

## Silence as a Teaching Tool

Moments of quiet in class are doorways to learning, not empty spaces to be feared.

By Brenda K. Plakans

As a teacher, you want to share everything you know about yoga with your students. But when you talk too much during class, you run the risk of ruining your students' opportunity for stillness and introspection.

Sometimes the best way to help deepen your students' practice is to hold your tongue, and let your students learn from the quiet.

"I use silence as a way to let the students go in and experience," says Yoga Alliance president Rama Berch. "If I keep talking, they'll think the pose is about the anatomical details. But if I give them that choreographed moment of silence, they have an opportunity to experience what yoga is really about."



Cyndi Lee, who founded the OM Yoga Center in New York City, agrees. "When people come to [do] yoga, they come to empty," she says. "If the teacher is filling up too much space with talking, too much music, or too many stimuli, it makes it difficult for people to empty."

But using silence to enhance your students' practice can be harder than it appears—especially for the inexperienced teacher who isn't totally at ease in front of a class yet. How can you avoid the trap of nervous chatter?

### Be Your Own Editor

Once you've noticed your own tendency to talk, observe when your words begin to be distracting.

Some inexperienced teachers find that they talk unnecessarily because they are uncomfortable with silence.

"As a teacher, you have to look at why you are talking," says Senior Advanced Iyengar teacher Joan White. "Do you really have something to say? Or are you just talking to hear yourself talk?"

Another common mistake teachers make is babbling when they can't find the words to describe an action or principle. To avoid this, it's helpful to have a detailed lesson plan and follow it. Knowing exactly what you want your students to feel at any given point in the class makes it easier to plan your language so it's as concise and understandable as possible.

When you notice you've gone off on a tangent, stop, take a deep breath, and refocus, says Berch.

### **A Time for Quiet and a Time for Talk**

One way to avoid unnecessary chatter is to structure your classes so that silence comes naturally. When it's introduced in the appropriate spot, it won't feel strange or intimidating.

There are obvious places in a class to incorporate silence. "Sometimes after a very vigorous sequence, students get overstimulated," Lee says. "It's nice to just sit quietly and let them feel the effects of that practice."

However, using silence in your classes does not mean you should be completely quiet.

"When you teach a new pose, such as an inversion or backbend, you should keep up a steady stream of instruction," warns White. "You should not bombard them, but at the same time don't leave them hanging. Talking to people gives them the sense that you are present and ready to help them if they need help."

### **Strategies for Silence**

It takes practice to learn to be comfortable with silence. The following strategies may be useful.

1. **Give yourself assignments.** "Tell yourself, 'I'm only going to give two or fewer instructions per pose,'" Lee suggests.
2. **Leave room for self-exploration.** Ask your students to contemplate what they've learned. After you've described the pose, let them explore it a second time on their own. "Once you've built the pose and the students are getting it, leave them there," says Berch. "Let them breathe and settle into it."
3. **Don't keep talking.** When you find yourself giving too many instructions or digressing, you can always stop. "I bring the whole class to a halt," acknowledges Berch. "As a teacher, you're better at pulling yourself together than they are."
4. **Cultivate silence in your own practice.** "Do meditation practice before you teach, so you have a sense of your own habit and a discipline of staying quiet and grounded," says Lee. "If you want to be a really good yoga teacher, you need to be connected to yourself through your own practice, and that gives you something to bring back to your students."
5. **Choreograph quiet.** As your confidence level grows, you will find it easier to include moments of quiet. "The silent points are like rests in music, punctuation points that help you hear the composition," says Berch. "The purpose of a yoga class is to get you to silence—and not merely external silence, but inner silence and stillness."

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