, disrespect is inevitable when we lose control. We end up slamming doors and shouting at people. When we throw our clothes into a corner, when we yank on knobs, when we use violence and force, there is no consciousness in our actions, there is no respect.

“I could never love where I could not respect.”

—Charlotte Aissé (c. 1694-1733)

When she was four, the Turks destroyed her father’s palace and she was sold to a French ambassador. She was brought up in Paris. Aissé is known today for the letters she wrote to a friend, letters filled with information about her life and about celebrities of the day.

BEING ADAPTABLE

Respect often means sacrificing a little of myself for another. I have seen students sitting in narrow, busy passageways with their legs stretched out, eating lunch, oblivious to others who must step over their legs. Regularly ask yourself questions that will help you become aware of your place in the world and your effect upon it: Can I put myself to use rather than just stand here? Do I at least acknowledge others with a smile and a nod when they come into a room, or do I just ignore them? Do I blindly march ahead, or do I yield? Am I so involved with myself that I am unaware of the impact I have on others? When I ask my yoga teacher a question between classes, am I keeping her from taking a much-needed break? Is my comfort causing discomfort? Is my convenience causing inconvenience?

In the story about Reg, my brothers acted from attentiveness and care, and therefore they naturally adapted to the situation rather than merely acting on blind impulse. Respect often means that we must adapt what we would habitually do. Respect is not in doing what I want, but in doing what the other person needs. However, this is not the same thing as self-denial. We are not being respectful when being respectful to another involves being disrespectful to ourselves.

Are our leaders being respectful by imposing our system of government on other countries? Is it respectful to try to make everyone just like us? Are missionaries being respectful in trying to convert everyone to their own faith?

What I consider respectful, another may not. In Japan, casual remarks to strangers are considered disrespectful, yet in America they are acts of friendliness. In America, it is respectful

“Kindness is more important than wisdom, and the recognition of this is the beginning of wisdom.”

—Theodore Isaac Rubin (1923-)

Rubin is an American psychiatrist and author of more than twenty-five books. One of his books was made into a movie called *David and Lisa*, about a girl with multiple personalities falling in love with a boy with an obsessive-compulsive disorder.

to shake hands when you meet someone, while in India it is respectful to do *Namaste*. In America, it is considered respectful to look someone in the eye; in Japan, it is often considered disrespectful to do so. We must be aware, responsive, and adaptable to be respectful, and not blinded by our own customs. I cannot respect my wife until I know her wishes and what she considers to be respectful. My urge to respect her develops my sensitivity to her and thus strengthens our relationship.

When we are present and adaptable, we may even find that we have to practice uncommon forms of respect to be truly respectful. In India, it is generally considered rude to lie down and talk to someone who is sitting. Yet I remember being on trains with *Guruji* after he had taught many public classes. He was thoroughly exhausted. As we talked, I was sitting and he was lying down. In this situation, it would have been disrespectful for me to expect him to sit up and talk with me. To be respectful may mean allowing another to express apparent disrespect.

RESPECTING DIFFERENCE

A few generations ago, the entire nation of India was divided overnight into India and Pakistan. Once-friendly neighbors started killing one another, and millions died. Why? Simply because people could not respect others' belief systems. As then, so now. Whenever a person is attached to his viewpoint and wants it to prevail at any cost, anger and violence are born.

If we were all the same, we would not realize our uniqueness, or even our value. We can only understand ourselves

“Respect is not fear and awe; it is the ability to see a person as he is, to be aware of his unique individuality.”

—Erich Fromm (1900-1980)

In his autobiography, Fromm wrote that he became a psychologist because he was deeply disturbed by the irrationality of World War I and the suicide of a family friend. He took a middle path between Freud and Marx, emphasizing the twin influences of biology and sociology.

“I can respect others only to the extent that I respect myself.”

—Aadil, Class Quotes

“True self-respect, being very different from false pride, leads inevitably to respecting others.”

—Virginia Moore (1903-1993)

She wrote books of poetry, articles, reviews, short stories, biographies, and a book about our changing attitudes toward death.

on the basis of difference. We can value the peace that yoga brings only when we compare it with our earlier irritability or with our neighbor’s anger. So we are then able to say to those we perceive as our wrong-doing enemies, “Thank you for being you so that I can be me. Thank you for taking on that burden!”

One of the toughest things to do is to respect a contradictory viewpoint. On the other hand, nothing is easier than to respect people who believe exactly what we believe, say exactly what we say, and act exactly as we act. Then we are quick to say, “I respect that man! He’s so right! But that other fool! He doesn’t know what he is talking about! I could certainly never respect him.” Must we respect only what is familiar? Can’t we learn to respect people we don’t agree with, people who are different from us?

RESPECTING THE DISRESPECTFUL

“If one doesn’t respect oneself one can have neither love nor respect for others.”

—Ayn Rand (1905-1982)

Born Alisa Zinovyevna Rosenbaum in Russia, she started writing novels at age seven, and later in life became a famous American novelist. In *Atlas Shrugged*, she wrote, “My philosophy, in essence, is the concept of man as a heroic being, with his own happiness as the moral purpose of his life, with productive achievement as his noblest activity, and reason as his only absolute.”

How can we respect leaders who regularly send the youth off to fight and die in wars? How can we respect those who have no respect for us? In yoga, there are two ways. First, we respect others for doing their dharma. It is my dharma to do what I do, and it is the leader’s dharma to do what he does. If it is his dharma to start a war, then I respect him for living his dharma. I might not start a war, but then again, I am not he.

The second way to respect the disrespectful is to realize: When I cannot respect a power-hungry or greedy person, then I must immediately turn to myself, for there must be some part of me that is tempted by power, greed, and personal profit regardless of the cost to others. I must have some of those

qualities in myself to be able to recognize them in someone else. For example, if I have no greed in me — none whatever — a greedy person may elicit sympathy or compassion, but never anger or righteous wrath. Those who have righteous anger know little about being righteous but a lot about being angry. In learning to respect the disrespectful by recognizing ourselves in them, we rid ourselves of anger, of wrath, of pain.

Therefore, we can respect people we disagree with by asking these two questions: Is it his dharma to do that? What is he teaching me about myself?

But what about situations in which these two questions don’t apply? For example, if we are invited to a smoker’s house, do we respect his desire to smoke in his own house? Of course, because it is *his* house. However, we respect ourselves enough not to go there in the first place!

Out of respect for my lungs and my health, I will not enter a restaurant that allows smoking. To respect a smoker’s choice to smoke in a public place is equivalent to not respecting my *non-choice*, my need to breathe. Therefore, I politely ask smokers to stop smoking if they begin smoking near me, and this is not being disrespectful to them. Very often we think that we should respect someone else’s wishes above our own so that we are not being disrespectful. But when someone is injuring you, then you have every right to demand respect. This is actually a manifestation of self-respect. When we act this way, we are not being disrespectful to others but respectful, simply because our action is helping them awaken to their lack of respect.

When we respect ourselves enough, we will simply not allow others to act disrespectfully toward us. For example, my wife and I respect the cleanliness and sanctity of our home.

“The soul that is within me no man can degrade.”

—Frederick Douglass (1818-1895)

Douglass escaped life as a slave at the age of twenty, and then devoted his adult life to speaking out against slavery. His biography made him famous in 1845, and he later became an adviser to President Lincoln during the Civil War.

“He that respects himself is safe from others; He wears a coat of mail that none can pierce.”

—Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (1807-1882)

Longfellow was so popular in his day that he is considered one of the first American celebrities. His seventieth birthday was celebrated with parades and public readings of his poetry.

Therefore, we do not welcome anyone into our house who wears shoes. We give all visitors shoe covers or slippers to wear, and we do this without apology. When someone is going to enter our space, we ask him or her to do what is respectful to us. Once, we were having telephone problems and the phone company sent a technician over. I asked the technician to put on shoe covers before he came in. He said rather obstinately, “No, I won’t.” Very politely, I told him that he was not welcome in our home. I then called the phone company and explained the situation. They apologized, and immediately sent another technician who respected our wishes.

NEVER BE OFFENDED

Another means of cultivating respect is to focus on our reactions to what we perceive as disrespectful behavior. In particular, observe the feeling of being offended. Being offended means that our ego is too big to let go of what has happened. Indeed, the Divinity within is never offended — only the ego is.

Today people are offended about words and phrases that are labeled racist, sexist, nationalist, and so on. As a result, we constantly endeavor to be “politically correct” and change what we were about to say just so that we don’t hurt somebody else. This may be justified. However, when somebody says something to us and we feel offended, it is just ego. The fact that so many of us are so easily offended today clearly indicates how big our egos have become. If we look inside ourselves, we will see that being offended is nothing more than thinking we are so

“Self-respect: the secure feeling that no one, as yet, is suspicious.”

—H. L. Mencken (1880-1956)

During his last eight years, this highly influential writer suffered brain damage and, though fully conscious, was unable to read or write. He sometimes spoke about himself in the past tense, as if the “real” Mencken were deceased.

important that we should not have our egos affected at all. Though we always try to be respectful and not offensive, we must also strive not to be offended when we are on the receiving end of disrespectful behavior.

THE PRETENSE OF RESPECT

Respect is different from the pretense of respect — what my wife, Mirra, calls the white shadow. “Oh, I bow to you! Oh, you are so great!” As we say this, we are thinking about what we are going to have for dinner! This is just pretense, fakery.

When I treat people nicely because I don’t want them to be upset, I am only pretending to be respectful. When I treat people, thoughts, and things with care because I am “on the path of yoga,” I am not on the path of yoga. When I am kind to people because that is “the spiritual thing to do,” I am neither spiritual nor kind — I am on the path of illusion, not Spirit!

As we practice respect, we must make sure that we are not creating a bigger shadow in ourselves by pretending to be something we are not. We must be respectful not because it is correct to be so, but because we have observed our patterns of disrespect, and allowed our *inherent respectfulness for life* to flower. Then, kindness and respect are part of our nature, not a mere pretense.

Once again, we find that we must first unveil the respect within ourselves before we can give it to others. Giving what we don’t have is meaningless. But when we give the respect we have cultivated within ourselves, few gifts are more profound.

“Conceit is God’s gift to little men.”

—Bruce Barton (1886-1967)

Barton was an advertising executive who wrote a book in 1925 that portrayed Jesus as an advertising man. In just two years, it sold three quarters of a million copies.

Teaching Respect

“The secret of education lies in respecting the pupil.” — Ralph Waldo Emerson

I was teaching a workshop in New Jersey with seventy students neatly arranged into five long rows. Right in front stood an eager man in his early fifties, listening intently to every word I said. He made valiant attempts to follow each and every instruction, and worked extremely hard. At the end of each class, he came up to me and thanked me respectfully. After a few classes, I asked my hostess about this bright and focused man. She replied, “I must tell you a story.”

“About three years ago,” she said, “a gentleman came to me before class and asked that he be allowed to lie in the back of the room and not participate. At first, I was taken aback. I felt that he didn’t respect me as a teacher or show respect to the other students in class. Yet, after seeing how exhausted he looked, and trusting my intuition, I put my ego aside and agreed to his strange request.

“He came three times a week, without fail. In each class, he would lie down in the back of the room for an hour and a half and listen to the class with his eyes closed. He paid me for each class. One day, he got up in the middle of the class, did a few poses with the rest of the students, and then returned to his pseudo-*Shavasana*. Over the next few months, he slowly increased his participation in the class until he eventually did every pose in every class. I tell you this story because that gentleman is the same man whom you just asked about.”

RESPECTING BEING AND BECOMING

Respect for our students has two aspects: accepting and rejecting. As teachers, we must accept and honor each individual as he or she is, in this moment. Yet we must also reject their present state, for it can never do justice to their potential. Every one of us is always less than what we can be, so our job is to help transform each student into what he or she can become. We must respect both actual and potential, both being and becoming. These dual aspects constitute true respect, just as inhalation and exhalation are of the same breath.

The more we respect our students and their individual dharmas, the more effective we are as teachers. As the story of the exhausted man illustrates, we must often teach in ways that fly in the face of common notions of respect. As we come to realize that the class is not for the teacher but the student, we learn to put the student’s individual needs above the petty desires of the teacher’s ego. We learn to treat our students with uncommon styles of respect.

NO CHOICE

Our purpose as yoga teachers is to empower our students. A true teacher’s deepest desire is to help her students express their potential, awaken them to possibilities, and give them choices in life. Oddly, to fulfill this desire, it is often wise to give our students no choice.

Imagine you are learning to sail and, in your very first lesson, the teacher says, “You can use the small sail, or the midsize sail, or the big sail to move forward. You choose.” Of course, you have no idea which sail to use, and although it might be correct to use any one of them, the choice is confusing. At least for the time being, you want your teacher to tell you what to do. Only later, once you know more about sailing, can you make the

choice without feeling confused.

In yoga class, it is best not to give beginning students a choice as to how to do the pose. When teaching *Trikonasana*, for example, if you tell a beginner to choose between putting a brick under her hand, or placing her hand on her leg, or setting her fingertips on the floor, she will find the decision extremely confusing. Most beginners have neither the body awareness nor the requisite knowledge of yoga to be able to make such a choice. Instead, instruct everyone to do the same action, to place their lower hand on a brick. Beginners must be told exactly what to do and should not be asked to do the teacher's job.

What if you see someone in your class who cannot even reach the brick? Go to that student and whisper an alternate instruction in her ear. What if you are teaching a mixed-level class with both beginners and advanced practitioners? In this case, your instructions might begin with, "Everyone, please put your hand on the floor." After they attempt this, continue with, "Now, those of you who cannot reach the floor, go get a brick and place your hand on it." Then, if necessary, continue with "Those of you who cannot reach the brick, go to the wall and put your hand on the wall." (To avoid disrupting the flow of the class, you could have all students keep a brick next to them.) Though it may appear that the student is being asked to make a choice, this is not the case. You are merely clarifying the situation so that your students know exactly what to do. You are allowing them to reap the most benefit by choosing to give them no choice.

Yet we must be careful not to apply this concept of "no choice" too broadly. Otherwise, it can easily degenerate into a brand of fascism. In giving clear instructions, we must be careful not to deny our students the opportunity to feel and discern; our intent is to provide them with a framework in which they can start to feel their way into the poses with some confidence. After a student has had a few years of experience, he does not require this approach, and, in fact, it may even stunt the development of his capacity to feel.

True yoga comes from within. We may do a pose differently each day according to our condition, situation, time of life, or season. The only way we can correctly adapt a pose to our present situation is by sensing how the body is reacting to the posture.

Therefore, it behooves us as teachers to cultivate our students' ability to feel while they are in orthodox poses so that, once they understand the basic alignment, they can be free to make their own choices. As the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Mark Van Doren wrote, "The art of teaching is the art of assisting discovery."

REPETITION REPETITION REPETITION

*R*epetition is the mother of all skill." — Proverb

Out of respect for our students' desire to progress, we naturally wish to share all our helpful ideas, so we may feel that we are doing our students a service by flooding them with new details in every class. As I look back over my thirty-five years of teaching, I see that this attitude made my classes interesting for me, yet it did not serve most of my students. Often, the best way to respect a student's desire to learn something new is to repeat the old in a new way. Over time, this repetition converts information into experience, thereby providing a stable foundation for the knowledge to come. Until you can repeat the same instruction again and again without guilt, it is unlikely that your students will progress.

To give an example, if your students are doing a twist but cannot perform a shoulder movement, ask them to repeat that shoulder movement three times on each side. This is similar to the manner in which a pianist practices — working on a small section of a difficult passage over and over, until it becomes second nature.

Repetition is especially important when teaching complex movements. For instance, when you are teaching beginning students to land with the outer edges of their feet parallel while jumping apart in standing poses, have them bring their legs together and jump them apart many, many times, until this correct action becomes a part of their neural memory.

The principle of repetition applies on a larger scale, too. Suppose we want to teach

the concept of rooting and recoiling. If we teach this in every class for a month, applying the same concept to different postures and sequences, our students will remember rooting and recoiling for a lifetime. Repeated often enough, any concept or action becomes a part of the nervous system's memory, and our students recall it without any effort to do so.

A caveat: Repetition, though absolutely necessary, must be accompanied by vigilant awareness. Because repetition leads to the formation of habit, each time the student repeats an action, we as teachers must be alert enough to make the requisite corrections and refinements, or else the student will form bad habits. By going where he has always gone before, the student will only reinforce mediocrity. Also, when the body repeats movements unintelligently, then repetition leads to selective hypermobility or selective tightness; hence, to vulnerability. Therefore, repetition by itself is not enough; it must be accompanied by expert direction and consciousness.

FEWER DETAILS (NO MORE THAN THREE POINTS AT ONCE)

“What doesn't add will subtract.” — Aristotle

As teachers who respect our students' need to learn and evolve, we strive to help them refine their awareness by exploring the myriad details in each posture. However, we often teach too many details too soon, and as a result, our students suffer from the “paralysis of analysis,” their brains drowning in a frothy sea of instructions. Thinking fervently about the plethora of refinements they are supposed to accomplish, they can perform none of them effectively.

The amount of detail necessary for beginners is the amount of detail necessary to keep them safe. Focus on safety first. Later, give the students the details they need to refine the posture and feel the energy of the pose. As teachers, we must know the difference between foundational details necessary for safety, and advanced details — nuances, subtleties — that make a posture's effect more powerful and refined. This way, we are

respecting the limits of our students' ability to absorb information. Keep in mind that your students are learning a complex art. They are entering a new world, and to flood them with details (just because you know them) is, at best, premature and, at worst, paralyzing.

Explain no more than three points at any one time, and explain each point individually. If somebody starts to tell us a recipe with more than three ingredients, we reach for pen and paper! On the other hand, when we are told, “All you need is three ingredients to make rice — rice, water, and some salted butter,” then we think, “I can remember that.” In the same way, if our instructions have too many points, our students panic and their minds become tense, thinking, “Oh, my God, if I don't remember all these points, I won't be able to do the pose!” This reaction prevents them from remembering what they have just heard and perhaps from even trying the pose at home.

USE COMMAND LANGUAGE

As practitioners of yoga, we cultivate awareness and sensitivity. Having developed these qualities, we realize that trying to control situations and command others is not only unnecessary, but also violent and counterproductive. Commanding others seems, on the surface, to be domineering, disrespectful, and unyogic. Yet when it comes to giving clear instructions, we are most effective, and therefore most respectful to our students, when using direct commands. *Lift the quadriceps. Pull your kneecaps up. Stretch your arms from your spine into your fingertips. Move your head back. Open your eyes. Lift the pit of your abdomen.* With directions such as these, our students instantly know what to do and can respond immediately, without confusion.

Giving instructions in command language means telling your students what to do rather than what should be done. “The spine rises in this pose,” for example, is not an instruction to do a certain action; it is simply a description of an action. Therefore, the brain does not automatically turn to the body and say, “Do it.” However, if the instruction

were “Lift the spine,” the brain would immediately comprehend that its job is to create that action.

Avoid instructions such as these: *You need to lift the spine. You want to lift the spine in this pose. I want you to lift the spine. The spine is lifted in this pose. Try to lift the spine. I'd like you to lift the spine. If you want, you can lift your spine. It's best to lift the spine in this pose. Your spine should lift in this pose. Since Mercury is not retrograde, your spine will lift in this pose!* Though these instructions may seem kind and respectful, whereas command language may feel imposing and arrogant, they are actually fluffy, wordy, nondirectional, and ineffective.

Although command language is usually associated with the army and a sergeant barking orders, a skillful yoga teacher learns to use command language with a compassionate tone, thereby avoiding these militaristic associations. Everything depends on the delivery. If you modulate the tone of your voice such that you do not sound arrogant, then command language is actually far more respectful and effective than wishy-washy illusions of politeness.

Command language is for making instructions penetrate the mind and body of the student without confusion. When the mind is clear and transparent, it is not stuck deciphering various interpretations, and can devote itself to feeling. Command language, then, should never deny feeling, but encourage it. Always give your students the freedom to come out of a pose when they are tired or feel any sharp pain, and ask them to call you when they feel that a particular action is not working for them. Much as they may listen to you, make sure they also listen to the command language that comes from within.

GIVE PAUSE

“Drawing on my fine command of the English language, I said nothing.”
— Robert Benchley

I have observed many beginning teachers who chatter nonstop throughout class, a consequence of the lethal mix of tense nerves and the desire to impress. Students, however, need both time and space to assimilate instructions. Indeed, they become frustrated and agitated when instruction follows instruction follows instruction follows instruction without pause. In the face of this onslaught of verbiage, our students’ minds cannot stay focused and switch off, much as our minds switched off in response to the incessant drone of our math teacher’s voice years ago. Therefore, pause between thoughts, between instructions, even between sentences. This gives your students time to absorb and integrate what they have heard, a chance to go inside themselves, reflect, and assimilate what you have said. Also, as every good actor knows, pausing makes the audience eagerly anticipate the next word.

Yoga is about self-discovery, about learning who we are. We can only truly learn from what we experience. Therefore, we must allow our students ample time to reflect on what they have just done, time to notice the effects in their bodies, minds, and emotions. For example, if you want your students to experience the fact that *Sarvangasana* improves their ability to hear, ask them to sit quietly in *Virasana* after they come out of the pose, or in a simple cross-legged position. Ask them to lift their heads, keep their spines erect, close their eyes, and observe the effects of the pose in their body. Instruct them to sit quietly, breathe deeply, and feel. Then ask them to tune in to the sounds they are hearing, and experience for themselves that *Sarvangasana* enhances their ability to hear. In this process, they go inside themselves and experience firsthand what they may have otherwise blindly accepted as fact. They are practicing yoga from inside out, realizing that they are on the path of self-exploration, self-growth, and self-union rather than a path of accomplishing postures. Pausing promotes this self-discovery.

Modern society is addicted to stimulus and mortified by silence. Our yoga classes must provide a quiet haven, a refuge from the cacophony of society, giving our students perhaps the only chance they have for silence and reflection — a silence we all internally yearn for. Mozart once said, “Music is painted on a canvas of silence.” Let our yogic instructions, too, be painted on the canvas of a silent mind.

DO WE GIVE STUDENTS WHAT THEY WANT?

More and more people come to classes expecting to do Ashtanga Yoga or Power Yoga sequences just like some movie stars are doing, so we may be tempted to teach these to our beginning students. Though it may seem respectful to give our students what they came for, we must not give students merely what they want, because they don't yet know what they need. If we do, we are teaching running before walking, and our students may fall. Students must first learn how to keep their shoulders in joint, strengthen their knees, and develop basic hip alignment. They must also learn how to work their ankles, protect their sacroiliac joints, and prevent injury to their wrists by adjusting the weight on their hands. In other words, students must master the basics of each pose before they can safely combine poses into a flowing sequence. I do not teach beginners the jumping sequences, not because these sequences are unimportant or irrelevant, but because teaching students jumpings without first teaching them the basics of alignment and form is irresponsible. Indeed, some of the finest teachers of Ashtanga Yoga have told me that they always teach alignment before they teach the sequences.

To give another illustration, some teachers think it important to teach *mula bandha*, *uddiyana bandha*, or *bhastrika pranayama* in beginning classes. This again is too much, too soon. Students must first learn to align their spines and develop strength in their nerves before they learn these powerful *bandhas* and pranayamas. If students perform these advanced and risky techniques before they are physically and mentally prepared, the energy generated by them may be deflected into the wrong energy meridians and may lead to severe disturbances in the nervous system, as well as to muscular distortion and inflated egos. Additionally, students may gain weight, as their body puts on fat to remain grounded and to protect their nervous system from injury. We must therefore teach our students to develop alignment in their bodies and strength in their nerves before teaching them the subtler, more powerful aspects of yoga.

Students who want to do beautiful, arching backbends and showy, ego-gratifying poses often need the simple fundamentals. Do not succumb to your desire to gratify your

students at their expense. For at least the first decade of teaching, focus on solidifying your ability to teach the fundamentals, not the advanced poses. Teaching the fundamentals repeatedly is like laying a foundation upon which your students can later build the more intermediate and advanced actions. In time, your students will grasp the fundamentals so thoroughly that, as they attempt deeper movements and advanced poses, foundational memories will support them and prevent their bodies from being injured. Besides, it is not about the asanas anyway. It never was.

KINDNESS IS RESPECT

“That best portion of a good man's life; his little, nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love.” — William Wordsworth

Though being respectful to our students can take all these unexpected forms and even, at times, appear to be disrespectful, there is one constant in all true expressions of respect: Kindness. There is no respect without kindness, and no kindness without respect.

Since yoga is the process of cultivating consciousness, any action that is harsh, brutal, forceful, or disrespectful is unyogic. I have heard of yoga teachers who, in fits of anger, have become extremely violent. In one case, a teacher actually picked up his friend and threw him against a wall when his friend told him that he could no longer teach in the friend's studio. Other teachers have kicked and slapped students for perceived insubordination or in an attempt to crush their students' egos. Yet these are famous yoga teachers. How can this be? How can someone who does not respect another human being claim that he is teaching yoga? This is a farce! Such a teacher may be practicing asana for physical form or for personal power, but neither of these is yoga.

A lesson about the value of kindness was revealed to me years ago when I was teaching a workshop in Idaho. The class was full of beginners. I noticed two older men in the back of the room, struggling with every move they made. I gave them my best despite

their lack of promise, and treated them with kindness. That evening, I learned that one of the men was chairman of the board of one of the world's top corporations. He had appreciated my kindness and my efforts, and later arranged for me to deliver lectures to his executives, managers, and staff about the mind, integrity, and the workplace.

As teachers, we are constantly around people who are struggling to do what we can do with relative ease. Our superior skills can draw us into the trap of the ego, and we begin to become less respectful to others. To counter this tendency, I constantly remind myself that my classes are filled with professional chefs, concert pianists, ballet dancers, marathon runners, expert swimmers, mothers of five children, CEOs, medical doctors, massage therapists. . . . Yes, I can do yoga well, and I can teach yoga well, yet each one of my students possesses qualities and skills that I will never own. If we keep in mind that each student is far more than the fumbling body we see before us, our ego will be humbled, and our innate kindness flourish. Kindness is respect, respect kindness. This does not mean that we molycoddle the student, or do whatever the student wants. Kindness means helping the student progress quickly with the least possible harm. Maximum progress, with minimum time and harshness.

NOTHING CAN BE TAUGHT

“I forget what I’ve been taught. I only remember what I’ve learned.”
— Patrick White

In his book *A System of National Education*, Sri Aurobindo states, “The first principle of true teaching is that nothing can be taught.” So true. So beautiful! Perhaps the most respectful thing we can do for our students is to accept that it is not our teaching but their learning that is most important. We must focus on developing each student’s urge to learn; that is, to teach in such a way that our students are inspired to learn, because the

transmission happens only when students are receptive to learning. We can demonstrate a pose, explain it in a hundred different ways, go over it again and again, but only the student can learn. Our challenge, and our joy, is to be an embodiment of our teachings so that our students feel inspired to learn, and yearn to follow the example we are setting.

Just because “nothing can be taught,” that does not excuse us from the responsibility of being the best teachers we can possibly be. This maxim only reminds us that our responsibility is to teach, and the student’s responsibility is to learn. Then there is the joy of mutual respect between teacher and student.

CULTIVATE RESPECT

The greatest spiritual masters that I have had the profound privilege to know and learn from — The Mother, Dilip Kumar Roy, Indira Devi — treated all people and all things with a respect that verged on caring tenderness. No word was misspoken, no gesture misdirected, no object misused, no effort misspent. Nothing was acquired until it was really needed; nothing was discarded without thought. Every human being was treated as *God in potentia*.

What is the mysterious channel that allows the force of yoga to flow freely from one generation to another? What, besides respect? Therefore, cultivate respect for your teacher, for the teaching, for the yoga, for yourself, for your students, for your colleagues, for the very earth that holds you as you practice your art. Spend some time each day with your hands in Namaste, your head bowed, contemplating the many insights and sacrifices of the teachers who have brought the gift of yoga to you. When you fill yourself with humility, when you fill yourself with gratitude, you are filling yourself with respect. Respect will become a tangible aura around you, overflowing from your humble Namaste to nurture your students, soothe your family, heal our world.