

CONSENT, POWER, AND ABUSE (1)

INTRODUCING A SYSTEM OF COLOURED
FLAGS TO INDICATE HEALTHY AND
UNHEALTHY POWER DYNAMICS WITHIN
WORKSHOPS AND TEACHING SPACES

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INTRODUCTION

Just as in many other areas of life, stories continue to emerge about teachers of tantra, yoga, spirituality, sexuality, and personal development who have abused their power. Past students are increasingly finding the self-confidence and support to come forward with shocking tales of bullying, gaslighting, assault and even rape - by the very leaders and facilitators in whom they had invested huge amounts of money, time and trust. All in the hope of healing and learning.

Listening to these stories, it becomes apparent that the same unhealthy power dynamics - from the relatively minor to the seriously abusive - are played out again and again, in many different organisations and schools.

THE VULNERABILITY OF HEALING

People usually come to workshop spaces to learn, heal and develop self-awareness, by opening themselves up to new practices and experiences. Such work can be extremely powerful and valuable. However, this opening up requires vulnerability and trust, and if it is taken advantage of by those setting themselves up as authority figures, it can be an especially bitter betrayal. Instead of healing, there may be (re-)traumatisation.

SCOPE

When we understand power dynamics and our own responses to them, we can take better care of our wellbeing.

We believe there is a strong need to inform and empower those who are drawn to learning new skills with facilitators and schools of all kinds of embodiment practices. This is particularly true of trainings around intimacy, relationships, or sexuality. This booklet is part of an ongoing project to support workshop participants to keep themselves safe, empowered, and in consent when they step into new and unfamiliar experiences. It is also intended to help facilitators avoid the pitfalls of falling into shadow power dynamics with their participants, which is often not included as part of their training.

In this brochure, we introduce a system of coloured flags that list many of the most common problems. The flags are listed in four categories, and refer to different kinds of conduct and teaching methods of workshop facilitators - primarily, but not limited to, those working in the fields of tantra, sexuality, and relationships.

THE FLAGS: AN OVERVIEW

Red Flags

Serious malpractice, avoid. These are signs of criminal, abusive and/or highly manipulative teaching styles and group dynamics.

Orange Flags

Major Issues, approach with caution. Major issues and/or teaching styles which might be okay for some people if they know what they're getting themselves into, but might be upsetting or traumatising for others. Could lead to red flag issues. Approach with caution.

Yellow Flags

Room for improvement. Many well-meaning teachers and schools operate within a 'murky' zone of vague agreements, lack of transparency, and unclear boundaries, which if left unchecked could develop into orange flags. Room for improvement.

Green Flags

Best practices. Teachers working with the best practices available to them, and open to improve where feedback is given. Awareness of power dynamics, including systemic and cultural marginalisation and oppression, trauma-awareness, gold-standard consent practices and having a clear ethics and accountability process. Best practice

A NOTE ON SUBJECTIVITY

*What is a yellow flag for one person, may
be a red flag for you.*

Some flags are subjective - for example, a behaviour which feels like a yellow flag for one person might be an orange flag for another, and even a red flag for someone else. However, some flags are not subjective - and here we would include most red flags - because they are unambiguous examples of abuse of power.

The examples of the different flags we introduce is intended as a starting point to encourage awareness, provoke discussion, empower participants and offer self-reflection for facilitators. We would expect most teachers and schools to have some yellow flags, and hope this document might help in identifying them

Occasionally a participant may project unresolved issues onto a relatively blameless facilitator or group and 'red-flag' them. Our experience is that these events are relatively rare, and facilitators who are projected upon are usually in a much less vulnerable position than participants who are manipulated. Therefore we have not included this topic in this short booklet.

Many unhealthy power dynamics are maintained, often unwittingly, by bystanders and enablers - a topic we will address in our next booklet.

EXAMPLES OF RED FLAGS:

SERIOUS MALPRACTICE/AVOID. These are signs of criminal, abusive and/or highly manipulative teaching styles and group dynamics.

Consent and boundaries

- They (facilitator or school) say: “*You don’t need any boundaries, because I will tune in and feel exactly what you need*” or “*I know exactly what you need, better than you do yourself*”.
- There is an absence of safe words, and/or clearly unsafe practices, including encouraging unsafe sexual practices.
- The use of alcohol, drugs, or other mind-altering substances in workshops in ways that blur boundaries.
- They reject consent as ‘irrelevant’ or even counter-productive, for example by saying “Consent comes from the mind, but this practice involves listening only to your body.”
- Facilitators’ personal process or pleasure takes over the focus of the workshop, leaving participants’ needs unattended.
- Workshops are more sexual than announced in advance. Nudity is more or less mandatory.

Power dynamics

- They claim that sleeping with the teacher will give a direct connection to God/Spirit, bring healing, or ‘raise your frequency’.
- They use regular and/or extreme sleep deprivation, food deprivation, etc.
- Students are encouraged/demanded to break contact with family and friends.
- Students are dependent and dread leaving, or threats are being made to students to keep them in.
- Students walk around on eggshells, afraid to say or do the ‘wrong’ thing.
- Students’ lives are controlled, e.g. who to date or where to live.

Abuse

- When you search the internet for ‘Name of School/Teacher’ and ‘abuse’ or ‘cult’ you find relevant stories.
- Stories of sexual assault, abuse, or other misconduct circulate widely in the community.
- They use extreme gaslighting to cover up abuse (e.g. “*Ultimately we’re all one, so there are no abusers or victims*”, “*You need to stop identifying as a victim*”, “*You need to work harder on your fear*”)

EXAMPLES OF RED FLAGS:

SERIOUS MALPRACTICE/AVOID. These are signs of criminal, abusive and/or highly manipulative teaching styles and group dynamics.

- They moved to another country to escape prosecution.
- Many other facilitators refuse to work with them.
- Buzzwords and jargon are used to describe and justify what is actually assault.

Credentials and business

- They have a kind of scripted story of “*In my past, I did all this bad stuff*” (cue story), *but *now* I am completely reformed and therefore you can trust me *more* than other people* (and so I can begin the grooming process).”
- They claim to be ‘enlightened’ or ‘operating at another dimension/frequency’, potentially accompanied by claims they don’t need teachers, education, or supervisors.

Team

- They are under the influence of alcohol or drugs.
- They are completely unavailable for care and questions after the workshop.

Inclusivity

- They assume everyone is cisgender and heterosexual, or imply that being LGBTQ+ is ‘less spiritual/evolved’.
- They spread racist or discriminating messages in their work or on their social media.

EXAMPLES OF ORANGE FLAGS:

MAJOR ISSUES, APPROACH WITH CAUTION. Major issues and/or teaching styles which might be okay for some people if they know what they're getting themselves into, but might be upsetting or traumatising for others.

Consent and boundaries

- They (teacher or school) present conspiracy theories as part of the teaching.
- They offer a lack of choice in workshops, e.g. *"We are all doing this now."*
- They show major inconsistencies in the agreements they make.
- Nothing changes after promises of change.
- They use intense emotional release exercises without awareness of, or support for, students who may be (re-)traumatised.

Power dynamics

- They deny that power dynamics or abuse exist in the workshop using statements like *"We are all consenting adults here"*, or *"Only men abuse, so you shouldn't question anything if the teacher is a woman"*.
- They regularly or only date previous or current students (using their community as their dating pool), or only date people much younger than themselves.
- They allow themselves to be deified by their followers.
- They clearly have favourite students whom they flirt with in class.
- They use workshops to selectively promote their one-to-one sessions to particular individuals (often young, conventionally attractive cis women).
- They practice spiritual bypassing which includes things like: *"Everything happens for a reason"*, *"You create your own reality"*.
- They have little self-awareness of their own power or privilege or believe themselves to be above positionality or bias.
- They give students new names to go by.
- They claim a certain relationship style (often some form of non-monogamy) is more evolved/better than another.
- Students all wear similar clothes or behave in a certain similar way (e.g. diet, looks, and sexual behaviour), and exclude people who are different.
- Students are pressurised into paying increasingly high amounts for courses, to stay part of the 'in-group'.
- Students are sworn to keep secrets about what happens in workshops or certain exercises.

EXAMPLES OF ORANGE FLAGS:

MAJOR ISSUES, APPROACH WITH CAUTION. Major issues and/or teaching styles.

Abuse

- They are frequently bad-mouthing other schools and teachers.
- They are charming one minute, and 'wrathful' the next.
- Their teachings leave you feeling confused, drained, or continually trying to grasp something incomprehensible and unnecessarily abstract.
- Teachers who promise to 'tear you down', 'take you apart' etc. without indicating how you might exercise consent, or how they will support you afterwards.
- Ex-partners complain about them being emotionally abusive, gaslighting, blackmailing, manipulating behaviour, etc. in the relationship.

Credentials and business

- They are part of a Multi-Level Marketing company or a pyramid sales scheme.
- They are mysterious about their own education, or their teachers are untraceable.
- They speak authoritatively on subjects they are not qualified in.
- They copy complete workshops, workshop titles, or texts from others without consent or credit.
- They put themselves at the centre of their teachings, potentially accompanied by a story of an event making them enlightened.
- They position themselves as to be superhuman and don't own up to having any faults.
- The teachings cannot be challenged or questioned because they have been "passed down for hundreds of years" or come from mysterious, untraceable sources.

Team

- They take excessive advantage of unpaid assistants.
- The assistants don't have much life or personality of their own, and never contradict or question the teacher.
- Assistants seem not skilled for the task they have, or there aren't enough of them present.

Inclusivity

- They claim that it's an "*inclusive space*" with no awareness of what that means, or not making any efforts towards inclusivity.
- The methods they use have a negative impact on others, especially marginalized groups and indigenous people (e.g. stolen content, unethically harvested materials like plant medicines).

EXAMPLES OF YELLOW FLAGS:

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT. Vague agreements, lack of transparency, and unclear boundaries.

Consent and boundaries

- They (facilitator or school) use methods to maximise the group dopamine hit without understanding what they are doing, and not knowing how to hold or address the inevitable crash afterwards.
- Their workshops contain micro-inconsistencies: they say one thing and do another (e.g. they don't keep to time agreements).
- They playfully cajole/push students into taking part in workshop activities.
- They push/convince people to buy future workshops/sessions.
- There is a speech on consent and boundaries only at the beginning of the workshop (it may feel like a checklist that's crossed off and put aside) - and not repeated during the workshop.

Power dynamics

- It's not made clear that the facilitator has a supervisor, peer support group etc.
- They tell you what you are 'supposed to be feeling', e.g. *"This next exercise will open your heart"*.
- They teach a 'one size fits all' method - e.g. that practice works for everybody, excluding the idea that everybody is different, and different people need different things.
- They use exaggerated claims for their teachings, which will *"totally change your life"* or *"completely transform who you are"*.
- They clearly have favourites or make cliquey in-jokes with certain persons.
- They are impatient with people for making mistakes.
- They frequently use the word *"don't..."* rather than offering invitations of things to do.
- They use subtle affirmations of status, e.g. furniture dynamics (high versus low seats).
- They have a charismatic, enigmatic teaching style combined with an air of mystery.
- They use jargon or buzzwords rather than teaching using clear, everyday words

Abuse

- They are known as 'boundary-pushers' in social situations.
- There are one or two stories of minor consent violations, but no consistent pattern.

EXAMPLES OF YELLOW FLAGS:

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT. Vague agreements, lack of transparency, and unclear boundaries.

Credentials and business

- They lack transparency about who their own teachers were.
- They have no background in being trauma-informed.
- They don't 'walk their talk': they don't put their own teachings into practice.
- They make use of other peoples' work or ideas without crediting them.
- You find out that they do not declare or pay taxes on their earnings from workshops

Team

- There are times when the space-holding feels weak or non-existent, e.g. facilitators and/or assistants are chatting with each other during exercises and not paying attention to the room.
- Assistants are not rewarded for their work.
- Assistants all seem much younger and of the sexually preferred gender of the facilitator.
- Assistants are not focussed on their tasks.

Inclusivity

- There is cultural appropriation, especially when this is unacknowledged.
- They do not make it clear that they are aware of wider power dynamics at play in the world and how that can show up in the workshop space (such as patriarchy, misogyny, racism, discrimination, and white supremacy).
- They use language that talks about 'higher', which implies someone being 'lower'.

EXAMPLES OF GREEN FLAGS:

BEST PRACTICES. Teachers working with the best practices available to them, and open to improve where feedback is given.

Consent and boundaries

- They (facilitator or school) work on boundaries and consent before anything else in the workshop and repeat this throughout the workshop.
- They ask the consent of the whole group before changing group agreements.
- Their workshop descriptions are clear about what will and what won't happen, in advance. There is no secrecy about the practices.
- There is a clear scope of practice (*"This is what we do and don't, and this is why."*)
- The teachings are explained using clear everyday words, no jargon or buzzwords.
- They have an ethics statement publicly available on their website.
- There is a clear and transparent accountability process with named individuals separate from the organisation who can be approached.
- They are consistent: they do what they say they are going to do, and 'walk their talk'.
- Students are regularly reminded throughout that they have a choice about how and whether to participate (not just once, at the beginning of the workshop).
- It is fully accepted, or even encouraged, for students to choose to sit out of exercises, or even leave when they choose to.

Power dynamics

- They are open about the shadow aspects of their position.
- They are supervised and/or peer supported.
- They are easy to approach and listen to feedback, and actively ask for feedback from participants.
- They own up when they get it wrong, and make real attempts to correct it.
- Their current students say things like: *"I had this valuable insight / I noticed something about myself"* (rather than *"The teacher told me something about myself."*)
- Their former students are positive about the experiences they had.
- They are humble and don't claim their teachings are 'the best for everyone'.
- Students are empowered to ask questions and to disagree.
- Students who are insulting or causing trauma for others are spoken to.

EXAMPLES OF GREEN FLAGS:

BEST PRACTICES. Teachers working with the best practices available to them, and open to improve where feedback is given.

- They make use of trauma-aware, invitational language.
- They allow space for the 'silent no' and look out for where students may not be speaking up for themselves and how supportive the space is for them.
- Facilitators and assistants practice their own self-care, within and outside the workshop.

Credentials and business

- They are trained and proficient in gold- standard consent teachings and trauma-awareness.
- They practice information integrity, quoting sources, acknowledging where teachings came from, and which are their own original teachings.
- They are spoken of highly by other schools, teachers, ex-students.
- They are part of a wider organization representing high standards.
- Their website makes it clear they are insured and who their insurers are.

Team

- Assistants are rewarded for their work.
- Assistants are capable, present, friendly, enthusiastic, and are an example of the consent agreements set by the facilitator.
- Facilitators and assistants can laugh at themselves.

Inclusivity

- They practice an equalities policy that goes beyond "*I/we treat everyone the same*". For example, they have an active policy of anti-racism, and own the limitations of their own positionality (e.g. white, cisgender etc.).
- Co-facilitators, assistants, and participants are representing people of different social backgrounds, ethnicity, race, gender, and sexual preferences.
- They don't make any life choice, life experience, or background better, more special, more evolved, etc, than any other.

IF YOU NEED SUPPORT...

Reading this brochure, you may realise that you have experienced abuse, whether that was physical, emotional, spiritual, or otherwise. Or maybe you know someone who is under the influence of a facilitator or school that is abusive – or you suspect it might be. If there are no red flags, there may be orange or yellow flags you have identified and have questions about or would like to understand better.

There is help. We know it can be scary, but there are steps you can take. These are likely to be different depending on what kind of flags you have identified:

YELLOW FLAGS. A good first step to take is to see if you can address these issues with the teacher or school where this happened. Is there a trusted person who can help you? You may also want to discuss issues with friends or other students in the school

ORANGE FLAGS. For more serious issues, it may not feel safe to address the matter directly with those concerned. Can you reach out to the teacher's supervisor or mentor, if you know who that is? Perhaps you can talk to teachers in other schools who may have worked with this person? Or speak to previous students of the school? You could search online to see if there are any groups or threads discussing this teacher or school. See also our support links below.

RED FLAGS. Consider talking to your local authorities. Police stations have a sexual assault department. Even if legal steps may be impossible, complaints can be filed and can contribute to legal procedures later, preventing new harm from happening. Where it feels safe, you could reach out to find others who have been harmed by the same teacher or school, or by different ones. Survivor groups can be very healing. See also our support links below.

Here are some resources for victim support:

- Wikihow on reporting abuse: www.wikihow.com/Report-Sexual-Abuse
- Victim Support UK/US/CA: www.victimsupport.org
- Victim Support Europe: www.victim-support.eu
- Anonymous platform for reporting sexual misconduct: www.jdoe.io

FURTHER RESOURCES

Books

Anke Richter - [Cult Trip, Inside the World of Coercion and Control](#) (including stories about Agama, Gloriavale, Centrepont, Osho, and ISTA)

Matthew Remski - [Practice and all is Coming: Abuse, Cult Dynamics and Healing in Yoga and Beyond](#)

Alexandra Stein - [Terror, Love and Brainwashing - Attachment in Cults and Totalitarian Systems](#)

Online articles

Karen Rain & Jubilee Q. Cooke - [How to Respond to Sexual Abuse Within a Yoga or Spiritual Community](#)

Be Scofield - [several articles about abuse in tantra communities](#)
[Abuse by a controversial tantric healer](#) (Dutch NOS 2022)

Documentaries

[Wild Wild Country](#) - about the people following Osho

[Seduced - Inside the NXIVM Cult](#)

[Bikram: Yogi, Guru, Predator](#)

[Jonestown: The Life and Death of Peoples Temple](#)

[Orgasm Inc.: The Story of OneTaste](#)

Podcasts

- The Conspirituality Podcast
- A Little Bit Culty
- Let's Talk About Sects
- IndoctriNation
- The Orgasm Cult
- Escaping NXIVM
- Good Cult
- Let's Start a Cult

ABOUT THIS PROJECT:

CONSENT, POWER, AND ABUSE

This brochure is part of a series of workshops, brochures, and online content created to support facilitators, their assistants and participants to get better insights into potentially harmful dynamics at play in workshop spaces.

This brochure is free of charge and may be circulated in its entirety. No parts can be taken out and distributed separately without the author's prior consent.

You are welcome to use and adapt this material to create your own presentations and workshops, however, we request that you credit our work and inform us if you are planning to do this.

This is a work in progress. All feedback is welcomed.

If you want to support this work, you are welcome to send us a donation through Paypal: consent@exploringdeeper.com or click the donations button. All support is deeply appreciated.



ABOUT US:

Wilrieke Sophia grew up in a mix of toxic relationships between adults and being bullied. The researcher that they are, they collected the data and combined that with data from their own adult relationships, as well as some unhealthy power dynamics they observed in the world of tantra and intimacy around them as well as in people they once worked with.

Wilrieke has spent years developing structures for consent and ethics for intimacy-based workshops, creating their own workshops on personal growth through intimacy (Exploring Deeper, Cuddle Workshops International, neo-tantra, kink, ritual, eros), as well as writing on her blog for nearly a decade. They are currently writing a book on Queer Tantra.

www.exploringdeeper.com

Rupert James Alison was recruited by an abusive Buddhist yoga group in his twenties. Since then he has worked with a wide variety of teachers of different embodiment practices: one or two were mostly ethical; some had integrity in some areas but not in others, and some were talented teachers but highly abusive. Very few had any kind of stated ethical position to which they could be held accountable or transparent about the power dynamics of hierarchical learning environments. Going forward, we need to do much better. Rupert is an accredited facilitator of Betty Martin's Wheel of Consent, which promotes an understanding of consent that is embodied, trauma aware, focussed on pleasure and empowerment, and takes account of individual, social and cultural power dynamics

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