

Teaching Yoga: Essential Foundations and Techniques (2010)

by Mark Stephens

From the Introduction

Teaching yoga will change your life. It will continually bring you back to your earliest motivations to practice and add abundant clarity to the first questions you asked yourself about yoga. These questions are almost invariably philosophical and personal, the answers shifting amid the currents of our lives. Who am I? What makes me feel happy and balanced? How can I make things easier and steadier in my life? Even after years or decades of practice, most teachers' motives are still evolving. Jim Frandeen, sixty-five, a yoga teacher for many years and a student since his early forties, just completed his fourth teacher-training program in part because, as he puts it, "the more I practice and teach, the more I realize there is to learn about myself and life—so here I am, feeling like it's all just beginning."

Students come to yoga for a variety of reasons. For many it is a way to relax and reduce stress from living in a world of cell phones, high-pressure jobs, relationship challenges, and the fast pace of modern life. Yoga's widely proclaimed health benefits bring many people to the practice. Some are looking for the "hot workout" and perfectly sculpted body highlighted in the media courtesy of yoga practicing stars like Madonna and Sting. Others, however, are interested in inner harmony, balance, and a sense of overall well-being. Some are motivated by pain or suffering, looking to yoga as a way to heal and feel whole. Still others consciously gravitate to yoga seeking a sense of spiritual connection or growth. For most it is a combination of these and other goals.

The role of the teacher is to provide inspired support and informed guidance to students pursuing these varied and changing aims. When teachers create safe and nurturing yoga classes where students can explore and experience anew the body, mind, and spirit, amazing things start to happen. New sensations arise in the body. Just breathing becomes a profound tool of awareness. The mind becomes clearer and stronger. Emotions even out, the heart opens, and the spirit soars. You simply feel better—more vibrant, more alive.

Our ability as teachers to help students develop and sustain their yoga practice in keeping with their personal intentions rests upon three basic foundations.

First, continually cultivating our own personal practice keeps us strong, clear, and connected to the evolution of yoga. It also refreshes the well from which we draw new insight and inspiration. In his autobiographical introduction to his book *Yoga: The Spirit and Practice of Moving into Stillness*, Erich Schiffmann (1996, xxiii) tells the story of how he first fully awakened as a teacher. In learning from Joel Kramer to be "guided from within," Schiffmann tapped into an endless well of experience in which "each

session is a learning event.” The lessons we learn on the mat as well as from our teachers and students are invaluable when giving guidance to others on their mats.

Second, deepening our understanding of how bodies work—biomechanically, physiologically, and as the embodiment of spirit and life experience—gives us an essential set of tools for offering appropriate instruction. While our experience on the mat is essential, the marvelous diversity of people and the different conditions they uniquely bring to the mat requires ongoing learning about functional anatomy, common injuries, alignment principles, physical and emotional risks, pregnancy, the respiratory process, and many other aspects of our being.

Equipped with more knowledge and greater understanding, we can teach more safely. As yoga continues to grow in popularity, many teachers are entering the profession unprepared for working with the diverse array of students in their classes. Popular news articles on yoga teaching with titles like “In Over Their Heads” (Los Angeles Times, August 13, 2001) and “When Yoga Hurts” (Time, October 4, 2007) are an unfortunate reflection of a growing trend of students getting hurt in classes. This is the last thing a teacher wants written about his or her own heartfelt work. Third, drawing intelligently from the wide variety of styles and sources available to us from the historical evolution of yoga provides an essential foundation for effective teaching. For just about every intention one finds in a yoga class, there is a tradition and style of yoga to inform and fulfill it. Within the various traditions and styles, a teacher’s approach to the craft gives further nuance to students’ experience. Most of the styles and approaches are, wittingly or not, rooted in a vast and rich web of ancient to contemporary writings on the nature of being, the physical body and mind, healing, and spirit. Tapping into these sources, teachers find greater ease in navigating the shifting tides of interest, need, and motivation arising from students and their own lives. Exploring the vastness of yoga philosophy and literature creates a richer, deeper palette from which to draw in the art of teaching yoga.

This is the focus of chapters One and Two, exploring the received wisdom of ancient yoga traditions and the development of modern Hatha yoga, respectively. A marvelous quality of human beings is our natural dynamism. Even when choosing stillness we are still moving, our hearts beating, breath flowing, all our systems at work. When we choose to move, it is often with unconscious actions as our neuromuscular and skeletal systems interact. In the body-mind-spirit practice of Hatha yoga, we are becoming more and more aware of how we move, how we position our bodies, how we breathe, where we are in our minds, how we feel throughout our being, how we might move into a sense of stillness. In this way, all Hatha yoga is Vinyasa Flow—vinyasa meaning simply “to place in a special way” and flow denoting the conscious dynamism of movement within and between poses. While some classes flow more than others, even in a Restorative or Iyengar-oriented practice with long

holds, there is always dynamic movement that involves consciously placing the body-breath-mind in a special way. To flow we need form and a stabilizing structure. Like a river flowing from the mountains, the riverbank, riverbed, and objects along the way channel the flow just as the flow changes the shape and conditions of that which holds it. Sometimes a powerful flow will break the banks, creating a new relationship along a different path in a way that could be a disaster or a blessing, depending on what happens. Sometimes the structure is so rigid, like the concrete walls of the Los Angeles River, that the flow is constricted to a point of seeming lifelessness. With time, with evolution, a new balance is always emerging, the flow expressed in new and wondrous ways. “The interplay of structure, rigidity, and form with formlessness,” says Ganga White (2007, 114), “makes up the movement of life.”

In consciously flowing in Hatha yoga practice, there are two sources of guidance: the outer teacher and the inner teacher. Their roles are similar even while their experiences of what is happening in the moment are different. Both are listening, watching, using what they feel and know to adjust and refine in ways that create a more beautiful experience. The inner teacher is ultimately the best guide, using physical sensations, emotional states, and knowledge to find what feels right. The outer teacher—being trained and well practiced in sensing how subtle energy flows in the body, how muscles and joints work and possible risks of injury, how to modify asanas to cultivate ease and stability, how to work with the breath— guides the student in deepening his or her relationship with that student’s own inner teacher and thereby his or her practice.

Understanding how the body works is a key part of being a yoga teacher. Part of the challenge is that the human being is described with a completely different language and set of concepts in traditional yogic and Western scientific models. One has prana, koshas, nadis, and chakras; the other has systems made up of bones, tissues, nerves, organs, and fluids. Each makes sense only when understood as a whole comprised of its interrelated elements. Prana makes no sense without the concept of nadis, just as bones are largely devoid of practical meaning when viewed separately from tendons, ligaments, and muscles. Furthermore, each perspective has a view of the other. The traditional yogic perspective sees the physical body as an expression of cosmic and subtle elements, while the Western scientific model tends to dismiss any notion of nonmaterial or nonphysiological forces as religious in the traditional perspective suggest that technology is simply not yet capable of detecting the reality of subtle energy, while some who are committed to the Western scientific perspective acknowledge the possible material effect of mystical or spiritual forces. In the dance-like interplay of these two views, we are treated to a rich array of insights to guide us in our teaching.

Chapters Three and Four explore the elements of energetic flow, form, and structure that

expand the scientific foundations of our teaching palette. We first review concepts of subtle energy and anatomy, recognizing the formative stream of tantra—a conception of human beings and the universe as an integrated whole— as a key element in hatha, or physical, yoga. Then we look at basic functional anatomy and biomechanics through the lens of the yoga teacher, paying close attention to the spine, pelvic and shoulder girdles, feet, ankles, knees, elbows, wrists, and hands. Here we will lay the foundation for what to watch for, how to see not merely bodies but people in their bodies dynamically doing yoga. We expand this part of the teaching palette in Chapters Five and Six, exploring how to create favorable space for students to deepen their practice (Chapter Five) and fundamental principles and techniques for guiding that practice (Chapter Six). These general principles are given practical application as we look closely at teaching 108 asanas (Chapter Seven), several pranayama techniques (Chapter Eight), various approaches to meditation (Chapter Nine), sequencing asanas and planning classes (Chapter Ten), and working with diverse student conditions and intentions (Chapter Eleven). And in Chapter Twelve, we look at yoga as a profession, offering guidance on navigating the business aspect of yoga in a way that allows you to sustain yourself as a teacher.

Yoga originated in India, where much of its development was expressed through the ancient Sanskrit language. The meaning of many yoga concepts is still best stated in Sanskrit, and wherever there is translation there is concern about accuracy. This might not be an issue for teachers whose approach eschews all reference to yoga’s ancient roots. Many other teachers (as well as books, periodicals, and electronic media) do draw from the ancient teachings and also employ the Sanskrit terms for concepts and asanas (which means “to take one seat”). The most commonly accepted and used terms for asanas and other aspects of yoga are drawn from the Krishnamacharya lineage, reflecting the widespread influence of teachers such as B. K. S. Iyengar, Pattabhi Jois, and T. V. K. Desikachar. Yoga Journal magazine has further popularized this terminology (and the related spelling forms). Throughout this book we use these terms and forms, providing English translation with each first instance of the term. All Sanskrit terms can be found in the glossary, and all asanas are additionally listed in Appendix C with their English and Sanskrit names.

The ultimate language of yoga is expressed in doing yoga, a practice that transcends words as we open our lives to living more consciously through the infinite wisdom of the heart. It is in this wisdom that we take the seat of the teacher, sharing yoga with all who cross our path. In my own experience as a yoga teacher, nothing has so changed my life as the commitment to sharing yoga in a way that helps students to develop their own personal and sustainable practice. From my earliest days as a teacher in Los Angeles to the present—and whether teaching public or private classes, beginners workshops or teacher trainings, working with famous celebrities or convicted felons—every one of my students

has been my teacher, each in his or her way bringing new light to my practice and teaching.
May this book similarly inspire and guide you along your path as teacher.