



# PATTERNS OF ABUSE: **THIRTEEN WARNING SIGNALS**

Eradicate abuse of women in yoga:  
reclaim yoga as a tool for freedom, planetary healing and justice.

**SUPPORT AND PROTECTION FOR SURVIVORS,  
ALLIES, SISTERS AND OUTCASTES:**

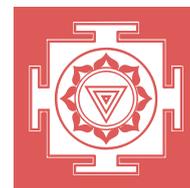
**HOW TO CULTIVATE RESPECT FOR INTUITIVE, EMBODIED WISDOM  
AS AN ANTIDOTE TO DISEMPOWERMENT AND ABUSE.**

Here follows a heartfelt set of warning signals to notice. They are co-created by survivors and their allies. The intention is to support everybody's capacity to cultivate respect for intuitive knowing when we may be surrounded by people or behaviours that suppress or discredit the clear guidance of our deepest instinctive and embodied wisdoms. These warning signals are intended to alert us to abusive attitudes, to notice patterns and practices that signal abuse. When we notice these signals, we can see that many different forms of abuse all share a formula, a system of 'grooming' and 'gaslighting'. These are general terms to describe how abusers manipulate, control and brainwash victims; the thirteen signals beneath identify how this occurs more specifically in yoga teaching environments and individual student/teacher dynamics.

- 1 DISRESPECT FOR ANY OTHER WAY**
- 2 ELITISM AND CONTINGENT FLATTERY**
- 3 SECRET TEACHINGS**
- 4 ISOLATION OF DISSIDENTS**
- 5 INNER CIRCLES AND POWER STRUGGLES**
- 6 DISCIPLINE, COERCION AND PUNISHMENT**
- 7 UNSUSTAINABLE IMBALANCES**
- 8 RIDICULE, SHAME AND SILENCING**
- 9 NO BOUNDARIES, NO CONSENT**
- 10 PREJUDICE AND HYPOCRISY**
- 11 OMNISCIENCE, SURVEILLANCE AND OMNIPOTENCE**
- 12 ABDICATION OF PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY**
- 13 SPIRITUAL BYPASS: SEX, HARMING AND TRANSCENDENCE**

**I invite you share these signals widely. Noticing the signals helps to alert us to patterns of abuse and to prevent future harms: sharing our stories, coming out of the silence, connecting the dots, shows abusers that there are consequences. And that is the path to protection.** *These warning signals are presented as individual items, but in practice there is often a lot of overlap. Elitism intersects with secrecy, which is preserved by inner circles, who disrespect other schools and isolate dissidents. Ridicule can lead to an acceptance of discipline and punishment which can be used to erode boundaries and silence dissent or critique of hypocrisy. Once you have spotted one warning signal, then often there is an 'Aha!' moment when you begin to notice the presence of all the others ...*

EXCERPT FROM YONI SHAKTI 2020





## 1. DISRESPECT FOR ANY OTHER WAY

Be aware if a teacher speaks with disrespect about other schools or teachers, or describes others in demeaning terms, such as ‘shallow’ or ‘new-age-hippie movements’. If they disrespect others then it is likely at some point that they will disrespect your own intuitive wisdom. See also ISOLATION OF DISSIDENTS (4).

**ASK:** Is there any respect or tolerance for diversity here? Is this really the only way? How might it feel to have my own wisdom demeaned in the same way that these other teachings/teachers are being disrespected? What experience does this teacher have of the other ‘lesser’ schools?

## 2. ELITISM AND CONTINGENT FLATTERY

Notice if a teacher believes themselves or the teachings they share to be ‘elite’, and flatters students for having chosen to be in this school, or to be learning from this individual. This kind of flattery is contingent on compliance: students only receive approval so long as they continue to regard the teachings as superior to all others.

**ASK:** Do I enjoy being flattered? What aspect of myself is being buoyed up by this kind of contingent flattery? What aspects of myself are being pushed into the shadows when I welcome the idea of myself as ‘special’ or a ‘superior’ member of an elite? Where does my intuition fit into this? What aspects of myself am I willing to sacrifice in order to continue to receive this level of approval and flattery? Do I recognise where this might lead?

## 3. SECRET TEACHINGS

One strategy to establish an elite, or to secure the supremacy of an individual, is to hide the source of power in secrecy, to give the impression that these teachings are so precious that not everyone is worthy to receive them. This strategy uses ‘inner circles’ and secret initiations as a means to create mystique and intrigue, adding the value of prohibitive rarity to the teacher who holds the secret teachings, because not everyone is permitted to receive them.

**ASK:** Who is keeping the secrets? If the teachings are truly powerful, why do they need to be kept secret? What is the price for receiving the secret teachings, and am I willing to pay it?





## 4. ISOLATION OF DISSIDENTS

Notice how the teacher/s speaks about students who have moved on to other schools, or grown and developed other ways of practice. See also RIDICULE, SHAME AND SILENCING (8)

**ASK:** What happens to people who disagree with this teacher/s or leave this organization? Are they welcome to return? Does their isolation from this environment encourage growth? Is there a diversity of opinion and perspective here, or does everyone respond in the same way? Does this homogeneity feel healthy? How do I feel when I swallow my disagreement? Where does it go in my body, and what does it do?

## 5. INNER CIRCLES AND POWER STRUGGLES

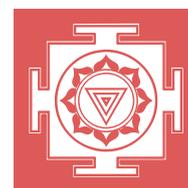
Notice how the teacher/s and student/s relate to each other. Evident power struggles, conflicts or jostling for positions within hierarchies and ‘inner circles’ indicate a brutalising culture of oppression and disempowerment. If they are willing to oppress and harm each other, it is likely they will brutalise others too.

**ASK:** Are these people co-operable and friendly to each other? Do their working relationships demonstrate a sense of equality and fairness within the organization? Do I trust their integrity?

## 6. DISCIPLINE, COERCION AND PUNISHMENT

Notice the relationship between discipline and kindness in the school/ organization or between the teacher and student. If there is a public harshness towards those who struggle in classes, or verbal cruelty in answers to questions in groups, this indicates that there is likely to be other kinds of violence hidden in other private places too.

**ASK:** How does it feel to be told I am ‘weak’ and ‘not serious about spiritual practice’? Is the level of discipline required sustainable and healthy for me? Does this teacher coerce students into practice, or threaten punishment for not practising enough? Are students frightened of the teacher’s response to insufficient or inadequate practice?





## 7. UNSUSTAINABLE IMBALANCES

Consider the balance between daily life and the amount of time that students are expected to do their spiritual practice. If daily life is being organized around required practice, rather than practice supporting daily life, this is likely to indicate an imbalance of other priorities within the school or teacher's value system. Observe responses to those who admit they have not maintained recommended level of practices. Notice if it is easy to be made to feel guilty for doing less, when in fact the level of practice required is unsustainable within a balanced, healthy life.

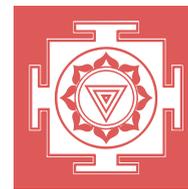
**ASK:** Do I have enough time in my life for this practice? Is the practice I am learning supporting my life, or is it taking over my life? What benefits am I getting out of this practice? Am I being praised for maintaining an unsustainable balance, and if so, what does that encourage within me?

## 8. RIDICULE, SHAME AND SILENCING

If a teacher ridicules anything or silences anyone, be aware of what is at stake. Shaming questioners, or silencing enquiries is an elitist strategy to preserve the believed superiority of the school/guru, and can often indicate a hidden agenda of violence and suppression. Ridiculing women's empowerment initiatives, such as feminism and the #metoo movement is often an indication of deep misogyny, as is ridiculing efforts to protect women. Teachers in Atman Federation of Yoga schools widely ridiculed the 2018 Swedish legislation making it against the law to have sex with someone without their clear consent.

**ASK:** What are they afraid of? Why are questions inadmissible? What is being hidden?





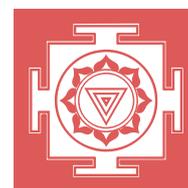
## 9. NO BOUNDARIES, NO CONSENT

Notice if teaching methods permit students to negotiate safe and clear personal boundaries or if they push people to go beyond comfort levels, in particular around issues such as nakedness, closeness or pain. Notice if teachers observe their own professional boundaries in relation to preserving the sanctity of the student/teacher dynamic, or if they are having sex with students. Be aware that sometimes boundaries that seem clear at the beginning can be blurred through familiarity and time, sometimes over years, through a cumulative erosion of boundaries that changes the terms on which consent was originally given.

If there is no culture of asking for consent in public, or in introductory practices, then it is easier to override a person's wishes later, or in private. It is not consent if you are too scared to say no. It is not consent if you do not know what is happening, and so cannot object. Some teachers have highly developed skills of hypnotism and control of subtle bodies, and use these to induce trance states. These were the skills that Mohan Singh used to rape women, and they are widely known in Tibetan Buddhist Tantra to induce intoxication and blissful states of arousal that put the entranced person entirely, and entirely unknowingly, under the control of the hypnotiser.

**ASK:** Is everybody comfortable in this teaching space? Am I willing to do whatever they say? Can I say no to this now? Do I know what is happening? Would I be able to say no to this if I continued to spend time in this environment, in other states of mind? Do I feel safe with this teacher? What roles do I see this teacher adopting in this space?

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## 10. PREJUDICE AND HYPOCRISY

The personal is political. Listen to the expressed personal opinions of teachers and students in this environment. If there is racism, homophobia, sexism or condescension towards minorities or marginalised people, consider whether this is congruent with the higher moral ground that teachers occupy by virtue of their role as leaders in a spiritual community. Ignorant, personal prejudice is toxic, and is intensified by elitism. Hatred of others expressed verbally can indicate hidden levels of violence towards anyone who does not conform to values of the school. See also ISOLATION OF DISSIDENTS (4).

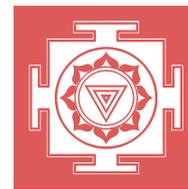
**ASK:** How can prejudice and hateful speech be congruent with spiritual practice? Who are these teachers afraid of, and why? If this kind of speech is acceptable in public, what level of violence would they be willing to enact in private? Who do I have to be in order to be acceptable to this group? What parts of myself need to be hidden in order to gain acceptance? Who do I have to hate in order to be accepted by this group?

## 11. OMNISCIENCE, SURVEILLANCE AND OMNIPOTENCE

Notice what level of power and knowledge teachers/leaders claim they have over students. If teachers always have an answer when students request guidance about their own lives, what level of agency does this permit students? Consider the advice given to group members by their leaders, and the levels of surveillance and/or disclosure that are accepted and expected in this environment. If teachers are believed to understand precisely where each student is in their individual process, ('guru knows best'), then what level of omniscience / omnipotence do students believe their guru possesses?

**ASK:** How is my privacy protected in this school? Is my autonomy being limited by group surveillance and/or public scrutiny of my inner life? What boundaries exist around personal and private experiences being shared in public groups? How is it possible for anyone to know me better than I know myself? If I believe what I am being told about the omniscience of the guru, is it possible for me to have a private life independent of the guru?



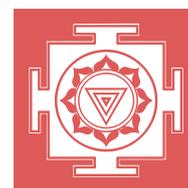


## 12. ABDICATION OF PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

Notice the decision-making processes of long-time students or devotees. Observe especially what level of personal responsibility they are willing to take for significant choices such as work, relationships or family life. If you see that many of these major decisions are ‘referred up’ to the guru, then consider exploring what role the devotees have given to their group leader. For example, people who worship a guru as god will often refuse to make any personal choices about lovers, or jobs, and may speak of it all being ‘God’s will’. In a cult where ‘guru is god’, this means that the guru is in charge of what lovers or jobs a person accepts. It may not be immediately apparent that students and devotees worship or regard their guru as a god, but the evidence of this will become clear in the nature of their choices and how they speak about the leader. If there are encouragements to ‘trust the spiritual guidance’ of the teacher on issues like clothing, sleep patterns, and food and daily rhythms, then consider that this might pave the way for larger scale abdications of responsibility in the future.

**ASK:** Are people taking responsibility for their own lives? Am I willing to abdicate responsibility for major life decisions? If I accept this guidance now, can I refuse it later?

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### 13. SPIRITUAL BYPASS: SEX, HARMING AND TRANSCENDENCE

Notice the attitudes to sex, sexuality and relationships expressed by this teacher or existing within this community. Observe what is encouraged, what is discouraged, who is happy with the group's sexual dynamics, and who is crying about it in the bathrooms. Observe the prevailing attitudes towards what is acceptable, and the accompanying value judgments. Spiritual bypassing is what happens when people claim that they are operating from a recognition of 'transcendent one-ness' when in fact they are failing to see the lived human experience of deep inequalities of suffering and/or to admit that their actions cause harm. Consider that sex-addicted male teachers who promote polyamory as a spiritual practice may use spiritual bypass to justify their ulterior motives.

**ASK:** Who benefits from these patterns of sexual relating, and who is harmed by them? Do these attitudes sit well with me? How willing/able would I be to express my dissent under pressure?

*These warning signals are offered as a resource to anyone who may find themselves in yoga teaching environment or in yoga teaching dynamics that make them question intuitive knowing. Many of the signs listed above were reported to me by women who experienced sexual violence from yoga teachers, or who were disrespected and harmed by the individuals and institutions in the list presented in the accompanying campaign movement document: 'Compilation of Evidence'.*

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