

# Vision Text on Respect for Integrity in the Context of Yoga

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## Preface

In early January 2020, a book<sup>1</sup> came out in the US that caused a shock wave in the International Kundalini Yoga world. The author who was number two in the organisation for years provides testimony in the book of sexual misconduct and abuse of power by the spiritual leader Yogi Bhajan († 2004).

Encouraged by this book, the MeToo movement and zeitgeist, more and more new allegations regarding Yogi Bhajan emerged. The leadership of the organisation in the States commissioned an independent investigation. Two hundred victims and defenders of Yogi Bhajan told their stories.

[The report](#) was published in early August 2020. The conclusion says: ‘... *Based on reports of harm from 36 people, the investigation concludes that it is more likely than not that Yogi Bhajan engaged in several types of sexual misconduct and abused his power as a spiritual leader. ...*’

Following these developments, the board of the Belgian Kundalini Yoga Association published a statement on its website with 3 key messages:

- 1. We reject any form of abuse and exploitation.*
- 2. In Belgium we want to ensure a safe environment for students and teachers.*
- 3. Kundalini Yoga as taught by Yogi Bhajan has brought many good things into the lives of many yoga practitioners in Belgium. We want to keep it that way.*

*We strive for a future in which abuse is avoided at all times and where respect for the integrity of each individual and yoga experience are central.*

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<sup>1</sup> Book: Premka – White Bird in a Golden Cage by Pamela Saharah Dyson.

Moving from words to action, the Integrity hotline was set up in July 2020. Contact details can be found on the home page of our [website](#).

We asked [Sensoa](#), the Flemish centre that specializes in sexual health, to advise and guide us in drawing up a policy on integrity for our organisation.

**This vision text is the basis for that policy.** We describe in this document what transgressive behaviour in the yoga context means to us, how we want to deal with it and, above all, how we want to do everything we can to prevent it.

December 11, 2020

The Hotline Integrity  
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## 1 Transgressive Behaviour and Yoga

Transgressive behaviour occurs whenever people meet and therefore also in the yoga world, as students and teachers come together to practise. It is a shocking but realistic finding.

When boundaries are deliberately crossed, we speak of **abuse**. This can take many forms: verbal or physical violence, discrimination against people because of their skin colour or gender, sexual harassment, inappropriate behaviour, rape, and so on.

Unacceptable behaviour is often related to an abuse of power and leads to trauma for the person experiencing it. Professional counsellors are increasingly integrating **yoga into trauma therapy**. This makes combating transgressive behaviour within the yoga context all the more important.

Yoga is good for your physical and mental health. There is no doubt about that and millions of people will endorse this. And luckily, **the vast majority of yoga teachers behave in an ethically correct way**, but there are exceptions. They abuse their position as teachers to exert power. It can be self-proclaimed power, or a power state into which they are projected by their students. The damage done by these individuals can be immense.

Abuse in the yoga context is especially reprehensible because yoga is also a **spiritual experience**. Yoga was designed centuries ago to prepare body and mind for meditation and contemplation. That is why yoga exercises not only have a physical impact, but also work on the emotional, mental and spiritual level. When yoga students open themselves to spiritual guidance, they become more vulnerable. There is a risk that they are drawn into an unhealthy power dynamic and ill-intentioned teachers manipulate them.

It is known that yoga is a natural way to increase the production of the happiness hormones **serotonin and dopamine**. That is one of the reasons why yoga is recommended to combat depression and makes people feel good. When students do their yoga with concentration and dedication, they can experience a kind of "high" during or just after a session. In those moments their critical and rational thinking is often no longer fully present. Therefore, it is extremely important that yoga is practised in a **safe and reliable environment** where the integrity of participants is carefully monitored. After an intense session, it may take a while for students to feel grounded again. Meanwhile, the student is extra vulnerable, and he or she must be able to count fully on **the integrity and professional approach of the yoga teacher**.

We are pleased that the Belgian Minister of Justice in his policy memorandum at the beginning of November 2020 identified **the fight against sexual violence as an absolute top priority**.

## 2 Causes of Transgressive Behaviour

Transgressive behaviour occurs when people cross the boundaries of others, consciously or unconsciously, intentionally or unintentionally. However light or brutal the abuse, the **nervous system** of the person being attacked **will respond**. When someone is overwhelmed and for whatever reason is unable to defend or protect himself or herself, the **survival mechanism** automatically springs into action, resulting in multiple short-term and longer-term impact on health, mental, physical and emotional.

Research shows that transgressive behaviour often occurs in **people who have experienced it** themselves. They can become perpetrators because this behaviour is strongly present in their subconscious mind. This is passed down through generations. It settles in family systems.

During the two **world wars** that were fought in our region, the entire population was subjected to transgressive behaviour. Many of us still carry the consequences of that horror at an unconscious level.

Another context in which transgressive behaviour regularly occurs is in dysfunctional **parenting situations** or **family violence**.

**Refugees** fleeing wars, scarcity, or violence often also encountered unacceptable behaviour in many forms, in their home country or during their search for a safe place to live.

In all of these and many other problematic situations, people experience an impact on their emotional stability. The way they relate to themselves and to the world has been undermined. As a consequence, they do not correctly sense and assess the boundaries of others and of themselves.

But there is another important driving force that can lead to transgressive behaviour. Power has a **sexual energy** to it and that can be **attractive**. There is a biological explanation for this. Getting into a relationship with a person of power increases your chances of survival. Henry Kissinger once stated that many beautiful and young women fell for him. *It is not my beauty that charms them, he said. I am now old and obese. It must be the power and influence that makes me so attractive.*

Unfortunately, as their power increases, some feel that they can get away with everything. They think less and less that they should conform to general values and norms. This is also called the **Sun King effect**.

### 3 Effects of Transgressive Behaviour

#### 3.1 For those who experience transgressive behaviour

The consequences of transgressive behaviour can be traumatic for the person experiencing it. The impact can be **drastic and long-lasting** at physical, emotional, mental and spiritual level.

In the long term, by working hard and under proper supervision, the trauma can, in the best case scenario, be transformed into more awareness and empowerment. But it is never a path you wish upon someone.

People whose boundaries have been brutally crossed have to deal with anxiety attacks, lowered self-esteem, shame, guilt, anger, and so on. Often, they quit yoga because their trust has been betrayed.

Experts in trauma processing know that it can take a long time for a trauma that has become deeply embedded in the human system to be released. It may not be until years later that the person files a complaint or dares to speak about it. They are often blamed for this. *Why didn't you talk about it earlier?* It is very important therefore that there is **more, better and broader information and communication** about the dynamics and process of trauma processing and recovery.

When people are abused by a person they look up to, the **confusion** is huge. On one hand, they feel hurt, but on the other hand they perceive it as a gesture of recognition: *I am special*. They are seen by the person who is important to them and that feels good. Even if the nature of that interest is negative.

It often happens that the person experiencing abuse, despite everything, finds it difficult to give up the relationship with the perpetrator. They experience a kind of **loyalty** towards the perpetrator. This can be difficult to understand for the outside world. Fortunately, these days there is a growing body of scientific research that recognizes this phenomenon. And there are ways to break through the false protection of the offender so that a healing process can begin.

As you have probably noticed, **we do not use the word *victim***. We talk about *someone who undergoes or experiences transgressive behaviour*. In trauma therapy the word *survivor* is used instead of *victim*. There are two reasons for this:

First, there is often a connotation to the term *victim* which implies a lack of resilience, helplessness, weakness and naïvity that can be misleading. The term *survivor* holds more self-esteem, strength and resilience to free oneself from the negative context.

Second, *survivor* is more appropriate because research has shown that any trauma is a serious breach of the integrity of the person who literally goes into survival mode to deal with the event.

It is up to the person who has experienced the abuse to decide which term best suits his or her experience. According to their particular context, this can be **victim, survivor, sufferer, the target of abuse, the person who is deceived or damaged, or something else**.

### 3.2 For the perpetrator

The perpetrator can have many perspectives on the transgressive behaviour.

He or she may be genuinely **ignorant** of the damage that has been done and unaware that a line has been crossed.

However, he or she may also feel **empowered** by his or her actions. *See what I did and can do?* There can be an incentive to push boundaries even more because of the kick, because of a need for recognition, because of a craving for attention, and so on.

Or the perpetrator might gain **insight**. He or she realizes that boundaries have been crossed and takes bold steps to repair the damage and avoid similar behaviour in the future. This is possible, for example, by going into therapy.

If the person who is subjected to the transgressive behaviour lodges a complaint, **sanctions** may follow.

Or, both parties may take part in **mediation** or a **restorative justice** process in which an attempt is made to restore the integrity of all those involved.

## 4 Abuse in the Yoga World

The painful thing about **abuse in the yoga world** is that people often start with yoga and meditation because they don't feel good about themselves. They seek support for their healing process, or they want more peace and stability in their lives, they want a healthier lifestyle, or they are looking for a safe haven where they can recharge their batteries. Some hope to find meaning in their lives again by immersing themselves in spirituality.

Many seekers find themselves in a **vulnerable** situation. And yet they are willing to open up to new things. They doubt themselves. They think that they don't know. They are missing something they hope to find in a yoga class.

Fortunately, in the vast majority of cases, the outcome is positive, and yoga indeed brings a lot of good things into their lives.

**Yoga students** often look up to their yoga teacher and sometimes they idealise him or her. In their eyes the teacher has already achieved what they still seek and what they long for. They see the teacher as a role model, and they are not very critical about what he or she says or does. They accept what is being told, even if their inner voice says otherwise. They are afraid to go against what the teacher is doing, even if it doesn't feel right.

**Yoga teachers** may feel flattered by the attention they receive from students. Because of their perceived position of authority, they may experience an impression of **power** that they are not skilled to handle. This is a point to underline in all teacher training programs.

For those who imagine themselves in a position of power or who are placed there by others, there may be the **temptation to take advantage** of the situation. Someone who behaves submissively is easy prey. A weak person who does not dare to react is easily manipulated. Working on the resilience of vulnerable people and emphasizing that all people are equal is therefore extremely important.

A common phenomenon is that people who embark on the spiritual path gradually start to feel **superior**. By insights they acquired or by special spiritual experiences they have had,

they believe they can place themselves above others. They look down on people who are not concerned with spirituality. In this way they put themselves in a **position of power**. This involves risks. We have already described them above.

When someone perceives himself or herself to be above another for such a reason, we jokingly speak about a *spiritual ego*. Fortunately, there are plenty of yoga exercises and meditations to prevent or remedy this. In addition, a healthy atmosphere in the yoga community can also help to keep someone from falling into this trap.

Unfortunately, in **the spiritual context**, there are several cases of so-called great masters or gurus who recount to their gullible students, stories of **spiritual growth** that can only be achieved **through sexual experience**.

Students who seek support and security from their teacher are easily seduced. They do not dare to oppose someone who, in their eyes, is wise or even supposedly enlightened. Or they believe the theories that the person they look up to gives them.

When, after a while, they realize that they have been shamefully abused, it is a traumatic experience. Such underhand and pernicious sexual abuse perpetrated by spiritual teachers in their own interest must be eradicated at all costs.

Fortunately, thanks to the *MeToo* movement, these kinds of abuses have been brought into the light and there is a growing awareness that **talking about them** is a first step towards healing and towards preventing further abuse.

A teacher and a student may also simply **fall in love** with each other in a very natural and healthy way in the context of a yoga activity. In such cases there is a standard guideline that applies: the student stops attending classes with the teacher for at least one year. After that, the relationship can pick up because it is then outside the teacher-student dynamic.

## 5 Our Policy Related to Transgressive Behaviour

The Belgian Association of Kundalini Yoga as taught by Yogi Bhajan wants to make every effort **to eliminate** the risk of transgressive behaviour in the yoga experience of students and teachers. That is why an **Integrity Policy** was developed that is based on this vision text. Below you will find a brief description of the **instruments** used in the policy.

The **Integrity hotline** was launched in July 2020. It is an easily accessible point of contact where everyone can come with questions, comments, complaints or reports about transgressive behaviour in the yoga context. It offers a space where people will be listened to, where confidentiality is respected, where patience reigns, where plenty of time is devoted to healing, where there is no judgment, and where everyone can feel safe. If necessary, people will be referred to professional support providers. Aftercare will also take place.

The **Integrity Charter** is a guideline for yoga teachers. Eight golden principles clarify the basic rules of a healthy relationship between yoga teachers and yoga students.

The **Integrity Guide** contains guidelines that help participants in yoga activities to fully enjoy their yoga experience in a safe and wholesome way.

In the **Integrity Training** "*Physical and sexual integrity and diversity in the yoga experience*" yoga teachers learn to deal with transgressive behaviour. They learn about the skills required

for this and receive a general overview of the Integrity Policy and the other instruments mentioned above.

In our policy we strive for yoga teachers to encourage and support each other to engage in self-reflection, to dare to look inside themselves and to allow supervision.

When dealing with **incidents**, we are in favour of using **restorative justice**<sup>2</sup>, if it is possible and acceptable to all parties involved. In doing so, it is not the perpetrator or the act that is taken as the starting point for the intervention, but the damage that was caused. The aim is to restore the integrity of the entire system, of everyone involved: the person affected by the transgressive behaviour, the perpetrator, but also additionally, where relevant, the partner(s), the people in charge of the yoga studio where the abuse took place and persons or organisations that organised or supported the yoga activity.

## 6 How Can We Prevent Transgressive Behaviour?

We believe that prevention is the most important thing, and that it is possible.

The [Integrity Charter](#), the [Integrity Guide](#) and the **Integrity Training** are important instruments to ensure "transgressive behaviour" is discussed more frequently and more easily so that potential perpetrators might be discouraged.

Today there is an increased awareness in this area, worldwide and in many sectors. **The yoga world should not miss this opportunity.**

In that respect it is also important to provide shelter and support for **(potential) perpetrators**. Through the Integrity hotline a safe space is created where they will be listened to. If they are open to it, they are guided to information and professional assistance.

If restorative justice is not chosen after a serious abuse, measures will follow for the perpetrator. By communicating clearly and openly about **sanctions** that will be taken in the Integrity Charter for yoga teachers, we hope to deter potential perpetrators.

As we indicated earlier, more attention must also be paid to transgressive behaviour within the **teacher trainings**. *How do you deal with the power that you experience as a teacher or that students project on you? How do you react when you feel that students do not respect your or each other's boundaries? What do you do when you yourself show the tendency to step beyond the boundaries of others?* In short, all possible facets of transgressive behaviour and how to deal with it deserve much more attention in the training.

We will ask the lead trainers active in Belgium to strengthen their teacher training in that regard.

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<sup>2</sup> Restorative Justice differs from the traditional use of sanctions because it is inclusive. This means that all voices are heard and that all parties involved work together to repair the damage in all possible areas. There is no room for blame or shame. A joint vision of the future is sketched in which everyone feels good. All those involved take their responsibility to ensure that the necessary changes on an individual, relational and organisational level are realized.

Last but not least, we will use every possible opportunity to work within our yoga community to **remove the illusion that a teacher stands above a student** or that he or she dwells on a higher spiritual level. That way we want to **neutralise the pull of power**.

Everyone is equal. *No one is high, no one is low.*

## 7 The Values in our Policy on Integrity

Within our yoga movement there is no place for transgressive behaviour. The most important values of our [Policy on Integrity](#) are:

**Equality.**  
**Respect for Integrity and Authenticity.**  
**Transparency and Non-Violent Communication.**

We strive to encourage and inspire yoga students, yoga teachers, trainers, let's say everyone, who is involved in yoga activities to dare to be authentic, to stand up for themselves, to make boundaries known and to monitor them. And especially, to deal consciously and responsibly with the consequences of their actions.

## 8 This Policy on Integrity Continues to Evolve

We are committed to regularly evaluating the policy and adjusting it according to emerging needs and making use of feedback, experiences, knowledge acquired, new insights or changing situations.

We invite everyone to help ensure that our way of dealing with transgressive behaviour, is the best way to avoid abuse and to nurture conscious and respectful interactions.

We are happy to listen to your comments, suggestions and questions.