

Teaching yoga with sensitivity to the body as a complex place

Reflections on a yoga group for victims of sexual assault

by **Yael Itzhak-Edan**

In this article I present some of the insights and questions that came to me when guiding a yoga group for victims of sexual assault, rape or incest. It was a focused group, a project sponsored by the "Crisis & Support Center for Victims of Sexual Assault" in Jerusalem. My ideas may therefore be relevant for therapists from other disciplines who are interested in using yoga to treat members of such a group. Vijnana teachers who are not planning to start this kind of group may think that the matters I raise here are of no concern to them, so I would like, at the outset, to discuss how important it is for every yoga teacher, from whatever yoga system, to understand this issue and how relevant it is to regular yoga classes.

According to official statistics, one in three women in the West is raped during her lifetime, and one out of every six women undergoes incest. Other statistical assessments are even harsher, recently suggesting that one in five women is a victim of incest. Sexual assault and rape are not exclusive to women. Men are also casualties of sexual assault. Up to the age of 12, the statistics for sexual offences are identical for males and females. The legal definition of rape, which statistics support, is a sexual assault that involves penetration without consent, by a genital organ or an object, of one of the victim's body cavities. Thus we may draw the conclusion that in every yoga group, indeed in any group, these grim statistics will be represented. We should assume that out of any 10 women in a yoga class there will be at least three who have been raped, one that underwent incest, and quite a significant number who have been sexually harassed. Because sexual assault is violence against the body, it leaves traces in the body and in the way a person relates to her body. And because in teaching yoga we work with our students through the body, such understanding requires us to approach our work sensitively.

I want to describe this unique project of combining a yoga class with a discussion session, at the Jerusalem Support Center.¹ First, I explain how the group was structured and how it was conducted. Then I examine the main issues raised at group meetings and suggest what can be learned from them for teaching yoga in a regular group. I conclude by considering how the physical and the verbal domains relate to each other in yoga groups for sexual assault victims and in yoga practice in general.

¹ I want to use this opportunity to thank the women at the Jerusalem Support Center who believed in and made space for this group, as well as for future groups. I would especially like to thank Yael Bella who took the risk of starting this project, Shimrit Frankel, the support coordinator for her hard work in promoting these groups, and Rinat Kedem, the current Director, who raised funds to make the project happen, despite difficult economic circumstances, both in general and for the Center in particular. I want to thank especially Efrat Baron, my co-moderator in this group, who was a partner in formulating the model and in long hours of reflection on how to improve the group's efficiency and success, and also Orit Leibowitz who mentored us throughout, assisting us with her wise comments and broad perspective.

How was the project born?

The idea of starting a yoga group for victims of sexual assault matured over time, in an ongoing conversation between me and Yael Bella, a friend of mine, who later directed the Jerusalem Support Center. The Center offers a variety of victim support groups. Previously, most groups used the method of talking about the traumatic experience with women who had been through a similar type of attack, for example a group for victims of incest. The moderators were mostly psychotherapists. Recently, the range of groups has expanded to include different therapeutic approaches. For example, one group began working through bibliotherapy, a treatment using texts that were either presented by the therapist or were written by the participants themselves.

The incentive for opening a support group to work through yoga came from a particular understanding, supported by current research, that since the trauma occurred in the physical arena, treating it purely through emotional-verbal processing would be difficult. Sometimes in psychotherapy the body is discussed, but the conversation is **about** the body, as opposed to the experience of working **in** the body, which allows an understanding that is not necessarily verbal, logical or organized.

Group Model

Structure and duration of the group

Each group was limited in advance to 14 sessions. Each session lasted about two and a quarter hours, of which one and a quarter were devoted to yoga and one to discussion, with no break in between. At the end of the yoga, chairs were brought into the practice room along with water and tissues, and the group went directly on to the discussion.

As for all the groups at the Support Center, two moderators shared the instruction. Dr Efrat Baron and I started working together. Dr Baron is a bibliotherapist, lecturer and therapist specializing in sexual assault, who has extensive experience of facilitating groups at the Center. I have a doctorate in philosophy and am a Vijnana Yoga teacher and group facilitator. Previously I was an active volunteer at the Center on the emergency helpline and also coordinated educational workshops.

Participants and circles of support

Working with the body is a sensitive issue for sexual assault victims, who may feel overwhelmed by difficult feelings and memories. Thus the group was defined as a continuing group: women could only join a yoga group after they had previously processed their injury by participating in a support group. They also had to be in a supportive, well-established therapy during their membership of the yoga group.

In this way, we combined working from the body with two spheres of support: one was created in the discussion group that accompanied the yoga lessons and the other in individual psychotherapy sessions. Thus, although the amount of time available for group discussion was limited, participants had an additional opportunity to process issues that came up during practice or in discussion. Such psychological support throughout the duration of a group can be used, as it was here, as leverage for significant progress both in treatment and in everyday life.

Facilitating the group

As I am a yoga teacher, I ran the yoga session. Our first idea was that Efrat, the bibliotherapist, would not actively participate in it, but only be present, to observe and assist if necessary. After two meetings, it was clear this was completely unnecessary, so we changed tack. Efrat practiced alongside the other women, whilst also observing and assisting when necessary, usually when some technique required it. It should be noted in passing, that Efrat's participation in the yoga, as a complete beginner, was a helpful, driving force within the group. Unfortunately, there is not space to elaborate on this here. The second part, discussion of experiences, was run in collaboration by both facilitators.

"Holding" themes for each meeting

In such a group the participants face three tasks, none of which is easy. The first and second are intertwined: learning yoga is like learning a new, unaccustomed language through the body, while approaching and touching a sensitive place that carries painful memories within it. The third task is to verbalize experience and possible insights. Experienced yoga practitioners will agree with me that transferring a physical experience into an emotional-verbal expression is not a 'language' that most practitioners are skilled in. Furthermore, anyone who practices yoga knows that the intensity of the experience, and the change resulting from it, take place in a physical domain, which our normal logical rules cannot explain. An unspoken question underlies this knowledge: "Should we try to express our physical experience in speech?" Maybe we should just stay in the body and let the power of healing develop on invisible paths, hidden from the ordinary language we speak? Knowing how hard it is to put the experience and effects of practice into words, we decided that each meeting would focus on a major topic and explore ideas that might emerge from it. The main theme was presented at the start of the yoga class, and attention was often re-directed to it as the class proceeded. At the discussion stage, we presented the main theme again, as well as inviting the participants to discuss anything they felt was relevant. The themes were designed to reduce anxiety and focus the discussion, given the difficulty of putting physical sensations into words. The progress of the yoga lessons dictated the choice of theme: feet and legs; a sense that all the parts are connected into one body; or the lack of such a connection; breathing, rooting, hands and so on.

Significant issues raised in the group

In this section I want to discuss in an Integrated way some key issues that sprang from this unique model for teaching Vijnana Yoga to a group of sexual assault victims and to examine whether the insights gained are relevant to yoga teachers in other settings.

Sexual assault, rape and incest are characterized primarily by loss of control. The body, as a sacred, private place for each and every one of us, has been made the scene of an injury. The victim's will, as well as her physical boundaries, have been ignored and violated. Given that most victims know their attacker, e.g. a neighbor, family member, teacher, or a date, the loss of control involves a loss of trust. Victims often feel detached from their bodies, and lack any inclination to 'make friends with it'. Sometimes an injury or self-harm keeps recurring caused by lack of attention or

proper concern for the body, or by conduct that seriously harms the body, due perhaps, to an inability to live in peace with it.

We began by working on the **contact of the feet** with the ground and the **positioning of the feet** on the mat and slowly also on **standing poses**.

In a discussion on working with the feet, the women shared their feelings of distance from their body, that everything is vague and nothing is connected to anything else. Their experience of their body as separate bits came up as a very significant issue. Participants spoke at length about the need for strong feet, symbolizing for them stability and contact with the ground, and how these qualities are absent from their bodies and their overall experience. In the first lessons, where we focused mostly on standing poses along with sitting and pranayama, many women reported a sense of "connection" coming out of work that was very focused on details and precision. Tree pose (Vrkshasana) became a favorite posture. Students were able to find their balance and this success gave them deep satisfaction and courage.

What can we bring from this to a regular group? Understanding that there may be women or men in any group who have been through a traumatic experience, partially or wholly located in the body, from sexual assault to illness or disability, may carry us into class with a broader and more sensitive outlook. We cannot assume that coming to a yoga class is a simple matter for everyone and have to realize that an encounter with one's body may not be at all easy. We have to strengthen our understanding, which already exists in Vijnana, that getting down to details is very significant. It is important not only in itself, but also because working precisely with attention to detail restores control and helps to give a sense of the whole. From this perception, we can then transmit to an ordinary group the power of the standing poses. We can appreciate how important it is for students to experience success in a yoga class.

Another prominent theme was **my attention to my body and my ability to do what is right for me, instead of complying with a directive from an authority in the shape of the teacher**. People who have suffered incest, rape or sexual assault, have had their right to decide about their own body revoked. Because of this, their relationship with their yoga teacher is highly charged, turning into a relationship with an authority figure, who "tells me what to do with my body". In the light of this complication, the yoga teacher has to realize that students may do "what is requested of them" even if it is not right or comfortable for them, just out of repetition of a problematic pattern. For some of the women, this debate carried on throughout all our meetings. I constantly stressed their right to do what felt right for them, to stop when they needed to stop, or just to do part of an asana. In my teaching, I made sure to demonstrate some places where one can stop, and I stressed repeatedly the need to adopt the attitude of a benign parent towards ourselves as we work with our body. However, the term "parental attitude" was somewhat loaded here, since almost all the women in the group were victims of incest. The advice to decide for themselves what felt right for them was present in class at all times, but it was not always easy for the participants to respond to it. It was very interesting, but sad, to discover how much concern they invested in whether I would be angry with them if they did not do the asana or did just a part of it or just the preparation towards it.

What can we bring from this to a regular group? We need to understand how important it is to encourage students to be attentive to what is right for them; in other words, not to push a student to do something because we think she can do it. We should respect the students' right to regulate their own practice, by providing significant "stopping places" on the way to an asana. We can make clear that the way stations are important in their own right and are not just an acceptable substitute for those who cannot do the real thing. For people damaged by their experience of loss of control, regaining the feeling of being in control is much more important than any asana.

Being able to deal with an authority figure in a way that maintains appropriate boundaries for the victim is not a trivial issue. It is a very difficult area of practice. Gradually learning inward attention, compassion and tenderness towards one's body is very significant for people damaged by sexual assault, especially in cases of incest, when the perpetrator was a family member, supposed to provide care and protection.

More generally, teachers can apply the same guidance to encourage students to be attentive to their ability and needs. Teachers can consider dismantling the inherent authority structure of their relationship with their students, which may be beneficial for practitioners everywhere.

Correction by touch

This issue was never presented to the group as a theme, but I took care to ask permission before making any correction through physical touch. I asked permission anew at every class, on the assumption that what was right last week is not necessarily appropriate today. Some participants had no problem with correction by touch; on the contrary, they were happy to have the attention, and wanted very much to be precise or to reach a comfortable place that was not painful. However, touch made some women anxious. As we progressed in our work together and trusting relationships were established, they felt more comfortable with it.

What can we bring from this to a regular group? People who have practiced for many years, who are used to this way of working, often do not understand how much laying a hand on someone's sacrum, for example, cannot be taken for granted. The same applies to correcting someone's posture, while she sits with her eyes closed during breathing or meditation. A teacher should always ask new students for permission to correct by touch. If we sense some reservations from a student, it is better not to do it. If we have asked and received a tentative answer, it is better to give up. Touch is not a simple matter for sexual assault victims. A high degree of sensitivity in this area has to be cultivated. If you do pair-work with your students, always offer the option of working alone, making sure that whoever does not want to work in a pair can work on their own. When you work in pairs team up men to work with men and women with women. Do not let the students pair up on their own. It can be unpleasant for someone to be seen rejecting a potential partner. And don't put any woman in a position where she is forced to work with a man, despite feeling uncomfortable about it. A teacher needs to let the students stay in control and exercise caution.

Breathing

We were amazed to discover just what an emotionally charged area breath is, for victims of sexual assault. Some of them found it very difficult to breathe, as if something inside was closed or stuck. Some of them had very shallow breath. Breathing also raised the serious difficulty that most of the women could recall the experience of breathing in enforced intimacy, and remembered the sound of the attacker's breath. Hearing the breathing of other people around them, including my own, was hard. One woman, for example, said that during kapalabhati, she had to remind herself constantly that this wasn't the attacker. Breathing also brought back the memory of holding the breath, so that the attacker won't know I'm in the room and won't hurt me. So breathing was not an easy task and the group discussion of this subject allowed many difficult feelings and bad experiences to be dealt with.

What can we bring from this to a regular group? Understanding that breathing is a highly loaded space is important. In my experience, breathing is a complex area for many students regardless of sexual assault. Many 'can't find themselves' in this part of class. They do not understand what to do or why they do not feel anything. We can occasionally point out that some people do not connect to breathing or relate to it. With a new student, or one who has no experience of breathing practice, reassure them before the class starts: tell them that it is not always simple or understandable, and that if they do not feel comfortable with it, they can open their eyes and return to normal breathing. Providing legitimacy may help someone who has difficulty in the breathing practice.

Arms

When we started work on strengthening the arms and hands for balance poses, we made "arms/hands" a central theme. In the discussion, it became clear that several women felt their hands were very weak and powerless, but they were ambivalent about strengthening them, for hands symbolized for them both their helplessness as a victim and the power of the assailant, whose strength lay partly in his arms and hands. One of the women asked herself if she wanted to strengthen her hands and went on to talk about her difficulty thinking of herself as a mother, from fear that her hands could do harm.

What can we bring from this to a regular group? If we consider the arms/hands as limbs that expresses competence and strength or lack of it, we can understand students' difficulty when their hands are weak and do not strengthen to their satisfaction or when they lack the motivation to work at making them stronger. Of course, we should be very careful not to make assumptions about our students. It certainly isn't the case that someone who can't do hand balances or doesn't like these poses has experienced sexual abuse, but working with the body has hidden dimensions for each and every one of us and what the source of a difficulty is, may not always be clear either to the teacher or to the student. It is important to make room for the problem and focus on the process and the way.

Looking

For us, as yoga teachers, looking at our students is a skill. Seeing helps us guide a student when she tries to find the exact place which feels comfortable, quiet and pain free. In this sense, seeing is a significant part of what we do. In the context of a yoga group at the Support Center, designed for women who had undergone sexual assault, it turned out to be of great significance.

A yoga teacher looks at a student's body, trying to see where it is painful or uncomfortable, and how to offer a solution. Looking, and the attempt at easing and supporting that is enabled by it, echo our fantasy about the maternal gaze. In a baby's first years, her mother looks at her and guesses whether she is hungry, thirsty, or tired, or if something is hurting or bothering her, and she tries to assist accordingly. Even when we are older, we expect our mother and father to look at us and see what we are going through and take this into consideration. When a yoga teacher is looking, in the unique context of class, she is echoing the primal maternal gaze that sees her baby and cares for her. Like a mother with her baby, a yoga teacher sees the physical dimension first and foremost. The echo of the mother resounds with the students, stimulating them to project their feelings on to their yoga teacher. The mother figure came up very significantly in group discussion. One difficult memory that emerged was of a mother who every lunchtime sent one of her daughters 'to sleep' with their father, a memory that had not surfaced during long years of psychotherapy. The yoga teacher may also represent the mother who does not 'see' me and wants to give me things I really do not want to receive, or alternatively is very critical and demanding towards me.

What can we bring from this to a regular group? While the strong transference on to the teacher in the yoga groups for sexual assault victims resulted from the unique context, 'the teacher figure' can become a receptacle for all kinds of fantasies from students in all types of classes. Fantasies about the teacher arise out of the student-teacher relationship in the context of working with the body. Even in regular groups, students may invest the teacher figure with perfection. The feeling that they are being seen is very significant for regular students too. Seeing is of great importance in every yoga class. Many teachers practice together with their students and don't stop enough to look and correct. Of course, a silent practice together with the class is important too. However, looking and correcting are important not only for modifying and accuracy, but also for what flows consciously from the precision and focus on details. **The look that watches with compassion and emanates from deep care is crucial.**

I want to end this article with the question **where does the significant 'work' occur, in the physical space or in the conscious-verbal space?**

There was a distinct feeling in the group that very meaningful processes for the participants were taking place, both on a personal level and at the group level. They recalled experiences that had lain hidden for years and went through a process of empowerment and connection that were expressed in their bodies and in the way they brought themselves to the group.

My basic assumption at the beginning was that women who had suffered from sexual assault would potentially be able to make a significant connection with their body. When we started, all the participants reported a lack of connection to their body and in their body. However, in most cases, the quality of their work was very connected. In my opinion, the complexity produces a kind of connection, albeit from a place of pain and difficulty, but a connection nonetheless.

Efrat and I often asked ourselves, where does the effect occur? Where does the magic happen? Is it in the yoga or in putting the experience into words? By the time we facilitated a third group, we felt we had touched on a possible answer. We felt this third set of participants were doing very significant work on a personal level, but didn't function as a group and so had less commitment to the group and less interaction with what other members talked about. Throughout the course, we tried, on our own and in supervision with Orit Leibowitz, which we had for all our groups, to understand why a group had not formed in this case. Towards the end of the sessions, we realized that in choosing themes to guide each meeting, we had deviated from our initial decision to "derive" them out of the topic for each class. We had chosen instead to formulate the guiding themes by looking at the processes that occurred in the group. So themes in this group tended to be more psychological and less anchored in the body. One theme, for instance, was emotional regulation. Once we understood how we had deviated from our original practice, we returned to formulating the themes out of the body and immediately, as if by magic, something changed in the group. My understanding of this is that in order to create a connection between the physical and the emotional spheres, we should work simply and precisely from the body. Psychological or New Age interpretations aside, a significant and authentic connection occurs between the physical and the conscious emotional spaces. A yoga group for victims of sexual assault is unique in that it doesn't enforce a choice between the body and the mind, or the body and the emotions, nor does it create any other fragmentation. The combination of physical exercise and a reflective discussion about the practice and the memories, feelings and thoughts that it raises, permit a whole to be created out of different layers. In this lies its greatness.

While teaching and mediating in these groups I learned a lot. First, I learned how great a potential lies in integrating yoga practice with discussion about this encounter with the body. The groups at the Center inspired me to allot some time at the end of a longer class I teach there, to discuss the practice. In this long class, which is for deepening the practice, there is a guiding topic for each session. In our discussion, we put the topic into perspective and consider the way it echoes other areas of our lives. Over the past two years, we have had fascinating and meaningful discussions about our practice and the thoughts it brought up. My challenge next year is to find a way to weave the quality of our discussion about practice and the body into the study of texts as well.

Second, I learned to be sensitive to the body as a place of complexity, which it is for many people, if not for everyone, whether this is due to sexual assault, physical injury, illness, disability, overweight, underweight, complex body image and more. This understanding reminds us of the sensitivity required by all those who work through the body.

About the author

Dr Yael Itzhak Edan lives in Moshav Aminadav, Israel, with Shabtay and her two sons, Noam and Uri. A Vijnana yoga student since 1998, initially with Noga Ron-Barkai and currently with Orit Sen-Gupta. A group Facilitator trained at the School for Peace in Neve Shalom. Volunteered for 4 years at the Jerusalem Crisis & Support Center for Victims of Sexual Assault, after completing a training course for volunteers, and then coordinated an educational project within the Help Center. She wrote her dissertation on "Perfection of consciousness and the path towards it on the individual and social level in the teachings of Maimonides and Spinoza". Teaches at "Nave Sha'an'an Yoga Center" in Jerusalem, established by Orit Sen-Gupta, and manages it together with Leora Amichai.

E-mail: yaela.e@gmail.com

Web site of Nave Sha'an'an Yoga Center: vijnanayoga.com