

Helping Students “Own” Their Yoga Practice



It is wonderful to be valued for the work that we do, be it as a teacher or a healer, but the real magic of our work is the partnership that develops when we each take responsibility for our role in facilitating the process. *By Karen Schwartz*

Years ago, when I was practicing social work, it occurred to me that my goal might be to put myself out of business. If I could help my clients become self-sufficient and empowered, proactive instead of crisis-driven, able to find their own resources and develop healthy relationships with themselves and others, they'd no longer need my help—and I'd be out of business. It was an unrealistic goal, of course, since the world is large and complex, and people will always need help, for many different reasons. However, I couldn't help but wonder if what the helping system actually did was to foster a subtle, ongoing dependency that ensured we'd continue to exist.

As a Yoga teacher, I have similar thoughts about teaching. How many times have you had a student ask you to suggest a pose to work on some part of their body, when you know they've done that kind of pose many, many times before? Or perhaps you've worked with a longtime student or client who comes into a session aching, distressed, or unhappy, and leaves feeling peaceful, thanking you for the miracle you've performed?

I've come across many Yoga students over the years who put their Yoga in a box, practicing only in class or with their teacher, doing pose after pose without understanding the choices or the sequencing of each, never integrating adjustments and repeating patterns over and over. It can be nice to surrender the need to think and to ride the wave of group energy that develops in a class, but we know that's not the same as developing an individual practice—and I often hear students say they would practice at home if only they knew how to put the pieces together.

Just as people will always need help, there will always be new students who want to learn and others who want to deepen their knowledge, so a good teacher will always have a place. What I don't want is for students to feel that they can't do it without me, or that I have some mysterious power over them. In short, I want students to “own” their practice. If you do, too, then here are some elements you can weave into your teaching that will help students understand that there's no one-size-fits-all in Yoga, and they can begin to make the practice their own.

Begin with acceptance.

In our goal-oriented culture of self-improvement, it's almost impossible to approach a new endeavor without the notion that something in us needs to change, and Yoga is no exception. The idea of being more relaxed, centered, happier, peaceful, spiritual—somehow it all seems to imply that we need to be different, and better, than we already are. The paradox, of course,

is that without accepting the way things are right now, a subtle resistance develops that actually prevents change. We are who we are for many reasons, and those reasons need to be honored for the way they have served us in the past. The sooner you can set a tone that emphasizes acceptance—of tight hamstrings, of a stressed-out mind, of our fears and insecurities—the sooner students may begin to unhook from competition, comparison, and self-judgment, and allow the experience of Yoga to unfold.

Create an atmosphere of self-discovery.

I teach a lot of beginners, and one of my favorite questions to get is, “What am I supposed to be feeling?” The very phrasing of the question is telling. It supposes that there is a “right” way to do something and, if done that way, a particular result will follow. I notice this question coming up a lot in hip-opening poses, when students may be accessing a part of themselves from which they have been long disconnected.

On a physical level, different poses focus on different muscle groups, emphasizing strength, flexibility or both, and observing proper alignment principles means most people will feel a pose in the area of the body that is being emphasized. However, there can be many layers to an individual's experience, and breaking down the vast experience of sensation is a particularly rich area for discovery. Distinctions between discomfort, pain, and intensity are often finely edged, and sometimes change in an instant. Students can begin to differentiate between the feelings and their habitual responses to them—such as backing away, ignoring, or pushing through—and cultivate a moment-to-moment awareness of and sensitivity to feedback. When the emphasis shifts from goal orientation to honoring the self in this way, the practice becomes a rich metaphor for life.

Work with open-ended questions and encourage exploration.

If you do get the “What am I supposed to be feeling?” question, and you answer “your left hip” or “your right hamstring,” you've closed off an opportunity for exploration. An open-ended response would simply be “What *are* you feeling?” This way, you and your student can determine whether the pose needs physical adjustment, or whether there is a deeper issue to be explored. I like to explain alignment concepts in terms of safety, but encourage experimentation to help students understand lines of energy and how to make the pose feel alive for them. Even beginners can start to understand how this works.

Help students develop holistic awareness.

In most poses, there is usually one part of the pose that grabs the attention—for example, the inner thigh in *utthita trikonasana* (extended triangle pose), or the side of the body in *utthita parsvakonasana* (extended side angle pose). In these poses, it's common to see the head hanging off to the side or the shoulders hunching up to the ears, creating and holding tension or breaking the energy flow. I remind students that they are working with the body as an energy conductor, bringing life and awareness to parts of the body from which they have been closed off, and freeing blocked energy from areas where it's trapped. Opening up one part of the body only to close off another simply shifts the imbalance in the system. I ask students to “move their awareness around the pose,” noticing where there is the most sensation,

and where there is the least. Striking a balance in energy flow, between strength and flexibility, between pushing and yielding, mirrors the efforts we all need to make to balance our work and home, friends and family, service to others and to self. Bringing awareness through the physical practice is a great first step.

Share your “failures.”

While there is a healthy professional boundary to maintain between you and your students, they like to know you aren't perfect (even if you think that's evident). Letting them know some of the challenges you've faced, and continue to face, gives them hope and minimizes the expectation that there are goals to be achieved. I often share with students that when I started teaching Yoga, I had been teaching health and fitness for years, and I couldn't believe how difficult the practice could be. It was a whole different way of working from what I was used to. It was about two years before I understood that it wasn't a competition, with myself or anyone else, and it was only then that I began to be able to accept myself and let the practice unfold.

There have been plenty of times when I've fallen out of a pose in front of students, or that I've practiced challenging poses with them but not quite “gotten” them. Students appreciate your commitment and your expertise, but they want to feel like the practice is accessible.

Get out of your “right” mind.

It's also important to realize that there is often a very distinct hierarchy created in our conditioning about teaching and learning. The teacher is the one who knows, the expert, the “guru.” Certainly, many Yoga traditions have a hierarchical orientation

themselves. We speak reverently about own gurus and teachers, and authoritatively about traditions and meanings—what is “right”—often without realizing what we are doing, or without giving credence to the possibility that there may be different interpretations.

Of course, we all have a point of view. However, students may go to different classes and teachers and get conflicting reports about what is “right.” The more you know about the different traditions and can explain the various provenances of different approaches, the broader your students' options are. I always explain what I teach and why I teach it, and if there is something I believe in strongly, I will express that. But I always emphasize that each person is unique, and it is up to them to find what works best for them. This may change over time, as our lives and bodies also change with time.

It is wonderful to be valued and acknowledged for the work that we do, be it as a teacher or a healer, but the real magic of our work is in our relationships with students and the partnership that develops when we each take responsibility for our role in facilitating the process. I want to help my students learn the techniques of body and mind that will help them heal, relax, grow, and find peace for themselves. I hope the practice of Yoga becomes an integrated, essential part of their lives, and I want them to benefit from my guidance, but not be forever dependent upon it. □

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