

# Core Concerns in Teaching Yoga

By Judith Hanson Lasater

One day as a child on a family outing, I was seated in a small motor boat facing backward as we cut a sharp path across an icy blue lake. I was fascinated by the ever-widening wake which our boat produced. I could see the wake as far back as I looked; it seemed as if the wake widened out forever toward the distant shore.

In a way, this is what happens when one becomes a teacher of yoga. What we share with students spreads out like the wake from a boat and touches people we may never see or know. Because of this, it can be beneficial and instructive to "turn around" philosophically, just as I did in the boat, and honor the experience of teaching and how it has shaped us through the years.

New teachers, however, are usually so busy learning the art of teaching that articulating a philosophy of teaching is a distant goal. But time has a way of creating a clearer view of student-teacher interactions as well as honing a style of teaching which expresses one's values.

This process was true for me; my earliest years of teaching were filled with an enthusiasm which hopefully helped to make up for my lack of experience. This year is my 30th year of teaching and I have suddenly found that not only do I now have a philosophy of teaching, but I would very much like to share it with others. Here are twelve points which express what I feel are the most important imperatives for yoga teachers to remember while teaching.

1. Create a safe environment. The most important condition necessary in a yoga class is that it become a "sacred circle", a term coined by author and Jungian psychologist Jean Shinoda Bolen. The "sacred circle" means that each class must be a safe place for the personal exploration of one's body, emotions and mind. No teacher is a good teacher if he/she does not create this sacred circle in which every student feels valued, respected and completely safe. This means that the class is free from verbal, emotional, physical and sexual coercion or abuse. The first duty of a yoga teacher is to create this safe place. Without this intrinsic sense of safety, it is impossible for the student to let go and allow the practice to unfold. "Safety" in this context means the student retains the right to say "no" to working with a partner, to say "no" to being adjusted or touched, and to say "yes" to moving at his/her personal pace.

2. Teach people, not asanas. Look at each person individually and teach to that person in this moment. Each person is an individual to be taught not a "posture" to be fixed. Often we are too focused on communicating information about a pose instead of communicating with a person. Your student may not remember the details about the asana, but he/she will remember that he/she

was seen, heard and helped.

3. Use humor. Humor teaches perspective as well as showing your own humanness to your students. Humor is a great way to reveal yourself. This is important because it models for the students the behavior of revealing themselves to others as well. Humor helps to relax any tension that may exist in the class. Additionally, laughter relaxes the diaphragm and thus helps to improve breathing. Laughter helps us all to remember that while yoga practice is important, it is not serious.

4. Inspire and challenge rather than coerce and correct. I do not like the word "correct" applied to teaching an asana. "Correction" implies that there is something wrong with the student; it implies that they are less worthy unless they get it right. Use your words, images and very light and occasional touch instead to transmit and teach. Another problem with "correcting" and "fixing" the pose is that it gives the unconscious and therefore very powerful message to the student that "it is never enough". Many of us are slaves to this judgment in our lives. Our house is never clean enough, our meals never "organic" enough, our teaching never sophisticated enough, the list could go on forever. By constantly correcting students you tell them that once again they are not doing enough in the pose. Of course we need to make sure that the student is not harming his/herself. But we also need to be careful to communicate that while there is always room to grow, where we are right now has a wholeness and beauty to it as well.

5. Balance focusing on technique with allowing students to experience the deeper spirit of the pose. Are we teaching students to become like a piano tuner who never has the joy of just playing the piano? Do they know volumes about the technique of the pose but have forgotten the joy of practice? Without technique the benefits of the pose can be lessened and injury can occur, but if we only teach technique, then there is no heart energy in our teaching. In Patanjali's Yoga Sutras this balance is taught in Sutra 11, Chapter I. In this verse the author writes about the dual concepts of abhyasa and vairagyam. Abhyasa is determined effort; it can be thought of as discipline, attention, action and especially as the form of the pose. Vairagyam, on the other hand, is translated as "supreme detachment". Vairagyam is surrender, letting go, allowing; it is inviting the pose into the body, it is the content of the pose.

An apt analogy is a river. In order for there to be a river there must be the banks as well as the flowing water. If there is only abhyasa, which is symbolized by the banks, then there is only a dry gulch. However, if there is only vairagyam, the flowing water with no banks, then there will be just a swamp, not a river. When the banks and the water exist together there is a beautiful river. When technique and form are balanced with heartfelt free movement then the asana is whole.

6. Every class needs some repetition and something new. Learn how to teach the same poses in new ways. The bedrock of teaching is the group basic poses which are usually repeated in almost every class. If you are bored with them, change your practice so that you can find something new in each pose each time you practice it. While you might be bored, the students are probably not.

If you have taught for some time, no doubt you have had the experience of a student coming to you in amazement to report a "great" insight about a pose that they just learned from another teacher. You have probably been teaching this concept for years but suddenly the student was ready to hear it. We all need repetition; it is really the only way we learn anything. Somehow find freshness in the sameness of each pose.

Contrariwise, always include something new in each class. It need not be an overwhelmingly difficult pose or approach. Instead it can be as simple as a new way to practice savasana, but it will nonetheless keep your classes fresh.

7. Listen to the student rather than just telling him/her what to do. "Listen" in this context means observing with all your senses as well as with your heart. Then teach from your heart what the student needs right now. Do not be limited by what you think you 'should' teach.

Trust your intuition. No matter how much training you have or how many years you have been teaching, each class is a new experience. Trust your intuition about what is appropriate in this moment and teach that.

There was a curious reaction from students in my classes after the San Francisco earthquake in 1989. For a couple of weeks afterward it was almost impossible for them to practice standing poses. No one trusted the earth. Each time I would try to teach standing poses students would have balance problems and become agitated. We all need the reassurance of sitting down on the earth for a while. I responded

to this obvious problem with focusing on sitting poses, gradually re-introducing standing poses as it seemed appropriate.

8. Choose your words carefully. It is an interesting irony that the body is programmed to move by neurological and muscular patterns which are based on whole movements and groups of muscles. We spend a great deal of time trying to use words to isolate specific movements in teaching when actually that is not how the body learns and remembers movements. A child experiments with movements until he/she learns the muscle pattern which accomplishes that movement and practices it enough until it is learned.

A perfect example of this patterned learning is to try to tell someone how to walk. It is impossible to tell them in words exactly which muscles to use as agonists, which as antagonists, and which are stabilizers. Walking is too complex an activity for someone to talk you through it. Nevertheless, teachers are stuck with using words until the student understands the movement from within. It is important, therefore, to choose words carefully. "Invite, entice, and allow" have a very different feeling

to them than "push, tighten, stamp, grind or cut". In a recent class I suggested that student "conjure" the pose out of his/her body. Images such as these help the student to by-pass the linear left brain and more fully access the right brain where whole movements are understood. Creative

imagery will add color and efficacy to your teaching.

9. Keep instructions simple and clear. Try focusing on one thing in each asana rather than giving the student too much information. We live in an era where we have so much information swirling past us. We can know everything about the pose and still be unhappy in our lives. While knowledge about the pose is useful and even necessary, it is not sufficient to provide us with what we all crave: peace of mind, clarity and compassion in our lives.

Allow the experience of the pose to be the true teacher. It is, after all, the practice which is the ultimate teacher, not our words.

10. Teach more complicated poses earlier in the class. Let the last part of the class be more simple. This will be more satisfying. Sometimes it helps to have a theme, a part of the body, for example, that you are focusing on in every pose. Another way to have a theme is to focus on an image that you repeat in each pose. Whatever you choose, allow the instructions to become simpler as the students slow down and internalize their focus during the class.

11. Always teach savasana. Sleep-deprived Americans desperately need the rest. Give your students the lifelong gift of learning how to relax at will by lying down on the floor in relaxation pose. I never cease to be amazed when I hear from students that in another class savasana was skipped and

labeled as unimportant. Nothing could be further from the truth. Studies document that relaxation lowers blood pressure as well as other physiological parameter associated with stress, including respiratory rate, galvanic skin response, and brain waves. Additionally, relaxation measurably

improves the function of the immune system as well as helping the blood become slightly more alkaline. The more alkaline the blood (within narrow limits) the less likely the blood will contribute to the leaching of calcium from the bones thus lessening the possibility of osteoporosis.

Finally, teaching savasana teaches much more than relaxation. It teaches clearly and concretely the importance of being not just doing. Our culture is very much a "doing" culture; we value action and results over being and awareness. Savasana may be the only time during the week that the student is quiet and present, not acting, not achieving, not sleeping, just being present. This is the beginning of meditation and an extremely important gift you can give to your class. Always allow 20 minutes for deep relaxation.

12. Practice regularly and with love. The integrity of the teacher is expressed in several ways. First and foremost, this integrity is apparent in how the teacher lives his/her life. If there is honesty in living then there can be honesty in teaching. Another way integrity is expressed is in the teacher's own practice. This practice should be regular and solid, not something that occurs haphazardly. Finally, this practice should reflect love: love for yourself and your students, as well as your love of yoga and life itself.

Copyright Judith Hanson Lasater

<http://www.judithlasater.com>