

Why Assist?

Remember that asanas are an expression of unique human beings, not ideal or static forms or "poses." –

Mark Stephens, Teaching Yoga, © 2010, pg. 119

It's fundamental that we clarify for ourselves why we are choosing to assist a student with verbal cueing, physical adjustments or other teachings.

Some reasons teachers have for assisting a student include:

- 1 Remove student from an unsafe position due to poor alignment, excessive forcing, or other factors that might lead to injury.
- 2 Give information about alignment of pose.
- 3 Give information about energy of pose.
- 4 Increase student's awareness of her body or breath.
- 5 Provide alternative ways of experiencing the pose, either to add interest, variety, depth or other.
- 6 Provide encouragement.
- 7 Respond to student who has questioning look or is otherwise asking for clarification or guidance.
- 8 Give student a "feel good adjustment" that helps to deepen stretch, massage muscles or otherwise bring an "aaah."

Following are additional reasons teachers might (perhaps unknowingly) desire to assist but that are less clearly appropriate indicators:

- 1 Student "doesn't look right" so teacher needs to try something.
- 2 Teacher learned a cool adjustment for the pose & wants to show it.
- 3 Teacher likes to show her skill in a pose.
- 4 Teacher feels she needs to give an answer or otherwise demonstrate expertise.

Preparing for Assists

Throughout this process of learning to see and relate to students, remember that you are teaching yoga, not trying to get people into poses. Keep coming back to the principle of yoga as a practice of process,

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not of attainment. Try to look at each student as the unique and beautiful person he or she is in the moment.

Explore how you can share what you are seeing in a way that helps the student to see more easily and clearly and to feel his or her own body, breath, and practice. Keep watching, keep breathing, feel your heart. — Mark Stephens (Teaching Yoga © 2010, pg 122)

We might use that beautiful reminder from Mark Stephens as our premise. The following are considerations gathered from numerous sources to help guide or refine our approach to assisting & adjusting.

Understand the Pose & General Student Issues

- 1 Before offering assists, we ensure we have a deep understanding & experience of the pose.
- 2 Know primary cautions of pose.
- 3 Be comfortable with variations to adapt pose.
- 4 Be familiar with common issues for students and how different bodies experience the pose.

Cultivate our Ability to See

- 1 Be grounded in our body & connected with our breath.
- 2 Engage in a mindfulness practice (also known as calling in our Witness) to stay abreast of our reactions while observing & interacting with students.
- 3 As possible, soften & broaden gaze, endeavoring to see & feel student in a big picture way.
- 4 Feel, empathize & imagine what student is experiencing.

Make Observations

- 1 First: observe areas of caution or risk in the pose.
- 2 Observe student's breath & overall comfort including signs of tension, resistance or fear.
- 3 Assess student's physical capabilities & challenges.
- 4 Observe student's body awareness.
- 5 Note where student appears to be focusing her effort.

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- 6 Observe alignment in feet, calves, knees, hips, spine, collarbones, arms, shoulders, and head.

Choose to Assist

- 1 Be clear with yourself about purpose of assist.
- 2 Assess whether there is time to provide the assist before leaving pose.

Verbal Assists

When we choose to guide a student in better alignment or a deeper expression of a pose, we may wish to refine our cueing or offer a different verbal teaching. Some options to do this include:

Teach the point we wish to make to the whole class.

- 1 Oftentimes, teaching to the whole class can be the easiest, least disruptive, and most effective way to respond to something we see in students.
- 2 We might give verbal instruction and cues, potentially adding additional demonstration.
- 3 This is a nice "go to" strategy.

Give a verbal teaching directed to a particular student or go to the student for one-on-one instruction.

- 1 When there is a student who is at a level different from the rest of class or she isn't responding to previous instruction, then we can learn to quickly note the elements in Preparing for Assists.
- 2 If we choose to make further effort with a more personal teaching, we can then decide whether to verbalize to the student from afar or go to the student.
- 3 Giving on-on-one instruction is a very common practice used by many excellent teachers. When possible & appropriate, the benefits of moving to the student include being able to show her the pose more closely, provide touch if appropriate, and provide more discreet interaction.

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- 4 The experience and connection between teacher and student plus observation of the student's comfort in her body can help identify suitable teaching options.
- 5 New teachers may also wish to be mindful of their intention and be sure to practice observing the student carefully. This can then guide the tone & technique for offering the assist.

Energetic Adjustments

What is Energy?

- 1 Energy may refer to the energy of the body or of the mind or both.
- 2 Physically, energy usually refers to the movement occurring in various systems of the body such as blood circulation and nerve impulses.
- 3 Energy of the mind refers to the way in which thoughts and awareness direct energy and movement and result in an action or other manifestation.

Yoga & Energy

- 1 In yoga philosophy, *prana* is the name for the underlying life force energy and our energy anatomy is described through *chakras* (energy centers) and *nadis* (energy channels).
- 2 Much of the benefit of Hatha Yoga can be said to be the effect of the practices on the "energy body."
 - 1 Better alignment, stability, and flexibility remove obstacles to free physical energy flow.
 - 2 Breath practices, sensory withdrawal, concentration & meditation tend to lead to a spacious perspective and a more positively focused direction for mental energy.
 - 3 So from this perspective, we might consider any assists we provide as "energetic" in the sense that there is no real separation between physical and energetic bodies; we experience them as directly related.

Therapeutic Touch

- 1 In addition, some people work specifically with energetic touch, also called healing or therapeutic touch.
- 2 Perhaps the most fundamental aspects of energy work are awareness and intention. To work directly with energy, we want to be very aware of our own present state and that of the student. Good energy workers have a clear and positive intention for any healing touch.
- 3 Typically, energy practitioners have their own learned and personal process for moving into a meditative awareness prior to providing intentional touch. Sometimes teachers without such training and experience, but with particular sensitivity, may feel themselves in such a meditative state and find themselves drawn to a particular area.
- 4 We are taught that it is very important to stay grounded, aware and relaxed, and to use deliberate and non-sensual touch.

For More Information

If you have recommendations we can share related to energetic touch, please [tell us](#) about them. One excellent teacher we found is Jillian Pransky, who specializes in restorative teacher training. As part of this training, she provides excellent background and practice to help teachers develop observation & intuitive skills, and to provide energetic touch. For more information, see her [website](#).

Physical Adjustments

We may wish to note before beginning the adjustment if the pose is two-sided. If so, judge whether we'll have the opportunity to do both sides.

Moving Into Student's Space

- 1 Move gradually.
- 2 Move with clarity.

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3 We may wish to provide verbal support, questioning or cueing as suits our intention, style & familiarity with student.

4 When asking for student permission, consider this point of view:

I believe the question shouldn't be 'is this okay?' I believe we should teach and be taught. The question should be 'can you go farther?' If my teacher had asked me that, perhaps of my own volition I would've broken through my own barriers and moved my ribs back on my own. Perhaps she could have asked 'can I show you?' and then placed her hands on me, which would truly be the essence of teaching: to show me how to get there myself.

Both options seem better than a passive yes or no, where I am tacitly asked to usurp my practice to what she thinks my practice should be, and where she then is forced to bear the responsibility of my practice herself. As teachers and students we need to compromise with touch to enhance the experience so we both grow from it equally. – Brandy Reinke, Whole Life Yoga Blog 4/29/13, [Touch Me or Touch Me Not?](#)

Stabilizing

- 1 To avoid taking the student out of balance and to increase the likelihood the adjustment will be effective, we must stabilize both ourself and the student.
- 2 We first stabilize our own posture. Oftentimes, being in a lunge, horse stance or squat are conducive to physical adjusting. Avoid being out of balance.
- 3 Next, we stabilize the student. This can be key to making the adjustment feel safe and for it to be efficient & effective.

Using Mindful Touch

- 1 We can vow to stay present and in our own breath, using the power of touch in a mindful way.
- 2 We strive to make our touch firm and confident without aggression, timidness or sensuality.

Exiting

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- 1 We exit the adjustment & the student's space as mindfully as entering it, releasing pressure gradually.
- 2 In cases where student is balancing in some way, ending for a breath or two with minor contact can give her time to stabilize before exiting.