

# Teaching Students to Trust Themselves

## A Pedagogic Model for Teaching Yoga

As a practitioner of Yoga for forty years and someone who has been teaching for over three decades, it's always been clear to me that rigorous and thorough study is an essential ingredient for any teacher wanting to offer the very best to his or her students. Whether you are a newly trained teacher, or a teacher with decades of experience under your belt, what would it mean to balance the acquisition of this knowledge with being able to enter the practice of teaching with what physicist Stephen Hawking calls a 'radical humility'? It is only when we truly and deeply do not know that we can remain open to all that is possible. I call this conscious uncertainty 'intelligent not-knowing' and it is the paradoxical basis of a pedagogic model for teaching that has informed my approach to teaching and to training teachers.

A pedagogic model is about forming a strategy for teaching that is based on principles that support true education. These principles serve to act as an invisible web that gives cohesion to the learning experience. Our pedagogic model is 'in between the lines' of everything we say and do within the context of the Yoga studio. Yet it may not be something that is readily apparent to our students. Rather the principles of our pedagogic model are most often presented covertly as strategies that inform our methodology. Yet, like the invisible electrical wiring that runs through the walls of any building, because we can't see it doesn't mean it isn't there, and more importantly, whether the lights go on for our students depends on that hidden circuitry.

The science of Yoga was designed to bring about self-realization, and through that self-understanding, an extraordinary level of independence and freedom. Many of us, however, are *unconsciously using archaic pedagogic models* based on rote learning, blind obedience, and a mechanical mirroring process that teaches students to replicate shapes and forms without necessarily having a direct felt experience of those forms or the meaning, purpose and relevance of specific practices. When our pedagogic model (or lack of any conscious model at all...) produces students who cannot think and feel for themselves, we have not only disavowed our students of any true learning, we may well have set the stage for students to harm themselves through Yoga. A teacher can make even the safest Yoga practice injurious when that practice is filtered through an unsound pedagogic model. One of the most common symptoms that our teaching strategy is misguided is the assumption that we know what the student is feeling and can gauge the student's threshold.

In recent years I have encountered students who have incurred serious injuries from teachers who are working with a pedagogic model that is founded on this unscientific bias. When I ask these students to relay the circumstances of their injuries the storyline tells me the specifics; 'He stood on my back and my lumbar disc ruptured.' But more importantly the action tells me the teacher was working with many unexamined assumptions, starting with the idea that just because the student is in the room he or she

has automatically given permission to be adjusted. When we uncover many of these unsound premises we not only improve safety for our students we also set the stage for creating an optimal environment for empowering people.

### Teaching is about Educating

The word educate is derived from the Latin word *educare*, which means to bring or draw out. Thus education is not about downloading what we know, but bringing out the inherent intelligence from within an individual. Or in the words of American Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, director of The School for Body-Mind Centering™, "Learning is the process by which we vary our responses to information based on the context of each situation." Carl R. Rogers said it another way: "The only person who is truly educated is the one who has learned how to learn and change." Education in its truest sense is not about memorising information or copying someone else. It is about building skills that allow us to respond intelligently to new conditions – a skill very much required in our rapidly changing culture. Seen through the lens of Yoga practice, a new situation may be an aging student carefully adapting his practice in a way that puts less stress on arthritic joints. In fact, in this model for learning the teacher's primary role is not to change or fix the student but to create an effective context where the student can build skills and learn to discover the answers to their own questions. By guiding rather than overriding the process of inquiry we help students find an effective entry point for making their own investigations.

## Inquiry-Based Learning

I call this kind of learning 'inquiry-based' learning, which is substantially different than 'exercise-based' learning (Table 1 and Table 2). Inquiry-based learning is a system for lifelong education and evolution, while exercise-based learning is a system for creating stability. Exercise-based learning fits very well into many one size fits all formulaic Yoga methods and approaches to teaching because it is quick to learn, easy to deliver and gives the teacher a sense of supreme certainty. While exercise-based learning has its place in building basic foundational skills, teachers who work *exclusively* through a rote process of 'Monkey See, Monkey Do', rarely develop the skill to truly observe their students and adapt practices to the needs of each individual.

When we look more deeply at the differences between these two pedagogic models, we see that inquiry-based learning sets up a relaxation in the nervous system that is particularly effective for gaining increased motor control. Students who are striving to copy and force their bodies into positions tend to be fearful and this can lead to heightened sympathetic arousal, increased levels of adrenalin and cortisol and, as research has shown, reduced levels of motor control. If you feel alienated by the competitive and commercially driven physical elitism that is rapidly becoming the Yoga of our time, working with an inquiry-based pedagogic model is an inclusive approach to teaching, making Yoga once again accessible to any one at any age.

### The Learning Environment Must be Safe

People learn best when they are in a relaxed, safe and accepting environment. I begin my own teacher trainings by asking trainees to make a list of the conditions that need to be present for them to feel safe in a learning environment. We also reflect on some of the conditions that can lead to fearfulness in a learning environment. These are some of the conditions that support a feeling of safety in the Yoga studio.

**Table 1:** Principles in exercise-based and inquiry-based models of learning

EXERCISE-BASED LEARNING	INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING
Copying and replication	Curiosity and investigation
Seeking a set answer	Seeking the truth
Assuming that information is true	Questioning existing assumptions/facts
Immutable certainty	No set predetermined conclusion
System of Stability	System of evolution

**Table 2:** Practices in exercise-based and inquiry-based models of learning

EXERCISE-BASED LEARNING	INQUIRY-BASED LEARNING
Competition	Inquisitiveness and curiosity
Learning under pressure	Learning while relaxed
Fear of failure	Sense of achievement
Sympathetic arousal	Parasympathetic & enteric NS support
Stress	Relaxation
Heightened levels of adrenaline and cortisol	Balanced body chemistry
Reduced motor control	Increased motor control, kinesthetic acuity and ability to sense, feel and act from felt perception

- ✓ The Teacher is an authority without being authoritarian
- ✓ Non-competitive
- ✓ I can set my own thresholds
- ✓ My efforts are encouraged and my progress is noted
- ✓ Non-judgmental (humiliation is never okay)
- ✓ Permission to be touched is offered
- ✓ Touch is slow, gentle and sensitive
- ✓ The level of the class is appropriate to my ability and what was advertised
- ✓ Class begins and ends on time
- ✓ Both teacher and student wear appropriate clothing
- ✓ The teacher meets me where I am
- ✓ It's okay to ask questions
- ✓ It's okay to arrive at conclusions that are different to my teacher
- ✓ Confidentiality: What happens in the classroom stays in the class room

One of the most basic requirements for a student's safety is an understanding that she has the permission to practice self-care by modifying any practice that is unsuitable for her. This may include asking for an alternative practice; modifying the practice in a way that has previously proven effective; omitting a practice altogether or coming out of a posture when her own felt perception (not the teachers) alerts her that she has reached a threshold. Many students incorrectly believe that they have lost their self-sovereignty when entering a Yoga studio and therefore override their own perceptions and fail to take action (or practice common sense) in relation to their own safety. Even students working with sensitive and well-trained teachers often feel compelled to 'obey the teacher' first, and listen to their own perceptions second. An inquiring teacher may be surprised to discover how many students stay in uncomfortable and even painful, injury-inducing positions be-

cause it has not occurred to them that it is their right and responsibility to practice an alternative (or even request help to find a safer option). It is therefore essential that teachers offer explicit permission for students not only to listen to their own perceptions but to modify their practice accordingly. At the beginning of *each and every* class or intensive, take the time to make this permission explicit.

## How Do We Cultivate an Inner Reference System?

In real learning the student is always gaining increasing degrees of self-reliance, self-confidence and self-responsibility. Ultimately this gives the student independence from the teacher. If the teacher knowingly or unknowingly perpetuates a belief that he or she is the holder of all knowledge and authority, this will move the student in the direction of increasing dependence and infantilization. There is no graduation ceremony in this pedagogic model! The effectiveness of your teaching should be judged by the ability of your students to work independent of your aid. The student should work towards being able to recapitulate skills with less and less need of outside help. Skill building should include cultivating the ability to find new solutions to new problems, and the ability to adapt strategies moment-to-moment based on the specific requirements of a new situation. In this pedagogic model all instruction is assessed in terms of whether it moves the student in the direction of independence or dependence.

In a healthy learning environment students naturally look to their own inner perceptions as a guide to their process and just as naturally become loyal to the dictates of that perception. A person who has honed her perception is

surprisingly capable of finding her own clear and safe pathways into movement. Unfortunately, many teachers unknowingly dismantle this inner reference system so that the student's first port of call is to look outside the self and to see the teacher as the ultimate and only reference point. Students who stay in uncomfortable or painful positions without any attempt to alter their position, or ask questions such as, "What should I feel?" reveal that this internal navigation system has been deactivated or never cultivated in the first place. This scenario does not serve the student, but it also does not serve the teacher. The teacher is not privy to the inside information afforded by the student's kinesthetic perception of their structure, that is, the sensory information provided by a complex internal system of proprioceptors throughout the body. To assume that it is the teacher rather than the student who has access to this information is to set the stage for injuries to occur. When the student lacks an inner reference then the teacher becomes the one that determines how far, how much and how long a student practices a posture. By giving explicit permission for students to respond to their own direct experience the teacher places the process of inquiry firmly in the hands of his students.

## Deduction versus Presumption Guides the Inquiry

Which brings us full circle to the concept of intelligent 'not-knowing'. When the teacher *and* student are in a process of shared inquiry, this requires that the teacher be able to deduct moment-to-moment with the clearest possible perception. Regardless of our technical training, our anatomical knowledge or our years of experience in the field, assuming we always know the answer clouds the screen of perception and prevents us from seeing

what is happening *now* with this *particular person*. Assuming that we already know the solution can also block some of our most valuable insights, that is, the insight that arises from the depths of a quiet, meditative mind. This open and unconditioned quality of mind is the hallmark of a deeply established Yoga practice.

Sometimes admitting that we don't know, gives both teacher and student an opportunity to take more time to investigate. If we are truly observing the student's responses to our instructions (whether auditory, kinesthetic, or visual), we remain willing to change plan to best meet our student's needs. When the teacher is working in a deductive capacity, she is observing whether or not the student has understood and been able to implement a new skill. When this is not so, the teacher may need to reiterate instructions, change instructions, or break down the material into more manageable steps. To a large degree, the model of horizontal communication (a respectful free flow of communication between teacher and student rather than a vertical communication model that moves in only one direction from teacher to student) supports a teacher's ability to act in a deductive capacity. When we ask questions such as, "Is this pressure comfortable?" and "Is this support making the pain better or worse?" we move from playing the role of mystical psychic, to intelligent detective. We stop being the supreme purveyor of knowledge and start being a sensitive listening and receptive presence. We fall short of knowing yet at the same time open up new creative solutions and possibilities. Undoubtedly, it is this fully present quality of attention that models the true teachings of Yoga, and offers a profound gift to both teacher and student in each moment of their exchange.

Donna Farhi leads intensives and teacher training programs internationally. She is the author of four contemporary classics including *The Breathing Book*, *Yoga, Mind, Body & Spirit*, *Bringing Yoga to Life: The Everyday Practice of Enlightened Living and Teaching Yoga*.

For more information on her intensives, teacher trainings and audio recordings visit [www.donnafarhi.co.nz](http://www.donnafarhi.co.nz)