

AUSTRALIAN YOGA JOURNAL ISSUE 50

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LIFE IN BALANCE

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*a Playful
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PROFILE

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"Get the mind right and
the body will follow"

Melbourne's
dynamic Yoga scene

APRIL 2016

ADJUSTMENT

To assist or not to assist?

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Beauty
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How to move
from Supta
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Healthy, tasty, and creamy ... savour the rich
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Let's get physical ...

To assist or not to assist?

By Diana Timmins

Ever enjoyed a profound 'aha!' moment as you are guided into a pose? Or perhaps you implored the earth to swallow you—mat and all— upon a teacher's approach? We look at the benefits (or not) of offering a helping hand.

"TEACHERS CAN FEEL psycho-physical resistance when adjusting some students, even if they requested or need it. A teacher must be sensitive, wise and empathetic toward students; many take adjustments as an ego trip, which is when things can become ugly. *Ahimsa* (non-violence) is the first rule of yoga; if we cannot follow it, are we yoga teachers at all?" queries chairman of Pondicherry's International Centre for Yoga Education and Research (ICYER), Dr Ananda Balayogi Bhavanani.

Realistically, very few would knowingly utilise their hands as weapons of mass destruction, but accidents do happen, even among experienced practitioners and teachers. Sydney-based Yin Yoga teacher and This is Yoga co-founder, Mel McLaughlin, says safe adjustments require a gentle, methodical, intelligent and patient approach.

"Adjustments can be really helpful at the right time with the right person in the right way; this takes trust on both sides of student-teacher relationships. With no agenda and a 'less is more' attitude, adjustments can help students go where they might not go alone," says McLaughlin.



“Teachers can’t be certain of anyone’s story—vulnerabilities, traumas, random rubbish days—and must remain mindful, perhaps intuitive about this ...”

Modern touch

The 2016 Yoga in America Study (*Yoga Alliance and Yoga Journal*) revealed that only 56 per cent of participants considered physical adjustments characteristic of a great yoga teacher; many favouring friendliness, clarity and knowledge. Despite this, instructors often feel pressured to ‘teach off the mat’; a movement emphasised among Western culture, where yoga’s physical component of *asana* (postures) popularly dominates.

“Indian culture is ‘hands-off’ in nature as opposed to the ‘hands-on’ pattern prevalent in modern times. Yoga sprouted from the fertile soil of Indian culture and hence emphasises verbal and nonverbal cues to help students find their own ‘inner adjustments’,” explains Dr Bhavanani.

“Physical adjustments are not part of the ICYER syllabus. We trust the intelligence of our students and facilitate their learning by developing a sense of keen observation, mindfulness, and listening to both teacher and their body-mind-emotion complex. We prefer not to physically adjust anyone unless absolutely required; in which case, informed consent is needed, especially in a modern context where people are very sensitive to ‘personal space,’” he adds.

Gaining consent is vital, yet often overlooked. So, without making an embarrassing song and dance, how can teachers determine who says “yay” or “nay”? Some studios utilise consent cards, which students display: “Yes, go for gold” or “Nope, not today”. This method may

ease nerves, but tried-and-true open communication generally trumps.

“I always ask new students if they are okay with being adjusted. If not, I leave them alone. If so, I usually won’t adjust them until part way throughout the class so they see others being adjusted, and begin with simpler, less ‘invasive’ adjustments until they feel comfortable with me as a teacher,” says owner of Vinyasa Yoga Wollongong, Steven Hinchliffe.

“Consent must also be dynamic. Each time students are adjusted, they will be feeling different physically, emotionally and mentally; teachers must ensure they are okay with the adjustment they are giving them *right now*,” reiterates Hinchliffe.

Consent is important in partner work; yes, the bit that commonly sinks hearts and triggers sudden bathroom breaks. Some students love adjustments from trusted teachers, but from fellow students without formal training and possibly not overly keen themselves ... well, the whole ordeal without warning can be plain awkward.

“Many colleagues and I have occasionally introduced partner stretching and almost always abandoned it due to the risk of inexperienced students pushing on each other. It’s a question of informed consent. If students come to a flow class and partner stretches are introduced, this can be uncomfortable for all. If promoted as a partner stretch class, there is informed consent to participate,” says California-based anatomy expert and Yin Yoga teacher, Paul Grilley.

Safe adjustments

Owner of Melbourne Yoga Shala, Jean Campbell, reiterates the importance of teachers knowing *why* they perform an adjustment; lengthening, strengthening, or both? Knowing the specific effects each posture has on musculature of the body promotes positive change. While teachers should recognise the basic mechanics of postures, unrealistically focussing on aesthetically ‘perfecting’ them can be damaging. Throughout 20 years of personal practice and teaching abroad, Campbell has witnessed countless adjustment-related injuries; commonly involving hamstrings, knees and spines.

“Hamstring injuries can occur from over-adjusting forward bends, especially when knees are hyperextended. Knee injuries may result from adjusting Lotus and Half-lotus. Spinal injuries occur in many postures; over-adjusting backbends when students are too tight or not ready, pressing on the spines of students who have weak, long back muscles during forward bends (overlengthening), and forcing in twists. Teachers must understand structure of the spine to know where rotation should occur,” says Campbell, who favours verbal adjustments unless certain of an individual’s physical state.

Teachers should be knowledgeable about general anatomy and the needs of each person. In *Teaching Yoga* (North Atlantic Books, 2010), Mark Stephens reminds us that “*asanas* are an expression of unique human beings, not ideal or static forms or ‘poses’”. Teachers must assess each individual: pregnancies, injuries, relevant medical history, and their range of motion.

“The most important concepts teachers must be aware of are range of skeletal variation, and difference between sensations of tension and compression. Tension and compression are always on opposite sides of a joint. Tension is the feeling of muscles being pulled or stretched. Compression is the sensation of something being blocked or pressed together,” says Grilley.

“*Baddha konasana* (bound angle pose), for example, might create tension in groin muscles or it may simply be impossible to press your knees to the ground because the femur bone is compressed against the hip socket. If it is the latter, it wouldn’t feel ‘tight’ in the groin muscles; you would just feel ‘stuck,’” he explains.

Simply put: while a little tension may be okay, what isn’t meant to bend may break. McLaughlin, who significantly modified her approach following studies with Grilley,

says fostering awareness of good and bad pain is crucial. After all, students feeling the experience are the ones who really know if adjustments are beneficial or backbreaking. If reportedly the latter, don't lose heart and throw in the mat immediately.

"If students report discomfort, teachers need to explain their intention and listen to what is being said. *Did we go too far? Was there enough dialogue between us?* This process provides an opportunity to learn and build a more trusting and safe environment for students to continue practicing," inspires McLaughlin.

Staying aware

Remaining present throughout adjustments is essential. Two years into his practice, Hinchliffe was in *Lolasana* (pendant pose) when a teacher half-heartedly attempted helping him into a handstand. Knowing his left shoulder was slightly unstable, Hinchliffe was apprehensive but, unfortunately, the distracted teacher was unaware of his pleas to stop.

"As the teacher continued lifting my hips, I felt my shoulder begin dislocating. I gripped surrounding muscles and it popped back in. That was over a decade ago and it hasn't been the same since. What I took from this was the importance of being completely focussed on each student you adjust. Some people don't like the 'flow' being interrupted by adjustments, but I would rather hold up a class for 30 seconds than injure students through inattention," says Hinchliffe.

Of course, remaining attentive also protects students' emotional safety. Teachers can't be certain of anyone's story—vulnerabilities, traumas, random rubbish days—and must remain mindful, perhaps intuitive, about this, applying appropriate pressure accordingly to ensure adjustments aren't misconstrued as aggressive or sensual.

"Aggressive adjustments usually apply too much force too quickly. If a student starts holding their breath or scrunching their face you are going too far. A strong but good adjustment begins with gentle pressure and gradually intensifies appropriately—continually asking the student if it is still okay as intensity increases," suggests Hinchliffe.

Using palms more than fingertips is advisable; Hinchliffe skilfully also uses his feet, knees and elbows. Furthermore, he enhances students' experience by encouraging slow, smooth and quiet breathing, and focusses on synchronising this with adjustments; generally lengthening upon inhalation, deepening upon exhalation.

Mindfully combining thoughts, touch and breath is particularly important throughout meditative moments. A heavenly ear massage in *Savasana*, for example, has potential to shock strung-out or snoozy students sky-high. For this reason, McLaughlin approaches students in *Savasana* like a 'dozing newborn baby'.

"*Savasana* is an intimate, restful time, so I quietly approach and take a few breaths to advise them of my presence. Slowly, sensitively and confidently, I lay my hands on them for a breath before I perform any massage or assistance, removing myself the same way. Clean and clear loving intention when placing your hands on someone is healthy 'tissue-to-tissue talk' between bodies," says McLaughlin.

Regardless of where the jury stands on adjustments, never underestimate the immense power of touch. Sue Flamm relays in *Restorative Yoga with Assists* (CreateSpace, 2013) how teachers become energy conduits upon touch; therefore should be conscious of energy they wish to transmit, connect touch with thoughts, and allow only goodness to flow through. An attentive adjustment will achieve that and, if either party isn't feeling it, abandon it. The studio must remain a safe and sacred place and the mat a self-empowering space. 🧘

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