

YOGIS AND PRIVILEGE

As we examine power and reflect on our own role in overcoming separation, to get closer to yoga as unity, we must reflect on privilege.

It's the nature of privilege to not see that we have it. This is how systems of power and oppression perpetuate themselves. Privilege is the opposite side of oppression.

Privilege is defined as a special right or advantage or immunity granted or available only to a particular person or group (Tatum, 2007).

For example, an able-bodied thin person walking into a yoga studio may not consider that the steps she has to climb to reach the studio are a barrier for access to others. This is a way that her privilege is invisible to her. This same person may notice that in class, everyone looks more or less like her—thin, white, able-bodied and cisgender. These are privileges that enable her to feel at home, welcome and at ease in the yoga space.

However, if a queer, trans, disabled, bigger-bodied person of color tries to walk into that same space, they may immediately feel unwelcome by virtue of their lack of privilege, or target identities. They may not even be able to enter the space due to accessibility issues. Once in the space, they may not feel welcome or at ease, or may have more barriers to feeling that they belong.

Having privilege or not greatly shapes our day-to-day experiences. It has a vast influence on our lives. Privilege can either:

1. Be gained over time (i.e., having a college degree or getting a promotion)
or
2. Be a societal construct based on things beyond our control (i.e., being born in a dominant country and free society, or being born white, or being born into wealth).

When we explore it in a yoga context, privileges from white privilege to cisgender or heterosexual privilege, to thin privilege to class privilege, all the ways we have or do not have privilege impact us moment-by-moment.



Explorations such as this are part of our practice of *svadhyaya*. *Svadhyaya* is the practice of self-inquiry and getting curious, having an open mind, engaging in critical thinking and exploring our own blind spots.

By beginning to look clearly at the ways we have or lack privilege, we pave the way for more caring action and more yoga as unity.

One important point is that many emotions may arise as we explore where we have or do not have privilege. It is common to feel guilty, but important not to get stuck in feeling guilty about all the ways we may have privilege. The power of realizing our privilege is leveraging it to help others who don't have the same access that we do. We help no one when we try to deny or avoid the privileges we have.

Facing the ways we have been targeted or oppressed can also be triggering and painful. Take great care with yourself as you engage in this reflection. Revisit the supportive steps for self or community care if they are helpful for you. Keep in mind that this is powerful and transformative work.



REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Create a **Privilege/Target T-Chart** and label one side dominant or privilege and the other side target or disprivilege. Target represents the areas where you do not have institutional privilege or power. (See the Resource section at the end of the book for an example of my own privilege/target T-Chart.)
- Reflect and list for yourself where you may hold privilege and where your identity is targeted.
- How do you feel about where you may hold privilege?
- How do you feel about places where you may hold target identities?
- What feelings or questions does this exercise bring up for you?

