



Am I Guilty of Racial Stereotyping in a Yoga Workshop?

by Timothy McCall, MD

Earlier this week I learned that I had been accused of using a “racial stereotype” in a yoga workshop I recently taught. I felt like I needed to address this situation head-on, so wrote the following letter to all the workshop attendees. I’ve also decided to go public with this in the hope of generating much-needed dialogue in this time of racial reckoning in the US and beyond.

Hi Everyone,

Thank you so much for taking part in the Re-Imagining Yoga Anatomy training. I’m writing you today because I was just informed by the studio owner that a couple of attendees had mentioned that they were offended that I had used a “racial stereotype” during the workshop. I was mortified to hear this, and have not been able to stop thinking about it. This morning during my meditation practice, I realized that I needed to write to you all to try to explain my intention.

The comment in question was that I had seen that some students with larger buttocks muscles, including some people of African descent, were being misdiagnosed by yoga teachers as having excessive curvature of the lumbar spine. They were being given yoga practices to try to correct this perceived alignment problem that ended up harming them. Although the way the incident was relayed to me by the studio owner, who hadn’t attended the training, was that I had used the word “fat,” I assure you I did not.

I was talking about muscles. In the back of my mind was a scientific study I had read about years ago that hypothesized that some of the tremendous success of many black athletes in sports like track and field might be related in part to their stronger and larger gluteal muscles than people of other races, which the study had documented.

The yoga practitioner I had in mind when I made that comment was my former wife, a native Brazilian of mixed European and Afro-Caribbean descent. A well-known, senior teacher in a yoga system that stresses anatomical alignment had misdiagnosed her as having “sway back,” and had given her typical yogic remedies like tucking her tailbone and bringing her abdomen in



toward her spine. The result of her embracing these remedies was years of back pain, which she hadn't had before.

Shortly after she and I got together, I realized she'd been misdiagnosed, and I worked with her to re-establish her lumbar curve and alleviate her pain. As I mentioned in the workshop, the diagnostic test I used to establish that she did not have sway back was pushing down on both her shoulders simultaneously with 10-20 pounds of pressure while she stood in Tadasana (Mountain pose) with soft knees. I call this the "tensegrity test." In someone with genuine hyper-lordosis, the lumbar spine will buckle when you do this. She was rock solid, meaning that whatever the outward appearance, her spinal alignment was excellent. Then before we split up a few years ago, she enrolled in a highly-regarded yoga therapy training program, in which senior teachers in that lineage insisted that she had an excessive lumbar curve and set out to correct it. I suspect this was a major reason why, days into the two-year training, she quit.

My intention in making the comment in the workshop was my concern for students like her who are misdiagnosed and who may suffer unnecessarily as a result. I can understand why what I said was construed as a racial stereotype, but I assure you that was never my intention. The irony, it occurs to me, is that it is precisely our black brothers and sisters in yoga (and those who teach them) who need to hear this information as they are the ones who may be at greatest risk of being misdiagnosed. That's why I broached a topic that I know can be loaded. Believe it or not, I was trying to be skillful with my words.

Another thing that struck me as ironic is that I was involved in the civil rights movement in the 1960s, starting at the age of 10 when I joined the NAACP. I grew up in Milwaukee, which was and remains the most segregated city in the United States, and attended a predominantly black high school. I'm a huge supporter of Black Lives Matter. None of that means, however, that I still can't be at times a clueless white guy who doesn't fully understand the experience of African-Americans or who may say things, innocently intended, that are heard otherwise.

To those I offended, I am sorry. I will try to do better going forward. If anyone wants to suggest a better way to convey this information, I am all ears. Or do some of you believe that this topic shouldn't be discussed at all — even if some students will come to harm as a result? I have not heard of other teachers in the yoga world discussing this subject, and I feel strongly that this information needs to get out there, but perhaps I am the wrong messenger.



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I invite you to email me at YogaAsMedicine@gmail.com with your comments or suggestions. I also plan to post this on Facebook in the hope of generating much-needed dialogue. However painful this episode has been to me, I am grateful that we are at this historic time when we can have these difficult conversations, try to look honestly at ourselves and forge a better future together.

In yoga,

Timothy

Timothy McCall, MD is a board-certified internist, Yoga Journal's medical editor since 2002 and the author of the Amazon #1 bestseller *Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing*. He practiced medicine in the Boston area



for a dozen years before devoting himself full-time in the late 1990s to yoga therapy. He has studied with many of the world's leading yoga teachers including BKS Iyengar and TKV Desikachar, as well as Patricia Walden, Rod Stryker and Donald Moyer. In 2005, Timothy began his studies with a traditional Ayurvedic doctor, Chandukutty Vaidyar, and spent more than a year at his clinic in Kerala, India. He serves on the editorial board of *The International Journal of Yoga Therapy*, and co-edited and

contributed to the 2016 medical textbook, *The Principles and Practice of Yoga in Health Care*. His latest book is *Saving My Neck: A Doctor's East/West Journey through Cancer*. Most recently, he has introduced an approach to yoga, which he calls Vinyasa of Breath. See DrMcCall.com