

# **Teaching Methodology: The Art of Teaching**

## **What is Teaching?**

Teaching is an art and a way of being that requires:

- *Knowledge* of the techniques and material
- The *ability* to demonstrate techniques and communicate material effectively
- *Mentoring* objectively and without judgment
- *Dedication* to personal practice, growth and teaching from experience
- *Courage and willingness* to “not know” and embrace “beginner’s mind”
- *A sense of humour* that acknowledges the ‘cosmic joke’
- *Non-attachment* and *non-aversion* to the practice and the outcome
- *Being present* to “what” and “who” shows up
- *Humility* and *gratitude* for your inner teacher and the lineage of teachers

## **Creating a Safe Space**

A yoga class begins the moment you arrive to teach it and when the students cross the threshold to share the practice with you. Every detail of the environment is an integral part of the total experience. In the spirit of ‘union’, it is important that the space you create for your classes is sacred and helps to create harmony between your students and their environment.

For students to deeply relax into their own inner learning process, they must first feel that it is physically and psychologically safe to move their awareness away from their external environment and within themselves. There are many ways in which you can mindfully help them to do so.

## **Emotional Energy & Interacting With Students**

The quality and degree of your emotional world affects not only you but also everyone you interact with. A commitment to developing and consistently practicing self-awareness will help you to avoid transferring the energy of your emotions onto your students. This does not mean you become a non-feeling individual; however, it does mean owning your emotional experiences so that you’re not projecting them onto others.

How you perceive your students and the emotions those perceptions trigger within you can also immediately and greatly affect your students. Although you may not be verbally sharing your thoughts and emotions about them, since only about 5% of what we’re thinking and feeling is expressed verbally, you can guarantee that your body language, facial cues and inherent energy will be noticed and sensed by your students. And so it is important to acknowledge and own what you think and how your thoughts are making you feel about someone and then ‘park’ all of that outside of the class so that you can teach from a place of compassionate and non-judgmental witnessing.

What you choose to wear when you are teaching can also impact your students. Yes, they are 100% responsible for how they perceive you; however, some choices may convey either more

information about yourself than you really want to share or may convey the wrong kind of information or energy. This is true both for male and female teachers.

When your students enter the yoga space, consider how you want to greet them. Do you want to make personal eye contact with everyone? Understand this is not necessary but is something you may wish to be clear about so that you are not repeatedly connecting more closely with some students and not at all with others as this creates the energy of cliques and separation. It is effective to greet each student face-to-face, eye-to-eye when you first meet them as this honours their existence on the planet and sends the message that you are grateful for their presence. At any rate, it is critical that you be clearly visible (and if you teach from a mat, that your teaching space is already established). You may be warming up or sitting in silent preparation for the class or you may wish to walk around the room (if you take attendance) and help students with various yoga props.

### **Physical Environment/Ambience**

Most people, consciously or unconsciously, react to and remember their initial impression of any new environment. As such, it is important to consider what you would like that first impression to be.

- **Music**
  - Music is one of the ways to create an intentional environment for the type of yoga class you plan on teaching.
  - Music has many moods and depending on the one you wish to cultivate, you may choose music that is slow, quiet, relaxing; active, stimulating, energizing; carefree, joyful, inspiring; mellow, deep, meditative.
- **Lighting**
  - The type of lighting can positively or negatively affect the quality of the experience.
  - Is the lighting soft, comfortable, inviting? Is it bright enough? Too bright?
  - If you teach in a room lit by fluorescent or harsh overhead lighting, it's a good idea to bring a small lamp or candles to soften the ambience.
- **Air Quality**
  - Your students will be guided to breathe deeply and so it is important that the air quality be fresh and non-toxic.
  - Arrive early enough prior to class time to air out the room and/or adjust the temperature (if you can) to better ensure everyone's comfort.
  - Burning a 'moderate' amount of incense prior to the arrival of your students can not only energetically cleanse the room but can also add a meditative quality to the mood. HOWEVER, some students have sensitivities to strong odours and so choose the scent wisely and give at least 15 minutes before students arrive to allow the scent to dissipate. It is also advisable to ask students if anyone has a scent allergy and promise that you will not burn incense at all if they are coming to class.

- **Floor Space**

- The entire practice takes place on the floor, often in bare feet and with students lying down on the ground.
- It is critical that the floor surface is clean and comfortable. When you are reviewing locations to teach, if you encounter cement flooring and you choose to teach in that environment, it is recommended that students use both mats and blankets to lie upon OR that you do not have them lie on the ground for longer than a few minutes at a time (especially in winter).
- It is helpful if you have access to a broom/dry mop/Swiffer/vacuum to sweep any dirt, especially if you are teaching in multi-use rooms.

## **Tools For Developing Awareness**

### **Mindfulness**

Our minds love to think, analyze, solve and they keep busy doing so throughout the day. Although it can help us navigate through the world and day-to-day tasks, it can also hinder our ability to be fully present to each experience. Much of the time, our mind or attention is focused on the 'external world'...rarely do most people spend much time focusing on their 'internal world'. However, most minds wander off perpetually, continuing the way they have been trained to function in a world that rewards multi-tasking.

Since the mind loves detail, consider giving your students specific points of focus as they explore the practice, such as: breathing, sensation, emotions, thoughts, tendency to strive, ability to feel ease, etc. Without overwhelming them with simultaneous points of focus, providing them with enough detail helps to deepen their learning experience and the healing effects of yoga.

### **Alignment**

To protect the body from injury while they explore the various poses, or asanas, and to avoid reinforcing painful imbalances that have already been developed in the body, it is necessary to provide your students with a basic map of alignment for each pose. For example, in Mountain Pose (Tadasana) if you have the students close their eyes and bring their feet parallel with each other without looking, many people will not come close to actual parallel alignment. They may feel as if they are aligned but the habitual imbalances have come to feel so familiar and 'normal', coming into actual balanced alignment feels awkward. Even with eyes open, for some coming into alignment can still be a difficult task. If you guide your students through this simple exercise at the beginning of their yoga journey, you can help to punctuate the importance of body awareness and how it can be cultivated through something like mindful alignment.

### **Isolation of Body Parts**

When they are lying on the floor, many students are unaware that one leg is often longer than the other or one foot is turned out more than the other. Or perhaps one of their shoulders is touching the ground more heavily than the other or their head is turned more to one side than the other. By drawing their attention to various body parts throughout the class, the teacher can help students cultivate awareness and watch for the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) imbalances that can develop over the course of their lifetime. This time in centered awareness can also underscore how there are often parts of their bodies that perhaps they have not brought their attention to for quite awhile...sometimes even years. In doing so, they give themselves the experience of acknowledging their entire physical self as an integrated and whole human being.

### **Before/After Comparison**

Having students notice how they feel before exploring a specific movement, pose or breathing practice, observe how they feel during and then again after they come out of the pose or complete the breathing practice gives them an opportunity to observe the effect and benefit of each part of their experience. It also gives them a chance to experience mindful transitions and how so much can take place in each stage.

### **Right/Left, Front/Back, Upper/Lower Comparisons**

The unifying effect of yoga can be an excellent way to help your students understand the interplay of complementary opposites. There are an almost infinite number of examples of complementary opposites in the natural world and most definitely in our very own bodies.

Exploring a pose by leading with one side of the body and then following with the opposite side can give your students an opportunity to observe the different sensations or emotional reactions they experience from one side to the other. This also helps to integrate the effects of the practice at the level of mind, integrating right and left brain hemispheres as well as mind/body.

### **Sensation, Emotions, and Thoughts**

It is helpful to draw the students' attention to any *physical sensations* they may be experiencing during the poses and breathing practices. As students explore movement, ask them to notice what sensations, if any, are present. Do they notice any tingling or pulsing sensations? Is one side warmer or cooler than the other? Does one limb feel longer, heavier or lighter than the other one or than it did prior to exploring the movement? Or is there a curious absence of sensation?

Some yoga poses can elicit emotional reactions from your students as they become more aware of various parts of their bodies in which the poses trigger 'muscle memory' and emotional patterns. For example, it is not uncommon for survivors of sexual abuse to experience emotional reactions to poses that stimulate energy in the areas of their pelvis and/or hips. This is not something to be worried about, especially if you help your students to understand that this is normal and can be very healing, in the right conditions and timing.

In some cases, students will begin to experience a repeated thought pattern or suddenly remember something from their past as they explore a pose or breathing practice. It is helpful to assure your students that this, again, quite normal and underscores the fact that mind, body and emotions are intimately connected and interdependent. And, over time, students can use their practice to help them return to a healthy and loving relationship with their total self.

## **Typical Class Format/Structure**

Each class has a natural beginning, middle and end. The class begins the moment people begin to arrive – teacher and students alike.

### **Beginning**

- Arrive with enough time to set up and get centered
- Acknowledge students as they arrive
- Introduction and welcoming
- Announcements and Logistical Information
- Centering – Seated or Lying Down

### **Middle**

- Breathing Practice (Pranayama)
- Warm-ups
- Review of material from previous class (if applicable)
- Introduction of new material
- Demonstrations – Silent and/or verbal
- Guiding students through the poses
- Reflections/observations

### **End**

- Warm-downs
- Meditation (optional)
- Relaxation
- Closing – Group ‘Aum’ (optional)

## **Centering**

Centering your students is a process that helps them to cultivate a sense of calm through embodied presence. When even one person lets go of tension, everyone else in the class will sense that at some level. It is essential that the teacher brings this sense of calm centeredness to the class; this allows the whole class to enter into synchronicity like a room full of grandfather clocks that eventually begin to tick-tock at the same time.

### **Benefits of Centering**

- Creates community within the class
- Helps students to transition into the class and to ground energy
- Starts the class on a positive note
- Brings students into the present moment
- Creates atmosphere of stillness, steadiness and relaxation
- Prepares students to be open to learning
- Allows teacher to relax and focus

## **Suggestions for Preparing for Centering**

- Do some of your own personal warm-ups to relax yourself
- Acknowledge students as they arrive
- Invite students to find a comfortable lying or seated position
- Coach awareness of alignment
- Invite students to close their eyes to bring awareness inwards
- Invite students to observe natural rhythm of breathing
- Guide students through a 'body scan'

## **Pranayama**

(See details in "*Pranayama*" section of this teacher manual)

## **Warm-ups**

Warm-ups do more than just warm up the body in preparation for doing the more vigorous yoga poses. Warm-ups also prepare the student to move out of the busy-making of the mind and into the experience of the present moment, thereby bringing body, emotions, mind and spirit into alignment.

Warm-ups create a sense of safety for the students and connection with the teacher and with each other as everyone explores them in community. The time spent in warm-ups also gives the teacher an opportunity to observe the students in 'motion', highlighting mobility issues or possible injuries that were not communicated prior to class. They also give students a chance to check in with their own bodies to determine what their bodies need from the practice.

Warm-ups can also be a wonderful way to move into gentle and/or invigorating variations of the poses you will be teaching. Allow yourself to be creative and experiment in playful and imaginative ways to assist your students to actual feel how their bodies work, visualizing joints, muscles and other areas of their body they are exploring through mindful movement.

## **Demonstrating**

***Silent demonstration*** can be an effective tool in teaching new poses as it communicates on a very deep level the energy or essence behind the pose that cannot be entirely expressed in words. It is a way to model not only how to 'do' the external form of the pose but also how to 'be' in the inner form of the pose; the inner attitude, how to breathe, how to enter into the experience itself, how to let go.

***Verbal demonstration*** provides the opportunity to share details about the pose, like the mechanics or 'nuts and bolts' of the pose. This is a good time to demonstrate it yet again while verbally guiding yourself step-by-step into and then out of the pose. It is helpful to practice this ahead of time so you have an idea of the key points you want to share with your students.

It is important that your instructions are clear and your dialogue slow enough to be heard and understood as you use your own experience of the pose from the beginning or 'ready position' to the eventual release and, if appropriate, into a simple complementary stretch or pose.

There's a delicate balance between giving too little and too much information. Too little can cause students to be unsure and feel unsafe...too much can have them feeling overwhelmed that there are too many things to remember.

Consider what details only need a visual demonstration and what ones need a commentary that provides important details. You may also want to demonstrate common misalignments and areas that need special attention. Remember that your students don't need to know everything about the pose in order to try it out. Always communicate safety issues (precautions and contraindications) and a few interesting tidbits about the benefits of the pose. Always allow time at the end of the demonstration for a few questions. Many of the questions your students might have will be answered as you demonstrate and then guide them to experience the pose for themselves.

## Benefits

- Each pose, breathing practice and meditation technique has a variety of benefits for the physical body, the emotions and the mind.
- A 'benefit' can be described as a positive and healthy response or condition created or enhanced through the practice of a specific technique.
- Benefits can be physiological, affecting the body's bones, muscles, organs, glands and nerves and including all of the body systems, such as respiratory, circulatory, digestive, nervous, lymphatic, metabolic, etc.
- Physical benefits are most easily detected by noticing where your student feels the pose in their body the most.
- Benefits can be experienced 'energetically' at the level of the biological, involuntary, intelligence that carries out all of the functions of the body.
- When poses are held with conscious awareness, both the physical and energetic body systems are flushed with a fresh supply of 'prana' and blood, bringing the whole body into balance.
- The various poses, or asanas of yoga also stimulate and purify the different centres of energetic consciousness – the chakras.
- Students also experience benefits that affect their mental and emotional well-being.
- Information about benefits can be woven throughout the class...they don't have to be discussed in any given order.

## Precautions and Contraindications

- A **precaution** is an 'existing condition' that *may or may not be* negatively impacted by the practice of a technique. Modifications for the specific technique can be offered to help avoid issues and allow the student to continue to practice safely. Students are encouraged to listen to their own bodies and communicate if something doesn't feel 'quite right'.
- A **contraindication** is an 'existing condition' that *will be* negatively impacted by the practice of a technique. In these situations, the technique should be *avoided altogether* and replaced with an alternative technique that allows the student to continue to participate safely until the condition has changed.
- Share precautions/contraindications *before* students try a pose or technique so they can make an informed choice about how, or if, they want to explore that part of the practice.

- Sharing precautions/contraindications is not about inducing fear but to educate students about when it's appropriate to explore a technique and when it isn't.
- Remind students with injuries to be gentle with themselves and only do what feels comfortable.
- Offer students the choice of 'sitting out' if they need to rest and to rejoin the class when they feel ready.
- Offer students modifications so they can continue to practice with the class, if they don't want to be singled out by sitting out.
- Ask all students for health information *prior to participating* (either by filling out a form or telling you privately) so that you have the information you need to help keep them safe.
- In the case of acute injuries/conditions or serious medical problems, don't hesitate to ask students NOT to do a pose.
- If you are unsure about whether a student should be participating in the class, it is appropriate to request a written permission from their physician first.

## Guiding Poses

- Start with some warm-ups to lubricate the joints and warm-up the body in general, or specific areas of the body that will be most impacted by the planned poses.
- Slowly guide the students into and out of the pose a few times to emphasize key points and synchronizing breath with movement. Moving in and out of the pose helps to warm up the body to staying in it for longer periods of time.
- Eventually guide the students into the pose, inviting them to cultivate awareness while in the pose and encouraging them to stay as long as it is comfortable to do so. For beginners, this might be for anywhere from 2 – 5 breaths; for more advanced students, it may be as long as 10 breaths or even up to a few minutes, depending on the posture.
- Encourage students to make any necessary adjustments while in the posture, based upon what they are noticing. These adjustments may be biomechanical, related to breathing, or the quality/quantity of their thoughts.
- Invite students to mindfully and slowly release, rather than rushing out of a posture. Always give students permission to come out when they need to rather than forcing themselves to stay as long as everyone else.
- Guide your students to observe how they feel once out of the posture (this could be physical or emotional sensations).
- Unless you are teaching a 'flow-style' class, give your students some time to integrate before moving into the next posture.

## Questions and Clarification

It is important that students feel comfortable to ask questions regarding any aspect of the practice. However, while encouraging this type of open atmosphere, it is also essential to make sure this doesn't turn into a long-winded, distracting conversation. If a student is confused about instructions or the benefits of a pose, it is essential that they feel safe to ask for clarity.

Sometimes clarifying requires further demonstration on the part of the teacher. After doing so, invite your students to return to the pose. The first experience of yoga or a new pose can be edgy, or at the very least unfamiliar. Beginner students especially, are experiencing new ways to

be in their bodies. They may also still be thinking about 'how to' and 'getting it right'. They may discover things about their bodies they didn't know before and need to check in with you to make sure everything is alright...especially if they are feeling discomfort or pain.

After students have had a chance to explore a pose a few times, they enter into more familiar territory and can more fully let go of the mind and relax into the experience of the pose.

## Relaxation

Relaxation will come most easily and naturally after a good workout in the poses and at the end of the class. Allow anywhere from 3 – 10 minutes for relaxation, depending on the level of studentship and the time you have left. The benefits of relaxation can be felt even in a short time. Another option is to take them through a guided relaxation at the beginning of the class as a way of centering and letting go of the worries of the day. This is especially effective for afternoon or evening classes as students are often coming to yoga after a day at work.

It's important NOT to miss relaxation as it gives your students a physical experience of moving from stimulating the nervous system (much like in a 'stress response') to relaxing the nervous system. In this way, they may learn how to allow for the much needed relaxation response to kick in during their regular, daily lives.

### Some considerations:

- **Lighting and temperature:** If possible, dim the lights for relaxation. If the room temperature is cool, offer your students a blanket, as the body temperature dips during the *relaxation response*.
- **Voice quality/rhythm:** Speak in a soft, natural and gentle voice. It is important to avoid the pitfall of *trying* to sound like a yoga teacher...let your natural voice be expressed.
- **Getting into a comfortable position:** Allow your students to take as much time as they need to make themselves comfortable. Usually the most comfortable position is Savasana, lying on their backs with the arms down at their sides, slightly away from the trunk and with palms facing up. The legs can be comfortably apart. The head can roll gently from side to side a few times, to help release any residual tension, then come to rest at centre. A cushion or blanket may be used under the knees to relieve any low back tension. Additionally, if the floor is hard, some students may wish to have a folded blanket under their head for added cushioning.
- **Staying awake/falling asleep:** After your students get settled, invite them to close their eyes, if they feel safe to do so. Encourage them to allow their minds to remain passively aware as their bodies let go and relax. This will increase their chances of staying awake throughout the entire relaxation. Sleeping and mindful relaxation are not the same thing, even though both can offer rest and restoration. Many students do fall asleep during relaxation because many students are habitually sleep-deprived and fatigued. It's important to reassure your students that it is okay if they do fall asleep. Encourage them to simply aspire to remain aware and to trust that their physical selves are doing exactly what they need to do. As students become more experienced in relaxation they will be able to go very deep and yet remain passively aware of all that is happening.
- **Awareness of breath:** No matter what type of relaxation you intend to lead, it is important to bring the awareness to the breath. Guide your students to watch their

breath as it flows in and out. Encourage them to notice the movement of their body in response to the movement, sound and rhythm of the breath.

- **Coming back to the present:** Be sensitive in the way that you bring your students back from relaxation. Take your time as you invite them to breathe more deeply and guide them to bring movement back to their bodies gradually. Ensure your voice is calm and soft; a loud call back to the present can be very jarring for them and we want to help them retain the sense of relaxation as long as they can. Without rushing, invite them to come to a comfortable and stable seated position, while keeping their eyes closed (or only partially open). At this point, you could guide them through a brief meditation, chant Aum/Om or have them massage their faces and then gradually open their eyes.
- **Closing:** Thank your students for participating and for trusting you to be their guide. If you are able, make yourself available at least 15 minutes after class and encourage your students to ask you any questions about the practice. Encourage your students to practice the poses, breathing or mediation methods they remember or enjoy when they are at home and have time.

## Assisting

One-on-one assisting provides a wonderful opportunity to personally support your students, affirms their efforts and facilitates deeper body awareness. You are not there to 'correct' them or show them the 'right' way to do it. Always allow the student to be fully in their pose and take a few moments to observe them, before intervening. Look at their whole body and notice areas of tension/holding or suppleness/release. Help them to become aware of these areas as you explore the pose with them verbally. Suggest modifications or variations only if this would facilitate their experience or to help prevent injuries. Always ask for permission before touching them in an assist.

### Make Your Presence Known

It's important to make your presence known as you approach students to assist them so they are not surprised or startled. This is especially important if they are deep into their experience and have their eyes closed.

### Some tips:

- Deepen your own breath and make it audible so that they can hear you from a distance. When you know that they know you are there, return to regular breathing.
- Use eye contact, if you are approaching them from the front.
- If you plan on offering physical assists, tell the whole class verbally, before you come start walking around. Give people permission to say no.
- As you approach someone, make sure you say their name so they know you are interacting with them. Especially important, again, if they have their eyes closed or are deeply into their experience.

### Ways to Assist

- **Presence:** Simply being with them, witnessing their experience, can have a profound impact.
- **Verbal:** Offer guidance, affirming their effort rather than looking for things that are 'wrong' or expecting perfection. Suggest variations, if you see student(s) struggling or for safer alignment.

- **Model:** Stand in front or beside your student(s), demonstrating placement of body parts.
- **Hands on:** Facilitate ease of effort and deepening of the pose rather than correction. This is sometimes the most direct and easily understood guidance.
- **Props:** Provide cushions, blankets, blocks, ties, etc., as needed. Demonstrate how to use a prop, especially if it's the first time you've offered it or for brand new students. Although giving them the option to use props is an essential for your students to develop their own agency and autonomy, sometimes you may wish to have everyone try a prop to support a specific teaching point.

## Touch

Touch is intimate. As teachers, we need to find a balance between caring, concern, compassion and professional detachment.

Touch is sometimes more direct and effective than verbal instruction since it brings students out of their heads and into their bodies. We can give sometimes more precise and detailed information through touch than the student can absorb verbally.

The body has its own intelligence and memory. It is important that students absorb the experience of the assist. It is not necessary for them to figure out how it was done, or intellectualize how they can re-create the effect by themselves. They need to be reassured that their bodies will remember, over time.

Students often feel that they are failing in some way because they cannot 'do it themselves'. This belief can distract them from their present moment experience. Encourage them by explaining that the more they allow themselves to receive support, the more they will benefit. No one person is an 'island'; we thrive when we support each other. As they practice yoga longer, they will respond more to help, not less.

### ***Through touch you can communicate:***

- caring, comfort and safety
- a secure foundation with the ground
- support that can allow the student to relax and release
- awareness of immobilized or insensitive areas

### ***You are also able to receive information through touch about:***

- the texture of the body
- degree of flexibility or tension (sometimes people who look quite flexible are rigid and unyielding when they are touched and vice versa); we can also feel when a student is unable to stretch or release further – when they arrive at their 'edge.
- temperature; areas of tension feel harder and colder and don't move easily with the breath
- degree of relaxation and release; when a student releases or relaxes, we can feel the movement in our hands.
- emotional release; with time, practice and experience, you will be able to sense the flow of emotional energy as you touch your students. Often, these are feelings your student is even aware of or are unable to express. Simply by being there and communicating that you care, you can be of help.

Check your observations with the student as a way of ensuring you are not projecting your own feelings onto them.

### **Attitude and Purpose**

When assisting a student, consider the person you are touching, why you are touching them and what is happening beyond technique. Be aware of the person you are with and relate to that person as you assist or adjust them. While this is obvious in principle, it is easy to become mechanical when you are nervous, distracted, teaching a large class, are tired, ill or burnt out.

It is the student's pose, not yours. Do not impose on them or try to do the pose for them. At the same time, be strong enough to provide a sense of security and give them a feeling of direction and depth.

### **Permission to Touch**

- We always need permission to touch. Obtaining consent is an 'ongoing' responsibility; do not assume just because your student agreed to be touched in one pose that they are okay to be touched in every pose.
- Respect the person
- Respect their body and its limitations
- Respect their right to say 'No'
- Respect their autonomy, acting *with* the person, not *for* them.
- Respect individual differences; what is right for one person may not be right for another

Be aware and respect any body signals that indicate the student is uncomfortable being touched, in general, or with a specific assist. Indications include:

- Tightening as you approach them
- Expressions of discomfort or pain or ticklishness
- Abrupt changes in body temperature, which may indicate build-up of tension in the area being touched or in general

### **Quiet Attention**

In addition to assisting or adjusting the poses, we can help bring students to a quieter state through touch. We should approach them in a way that does not disturb their quietness. This is particularly important when you are helping in Savasana. It is sometimes better, in the short term, to simply leave your students alone in a pose that is not entirely aligned, rather than disturb them by adjusting their position. The tricky part is balancing this with modifying their poses, or encouraging them to do so, as a means of finding balance as they are entering into poses.

### **Verbal Communication and Eye Contact**

Maintain as much eye contact as possible while helping. This is reassuring for the student, and will tell you if the student is in need of an assist or uncomfortable with your assist. Talk to the student to provide reassurance and to explain what you are doing. Check with the student regularly to ensure that your assists or adjustments are okay with them. Let the student know that they can tell you when to stop. Give them feedback throughout, letting them know when you sense movement of tension or release.

## **Sexuality**

Sexual feelings can arise in either the student or the teacher, or both. We need to be able to acknowledge these feelings in ourselves and recognize them in students. Sexual feelings should be handled with sensitivity and concern, and the recognition that it is inappropriate to act on them.

Part of our ethical practice as teachers is the practice of Bramacharya; in this case, the sexual restraint that may be required in relation to our students. When helping new or beginner students, keep an appropriate distance from them, especially when we are facing the student. As we build a supportive and trusting relationship with our students, the distance might change as we become more comfortable working with each other.

Pay attention to the way you stabilize or release the pelvis. Release of the pelvis with the breath can awaken dormant sexual feelings and/or trigger memories of previous abuse. Both the student and the teacher need to be very grounded to contain these feelings and energies. We are not psychotherapists (unless you are); students who release memories of abuse should be referred to a professional, if their feelings become overwhelming.

## **Detachment**

All students have equal right to our attention; however, we may encounter students we dislike, find physically repulsive, who have strong body odour, etc. As much as possible, put these feelings aside when you are teaching in order to be there for the student. Perhaps these students have negative feelings about themselves and their bodies and may be in need of your compassionate help. Reminding yourself of their potential suffering can also help you to overcome any negative reactions you might have towards them.

A helpful cleansing ritual before and after you teach can support you while you interact with the variety of personalities and issues your students bring to your classes. Prior to teaching, imagine zipping yourself up in an 'emotional Haz Mat' suit to protect yourself from being negatively impacted by harmful energy. After class, unzip and step out of your energetic suit and then purposefully cut the energetic threads that may have developed between you and your challenging students. During class, be sure that you continue to exhale while you are working with a student you are challenged by. In addition to unzipping your energy suit and snipping the energetic threads, you may wish to simply wash your hands after class as a way to cleanse physically, emotionally and mentally.

## **Class Management**

Adjust the amount of time you spend with each student to the size of the class and the students' needs. Spend time with all your students in larger classes. This attention may happen over a period of a few classes, not necessarily on the same day. Give students in a small class time to explore the poses without your intervention. In smaller classes, it is tempting to give students your constant attention but this can overwhelm them.

When you are teaching, keep the momentum of the class going even while you are helping one person. This is a skill that you can develop over time and is especially important for Beginners who do not typically know how to carry on by themselves. In order to keep talking as you assist, you can use the individual assist as a practicing tip for the rest of the class.

Allowing students to help each other can be dangerous and is tempting to do in larger classes where you believe you can't get to everyone who might need assistance. Unless your students are already teachers, they are typically untrained in anatomy and biomechanics and their inexperience can do more harm than good. When the body releases tension (physical or emotional), it is vulnerable and can be easily injured by even the most well-intentioned hands.

### **Intention**

Before touching someone, take the time to establish for yourself a clear sense of direction and purpose. Assists do not have to be complicated; they should be clear, simple and consistent (*words matching actions*). If you are confused about what you are doing and why, you will communicate this through your body language and touch to your student. This, in turn, may make them feel unsafe to receive your assistance. Wait until you are clear about why and what you are doing before you actually do anything. Relate the assist to what you are saying to help you and your student stay focused.

Our kinesthetic and biomechanical understanding of asanas is rooted in our own practice. If you are confused about how to provide an assist, you may still need to develop an understanding about the actions required in your own body as you practice for yourself. That being said, what you might need and what your students might need could be two very different things requiring very different assists. It is common for new teachers to 'over assist' or give more information than students can actually absorb. It is best to take a few simple ideas and points and repeat them throughout a single class; new/additional information can be shared the next time you explore the pose.

### **Safety**

#### ***Keeping Students Safe***

Non-injury/non-violence or compassion (ahimsa) is the cornerstone of yoga practice and teaching. It is important to become very familiar with your hands and their strength and quality of touch before attempting to use them on your students. It is also important to develop assisting skills using your hands before trying to use other parts of your body. When using your hands, follow the natural curves of your student's body; i.e., instead of putting direct pressure down on a specific area, move along and around the body part.

Work on areas that are strong and stable, like large muscle groups, the pelvic and shoulder girdles. Never apply pressure on vulnerable areas, such as:

- unprotected organs (abdominal organs, eyes, etc)
- joints, especially the knees and spine (no pressure on any vertebrae)
- injured areas

As long as your student has not reported a neck injury (and always asking for permission first), you can lengthen the spine by gently pulling on the base of the skull or the pelvic rim which provide natural handles.

Always give the body an 'escape clause'. Allow for more than one way to release, otherwise, you may cause an injury in a weakened area. Work within your own limits and understanding. You can injure a student by imitating an assist that you don't have a kinesthetic understanding of in your own body and hands. An experienced teacher who knows the student well may be able to work in ways that a novice cannot.

### ***Keeping Yourself Safe***

Ground yourself so that you are stable before doing anything with a student. For example, when helping a student up into a backbend or an inverted pose, plant your heels and bend your knees to protect your own back. Always maintain your own lumbar curve; when assisting or supporting a student, you are adding some of their body weight onto your own, increasing risk of back injury if you haven't properly supported yourself.

If you teach Handstand, stand with one foot in front of the other to maintain your own balance, if they come up or down quickly. Respect your own limitations, whether you are demonstrating or physically assisting. Be mindful if you are tired or healing from an injury. Acknowledge and respect your own strengths and weaknesses. Adapt your techniques to your own body and size in relation to the student you are assisting. Use your weight to anchor and/or offset their weight, rather than trying to muscle your way through an assist. This will help to protect you from injury and fatigue.

When assisting, breathe with your student. This not only keeps you breathing and helps you to coordinate your actions with your breathing but it also reminds your student to breathe and keeps you connected energetically. Observe your student's breathing and coach them to find a way to breathe easily. If they cannot, they may be straining in or forcing the pose or are uncomfortable with the assist. Try to synchronize your breath with your student's to help them anchor into the pose. If you are helping them to move, do so on the breath. This might be an inhaling breath, if core strength is required, or an exhalation, if they are in a more relaxed/restorative pose.

Do not force a student into a pose they are not ready to explore physically, emotionally or mentally. You can injure both yourself and your student by straining or forcing them into a pose their body is not ready for and can break the bond of trust so necessary for a healthy teacher-student relationship.

### **Taking Time**

Give your students time to move into and feel the pose on their own before intervening with an assist. Take time to listen to or get the feeling of someone's body before you try to move or change it. When you touch a student, give them time to feel the support and for their body to accept it. Observe changes from tension to release, effort to ease and release your assist when appropriate. This may be sooner than you anticipated or longer, depending on how your student's body responds.

When preparing to stop assisting, do not move away suddenly as this can alarm your student and take them out of their 'zen moment'. It might also produce a feeling of not being safe and supported, which is the opposite of what we hope to offer our students. Lastly, coming out quickly, and without giving them prior notice, might cause them to lose their balance or be unprepared to support themselves, causing them to fall out of a pose and possibly injure themselves.

## **Grounding**

Before making any adjustments to a pose, help your student to feel the ground and become more stable in the pose. When they seem ready for an adjustment, begin by adjusting from the base of the pose on the ground; in standing poses this will help to align the spine. When your student is practicing a standing pose, guide them to shift their weight in their feet, and within each individual foot, until you observe the pelvis is horizontal.

As a general rule, give more support and attention to the weaker side. The dominant side that has been over-compensating for the weaker side is often crooked and uncomfortable (or even in pain) because it has been overused and compressed. Adjust each stage of a pose to help your student find alignment in their fullest expression of the pose.

Do not create distortion or strain in order to improve visual alignment. Our purpose is to help students heal their bodies, not to make them conform to an external image. For example, excessive turning out of the feet is often caused by tension in the hips and pelvis caused by the pulling of shortened gluteal muscles. If you insist on your student making their feet parallel in Mountain (Tadasana) and the hips continue holding their tension, you can cause strain in the feet and/or knees. When an area is experiencing chronic holding, is injured or permanently deformed, it may not be possible to correct the imbalance immediately...or at all. It is important to consider the entire body when coaching for alignment.

## **Release and Relaxation**

Go with the release to promote greater length and relaxation in the body. Your hands can communicate very specific information about direction and movement in poses. As the student releases and lengthens, you can adjust imbalances more easily. Use your hands to both teach release as well as to support and reassure.

That being said, some Beginners will not necessarily release. Give them time to feel the pose, the adjustment, the breath...and then move on. New teachers often have difficulty helping Beginner students because of this lack of response in the students' bodies. The teacher may believe they are doing something wrong because the student doesn't appear to be responding. Sometimes the changes are so subtle and deep, we don't see them visually. Sometimes it takes awhile before the holding patterns are ready to let go.

It is highly beneficial to practice with experienced students and/or other yoga teachers so that they can respond more effectively to your touch and assists and can give you feedback about them.