



Understanding Yoga and Yoga Teaching Practices

**By Nancy Wile
Yoga Education Institute**

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Understanding Yoga Teaching and Yoga Teaching Practices

Introduction

Millions of people now practice yoga of one kind or another. Although yoga originated some 5,000 years ago in India, it did not reach Europe or the Americas until about 120 years ago, and only began to gain popularity within the last 60 years. Many of the practices in modern yoga classes are very old, while others have been developed much more recently. The physical yoga we know today as hatha is not even mentioned in the earliest yoga texts. Yoga, as always, has evolved to meet the needs of the people and the times.

Anyone can benefit from the practice of yoga. People of all ages, backgrounds and cultures have experienced the benefits of yoga. Some yoga students are in great health, while others have injuries or physical limitations. Some students are seeking stress relief and greater inner awareness, while others are looking for the physical health benefits yoga offers. As a yoga teacher, you will learn not only how to teach yoga, but how to better understand your students and help them find what they want from their practice.

This first session in this yoga teacher training focuses on developing your understanding of yoga – it's history and philosophy, as well as understanding general teaching principles and practices. In this first session, we will not get into the details of teaching specific yoga postures – we will cover that specifically in the next five sessions, and after that. This session is really about developing a general understanding of the rich history, philosophy and types of yoga, as well as understanding your responsibilities and general practices as a yoga teacher.

So, what makes a good yoga teacher? When students feel better about themselves after class than before class, you can feel good about what you are doing with them. On top of that, if you can help your students become more aware of their own bodies, thoughts, and emotions, and more accepting of those things, you're well on your way. Besides being a skillful teacher, a great yoga teacher is also an interested yoga student. It's important to establish and maintain your own daily practice to become a better teacher. There are certain things that you can never learn from books or from teaching others, that you can only learn (and pass onto your students) from consistently doing your own yoga practice.

Teaching yoga is a privilege and a great responsibility. Students are looking to you to help them feel better both physically and mentally, and to feel more inspired in maintaining their practice. Whatever a student wants, as a yoga teacher you can help them find their own inner power and develop their own unique practice. Learning to teach yoga also deepens your own yoga practice, and as you teach students you'll probably find that you never stop learning more about yoga or about yourself as a yoga teacher.

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Understanding Yoga

Anyone can practice yoga. No special equipment or skills needed – just a small amount of space and a desire for a healthier, more fulfilled life. Many people are first drawn to yoga as a way to keep their bodies fit and supple, but over time they begin to realize the mental benefits. Others come seeking help or relief for a specific complaint, like stress or backache. Some come wanting to get more out of life. Whatever the reason, yoga can be a tool for anyone – giving them what they came for and more.

I like to think of hatha yoga as a combination of movement, meditation and mindfulness, all connected through the breath. The yoga asanas (postures) exercise every part of the body, stretching and toning the muscles and joints, the spine and the entire skeletal system. By releasing physical and mental tension, yoga also liberates vast resources of energy. The yoga breathing exercises, known as pranayama, revitalize the body and help to calm the mind, while the practice of meditation and mindfulness gives increased clarity, mental power and concentration. Although pranayama makes special use of the breath, slow deep focused breathing is an important part of any hatha yoga practice.

When people first learn about yoga, it often seems to be little more than a series of physical postures, which keep the body lean and flexible. But in time, anyone who continues regular practice becomes aware of the subtle change in their approach to life. Through consistent toning and relaxing of the body, while also stilling the mind and focusing on the breath, students of yoga become more at peace. Yoga looks at health from a broad holistic perspective that appreciates the enormous influence of the mind on physical health.

In yoga, the practice of each individual is directed, not toward outward appearances and display, but inward to the center of his or her own self. In yoga postures, the focus is on the feel of the posture and the sensations caused by the posture. This brings our awareness more inward, so we begin to not only understand our bodies better, but become more aware of our thoughts and have more control over those thoughts; noticing when we have thoughts that don't serve us and recognizing that part of ourselves that is beyond our thoughts.

The word yoga means to join or to unite. The underlying purpose of yoga is to unite all parts of the self (mind, body, spirit) and to unite ourselves with the larger consciousness of the world. Yoga seeks unity at various levels. First yoga unites mind and body. Many times, people habitually separate their minds from their bodies, and may not be able to sense what their body is trying to tell them about the current state of their health. People who are not connected with their body may also feel somewhat disconnected to the world around them and daydream to avoid things, rather than facing their challenges head on. Yoga helps people to reconnect their mind and emotions to their body through breath awareness and inner body awareness. This helps people remain more grounded in the present

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moment, allowing someone to become less overwhelmed by their thoughts of the past or future.

Yoga also teaches us to be more accepting of ourselves and others. Through yoga, you learn to simply observe – your breath or your movements – without judgment. By learning to be the witnessing presence, simply observing, people begin to release the constant analysis and judgment in their daily lives that can lead to stress. They learn to observe their thoughts, rather than get too caught up in their thoughts, helping them balance their emotional lives.

The principles of yoga are all embracing. Yoga encourages practitioners to find their connections to everyone and everything. Rather than competition, yoga helps you learn to focus on cooperation and service to others, which often ends up bringing you whatever it is you wanted in the first place.

Differences between hatha yoga and typical forms of western exercise:

Hatha Yoga	Typical exercise in the west
Focus on calming the breath and body and finding ease within the effort	Focus on straining to push further while making maximum effort
Focus on making the movements of the body more mindful and stilling the mind	Focus on speeding up the movements of the body
Inward focus on the feeling of the movements and gaining acceptance.	Outward focus on competition and performing better
Focus on stretching the body to release blocked energy channels.	Focus on revving up the body to increase energy.
Mindful breathing through the nose is encouraged.	Breath may often be rapid and through the mouth.
Wellness and a connection between mind and body is emphasized.	Fitness and a focus on the physical body is emphasized.
Parasympathetic nervous system (calming system) is activated.	Sympathetic nervous system (fight/flight system) is activated.

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History of Yoga

Yoga is the oldest system of personal development in the world, encompassing mind, body and spirit. Yoga is a complete science of life that originated in India over 4,000 years ago. Although yoga teachings first focused exclusively on philosophy and mental practices, today the physical practices of yoga are often at the forefront.

The ancient yogis had a profound understanding of the essential nature of humans, and of what you need to live in harmony with yourself and your environment. Many early yogis took into account the interrelationship between body and mind, and formulated a unique method for maintaining balance in both – a method that combines all the movements you need for physical health and to create more awareness within the body, along with the breathing and meditation techniques that ensure peace of mind.

The Vedas

The philosophy of yoga finds its earliest roots in the vast collection of scriptures called the Vedas. In Sanskrit the word veda means knowledge or wisdom. It is here that yoga, meaning “to yoke” or “to make one” between the individual’s mind and the universal mind is explored. Portions of the Vedas date back to about 2000 BC (or BCE). The Vedas are made up of four books: 1) The Rig Veda (collection of hymns), 2) The Yajur Veda (rituals and directions), 3) Sama Veda (verses from the Rig Veda arranged musically), and 4) Atharva Veda (remedies and charms for use within the home). Each book of the Vedas has four parts: 1) Mantras (hymns), 2) Brahmanas (rituals), 3) Aranyakas (symbolic interpretations) and 4) Upanishads (philosophy). It’s the Upanishads, which begin to form the first foundation of the philosophy of yoga. The Vedas are characterized by rituals that strive to surpass the limitations of the mind. Meditation is the principle tool for attaining oneness and a higher state of consciousness, primarily through mantra. Mantra is the repetition of certain sounds that are thought to create an inner resonance with divine essence. The term AUM (om) first appears in the Vedas.

The Upanishads

The Upanishads were first orally composed before 1000 BC (or BCE). The Upanishads are at the end of each book of the Vedas, and provide the main foundation of yoga philosophy known as Vedanta. They are philosophical texts that were also an early source of Hindu religion. Central to Vedanta is the idea of one absolute reality or consciousness that underlies the entire universe. The creation of the Upanishads marks the Pre-Classical Yoga period. Here we find the first more developed teachings of yoga practice, which are still focused solely on meditation and philosophy. The aim in the Upanishads is to unite the individual soul (atman), which is a form-based expression of the divine, with the infinite universal spirit (brahman), which is the formless expression of the divine. And it states that it is our limited consciousness that keeps us from realizing our true state of oneness. Although the Upanishads bear little resemblance to what we find

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in most yoga classes today, they do form the first ideas of the philosophy of yoga, and of having a system for better living that can be passed along to others. The Upanishads are also the earliest source of yogic anatomy of the subtle body, and the idea of prana (life force) that runs through everything.

The Bhagavad Gita

Around 400 BC (or BCE) appeared two epic works – the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, containing the Bhagavad Gita. The Bhagavad Gita is the 6th book in the Mahabharata and is an important text in Hinduism. The Gita was a conversation between Prince Arjuna (the student) and God-man Krishna who is disguised as Arjuna's chariot driver, and who becomes his spiritual advisor. In the story, Arjuna is upset about civil war and the chaos it will bring. Krishna tells Arjuna that he must fulfill his dharma (duty) and fight against his kin. He says that in order to find peace, actions should be guided by duty and that a person should not be attached to the outcome. It basically stresses the importance of selfless service; of performing kind and courageous actions without worrying about what's in it for ourselves and without worrying about the outcome. The central point of the Gita is that in order to avoid difficulty in our lives and in others, our actions must be for the larger good and must exceed our egos. The Bhagavad Gita provides a philosophical framework for yoga and teaches Karma yoga or selfless service. It also tried to unify Bhakti Yoga, Jnana Yoga and Karma Yoga, and gained importance because of this. To the modern yoga teacher, it may seem to be a little bit of a stretch to relate the ideas of Bhakti Yoga, Jnana Yoga and Karma Yoga with a yoga class they are conducting at a local gym. However, you can make these connections through simple additions to your teaching. For example, you are demonstrating karma yoga when you commit yourself completing to your teaching during class time without thinking about what's in it for you. You can encourage your students to focus on their actions within class without being preoccupied with "getting" the posture. Engaging in the process of self-examination and sharing the insights you gain with your class can be a form of jnana yoga.

The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali

In 200 AD (or CE), the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali furnished the backbone of yoga. The Sutras provide a more focused attention of many of the themes in the Bhagavad Gita. The Sutras are a presentation of raja yoga (the royal yoga of the mind) and mark the Classical Period of Yoga. The Sutras were the first work that defined yoga and attempted to standardize it, and were the first work to contain references to both asana (postures) and pranayama (breathing exercises). It is composed of 195 aphorisms (or sutras) that expound upon raja yoga and its underlying principles. The sutras are separated into four chapters. The Yoga Sutras also introduced the eight-fold path of yoga. Pantanjali focuses mainly on meditation and philosophy in the sutras. It was later that the importance of asana (postures) gained more attention.

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Hatha Yoga

Around 800 to 1200 AD (or CE), the Siddha yogis developed Hatha Yoga. The Siddha yogis integrated ancient spiritual teachings with the medical knowledge of the times, formulating a program to promote a healthier mind and body. This was the beginning of the Post Classical Period. The potential of the human body now became an interesting field of study. Yogis of the past had not paid much attention to the physical body, as they focused on contemplation and meditation and moving beyond the physical body. During this period however, yogis developed a system in which different postures (or asanas), along with breathing techniques (pranayama) and meditation, would help keep the body young and vital. Asanas also helped people become more aware of what was happening within their bodies, and in turn became more aware of their thoughts and their minds. Developing an inner awareness through physical postures helps promote a meditation practice. This inner awareness is very important for releasing the ego and understanding the true self, which is not based on external circumstances, but remains unchanged. The body also became viewed as the temple for the immortal soul, which, therefore, made it important to keep it healthy and functioning well.

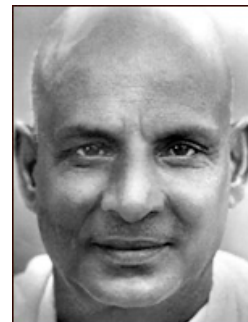
The Hatha Yoga Pradipika, published in 1350 AD (or CE), became the classical text on Hatha Yoga. It described the various yoga practices, including 84 postures (asanas), breathing exercises (pranayama) and locks (bandhas), which form the base of the modern practice of yoga. The Gheranda Samhita, published around 1700 AD (or CE), describes over 100 practices including hatha yoga postures. The Shiva Samhita, published sometime in the 1600s brings together non-dualistic philosophy with their knowledge of anatomy. It emphasizes that everyone can practice yoga.

Yoga was introduced in the West during the early 19th century. It was first studied as part of eastern philosophy and began as a movement for health. Modern yoga is said to have begun at the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893. During this meeting, a young Swami Vivekananda from India made a strong impression on the Americans to whom he introduced yoga. Subsequently, Vivekananda toured the U.S. giving lectures on yoga. Many yoga masters would later cross the ocean and follow in his footsteps. In modern times, many prominent yogis have made an impact on the forms and accessibility of yoga today. Below is a list of just a few of these remarkable yogis who have influenced the practice of yoga over the past 100 years.

Recent Yoga Masters

Swami Sivananda (1887-1963)

He wrote over 200 books related to yoga and philosophy. He studied medicine and served in Malaysia as a physician for several years. He is the founder of the Divine Life Society and author of over 200 books on



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yoga, vedanta and other subjects. He studied under Swami Vishwanada Saraswati. In 1945, he created the Sivanada Ayurvedic Pharmacy and in 1948, he began the Yoga-Vedanta Forest Academy. He called his yoga the yoga of synthesis and established the Sivananda yoga centers.

Paramahansa Yogananda (1893-1952)

He was instrumental in bringing the teachings of meditation and kriya (kundalini) yoga to the west. Yogananda moved from India to the United States in 1920 and founded the Self-Realization Fellowship to disseminate worldwide his teachings on the practices and philosophy of yoga and meditation. His book, *Autobiography of a Yogi*, published in 1946, was instrumental in introducing meditation and yoga to the West.



J. Krishnamurti (1895-1986)

He was a philosopher and lectured extensively. The essence of Krishnamurti's work is found in "The Core of the Teachings" which was published in 1980. He coined the phrase "Truth is a pathless land," meaning that people can not come to truth through any organization or ritual, but that it is found in the mirror of relationships and the contents of his own mind. It is important to view Krishnamurti in the context of his legacy. Throughout his long life, Krishnamurti exerted a great influence on philosophical and spiritual thought. Because of his ideas and his era, Krishnamurti has come to be seen as an exemplar for modern spiritual teachers - particularly those who disavow formal rituals and dogma. His conception of truth as a pathless land, with the possibility of immediate liberation, is mirrored in teachings of current spiritual leaders, including the Dalai Lama.



Swami Vishnu-devananda (1927-1993)

He studied under Swami Sivananda and is the founder of the International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centers and Ashrams. He wrote many yoga texts and emphasized the idea that an ounce of practice is worth tons of theory. He travelled throughout North America, teaching yoga and observing the western lifestyle. His mobility earned him the nickname "The Flying Guru." He created several yoga settlements (ashrams) throughout Canada and the United States.



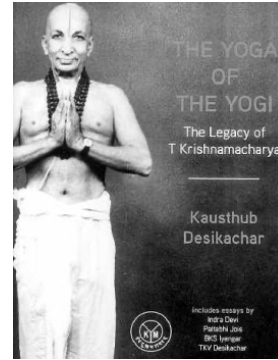
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Sri Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (1888-1989).

His students included many of the most influential teachers including: Sri BKS Iyengar, Sri K Pattabhi Jois, Indra Devi, and his son, TKV Desikachar.

Krishnamacharya believed yoga to be India's greatest gift to the world. Although many people approach it as a spiritual practice, he also incorporated a great deal of physical healing because he felt that it is difficult for a person to grow if they have a great deal of discomfort from illness. Through his teachings from his father and other instructors, he realized that every person is

absolutely unique and he emphasized the need to teach each student according to his or her individual capacity at any given time. This means the path of yoga will mean different things for different people and each person must be taught in a manner that they understand clearly. Because of this individualized approach, it is impossible to explain his process of teaching in full. Krishnamacharya was not only a yoga instructor, he was also considered a physician of Ayurvedic medicine and possessed enormous knowledge of nutrition, herbal medicine and other remedies.



Indra Devi (1899-2002)

She was born as Eugenie Peterson and was an early disciple of Sri Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, and herself became a renowned yoga teacher. She moved to India from Berlin in 1927, where she began studying yoga.

She was the first western woman to teach yoga in India. She moved to China and opened the first yoga school there. In 1947, she moved to California and began teaching yoga there, becoming one of the first people to bring yoga to America. The Indra Devi Foundation runs yoga, stress relief and teacher training classes in a number of major cities, as well as donating clothing and food to disadvantaged families.

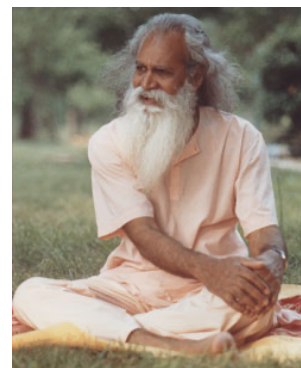


Swami Satchidananda (1914-2002)

He developed integral yoga, which believes the goal and the birthright of individuals is to realize the spiritual unity behind the diversity throughout creation and to live harmoniously as members of one universal family.

Integral yoga believes this goal is achieved by maintaining:

- A body of optimal health and strength
- Control of the senses
- A well-discipline, clear and calm mind
- A strong will
- A heart full of compassion



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Pattabhi Jois (1915-2009)

He was a student of Krishnamacharya in south India for many years. In 1948, he established the Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute. He developed the ashtanga style of yoga, which focuses on asanas (postures), pranayama (breathing) and bandas (locks) and is more physically intensive than many other styles. His yoga research institute still attracts thousands of foreign yoga students every year. They come to practice this unique form of hatha yoga in the place where it began.



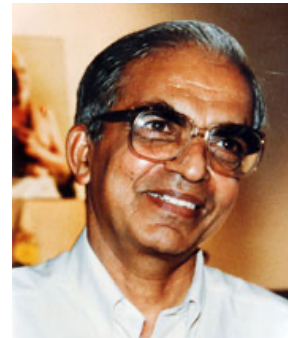
BKS Iyengar (1918-2014)

He was born in India and is the founder of Iyengar Yoga. He is considered one of the foremost yoga teachers in the world and has been teaching yoga for more than 60 years. He has written many books on yogic practice and philosophy and is best known for his books, "Light on Yoga," "Light on Pranayama," and "Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali." In 1966, "Light on Yoga" was published and became an international best seller, translated into 17 languages. Often called the "bible of yoga," it succeeded in making yoga well known throughout the globe.



TKV Desikachar (1938-2016)

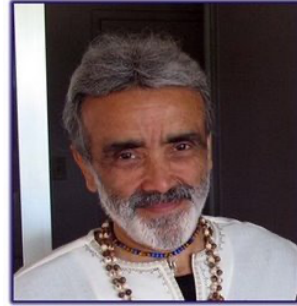
He is the son of Sri Tirumalai Krishnamacharya and credited with being a driving force behind the resurgence of hatha yoga in recent decades. Desikachar started his career as a civil engineer. Inspired by his father's teachings on yoga, he left his engineering career and became a student of his father's in the 1960s. In 1976, he established the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram, which is a leading institute of yoga and yoga based studies in Chennai, India. In 2006, he founded the Krishnamacharya Healing and Yoga Foundation, which is committed to spreading the holistic yoga teachings of Krishnamacharya. Like his father, his style of yoga encompasses a broader spectrum than many more famous schools of yoga and is more tailored to each individual.



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Dharma Mittra (born 1939)

He is best known for creating the Master Yoga Chart of 908 Postures, which is still displayed in many ashrams and yoga centers worldwide. Born in Brazil, he began studying yoga in 1958, and became a student of Swami Kailashananda in Rishikesh, India in the 1960s. He currently runs the Dharma Yoga Center in New York City.



Judith Hanson Lasater

She is a well-known American yoga teacher and writer. She holds a doctorate in East-West psychology, is a physical therapist, and has taught yoga since 1971. Judith Lasater is President of California Yoga Teachers Association (CYTA), which she cofounded in 1974. In addition, she is a founder of the Iyengar Yoga Institute in San Francisco as well as a founder of Yoga Journal magazine. She was an early student of Iyengar, and has been called "One of the nation's foremost (yoga) instructors."



These are just some of the many yoga masters you may encounter. Be open to learning what you can from anyone you consider a master, but take the time to develop your own teaching style and voice. There is no other yoga teacher like you. So, find your own way of teaching by paying close attention in your own practice and by taking time to understand your experiences through stillness and meditation.

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Eight Limbs of Yoga

The classical yoga viewpoint follows a strict interpretation of the Yoga Sutras – the culmination of a long development of the science of yoga that set forth a very specific path to self-realization. There are eight component stages, which make up this path. The stages begin with a set of ethical codes and progress through the physical postures, breathing exercises and mental practices, culminating in the highest stage of self realization.

Here is a description of the eight limbs:

- 1) Yama. These are the principles of ethical behavior that one should follow in everyday life. The Yamas are five virtues or restraints that govern our relationships with others and the world, including: ahimsa (non-injury), satya (truthfulness), asteya (non-stealing), brahmacharya (moderation) and aparigraha (non-attachment). The word “yama” means to control.
- 2) Niyama. Five observances of one’s own self, including actions to keep our bodies and minds clean. The Niyamas include: shauca (purity or cleanliness – healthy living), santosha (contentment), tapas (desire for self study), svadyaya (self study or self inquiry), and isvara pranidhana (surrender to what is, acceptance)
- 3) Asana. Postures for creating firmness of body, an increase in inner awareness, steadiness of intelligence and benevolence of spirit. It provides a release of mental and physical tension. This is the physical practice most familiar to Westerners, as yoga.
- 4) Pranayama. A set of breathing exercises designed to help improve the breathing process and generate and move “prana” – life force or energy.
- 5) Pratyahara. Withdrawal of the senses, mind and consciousness from the outside world to focus inward on the self. It’s the ability to let go of distractions and let things be.
- 6) Dharana. Focused concentration. With the body and senses trained by asanas, the mind and breath refined through pranayama and distractions under control through pratyahara, the student then reaches this sixth stage, which is what we think of as meditation. It’s the ability to have one point of attention. To keep your attention on one object.
- 7) Dhyana. Even deeper meditation with the complete withdrawing of consciousness. It is the process of becoming united with that on which we meditate.
- 8) Samadhi. This is self-realization. This is the state of complete release from the ego (or little self) and becoming united with the source of all.

Most modern hatha yoga classes in the West focus on the first five of these eight limbs – encouraging students to: 1) respect others, 2) take care of themselves and become more introspective, 3) practice asanas to keep their bodies fit, 4) practice pranayama to learn proper breathing, better use their breath and connect their movement with their breath, and 5) learn to let go of distraction. We may also begin to bring deeper meditation into class as our student progress.

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Yoga Styles

Yoga offers many different forms, each with its own emphasis. In this class, we will be learning more about hatha yoga, the most popular form of yoga and the one most concerned with the development of physical fitness. However, it's important to have some knowledge of the other major forms. Some of the other major historical branches of yoga include: Bhakti, Jnana, Guru, Karma, Kundalini, Mantra, Raja, as well as Hatha.

Bhakti Yoga

The term "bhakti" comes from the root bhaj, which means "to serve." This is the yoga of devotion. It's a very spiritual practice in which students are encouraged to offer all thoughts and actions to a higher power. Practitioners spent much time meditating on this higher power and seek to merge with the universal intelligence through acts of devotion. The primary activities are meditation on a higher power and providing selfless service.

Jnana Yoga

Jnana means "knowledge." Jnana yoga describes the search for real knowledge. The underlying assumption of jnana yoga is that all knowledge lies hidden within us – we only have to discover it. It teaches the idea of nondualism, which is the idea that there are no real separate and distinct objects (i.e. you, a table, a chair, etc), but that everything is part of a great whole, and that the idea of separation is a misconception. This form of yoga focuses on study and discussion, followed by reflection and meditation.

Guru Yoga

In Guru Yoga, a student's teacher is the main focus of spiritual practice. Such a teacher is expected to be enlightened or at least close to being enlightened. In Guru Yoga, you're asked to honor and meditate on your guru to bring about spiritual realization in yourself.

Karma Yoga

Karma Yoga seeks to influence destiny positively. This path's most important principle is to act unselfishly and with integrity, without attachment to the outcome. Karma yoga practitioners believe that all actions – whether physical actions, words or mental – have consequences for which a person must assume full responsibility.

Kundalini Yoga

Kundalini Yoga seeks to activate the latent spiritual energy stored in the human body. It seeks to bring the energy up the spine, passing through several power centers (chakras), until it reaches the crown of the head when intuitive enlightenment is triggered.

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Mantra Yoga

As the name indicates, mantra yoga seeks to influence consciousness through the repetition of certain syllables, words or phrases (mantras). It encourages students to focus on a particular mantra throughout their practice and to chant their mantra at certain times throughout their practice.

Raja Yoga

This is also known as classical yoga. The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali is the standard work for practitioners of Raja Yoga. It follows the entire eight limb path as explained above. It views hatha yoga practices as the preparation to practice – getting the body and mind ready for the advanced meditation practices it encourages.

Hatha Yoga:

Hatha yoga is part of Raja Yoga. It is the science of physical and mental self-control through the practice of physical postures, breathing exercises and meditation. This is the most common practice of yoga and the form we tend to do in the West, and is the focus of this course.

As you can see, there have been a wide variety of practices in yoga. For me personally, I have found the greatest connection with the straightforward practices of hatha yoga.

Hatha yoga has become a mainstream practice for mind/body development in modern industrialized societies. In hatha yoga, you don't have to change your spiritual beliefs or learn to chant in ancient languages. However, some new students are still a bit anxious about what they will encounter in their first yoga class. In this course, you will learn how to make your yoga classes accessible to a wide variety of individuals who may have no prior experience with yoga and who may nervous about what is involved. We will outline for you exactly how to focus on the specific physical and mental benefits of yoga, while providing a safe and supportive environment in which your students feel comfortable trying new things.

Forms of Hatha Yoga

Besides general hatha yoga, there are some variations that form their own distinct style, including:

- Ashtanga/Power: A physically challenging style of hatha yoga that focuses on developing strength and power through yoga practices that generate heat in the body. Deep breathing is practiced throughout each session. This breathing, along with the many strengthening postures warm the muscles, which are then deeply stretched near the end of the practice.
- Iyengar: a very precise form of hatha yoga, concerned with repeating very precise movements within each physical posture and breathing exercise.

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Postures are held for longer periods of time and each part of the body (down to the fingertips) has a precise placement within each posture.

- Bikram/Hot Yoga: This is hatha yoga performed in a heated room (typically around 105 degrees Fahrenheit). The purpose for practicing in a hot room is to keep the muscles warm and to flush out toxins through sweating. This style is not recommended for children, elderly people, pregnant women or those with certain medical conditions.
- Vinyasa/Flow: In this style of yoga, participants flow from one posture into another. Although some postures are held for additional breaths, many of the exercises consist of one movement for one breath.
- Anusara Yoga: This modern school of yoga was started by John Friend in 1997. The emphasis of this form of hatha yoga is on a set of universal principles of alignment, which underlie all postures, “heart opening” postures, and the spiritual/meditative benefits of hatha yoga. Joy in practice and in everyday life is an important underlying philosophy of this school.
- Yin Yoga: This is a slow-paced style of hatha yoga, in which postures are held for typically five minutes or longer. The postures are primarily seated and lying postures, which emphasize the hips, pelvis, inner thighs and lower spine.

There are also numerous combinations and variations of these styles and styles unique to certain instructors. Find your own style and use what works best for you and your student. Yoga is an individual pursuit, and it is up to each person to find what works best for themselves at any given time.

Hatha Yoga Style Taught in this course

This course focuses on general hatha yoga, with special consideration of incorporating vinyasa/flow techniques by learning how to connect breath with movement, and sequencing your class in a way that flows. Proper sequencing helps students stay focused within a yoga class and increases the effectiveness of each posture. An emphasis is placed on creating an individual practice for each student by providing proper modifications for those who can not, or should not, do certain postures. If you are like most yoga instructors, your students will come from a wide range of physical abilities. It is important to safely and effectively meet the needs of all these students, not just the ones who are already physically able to practice each asana. The purpose of this program is to help you teach yoga to anyone who is interested, not just the few who can already master its physical postures.

This program also emphasizes the internal and mental aspects of a yoga practice. We look at how the breath can connect the mind and body and how to develop more awareness of your thoughts and of how your body feels at any given time. Developing internal awareness is a key aspect of yoga. It allows people to stay

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physically healthy as they notice what is happening inside their bodies. It also helps people begin to critically examine their thoughts from an objective perspective and rid themselves of thoughts that are not productive or helpful to their lives. Focusing on the breath, and maintaining a slow and even breath throughout your yoga practice, can also help to still the mind and bring greater internal awareness.

This program will introduce you to a variety of ways to teach hatha yoga. Once you have the basics down, it is up to you to find and develop your own unique teaching style. Finding your own style allows you to really be present with your students and to discover what they need, much more than simply mimicking another yoga teacher's style.

Developing Your Skills as a Yoga Teacher

As a teacher, you provide your students with inspired support and informed guidance. When you can create a safe environment where your students can explore new things within their minds and bodies, amazing things can happen.

No matter what style of yoga you teach, you can follow certain guidelines to create an effective and inspiring class for you and your students. By incorporating some of the following teaching strategies, you will improve the overall experience for your students and yourself.

1) Develop your own personal practice. Only through your own personal practice can you find your unique voice as a teacher and gain a better understanding of how specific experiences will affect your students. Set aside time to maintain your own personal practice, along with attending classes from other instructors.

2) Orient your new students to the class. When you have new students, tell them what to expect (Example: "The focus of this yoga basics class is to help you learn the fundamentals of how to practice yoga safely, and includes yoga poses and breathing exercises. This class is for beginners and no previous yoga experience is needed.")

3) Set class objectives. Find out the needs of your class by asking students what they are looking to gain from yoga practice that day. This will help you determine if it's more important to focus on certain themes, such as stress relieve, improving energy levels, back pain, core strength, hip openers, etc., as part of any one class.

4) Explain the benefits of specific yoga postures and breathing exercises. Studies have shown that educating students about their bodies and the effects of the exercises they are doing increases motivation and consistency of exercise.

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5) Remind students to breathe and to focus on their breath throughout their practice. When holding a difficult pose, students often begin to hold their breath. Remind them to breathe fully and deeply. It's not good for students to hold their breath when working hard to hold a posture. Focusing on their breath also brings their attention inward and can deepen their practice by stilling their mind and putting them more in touch with the present moment.

6) Encourage student to maintain a sense of ease – even during challenging postures. Remind students to breathe deeply and slowly and to relax the muscles in their face throughout the practice. A key aspect of yoga is the ability to relax and have a sense of ease, even during the most challenging times (both on and off the mat). While its beneficial for students to give their full effort as they practice challenging positions, their breath should remain slow and deep, and their face should remain relaxed, regardless of what they are doing.

7) Practice effective presentation skills. Make eye contact with individual students throughout the class. Be sure to make eye contact with all parts of the classroom. Stand tall with your arms relaxed at your sides to convey confidence, yet openness. Walk the room so you can get up close with your students and see what they need.

8) Focus on your students. By focusing on your students and their needs, rather than on how you are doing as a teacher, makes you less self-conscious and more confident and helpful.

9) Walk the room. Try not to stay up front too much. This only keeps you removed from your students. Be with your students so you can be more aware of what they need. Notice when someone needs help and offer an appropriate adjustment.

10) Know your material. The only way to truly feel confident teaching yoga is to know your material. This means understanding the effects of the yoga poses and breathing exercises you teach and understanding how they can benefit your students, as well as understanding the philosophy and history behind yoga.

11) Think about what you want your students to gain from your class. Think about that now. Question: What do you want for your student in general?

12) Be a good communicator.

Teaching a yoga class is different than speaking with a friend or teaching an individual. It's important to be clear and concise – using too many words can break the flow of the class and cause more confusion than help for your students. A good rule of thumb when offering instruction is to think of the body part and the way you want it to move.

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For example, your students are in down dog and you notice that many of them are keeping their hands too far apart. To remind the class of the best positioning of their hands, you could say “hands remain shoulder width apart, fingers spread wide” or “keeping your hands shoulder width apart, fingers spread wide.” If you want students to move from down dog into a lunge, you could say, “right foot steps forward between your hands,” or “stepping your right foot forward between your hands.” It’s a bit of a shorthand version of the way we tend to normally speak but is more precise in getting the point across. In this same situation, it would be less clear to speak in your regular conversational language, saying something like, “If your hands seem to be farther apart than your shoulders, then you may want to bring them closer together until they are about as far apart as your shoulders. Then, after you’re done, spread your fingers wide on the floor.” It just takes too long to speak this way in class and you may end up keeping your students in positions much longer than is appropriate for their particular class. Furthermore, your voice will eventually get tired if you use it that much.

13) Be in the moment.

When you’re teaching or during your own personal practice, it is important to give your full attention to what you are doing. In your own practice, focus on each movement and on your breath. In your teaching, focus on the words you are saying as you say them and focus on the movements of each students and how you may be of help.

14) Help students develop their inner awareness

Remind students to focus on the feel of a movement, rather than how it looks or how they compare to other students. Encourage students to focus inward on the feeling of a pose and on their breath. This helps students stay present in the moment and connect movement and breath. Reinforce the idea that the goal of yoga is not to get into certain positions, it’s to become more aware of the present moment and more comfortable with our bodies and our movements, as well as to keep our bodies and minds healthy through movement and focus. We all have different anatomy. What’s hard for me may be easy for someone else, that doesn’t make them a better yogi. Being a great yogi means understanding and accepting your mind and body, and taking time to care for both properly.

15) Remind students to not overdo

Many new students are excited about starting a yoga practice and may push themselves too far when using muscles they may not have used much for years. Encourage students to use the modifications you show them for different postures and to listen to their body. If they are having a hard time maintaining a smooth breathing pattern through their nose, they may want to back off a little bit. Students who push themselves too much during their first few lessons often end up sore the next day and are less likely to continue their yoga practice. Also, tell any potential new students to check with their doctor before signing up for yoga class, and make this point clear on any medical release forms they sign before starting class.

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It is important for students to never force themselves into a pose. The postures are a process of gradual discovery of the body's potential. Each person's body is different, so encourage your students to honor their own body and find their own edge in each posture – that point where they are challenged, but not forcibly straining their body or their breath. Encourage students to move slowly into each posture, so they can notice when their body is telling them to stop and not overdo it.

Teaching Skills That Reinforce Learning

Help students become their own teachers

Each student has two teachers: the outside teacher who guides them and their own inner guidance. Help your students develop their inner guidance, by helping them learn to connect with their bodies and make decisions about what works best for themselves. This way they can develop their own personal practice, and they can become more confident in their practice.

Demonstrate the posture

Demonstrate the posture while you talk your class through it the first time. Though there are times when it is necessary to demonstrate a posture before students begin (having them watch only first), it is best to demonstrate while they are also encouraged to begin trying the posture when they are ready. When teachers take a long time to demonstrate without keeping their students involved, students begin to get distracted and out of the flow of the class. You want to keep your students actively engaged.

Take it step by step

Talk students through a pose step by step, emphasizing that they can stop at any step along the way. Encourage students to only go to their edge – challenging themselves, but not overdoing it. Encourage students to go to their “edge” that point where they feel challenged, yet their breath can remain smooth and steady.

Repeat postures

Repeat postures at least once or twice. This gives students a chance to maybe mostly watch the first time, but still have enough opportunity to practice the posture on their own.

Mirror the postures. When facing the class, mirror the movements you demonstrate and do with the class. For example, when you say “reach your right arm overhead,” actually raise your left arm, so it mirrors the arm used by your class. When mirroring postures, it is usually best to use directional language rather than rights and lefts. For example, you might say “reaching your arm towards the wall with the windows” to let your students know which direction to move, as you mirror the movement in front of them.

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Practice: Try instructing someone through two postures that require right/left movement, while you are facing them.

Connect breath and movement. Breath plays an important role in yoga by keeping the mind focused on the body and by making movements more efficient by connecting breath with movement. Explain to students when to inhale and exhale. In yoga, it is usually best to inhale in expansion types of movements (i.e. bringing arms back or overhead, back bends, etc) and exhale in “closing” types of movements (i.e. folding forward, rounding the back) Encourage students to breathe in through their nose, if possible. This helps keep their bodies warm, helps filter the air they inhale, and helps keep breathing more smooth and the breath rate slower. Often when students try a new pose, they tend to hold their breath, so remind students to breathe throughout the practice.

Use positive reinforcement.

When you see someone doing something correctly, mention it to them and let them know you’ve noticed their progress.

Make appropriate adjustments

By learning how to make simple and appropriate adjustments, you can help your students gain correct alignment in a posture or go more deeply into a posture.

Review what you covered in class. Along with reviewing what you did in class, you can give students one or two specific postures or exercises to practice at home to encourage their home practice. Check back with students during the next class to discuss how the home practice went and if they have any questions.

Practice: Try instructing yourself or someone else through a couple of yoga postures. Make notes here about what you did well.

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Yoga for A LIFE Method

No matter what style of yoga you intend to teach, we have developed some overall teaching principles you can apply to any yoga class or fitness class through our Yoga for A LIFE Method. By applying this method, your students will enjoy a better overall experience in yoga class and gain an increase in their motivation to stick with your class and to continue practicing yoga in general.

The Yoga for A LIFE Method is comprised of the following parts:

A = Acceptance, Attitude, (Non)-Attachment.

Yoga is about acceptance rather than resistance – accepting yourself and your students. It's important to accept your students' limitations and faults, as well as your own, working together for progress, not perfection. Yoga is a journey with no end point. You have to learn to accept where you are in the journey and enjoy that moment.

Encourage students to accept themselves and their limitations and to learn to work with their body. This means reminding students to focus inside – focusing on the feeling of the stretch and on what their body can do, rather than focusing on the outside by comparing themselves with those around them and becoming critical of the way their body looks.

When students learn to accept a certain limitation and work with their bodies, they are able to achieve the actual results they want from their practice much more quickly and easily. Through acceptance, they will more quickly gain the benefits of a stronger body, a more peaceful state of mind, and a greater sense of inner awareness, than when they beat themselves up trying to recreate some ideal. Encourage effort and inner awareness, not perfection. Remind people to pay attention to how a pose feels, rather than what it looks like. We want students to simply stretch and strengthen their muscles, while learning to quiet their minds. They don't need to look like the cover of a yoga magazine.

Encourage students to listen to their bodies. Each day is different and what is appropriate for one day may not be appropriate for the next day. The sooner students accept that idea, the sooner they will experience the benefits of yoga.

As a teacher, it's important to accept everyone who comes to your class (yes, even that guy with the smelly feet). Accept your students where they are at, rather than trying to mold them into what you think they should be. Give them instruction, but remember that it is their practice, so don't force anything on them. If they want to lie in savasana for the entire practice, so be it. Of course, if someone is disruptive to others, you will need to enforce certain rules of common courtesy, and you will also want to make sure that each student is always practicing in a way that's safe, but beyond that allow students to practice in the way they need to that day. Find what you like about each student so you can better accept their flaws.

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Many people lack acceptance in their lives, so make yoga class a place where they feel accepted.

As teachers we all make mistakes. Learning to accept ourselves – mistakes and all, not only makes us happier, it makes us more effective teachers. When I first began teaching yoga, I would often get so caught up in what we were doing that I would sometimes lose track of time and be forced to rush through the final relaxation at the end of class. I would feel bad about rushing and would apologize to the class, which just made everyone more aware that I was rushing and anxious for the end of class. I learned to accept it when I made this mistake and focus on giving students a quality relaxation time, even if it was a few minutes shorter than usual (and remind myself to check my watch during the next class). When I didn't mention my mistake and simply focused on how to best serve the students with the time left, a great thing happened – not only did no one notice the lack of time, but they actually enjoyed the relaxation time more than usual. My acceptance of myself had translated into a more calm and confident demeanor, which put my students at ease and created a relaxed environment for the whole class. Your students watch you closely. The more you can accept yourself and your own limitations, the more your students will learn to do the same.

Question: Do you have any personal qualities or qualities as a teacher that you have trouble accepting?

Imagine that one of your best friends had those qualities. How would you help him/her accept those qualities in themselves. Speak to yourself in the same way.

Attitude and Non-Attachment

Like acceptance, it's important to have a good attitude. Two people can have the same experience, but see it in two very different ways. Choose the attitude that will best serve you, bring you happiness, and move your life forward.

One of the main points of the practice of yoga is to learn how to let go of attachments; letting go of attachments to things, experiences, other people, and your own identity. According to yoga philosophy, only by letting go of attachments can you fully enjoy the things, people, and accomplishments in your life. If you desperately cling to something or someone, it is based on fear of loss, and fear tends to drive things away. Yoga teaches you to go beyond the grasping at impermanent things and find your strength in that piece of you that is impermanent – that part of you that is beyond your thoughts, that is the awareness that observes your thoughts. If you can connect with that inner awareness and simply allow the other things to flow in and out of your life through the natural cycle of things, you will discover a deep and lasting joy that comes from within rather than

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being dependent on outside situations. Many people look to things, experiences, accomplishments, or other people for their sense of happiness, but through yoga we learn that our happiness is within us now. We just need to uncover it.

L = Listening.

Listen to your students and encourage your students to listen to their own bodies. Listening to their own bodies will help your students find their edge – that point where they are challenging themselves, but not overdoing it. The more your students can listen to their bodies, the more they will increase their knowledge and respect for their body, and the more they will be able to care for it. Your students will learn when to push forward, when to modify the posture, and when to rest.

By listening to their bodies, your students also learn how to withdraw some of their attention from the outside world – from the judgment or the opinions of others, and how to focus inward, allowing their mind to become more still and in the present moment. They will learn to focus on what they are doing and on their breath, rather than on the chatter in their mind.

It's also important to really listen to your students and tune into their needs. You may have planned the greatest class that focuses on building strength, but if your students need a quieter class that day, filled with relaxing postures, follow their lead.

Just the other day, I had planned to give a fairly energetic class for an evening class. However, when the students began entering the room, I knew I needed to make some adjustments. A few came in relating some stressful stories of the day, while many dragged themselves into the room, clearly in need of some rest. So, we started the class in child's pose, giving everyone a chance to relax and really focus inward. Instead of focusing on a variety of more strenuous postures as planned, we incorporated more calming and quieting postures. After the class became more relaxed, we were able to bring in some of the more active postures. By the end of class, everyone looked and sounded more calm and rested, as well as more energized. And, their feedback indicated they had received exactly what they needed from class.

So, listen to your students, and if you're not sure what they need that day, ask them. Ask them if there is a particular area of the body they feel needs more focus that day and ask them if there are general things they want to focus on, such as flexibility, strength, balance or relaxation. And give your students different modifications and variations for specific postures, explaining how the variation emphasizes a different area, such as flexibility, strength, balance or breathing, so they can practice in a way that is best for them.

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I = Intention, Individuality and Involvement.

Ask your students to set their intentions for the class. At the beginning of class, during breathing exercises, give your students a chance to think about what they want to get from class that day. Maybe they want to feel a little stronger or develop their flexibility throughout the class. Maybe they want to work on developing proper breathing throughout the practice or maybe they want to feel more relaxed by the end of class. Whatever it is, encourage your students to set an intention for that day's class – something they can focus on during each pose and that guides their overall practice. Do this for yourself in your own daily practice. Be clear about what you want from your practice.

Next, have a plan and an intention for your teaching. As you teach longer, it becomes easier to notice what your students need in the moment and include those things in the practice. When you first begin teaching yoga, it's best to come to class with a general plan. Of course, you usually need to alter your plan after listening to your class, but having a plan that needs some changes is much better than having no plan at all. No matter how long you have been teaching, it's always a good idea to think about what you want your students to get from the class before you begin.

Yoga is not a one size fits all type of practice. Remember that each person comes to yoga with a different background, different experience, and different abilities and perspectives. It's important to recognize each person and individualize your instruction to meet their needs. You can do this by providing modifications and variations for each posture or exercise, so each student can develop a practice that works best for them. Your students come from a wide range of physical abilities. It is important to safely and effectively meet the needs of all these students, not just the ones who are already physically able to practice each asana. The purpose of this program is to help you teach yoga to anyone who is interested.

Finally, be involved with your class. This extends on the idea of listening. Being involved means understanding what goes on with your students and helping them define how yoga fits into their lives.

F = Focus, Flexibility and Fun.

Developing focus and inner awareness is one of the most important aspects of any yoga practice. Because of this, you can't always tell if someone is having an effective yoga practice or is an experienced yogi just by looking at them. Yoga is an inside job. You may not be able to see the process as a student begins to develop more focus and inner awareness, but you can always encourage that development. Remind students to be mindful of their movements, and to focus on different parts of their body, on their breath, and on their thoughts. After a while, this inner focus becomes a habit; part of their yoga practice, and also part of their

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daily lives. You can sometimes tell when students have not yet developed inner focus, or do not yet see that as an important part of yoga. You may see students who push and grunt to force themselves into postures, or who often look around the room to compare themselves with others, or who have a difficult time relaxing in savasana or sitting for meditation. We all have those days. Simply remind your students to focus on the feeling of the posture, notice the thoughts in their minds, and follow the flow of their breath. This will help them develop that inner awareness and a true yoga practice.

When we talk about flexibility, it not simply about stretching your muscles, it's about the flexibility of your mind. In practicing and teaching yoga, it's important not just to develop a flexible body, but also a flexible mind. Things don't always happen as you plan, so it's important to learn to go with the flow and tune into your students' needs. For example, the first time a CD player broke before class, I was a little concerned about how it would affect the class (this was before ipods). I had always used background music to help set a calm mood for class and didn't like the idea that there wouldn't be any. But I decided to just go with the flow and tune into what we were doing. At the end of class, a number of students mentioned that that silence in the room actually helped them focus that day. To this day, I sometimes choose to teach without music and it's thanks to a broken CD player.

It's important for your students to have fun or you'll lose them. See yourself not only as a teacher, but as a little bit of an entertainer. One of my goals when teaching any yoga class is to get my class to laugh a couple times during the practice. Laughing is a natural stress reliever and also makes the class more enjoyable and fun, helping to reduce the competitive feelings that students often bring to class. You don't need to be a stand up comedian and you wouldn't want to be funny all the time. Much of the class time you are helping your students increase their inner awareness and you can't do that when you're cracking jokes every minute. But make sure and leave some time for laughing.

Making fun of students in your class is not funny. That would just make the students feel awkward, and it's unkind. The source of my humor in class is either my own odd shortcomings (and I have plenty) or something I find inherently funny about a particular posture. For example, I sometimes mix up my rights and lefts when teaching, so I may point this out to the students, or joke that I'm just trying to make class more challenging for them. It puts students at ease to know that you make mistakes and that you can laugh about those mistakes. I also may say something about a particular pose. For example, saying something like, "Well, isn't this an interesting way to see your neighbor" when we are in a standing straddle forward fold.

Another way to make class more fun is to get students off their mats. Have students use a wall as a prop for certain postures or have students work in pairs for a few minutes. I also like to turn students around, teaching from the back and

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sides of the room. This helps students stay more focused on what's happening in the moment, more focused on what they are doing.

E = Education and Experience.

As yoga teachers, we are educators first. We are teaching students not just a form of exercise, but teaching them how to pay more attention to their bodies, as well as a whole new way of looking at life. When teaching yoga, it's important to have a clear understanding of the anatomy of hatha yoga and how different postures use different muscle groups before you begin teaching. Only once you have this understanding can you also educate your students about the physical benefits of the postures they are experiencing. Studies have shown that educating students about their bodies and the effects of the exercises they are doing increases motivation. Besides mentioning the benefits of specific yoga postures throughout class, you can also give students handouts regarding some of the latest research regarding the benefits of yoga. It helps to educate them about how they are improving their health. By understanding the philosophy behind yoga, you can also help your students bring a yogic viewpoint to their every day lives. This can help your students become less reactive, more calm, and more present in the moment.

See yourself as an educator and a student. Students come to me with all sorts of questions. Often, I can give them an answer that moment, but sometimes I can't. I love those times when I'm not sure of the answer because, after I tell the student I will look into it, I get to learn more myself. As I search for an answer, it's like putting together a complicated puzzle. As educators, it's also important to know when to refer your student to someone else. If a student needs medical advice, make sure you refer them to their doctor first.

Experience your own yoga practice. Make a commitment to your own daily yoga practice, even if it's just for 20 minutes. It's the only way you will really understand your students and how yoga can make a life better. I can tell you that in all my time of daily yoga practice, I've never had one day that I didn't learn some new thing that I could then share with my students. In your own yoga experience, you learn things that you could never find in a yoga book.

Experience the principles of yoga off the mat. This means letting go of judgment against yourself and others, letting go of competition. Letting go of expectations, and making time to simply be, by listening to your breath and being fully aware of the present moment, not caught up in something that has already happened or something you are worried will happen. When you are feeling stressed, learn to stop for a few minutes and simply focus on your breath. You usually find that there are no problems in this moment, only peace if you choose to accept it. We are educators first.

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Helping Your Students Stay Motivated

Your students may eagerly start a yoga program, but later give it up, succumbing to frustration or loss of interest. Most people don't know how to maintain enough motivation to get them through the inevitable decline in enthusiasm and plateaus of their practice. Below are some ways to help your students maintain their motivation and enthusiasm for yoga or any other fitness program:

- 1) Vary your classes. Add new postures and modified tried and true postures in different ways. Of course, don't throw out your regular postures just for the sake of variety. Keep the tried and true postures, but add something new each week.
- 2) Have students try using different props for familiar poses. This is another way to create variety. Show students different ways to use yoga straps, blocks and bolsters. Be creative and try new things.
- 3) Encourage interaction between your students. Human beings are social creatures. Your students are more likely to keep coming if they have developed friendships with others in the class.
- 4) Frequently mention the specific mental and physical benefits of different yoga postures as your class is doing them. The more knowledge your students have about how yoga is benefitting them, the more likely they are to continue their practice.
- 5) After a student has been coming for a few months, ask them to complete the following, "Before I started yoga, my body and mind felt _____; since practicing yoga, my body and mind feel _____. What a difference." The student can keep this statement with them as a reminder of why they started yoga and how it has helped them.
- 6) Teach your students about some of the history of yoga and its development. No, you don't need to give a lecture, but once in a while, mention some historical anecdotes about yoga. Many students find they develop a deeper connection to yoga by learning more about its history.
- 7) Give your students some homework. Okay, you may think this is not what your students will want, however giving them one or two specific postures to practice will help keep them involved with yoga until your next class.
- 8) Teach your students about the philosophy of yoga and how they can apply that philosophy to their daily lives.

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Importance of Counter Poses

Yoga is about bringing balance to the mind and body. Through yoga, breath is connected with movement to balance the mind, while each major muscle group is both stretched and strengthened to balance the body. Counter poses help maintain the balance in the body, while also preventing injury. For example, after Camel (Ustrasana), which is a backbend that requires muscles in the back to contract, we follow with Childs Pose – a gentle forward bend that gently stretches the back, allowing the muscles that were contracted to then relax, preventing muscle spasms. Another example is plow and fish. Plow pose increases the stretch on the neck and upper spine, bending the spine forward, bringing the feet to rest behind the head. Fish pose acts as a counter pose, compressing instead of stretching the neck and upper spine, relieving local stiffness.

Camel



Childs Pose



Counter poses are discussed in more detail in the training sections on teaching and practicing yoga postures.

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Modifications

Many people may come to your yoga class needing to use modifications for certain postures. In the sections on teaching and practicing yoga postures, we'll discuss the specific modifications for most postures. An easy example of incorporating modifications is in Tree Pose (Vrksasana). In full Tree Pose, the sole of the foot is placed on the opposite inner thigh or crossed over the front of the opposite thigh. However, many people lack the flexibility or balance to do this, so for the modification, students can place the sole of their foot just above their opposite ankle.

Tree Pose



Tree Pose Modified



It's important to encourage students to practice the modification when needed and gradually work towards the full pose. Students should pay attention to the cues from their body during each practice and learn to notice when it's best for them to use modifications. This way students can maintain their focus and their breath and not risk injury, while also practicing with proper alignment.

Modifications are extremely helpful when teaching a group of students with very diverse physical abilities. Everyone can find a level that works for them. By using modifications, students can find the place where they are challenged, but not overwhelmed, giving them a good experience.

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Yoga for Special Groups:

There are many groups of people that require special consideration in yoga practice. This course is concerned with teaching yoga to typical adults and uses the term “students” to refer to typical adults who are medically fit to exercise.

It’s important to first become aware if anyone in your class has any pre-existing medical conditions, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, etc. Always have any potential students complete a medical release form, along with a brief medical history and personal intake form. The resources file of this course provides you with a sample intake form. Make sure that your students check with their doctor before beginning any yoga program.

Besides adults with existing medical problems, children and pregnant women need special consideration and should not be included in a class unless you understand how to modify certain yoga postures to create a safe and healthy practice for them. If you would like more information about teaching to these groups, please visit our website to see our teacher training resources and programs for kids and prenatal yoga.

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Sequencing a Yoga Practice

In most yoga classes, whether it's beginners, prenatal, kids, mixed level yoga, power yoga, or gentle hatha, you can think of your class as though you are going over a hill. You begin class slowly through focused breathing and warm ups, then begin to build intensity as you move through more challenging and active postures. After that, you begin to slow down as you move into seated and lying postures, and finally going into the stillness of savasana and meditation. In yoga practice, you also want to make sure that you have a constant mix between effort and ease. After practicing a challenging standing posture, give student a few moments to close their eyes and relax their breath. The rhythm of yoga practice is to begin slowly and build intensity. But even within those periods of intensity there is time for rest and reflection. Then begin to ease the intensity of the practice, and allow for more quieting postures, until you reach the stillness of savasana and meditation.

The follow sequence is a general sequence that will give you a starting point. This sequence helps ensure that the body is first properly warmed-up and that most of the deep stretching postures take place towards the end of class, when the muscles and body are thoroughly warmed-up, thereby preventing injury.

- 1) Breathing – start with breathing exercises to relax and gently warm-up the body as well as de-cluttering the mind before starting.
- 2) Warm-Ups – at least five minutes of warm-ups are important to prevent injuries and create a more effective practice
- 3) Sun Salutations/Moon Salutations – a continuation of warm-ups, these flowing exercises help to generate more heat in the body and gently stretch muscles before we begin holding yoga postures. In Sun and Moon Salutation, students learn to move with their breath – one movement for one breath.
- 4) Standing Postures – These include both Warrior Series postures (warriors, triangle, extended angle, lunges, etc) and Balancing Postures (chair, eagle, dancer, pyramid). Start with Warrior Series postures, then move into Balancing postures. Many of these postures include standing postures that require balance. These postures generally help improve muscles strength and balance, especially in the legs, while also providing at least some flexibility training. Students learn to use their breath to stay focused in the posture.
- 5) Kneeling/Core Strengthening/Arm Balances – These postures continue developing strength and balance, but tend to focus more on upper body and core strength and flexibility than standing positions (camel, side plank, gate, etc). Always use proper modifications for any students with knee problems. Some core strengthening inversions can be included in this section of class, such as dolphin or preparation for headstand.

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- 6) Prone Postures (belly lying postures, locust, cobra, bow) – Many of these postures focus on back strength and flexibility. Make sure to counter these postures with postures that gently flex the spine (child's pose).
- 7) Seated Postures – While some postures, such as Navasana (Boat) focus on strengthening the core muscles, most seated postures focus on stretching the muscles we have previously warmed-up (seated forward fold, seated twist, cobbler's pose).
- 8) Reclined/Supine Postures – These positions mainly include relaxed stretching poses or inversions, designed to stretch warmed-up muscles and relax the nervous system. However, some core strengthening poses, such as bridge, may also be included at the beginning of this section, before beginning the more relaxing postures (bridge, plow, fish, reclined spinal twist, etc).
- 9) Savasana – Teachers should allow at least 5 minutes towards the end of class for final relaxation (savasana). This guided relaxation and rest time allows the body to cool down and return to its natural state. It gives the body time to fully take in the practice and enjoy the feeling of energy flowing through it and helps to further eliminate any tension before the student leaves class.
- 10) Meditation – Teachers should encourage meditation for the final few minutes of class. The mind and body are in a relaxed state at this point, making meditation easier and more effective at the end of class.

Within each section, it's important to develop sequences in which each posture augments or counterbalances the one before it. Further discussion of how to sequence specific postures within each segment is discussed in greater detail in the continuing sections of this course on standing/balancing postures, prone and seated postures, reclined postures, and savasana, relaxation and meditation.

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Sample Lesson Plan

Use the following space to record your sample short yoga practice (don't worry about knowing the exact names for postures yet).

Breathing/Warm-Ups
(May include Sun Salutations)

Standing/Balancing Postures

Kneeling/Arm Balancing/Prone Postures

Seated Postures

Reclined Postures

Savasana

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Practicing at the Edge

One key way to challenge your students without overdoing it is to teach them about going to their “edge.” The expression “go to your edge” has been around in yoga circles since the 1970s, and it helps you pay attention to where you are in a pose.

Have students move as deeply as they can into a posture, using their breath for assistance. Your edge is that point where discomfort begins to intensify. At that point, back off slightly, while you breathe and relax, still staying in the pose. Then slowly and carefully go to your edge again and see if it has slightly shifted. Again, once you reach your edge, back off slightly while holding the pose and breathe deeply. When you are relaxed, carefully go to your edge again. Repeat this process three or four times, each time trying to slightly push your boundaries, or your edge. It’s an effective way to trick the mind into going further into a posture than you might otherwise think you can, and also an effective way of allowing the body to surrender into a posture, rather than forcing it. This process of riding out to explore your boundaries and then repositioning them in ever widening circles is an effective way to learn to confront your limitations and go beyond them.

Having a plan (teaching or home practice)

Make sure and come prepared to teach class. Having a class that seamlessly flows from one position to the next helps keep students in the flow of the class and focused on what they are doing. There are many times when a teacher may need to greatly modify original class plans to better suit the mood of the class that day. But, it is much better to modify than to start from scratch. Having a plan helps the teacher know where the class is headed and have more confidence in his or her teaching, as well as giving students more confidence in the teacher.

Even in your own practice, it helps to have a plan. This way you can focus on your breath and on the feel of the movements and not be distracted by thinking about what to do next.

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Establishing Your Own Daily Practice

It's important to have your own daily practice. It gives you a wealth of information that you can never find in a book, and gives you a better understanding of what your students feel within each posture and how you may be able to better help them. Having your own practice also reminds you why you began teaching in the first place and revitalizes your own interest in and appreciation for yoga. I know when I'm consistent about my daily practice, I'm a much better teacher – more in tune with my students and more confident. When I skip a few days of my own practice, not only does my teaching suffer – which is unfair to my students – but I become a little bit stressed and a little less patient with myself and those around me.

Your daily practice also helps keep you honest in your teaching. I only teach those things for which I have a personal understanding and appreciation. For example, I don't teach chanting and vocal sanskrit mantras beyond "aum" (om). Although I've studied and tried different forms of chanting and understand how its benefits come from the vibrations of the sounds rather than the meaning of the words, aum is the only sound that provides a positive effect for me right now. I can't then honestly teach other chanting as something profound and useful to me. I understand that some of my students will be interested in learning more about different vocal mantras, so I make sure I have resources available to share with them, so they can learn more about it from someone else.

Your daily practice does not need to be elaborate – even 20 to 25 minutes will do. It's more important that your practice is mindful – focusing on your breath and giving your attention to what you are doing in that moment and the sensations you are experiencing as you go through the postures.

It's much better to do a little bit everyday than to do a long and intense practice once a week. Only through daily practice can you truly begin to better understand your own body and mind and learn the subtle ways to still your mind and strengthen your body.

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Yoga Teacher Ethics

As a yoga teacher, it's important to abide by certain ethical standards when dealing with your students or colleagues. Below is a list of some of these standards. As always, use your best judgment.

Yoga Teacher Ethics Include:

- Conduct business in a manner that commands the respect of the public and remains true to the goals of providing safe and beneficial yoga classes.
- Respect the confidentiality of students and colleagues. Never disclose to anyone any personal information about a student or colleague unless authorized, in writing, by the student or colleague.
- Educate your students about the benefits of yoga and living a healthy lifestyle.
- Never discredit another yoga teacher or yoga studio or facility, unless the information can protect students from dangerous practices.
- Maintain your own yoga practice and healthy lifestyle. It's important to practice what you preach, which includes living a healthy lifestyle. Practice yoga, limit alcohol, limit junk food, get proper rest, etc.
- Maintain an open door policy to any of your classes. Make sure people are welcome to drop-in to any class and feel welcome.
- Ensure that all promotional material is truthful, accurate and clear. Do not use advertising or marketing procedures that mislead students or misrepresent pricing, staff abilities, class styles, or that produce sales based on fear or guilt.
- Maintain honesty in all business transactions through fair pricing for all and deliver what is promised through contract or otherwise.
- Provide a high value of service to enhance client confidence and loyalty.
- Remain current on theoretical and practical information in the field of yoga teaching through continuing education activities or through the reading/viewing of quality information.
- Never discriminate on the basis of gender, age, race, mental or physical disabilities or any other characteristics and provide fair and courteous treatment to all individuals.
- Comply with local and federal laws including, but not limited to, applicable business, employment, medical and copyright laws.

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Working with Specific Student Issues

Think about the following scenarios – you don't need to write anything down.

How could you best help the following students:

- 1) Student is very athletic and is focused on perfecting each pose and sculpting their body. They get frustrated when they can't do a posture and are competitive with other students, trying to determine who is the "best." They tend to look around at others, while practicing a posture.

- 2) Student is stressed or anxious. They move on from one posture to another before the posture is complete and often don't stay for Savasana.

- 3) Student is overweight and seems self-conscious about being in a yoga class. This student tends to stay in the back and look down at the floor. They seem to feel awkward and apologize for not being able to do something.

- 4) Student has a medical condition (pregnant, high blood pressure) which needs special attention, but they are in your regular hatha yoga class with ten other people. What are a few things you can do with them to keep their practice safe.

- 5) Student continually interrupts you while you are providing instruction or makes impolite or negative remarks about yoga in general or about other students during class.

- 6) Often students may encounter an emotional release after a powerful practice. How would you help a student who becomes very emotional (i.e. crying) in a larger class setting?

How would you also deal with the following situations: 1) loud noises during class (i.e. car alarms, cell phones, etc), and 2) student injury.

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Review Questions (for your own review)

Complete the following questions for this session of the teacher training program.

1. Explain the meaning of the word “yoga” and the underlying purpose of yoga.
2. When did the first yoga writings appear? In what work did these writings appear?
3. What was the first work of literature that defined yoga? Who wrote this piece of work?
4. Name at least three well-known modern day yogis and explain the contributions each one made to yoga.
5. List and describe the eight limbs of classical yoga.
6. Define and compare the different major styles (or historical branches) of yoga.
7. Define and compare three of the main forms of Hatha Yoga.
8. List at least 7 teaching strategies you can use to improve the overall experience for you and your students.
9. Name at least 8 ethical principles by which yoga teachers should abide.
10. What do the letters “A LIFE” stand for (represent) in the Yoga for A LIFE Method? Pick one part (one letter) of the method and explain how you can incorporate that idea into your own teaching and practice.
11. Name and describe five techniques you can use to keep your students motivated. Give an example of how you would use one of the techniques.
12. List the overall sequence you should follow when teaching or planning a yoga class.
13. Why is it important to include counter poses after practicing certain postures? Give an example of a pose and its counter pose.
14. What does it mean to “practice at your edge” in a posture.
15. Why do you think it’s important as a yoga teacher to have your own daily yoga practice?