

The Philosophy of Touch: Exploring the Benefits and Risks of Hands-on Assistance

The subject of continual debate, adjustments run the gamut from helpful to hurtful. As you determine the role that adjustments play in your teaching style, consider suggestions and examples from some of yoga's master teachers.

By Carol Krucoff

It seems so simple: A student stands in Tadasana, shoulders tensed, and the teacher places his hands on the tight area, inviting relaxation.

Yet depending on a wide array of factors—ranging from the teacher's intentions and attitude to the student's emotional state, religious beliefs, and personal history—this basic adjustment can be healing or violating, welcome or repugnant, constructive or demoralizing.

Touch is an intimate act and a complex issue—particularly in our litigious, sexualized society. Concerns about harassment have led to a hands-off attitude in some workplaces, and anxiety about abuse has prompted some schoolteachers to avoid touching children. Members of some religious groups may refuse to be touched by members of the opposite sex. And people who have been abused may be reluctant to be touched by anyone at all.

As a result, touch can pose a dilemma for yoga teachers who use hands-on assistance as an integral part of instruction. "Touch is sometimes more direct and effective than verbal instruction, since it brings students out of their heads and into their bodies," said Esther Myers, a Toronto-based yoga teacher and author of *Yoga and You* (Shambhala, 1996). (Yoga Journal interviewed Myers about six weeks before her death from breast cancer on January 6.) "We can sometimes give more precise and detailed information through touch than the student can absorb verbally."

Yet the intimate quality of touch is "both its benefit and risk," Myers said. "As teachers, we need to find a balance between caring, concern, compassion, and professional detachment."

The role of touch in yoga instruction varies widely, depending on the teacher and the style, says Mara Carrico, a San Diego-area yoga teacher and author of *Yoga Journal's Yoga Basics* (Henry Holt, 1997). "I studied with Bikram 25 years ago, and there was virtually no touching. He would bark out the directions and we would follow." In contrast, she says, "Iyengar and Ashtanga tend to be more hands-on, while Viniyoga tends not to be so touchy."

In recent years, there's been a growing awareness that touch can pose risks for students, particularly if overzealous, inexperienced teachers perform aggressive adjustments. But it also can be hazardous for teachers, who might, for example, be kicked in the face while helping a

student into handstand. "Hands-on assisting can be very strenuous," says Carrico, who describes her own style as "eclectic." "In the energetic realm, we have to guard ourselves, particularly if we're working long days. With maturity, I've learned to pace myself."

Carrico tries to make visual contact with all students to make sure they're doing poses safely, and she uses a reasonable amount of verbal contact so students know she recognizes them and cares. But she often reserves physical contact for students who have been coming to her class for a while. "In certain cases, I actually have people put their hands on me," she says, explaining that she sometimes lies on the floor next to students and lets them touch her abdomen to feel it expand on inhalation and contract on exhalation. "This can be a helpful and safe way to use touch."

Kripalu Yoga has specific guidelines for use of touch, according to Shobhan Richard Faulds, a senior Kripalu Yoga teacher in Greenville, Virginia. "We do not do any kind of chiropractic adjustment or apply any outside force to the body," he says. "The touch considered most helpful is light touch that encourages the student to press into certain parts of the body." An example would be placing a hand on the crown of the student's head and asking her to press into the teacher's hand.

"The movement comes from the student's body, not the teacher's," Faulds stresses. "The touch brings awareness to a body part and suggests a movement, but there's a deep respect for the wisdom of the body in how to access this movement."

Touch is usually done with the hand, although occasionally the feet are used, he says, for example to ground the outside of a student's foot. "This must be done carefully, since I've had students tell me that in another yoga tradition the teacher kicked them, and it felt like a violation," Faulds says. "When we come into a student's space, we do so with great respect and always under the student's control."

While Faulds considers touch helpful and "sometimes essential" in teaching asanas, he says he doesn't touch very much in his classes. "Doing asanas is only the beginning of yoga and is a doorway to pratyahara (sensory withdrawal)," he says. "I try to guide people to a deeper yoga that gets them into an introverted state." Touching students who have gone "very deep inside" can be counterproductive, he says, "because it brings them back to an externalized state of awareness."

Another concern about hands-on adjustments is that "they can lead to an other-dependent attitude," says Edward Modestini, an Ashtanga Yoga teacher and co-owner of the Maya Yoga Studio in Maui, Hawaii. Physical adjustments are an integral part of the Ashtanga system, according to Modestini, who says his teacher, Sri K. Pattabhi Jois would sometimes lie on top of him to help him go deeper into Paschimottanasana (Seated Forward Bend). "And I loved it," he recalls. "But I want to teach self-reliance so students can learn to take care of themselves."

Modestini says he generally prefers verbal over physical instruction. "I do some physical adjustments, such as putting my knee on someone's sacrum when they're in shoulder stand," he

says. "But I try to hone my verbal skills, because I'd prefer the student grasp the adjustment inside themselves, without assistance."

His wife and coteacher, Nicki Doane, uses touch more often. "Sometimes hands-on is great because it lets people feel what the posture should feel like," she says. "And it can make people feel nurtured and taken care of." More than 10 years of teaching experience has helped her become more sensitive to people and their bodies, says Doane, who stresses that she never gives strong, aggressive adjustments. "I always ask students if the adjustment feels okay," she says. "And I constantly tell students to please speak up and let us know if anything doesn't feel right."

For some students, touch is essential to learning, says JJ Gormley, founder of the Sun & Moon Yoga Studios in Virginia. "In every class, there are a few--maybe one or two people--who are kinesthetic learners who need hands-on assistance," she says. These students often don't grasp verbal instruction but respond well to physical demonstrations of how to do something. "When I discover that someone is a kinesthetic learner," Gormley says, "I may touch them more."

Yet she generally prefers verbal to physical adjustment. "My overall philosophy is to touch as little as possible," says Gormley, who describes her teaching as a blend of the best of the many styles she's studied. "I want to give the student a chance to feel it and let it happen in their body. I think it means more to them if they find it themselves."

Before touching a student, it's essential to really look at the person's body and recognize that individual differences—particularly in skeletal structure—will determine how far someone can go in a pose, says Paul Grilley, a yoga teacher in Ashland, Oregon. "The shape of our bones is the ultimate limiter of our range of motion," he says. "Yet there's often this implication that if only someone works harder, they can do any pose, which is a fallacy."

For example, he says, "Some people will never be able to squat with their heels on the ground or put their palms in reverse Namaste, because their bones won't permit it. Bones are a humbling thing, and our ability to do poses depends on the way we're shaped."

Too often, Grilley says, yoga teachers assume that restriction comes from tension caused by tight muscles, without recognizing that it could be from compression caused by bones hitting together. While a hands-on adjustment may help someone relax tense muscles, it can't change compressed bones. "We need to balance the yang of effort," he says, "with the yin of calm acceptance of what is."

Adopting a "one-size-fits-all" adjustment strategy, or pushing students to achieve an aesthetically pleasing Tadasana, pose, can be both physically and psychologically harmful, says Grilley, who teaches Yin Yoga, a style that gently stresses the connective tissue through long holdings. "If you push students into an aggressive compression, you risk injuring them," he says. "And if you imply they 'should' be able to get their heels down or put their palms together, it can be very frustrating for a student, who may think, 'What's wrong with me?'"

The only adjustments Grilley does are related to safety, such as placing a support under someone's buttocks if necessary in Virasana (Hero Pose). "And then I'm in constantly dialogue with the student," he says. "I'm always asking, 'How does this feel?'"

Regardless of individual approaches to hands-on assistance, virtually all teachers agree it's essential to ask a student's permission to be touched. Some teachers seek permission each time they touch a student, others ask just the first time, and some only ask if they are dealing with an intimate area of the body.

A growing number of teachers require students to put this permission in writing by signing a release form. At Esther Myers' Toronto studio, the release form notes, "Hands-on assisting is one aspect of our teaching. Assists are given by both the primary teacher in the class and interns in our teacher-training program." The form asks students if they are "very comfortable," "moderately comfortable," or "uneasy" with hands-on assists. It invites them to specify whether they want assistance from the "primary teacher only," "primary teacher and intern," or "neither."

"One useful technique is to explain to the class during the opening relaxation that hands-on assisting is one of the ways that you teach," Myers said. "Some people like being touched and want a lot of assistance; others may be uncomfortable with touch or prefer less assistance. Ask for a show of hands for each category, while their eyes are still closed. This way, you will have a clear indication of who would like to be touched and who would not."

Here are six other guidelines for the proper use of touch:

1. Be respectful. Respect the person's body and its limitations, respect their individual differences, and respect their right to say "no."
2. Don't sneak up on someone. Approach a student so he or she can see you.
3. Check your intentions. Helpful touch invites students to blossom right where they are, rather than trying to change them in some way. Remember, it's the student's pose, not yours.
4. Practice brahmacharya (sexual restraint). Sexual feelings can arise in the student or the teacher or both. Ethical practice requires sexual restraint in relation to students. Some experienced teachers say they do not touch students from whom (or toward whom) any sexual energy is felt.
5. Watch your language. If you say you are "correcting" students, it implies that they are wrong. "Assisting" or "adjusting" is preferable.
6. Go beyond teaching poses to teaching people. Always consider the person you are touching, why you are touching, and what is happening beyond technique.

Resources:

- Hands-on Assisting: A Guide for Yoga Teachers, by Esther Myers, is available for \$24.56 U.S., plus appropriate taxes and shipping, through her Toronto studio. E-mail emyers@interlog.com or call (416) 944-0838.
- Anatomy for Yoga with Paul Grilley in DVD format, is available for \$40 from www.pranamaya.com.

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