# Editorial

*Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.*

In recent years, we have witnessed an extraordinary Yoga boom, at least as far as health-oriented Yoga practices are concerned. There has been a corresponding rush on teacher trainings, with thousands of practitioners seeking certification. This demand has been responsible for the mushrooming of training programs in the United States and elsewhere. It would appear that most of these future teachers opted for 200-hour programs or even less demanding courses, including weekend trainings. Many of these programs require little or no previous experience with Yoga and, to say the least, leave much to be desired.

As an alternative to these trainings, YREC inaugurated in 2002 a two-year, 700-hour teacher training program for which the concluding segment was given in October of this year. My staff and I felt very strongly that 200 hours (160 contact hours plus 40 home-study hours, per Yoga Alliance's standards) are simply not enough to create viable Yoga teachers. We also required a minimum of two years' steady personal Yoga practice to qualify for the program, and all in-depth teacher training programs have a similar requirement. Even two years of personal practice, however, are meager by comparison with traditional standards. Too many neophytes rush into setting themselves up as teachers before they have attained adequate knowledge and experience, or personal maturity, and some even find programs that will train them as teachers without any prior experience in Yoga!

If it were clearly spelled out that these fledgling teachers consider themselves to be *âsana* instructors rather than full-fledged Yoga teachers, the situation would perhaps not be quite so critical. This is by and large not the case, however. Also, how can a 200-hour training really qualify a student to teach *âsanas* competently, given that most instructors today must work with students—both young and old—with physical limitations. This calls for both sound anatomical knowledge and therapeutic skills, which a 200-hour training cannot possibly provide.

With our two-year course having come to an end this fall, my thoughts naturally turned to assessing what we have accomplished. From the testimony of our students, I am happy to say that almost everyone feels they have significantly benefited from our program. In all honesty, however, our program did not come close to a traditional pupilage in which the student is rigorously trained to one (unspecified) day competently pass on the teachings to his or her own students. The gap between a traditional Indian training and what is feasible in the contemporary Western world is simply too huge to bridge. In the traditional context, a disciple lives with a *guru* for years and has his or her competence tested daily.

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It is generally accepted that there is a significant difference between the traditional *guru*-disciple model and the contemporary teacher-student relationship. It might even be more accurate and modest to speak of contemporary Yoga teachers as *instructors* and learning students as *trainees.* These terms better correspond to the actual

situation, which is modeled after our Western system of education, a system in which the transmission of knowledge (data and skill) is emphasized rather than wisdom and inner growth.

As the director of YREC's teacher training program, I, along with the other teachers in our program, endeavored to communicate not only knowledge but also wisdom and to invite and challenge participants to approach our training and Yoga in general from the perspective of inner (or spiritual) growth.

Despite the encouraging progress made by some students in our training, I am obliged to state that something more in the range of a 2,000-hour (six-year) program would come closer to the *ideal* I have in mind for what constitutes an in-depth training program. Of course, such an extensive program would remain out of reach for most people and hence also would not be economically feasible for a Yoga center to offer. Even though YREC's 700-hour teacher training program for 2003–2004 started out with 60 people, several participants admitted to experiencing financial strain. Clearly, even a 700-hour training program is not easily accessible for most people, as it requires them to be in residence for a total of eight weeks in four two-week segments. As a result, I created a trial 500-hour training program (with three two-week residential segments) with an optional additional 200 hours, but enrollment was not sufficient to run it. It seems the compromise was not meant to be.

All of this prompted me to look once again at YREC's training program. After careful reflection, I concluded that a Yoga practitioner should ideally not start teaching until he or she has benefited from at least five years of personal (spiritual) practice and has attained emotional maturity. For similar reasons, YREC required that applicants to our original 700-hour teacher training program be at least 25 years of age. In our society, however, few individuals in their mid-twenties can be said to be emotionally mature, and I now consider it advisable to wait until one's thirties before starting to teach Yoga (as a spiritual practice rather than *âsana* instruction).

These criteria are, of course, not commercially viable for an organization with a teacher training program. Instead of revising standards to attract an adequate number of students, however, I decided to discontinue YREC's training program for now and focus on serving those students seeking more in-depth knowledge of the Yoga tradition. I realize that few, if any, other training organizations will likely follow suit. I would, however, ask each one to give strong consideration to eliminating their 200-hour programs in favor of more extensive training courses (at least 500 hours) and to always require refresher courses and further training for their graduates. I also will continue to champion the cause of spiritual growth as a vital part of Yoga teacher training. We must remember that Yoga is a spiritual tradition and should be practiced and taught as such, not just as *âsana* training.

Since commencing our 700-hour training in 2002, there has been a significant change in the Yoga "market" in the United States with its c. 20 million Yoga practitioners. Some Yoga schools have experienced a drop in participation in teacher training courses, with some, like YREC, having to cancel their training program altogether. In some areas, Yoga studios have closed due to lack of participation. In other localities, of course, people are looking for teachers, and new studios continue to open. In any case, truly *qualified* teachers seem few and far between.

I see two reasons for this situation. First, the United States is experiencing an economic slump. Second, a saturation point has been reached, and there now appears to be a surfeit of Yoga teachers (certified or otherwise) in some locations. The Yoga boom, which started in the 1990s, has in my opinion finally peaked.

This has led to both positive and negative developments. On the positive side, more people have been introduced to some form of Yoga practice than in any other period of history outside of India. Also, the medical and educational establishments are taking note of Yoga as a viable approach to personal health care. On the negative side, the public image of Yoga is a caricature of the real thing. Most people still confuse Yoga, which is essentially a spiritual discipline, with physical fitness. The overwhelming majority of Yoga practitioners approach Yoga from this incorrect—or at least incomplete—point of view. Also on the negative side, the public demand for Yoga teachers and present inadequate standards for teacher training have unleashed a multitude of unqualified teachers with dubious credentials or none at all.

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To me, this is a crisis situation calling for urgent rectification. I view it as a crisis on two counts. First, increasing numbers of practitioners of yogic postures are sustaining injury from faulty instruction and practice when Yoga's foundation

principle is *ahimsa,* or nonharming. Second, the medical establishment and health insurance companies are beginning to show a real interest in Yoga, and the lack of universally agreed-on standards of education for Yoga teachers and Yoga therapists will before long be recognized as a serious impediment. This is especially so given that some Yoga teachers act and at times also promote themselves as Yoga therapists while lacking adequate training. As Yoga moves in the West from physical fitness training to physical therapy, it will unquestionably attract critical attention from the medical profession and other well-established therapeutic modalities, such as physiotherapy, massage, acupuncture, and chiropractic.

These disciplines have had to pass through their own trials vis-à-vis medicine and in the process were obliged to create more or less common standards. We should learn from their experience. Contemporary Yoga's foray into therapy will most certainly draw the attention of the American Medical Association and legislators at the state level.

The Yoga Alliance, which was formed in 1998 and keeps a registry of over 6,500 teachers, has introduced standards at the 200-hour and 500-hour levels. For the reasons stated above, I consider the 200-hour training standards to be unsatisfactory. Also, because the Yoga Alliance does not do on-site review of training programs but relies on submitted self-reports, there is the added drawback of not being able to tell for certain whether the standards are actually being met.

The situation is tenuous enough regarding Yoga teacher training standards, and it is even less satisfactory in the case of Yoga therapy. There are as yet no common minimum standards for Yoga therapy training programs, and yet the label "Yoga therapist" is at present used liberally and often interchangeably with "Yoga teacher." Discussions about training standards for Yoga therapists have taken place over the years, but so far have not led to any significant concrete action. I believe there is a genuine urgency to formulate basic standards now, and in the course of pondering these criteria, we also ought to look (again) at the basic standards for teacher certification.

Given the goals and history of IAYT, this division of YREC has the distinct responsibility to make a positive contribution toward filling this gap. Since Yoga therapists, by definition, work with clients who are experiencing psychophysical and physical challenges, these standards must match, if not surpass, the standards applied in comparable therapeutic modalities. It is my hope that such standards will gain the support of many qualified teachers who have extensive experience with the therapeutic applications of Yoga.

**Any excision of the spiritual aspects of Yoga in Yoga therapy will flatten its effectiveness.**

In my editorials to several past issues of the journal, I have argued for the inclusion of the spiritual dimension of Yoga not only in Yoga practice and Yoga teacher education but also in the teaching and application of Yoga therapy, and therefore I will not repeat myself here. I would just like to emphasize that any excision of the spiritual aspects of Yoga in Yoga therapy will flatten its effectiveness. After all, as human beings we are not merely the physical body but a body-mind continuum capable of self-transcendence.

This is, in fact, the big lesson that contemporary medicine is gradually and reluctantly learning. We should therefore not launch Yoga therapist education from a position that has been shown to be incomplete and inadequate for the treatment of the whole human being. Today the reductionistic scientism of modern medicine, which is based on physics and chemistry to the almost complete exclusion of psychology, stands revealed as erroneous and impoverished. I believe we can do better and should be open to learning from the kind of insights and new approaches sanctioned by the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM). The Center, which was established by Congress in 1998, is one of the 27 institutes and centers that comprise the National Institutes of Health (NIH).

For the past several months, YREC/IAYT member John Kepner, in dialogue with Trisha, myself, and others, has been intensively investigating standards for Yoga therapists, and, as you will see in the appendix to his article "Alternative Billing Codes and Yoga," has formulated a set of draft standards to begin the dialogue with the broader Yoga therapy community. It is my hope that, if the Yoga Alliance decides to expand their registry to include Yoga therapists, they will work with these standards and keep the bar high for this emerging profession. If it can become established as a respected alternative and complementary practice, it has the potential to profoundly serve many and be part of the transformation of health care in the West.

Obviously, we would like to hear your opinion on all of this.

Also in this issue you will find an enriching array of articles on the theory and practice of Yoga therapy, including member Dr. Michael

Cheikin's Yoga Hatha Medica medical Yoga curriculum, Dr. Tom Alden's Anatomy of Choice approach to Yoga therapy, Vina Shah and Giles Hooper's exploration of Yoga and Ayurveda therapy, member Dr. Steve Katz's rebuttal to an orthopedic surgeon's warnings about certain *âsanas*, Dr. P. K. Vedanthan's pilot studies on Yoga breathing techniques for asthma and COPD, member Dr. Kimberly Williams et al.'s study of Iyengar Yoga for chronic low back pain, member Dr. Nora Mercuri's study of Yoga for diabetes, member Kiranjit Longaker and Gabriel Tornusciolo's work with traumatized adolescent males, member Amy Tate's mental health work with children and adolescents, and member Dr. Susan Galle's case study of Yoga and hypnosis for chronic headaches.

In Yoga,

Georg Feuerstein