

PERSPECTIVE

The Use of Touch in Yoga Teaching and Therapy: Principles and Guidelines for Effective Practice

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The use of touch in yoga and in yoga therapy is often overlooked. Touch is extremely important to physical, psychological, and spiritual growth across the lifespan. It is one of the prime environmental drivers of human development (Hunter & Struve, 1998). Infants can fail to thrive and even die from lack of tactile stimulation and affection (Field, et al., 1986; Harlow & Harlow, 1962; Older, 1982). Although touch is critical to health and well-being at every age and stage of life (Hunter & Struve, 1998), it is not often considered an essential tool in the yoga therapy and education process. This perspective describes the role and significance of touch in the practice of yoga.

In the yogic tradition, the *jnanendriya* or “knowledge-sense” of tangible touch and its connection to sensory mind, *manas*, relate to the contact with objects that creates physical sensations. There is also intangible touch in which our manas experiences touch on a nonphysical plane. In class experiments with psychology graduate students I have discovered a great deal of variability in how people perceive tangible and intangible touch. Some are particularly sensitized to the presence of another long before any physical contact occurs. This holds true for yoga students and yoga therapy clients as well.

In addition to its traditional conceptualizations of touch, yoga includes examination of communication through the subtle body (*sukshma-sarira*) by means of *prana* and at a more subtle level through the lower and the higher mind. Individuals often sense the aggressive intention of another long before witnessing any body language or touch to confirm that perception. How often are you aware that someone is watching you by feeling his or her presence and attention? This awareness also translates to the energetic transmission that occurs in the classroom or therapy session. If a teacher or therapist is stressed, distracted, depressed, anxious, or aroused, those states can be communicated through tangible and intangible touch. Positive states of relaxation and higher awareness may also be transmitted through touch (Avalon & Pandit, 1965, 2000).

In yoga teacher training workshops on touch and adjustment we have witnessed considerable ambivalence when trainees are asked to use touch with their students. Ambivalence may lead to overadjustment or underadjustment, and students or clients may experience discomfort when the instructor is mentally or physically ungrounded. There are also many individual differences in how individuals experience touch. When asked about their experience regarding physical adjustment during a recent survey, yoga students' comments

varied: “I don't like it; it brings me out of yoga.” “It felt like she pushed my arm and I resisted.” “I tend to go to my boundary and when somebody comes around I feel like I should go further and sometimes it hurts.” “I loved it; I loved to be touched.” Clearly, there is a great deal of variability in how yoga students experience physical adjustment during class. Responses can be influenced by a history of trauma, age, current injury or illness, cultural norms, and other factors that require teachers and therapists to be mindful in their use of touch.

Principles for Skillful Touch

What are the principles required to ensure that a yoga teacher or therapist is skilled and effective in the use of touch? First, the mind of the teacher or therapist must be clear and centered. It is essential that teachers and therapists sit for a period of meditation before working with clients, and practice moment-to-moment mindfulness (*anusmrti*, Pali *anussati*). Through continuous practice, the clarifying effects of meditation will generalize to other behaviors over time.

Second, the least invasive adjustment should be used to enable a student or client to deepen his or her experience of the practice and to achieve a sense of balance and independence. This approach may involve a word or a visual cue rather than touch. Visual or behavioral cues may be particularly appropriate for those with a history of trauma or those whose culture places limitations on acceptable touch.

Third, the use of touch depends on the intention of a class or session. If there is an orientation toward analysis of the physical form and alignment, there may be greater need to use physical cues to achieve optimal learning. If the intention is to cultivate an internal experience of the flow of a sequence of postures for meditative purposes, physical touch or adjustment may undermine that process and be disturbing or distracting.

Last, it is important for teachers and therapists to be cognizant of their personal intentions and motivations for using touch. It is important to examine whether the use of touch (a) serves the need to be experienced as a good teacher or therapist rather than nurtures the client's experience and development, (b) is driven by physical attraction, or (c) is motivated by the goal of enabling students and clients to cultivate an experience of their body rather than being driven by an abstract notion about the need to achieve perfect alignment based on photographs of postures.

Hunter and Struve (1998) offer great insight about therapeutic touch. The importance of understanding one's motivation and discussing the ethics and practice of the use of touch cannot be underestimated. This is particularly relevant when working with vulnerable populations, such as children and adolescents, elderly adults, and individuals who have a history of trauma.

Guidelines for Educational and Therapeutic Touch

Bearing in mind these considerations, we recommend the following guidelines for the use of touch in yoga.

1. Hold yourself in a healthy state of self-relationship in which you are aware of your boundaries and beliefs about the use of touch. Place your mind and heart in "right-relationship" and consider the practices of meditation and *nadi-sodhana* to clear your prana system before engaging with clients or students.
2. Hold your students or clients in your mind with selfless love. Let them be touched intangibly by your love and the knowledge that their welfare is your priority. Consider sitting briefly with clients at the beginning of a session to create a clear intention and to surrender yourself to the teachings of spirit and the absence of ego in whatever way works for you.
3. Have a clear discussion with students and clients about your respective feelings and values with regard to touch and about your procedures. When appropriate, be clear that physical realignment may occasionally be necessary and will be done in a respectful and constructive matter. Invite continuous dialogue and feedback and inform students that they can decline an adjustment at any time.
4. Always consider whether or not touch is essential and whether or not you can use visual or verbal cues instead.
5. When touch seems essential, approach the situation mindfully and be clear about what is being done and why. Ambivalence is often a sign that the instructor or therapist is not clear about what needs to be adjusted or the proper procedure for doing so.
6. Make your presence known visually, verbally, or with a confident, supportive touch to a neutral part of the body (e.g., a hand on the shoulder) before making an adjustment.
7. Touch the student or client during exhalation when there is a greater likelihood that the individual will be able to relax into the posture and be less resistant.
8. Be emotionally supportive and physically stabilizing. There is a psychological reason why Patanjali places *sthira* before *sukha* in Yoga-sutra II.46. There is a dance between stability and change. The need for stability must be honored to foster sustainable change. The absence of stability may increase the risk of resistance and injury.
9. Clearly imagine the minimal action needed, then proceed in a way that inculcates balance and promotes stability, comfort, and independence.
10. Offer the student or client space to explore what has changed, then enthusiastically reinforce their efforts. This enables a person to encode a positive, kinesthetic memory of the experience and the adjustment and facilitates learning.

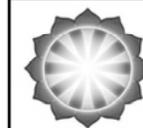
Conclusion

The importance of touch to human growth and development is undeniable. It is essential to develop the skills to ethically, responsibly, and skillfully use touch in yoga practice. It is important to clarify your views about the use of touch in yoga instruction and therapy to cultivate mindful awareness while working with students or clients. When performed with wisdom and right intention, touch will enable students and clients to experience nurturance and transformation and teachers and therapists to deepen their awareness of the practice.

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