

# Perspective

## A Fork in the Road: “Doing to” or “Being with”?

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*“When you come to the fork in the road, take it.” - Sri Yogi Berra*

The pace of Yoga therapy’s adaptation and acceptance into our culture continues to accelerate. This past year has seen more public media attention and more studies published. A person can now find an instructional video or book for nearly any medical ailment. While these changes are exciting and gratifying for those of us who have been working so long to promote Yoga therapy, I believe this phenomenon represents an important “fork in the road” for us as a profession. The koan Yogi Berra offers us on first blush seems to mean, “Go one direction or the other at the fork in the road,” but quite possibly he might be imploring us to be aware that we are making a deliberate choice at the fork.

We have all had the experience of suddenly realizing we missed the fork on the freeway and finding ourselves well down an exit ramp we never intended to travel. The fork in the road we as Yoga therapists find ourselves approaching is represented by the risk of Yoga therapy blindly and unintentionally going down the well-worn road of the Western medical paradigm of “doing to” students rather than choosing the less-traveled road true to Yoga of “being with.”

Innocently slipping back onto the well-worn road happens in any paradigm shift. Most of us, I would guess, have grown up in the medical paradigm and to some degree pride ourselves on having evolved beyond that paradigm. However, we are vulnerable to slipping back onto the mechanistic road.

As Yoga therapists, we teach, write, or present as if we, our *āsana* prescription, or even our “energy,” make up the healing force in our relationship with our students. That, of course, is the mechanistic model of medicine: Do “A” to “B” to get “C.” It presumes that the provider is the expert and the receiver is deficient at some level and must have something “done to” them for healing to occur. Such a position flies in the face of most Yoga teaching, which describes the innate

healing capacity of consciousness and living systems. In a misstep into unconsciousness, we find ourselves presuming to know, and then acting “on” students, or writing something like, “When thus and such presents like so, one should apply the following Yoga technologies.” Students clamor for such direction, and all too frequently instructors find themselves offering such prescriptive regimens and formulas.

I suppose I am a little sensitive to this, as I am what I jokingly refer to as a recovering physical therapist. I did the linear, analytical thinking and mechanistic practice confidently and with great expertise. Such a practice is very seductive, for when it works, it strokes the ego. The problem is that when it doesn’t work, either the patient or I must be deficient in some way. Since it obviously isn’t me, it must be.... And the *himsa* begins: The patient is not motivated, the patient is seeking gain from their condition, the patient is a wimp and just needs to buckle down and try harder, and so it goes. I knew what they needed (a form of *himsa* as thought), I am following Guru Joe’s prescription for back pain and they are not responding, possibly I should adjust them deeper into the *āsana* (a form of *himsa* as action), or they are hiding something deeper. In fact, I have not created the space or attitude to allow that depth of sharing (a form of *himsa* as domination in relationship) and my own projections bar me from being with the patient in presence (a form of *himsa* as unconsciousness and separation).

Please understand that I’m not suggesting we abandon the gifts of analytical thinking and reasoning. Rather, I’m suggesting that there is another less-traveled road at the fork, and this path of “being with” can both include the best of the dominant paradigm *and* remain true to the larger mystery of healing that is the heart of Yoga.

Right now, there is no healing profession that honors and studies the qualities of consciousness, transformation, and presence. If not us as Yoga therapists, who will champion the values of silence, *ahimsa*, and awe that occur in

a Yoga therapeutic relationship when we are “being with”? What group of professionals will explore in humility that experience of the yoking of healing that goes beyond each of us as individuals?

I am advocating that we remain vigilant as we approach each opportunity to choose which fork we will take in any particular moment. Our tendency as a culture and creatures of habit is to take on the hubris of the knower, the healer, or the “doing to” mode. Can we hold dear the honor and privilege of “being with” another as a companion and peer, knowing that in our relationship we both are healed? Granted, we may and should have technical knowledge and experience to share in service of another. But does the relationship allow for this to be done in a shared service and a spontaneous mutual awareness of right action? Call it mastery, flow, or grace, the feeling of this process goes beyond words.

This is the very fork in the road we find ourselves. What direction we take at this fork has implications at every level of our profession. The quality and type of our personal prac-

tice is of course the most basic. How we market, deliver, and teach in our local communities represents the next level. If we teach to a wider audience, how we set up workshops and develop products offers another level requiring awareness. At the level of IAYT, we work to keep this journal at a balance on that less-traveled road, as well as the programming of our time together at our annual meeting. Further, as an organization, we must also keep attuned to how we then relate around the world and with other professions. Can we be inclusive and collaborative, or do we slip into turf-protecting or regionalism? Many exciting possibilities lay ahead if we choose to travel that less-traveled road of inclusiveness.

In closing, I would like to call upon each of us to heed Yogi Berra’s wise counsel: At the fork that arrives in our practice, do “take it,” but take that fork with full awareness of which road you are choosing.

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