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Yoga Lessons: Speaking the Truth with Compassion

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In every issue of *Health Insights Today*, we learn about new developments in the sciences of mind/body medicine, nutrition, and physical activity. As we read about these new developments, we may experience excitement about a new possibility for our health or that of our loved ones. We may feel confused by the ever-changing world of science—especially as applied to human beings. And, there are no doubt times when many of us will rebel at some new piece of information, question its veracity and refuse to let go of our favored explanation.

The latter response has been the subject of much media attention over the last month since new guidelines for screening mammography were released in the United States. Dr. Daniel Redwood has covered the new guidelines and some of the controversy in detail in his editorial in this issue. From a yogic perspective, the struggle we face when presented with new information offers a powerful opportunity on at least two fronts.

Is It True? Should I Speak About It?

First, *satya*, or truth, is among the five *yamas*, or ethical restraints, that form the foundation of yogic disciplines. The ethical restraint around truth is often taught to yoga students primarily in the context of “right speech.” The yoga practitioner will ask him/herself not only whether or not the information s/he wants to convey is right (true), but also whether or not it is necessary to speak of it to another and how to relay it with kindness. Often in our zeal for sharing new knowledge we have gained, perhaps even for demonstrating our intellect to another, we forget to consider how the information will be received, whether or not the human being with whom we will share *really needs* to be informed. If we’ve asked ourselves whether or not it is necessary to share something and determined that it is, then the next consideration is how we can speak the truth to another with compassion and kindness, understanding that even though we value the truth and believe it is always better to know the truth than to live with lies, sometimes letting go of false beliefs has a cost.

The new guidelines on screening mammography provide a perfect illustration of the truth not always being appreciated by its hearers. The science behind the revised recommendations is solid. It is hard to argue against the necessity of altering our practices with respect to screening mammography when it is clear that the procedure carries risk and doesn’t produce a counterbalancing benefit for most women. So, the question really becomes one of conveying the information with compassion and kindness after careful consideration of the cultural weight surrounding breast cancer.

I was surprised at the ineptitude displayed by the government in its handling of these new guidelines—how could they fail so miserably to anticipate the fear and anger this would generate? Even though the science doesn’t support the approach we took for many years, women and their loved ones took comfort from yearly screening, believing it was in some way protective. It alleviated some of the fear about this mysterious disease, cancer. To let go of a comforting practice, even if it isn’t good for us, is to take a risk.

The Wisdom of Fearless Seeing

There is another way that the yogic practices, including *asana* and *niyamas* (ethical observances) like *svadhyaya*, as well as meditation, prepare us not only to apprehend what is true, but also to more skillfully share and receive it. *Svadhyaya* means self study. It is both the study of one’s self and regular, disciplined study of the texts that contain

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yogic wisdom. Making an honest evaluation of one's self is not for the faint-hearted. If we explore the truth of who we are and how we interact in the world, we often see things we'd rather keep hidden not only from others, but even from ourselves.

The bodily metaphor for this practice of fearless seeing occurs on the yoga mat when we encounter our bodies exactly as they are on any particular day. As we move through our *asana* (posture) practice, we will undoubtedly discover things about our body that delight us ... but we are equally likely to find ourselves deflated when we are unable to perform according to an arbitrary standard that we have in our mind. Staying present to both of these experiences without stopping the practice to gloat, or out of frustration, teaches us to encounter realities that we like and that we dislike without being derailed by them. Learning this bodily is believed to prepare us for the same experience in the realm of relationships, ideas, comfortable habits.

So, the next time you are faced with the opportunity to share something that is true, try stopping first to consider whether or not it is important for others to hear it. If so, consider carefully how you might present your truth to another such that s/he can hear it without fear or anger. And, the next time you encounter a truth that rattles your carefully constructed worldview, rely on the fearlessness you have cultivated through your yoga practice to give you the courage to include it, too.

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