

introduction

Most media representations of yoga depict young, slim women with blissful facial expressions, wearing expensive clothing and doing challenging poses in beautiful locations. And yet, yoga can be for anyone. At its best, yoga offers our world effective tools for navigating the confusing, sometimes painful, sometimes ecstatic morass of human life. Are you in poor physical condition? Yoga can help. Are you stressed out? Yoga can help. Is your thinking muddled or scattered? Yoga can help. Are you sad, angry, or anxious? Yoga can help. Do you have a hard time connecting to your world, your loved ones, or yourself? Yoga can help!

To teach yoga is to teach people how to deepen their relationships with themselves. That's a profoundly honorable endeavor! Can you learn to practice yoga from a book or a video? Yes, you can, and many people have. One of my students started practicing yoga with a yoga video made by MTV. She practiced with that video for four years before she made it into a yoga studio. Another one of my students was very troubled in her youth by bullying. At age 12, somebody gave her a book about yoga, and she taught herself to do a few poses based on the pictures in the book. She felt that after she started yoga, people in her school started treating her differently, because she was carrying herself differently.

And yet, in my opinion, yoga is vastly improved by face-to-face contact with a teacher, in a public yoga class, as part of a larger community of practitioners. A teacher can check your form and offer feedback. A class can inspire you to push a little deeper or hold a pose a little longer. A community can support you when you're sad, angry, afraid, lost.

At the most fundamental level, most yoga classes these days give you a way to move your body. But there's something more. Unlike going to the gym, where you put in your headphones, turn on the TV, and zone out as you run on the treadmill or pedal the bike, yoga asks you to engage. Yoga asks you to refine your awareness of your breath, to notice how you feel in your body, to observe the difference before and after a pose. By its very nature, yoga calls us to a deeper, richer relationship to ourselves.

The human race needs people with rich, full internal lives. And the human race needs people who are able and willing to talk about that inner life. One of the great privileges of teaching yoga is the opportunity to share your knowledge, insight, and experience with a relatively captive audience. For introverts, this is the hardest part of teaching. For extroverts, it's the most delectable. For everyone, it's a life-changing opportunity to contribute to your community. Some of the most joyous moments of my life have happened while teaching yoga. Nothing else I've ever done has made me feel so challenged, so connected, so useful.

I honor your desire to serve your world and your self in this way. It won't be easy. By the time you're done, you're going to question your own worth, my worth as your teacher, the worth of this training, even the worth of yoga. That's the nature of yoga, in practice and in teaching—it ruffles the feathers of your deepest, most tender vulnerabilities.

But I believe that if you want to teach yoga, and you commit to honing the skills required to do it, you can play a role in changing people's lives for the better.

What is "Good Yoga"?

Yoga is like cooking—everybody has their own taste. My bacon mac and cheese with Béchamel sauce is incredible! But the truth is that my 10-year-old nephew prefers Kraft. And one of my friends, originally from Thailand, thinks mac and cheese of any kind is disgusting.

Same in yoga. When you dislike a class, what's going on?

- Is the teacher unskilled? *Example: first pose is Down Dog. Second pose is Urdhva Danurasana.*
- Is she teaching a method you don't like? *Example: you're used to a Vinyasa practice and you're in an Iyengar class.*
- Is she teaching for a fitness level that doesn't match yours? *Example: you're a 25 year old dancer from Los Angeles. You go to a class labelled "Power Vinyasa" in Lawrence, Kansas. The other practitioners are substantially older and less fit than you, and you feel frustrated by the slow pace and elementary nature of the vinyasa.*
- Teaching material you don't like? *Example: the whole class is on twists and twists always screw up your back.*
- Teaching good material but in a manner that you dislike? *Example: you like the sequence, you like the method, the teacher is experienced and a good public speaker, but she talks too loudly, too fast for your taste, and you don't like that outfit she's got on either.*

In my opinion, all of the above are valid reasons for disliking a class. Thank goodness, there are a million different teachers out there, and if you keep looking, you'll find one you like.

What's going on when you like a class?

- You might really like the teacher as a person
- You might feel fascinated by the material she's covering
- You might really vibe with the style she's teaching in
- You might perfectly match the intended fitness level of her class
- You might appreciate her great public speaking skills
- You might respond strongly to her charisma

Who is the best teacher? Is it the one with the most Instagram followers? The one who can do the hardest poses? Is it the one with the most nuanced understanding of biomechanics? Is it the one with the most experience? Is the one with the most training in medicine? Is it the one who is most skilled at interpreting a particular method? Is it the most charismatic person? Is it the best communicator? Is it the kindest person? Is it the one with the greatest understanding of Indian history and philosophy?

I've known very charismatic teachers whose ethics were such that I could not respect them enough to learn from them. I've known learned experts in Indian philosophy who could not hold my attention. I've known teachers who studied at the feet of a master for decades, and knew every nuance of a particular method, but who didn't touch my heart. I've known very kind, compassionate teachers who I liked very much as people but who did not fire my passion for practice. In my experience, the best teachers have elements of all of these.

What is the best way to practice and teach yoga? Is it Mr. Iyengar's way? Certainly the Iyengar yogis think so. Is it in a 110-degree room with the knee always locked in standing poses? The Bikram yogis think so. Is it with Fish Pose always following Shoulder Stand? The founders of Jivamukti yoga style think so. Is sleeping with your yoga students a great way to impart lessons in yoga philosophy? Many unethical teachers think so!

In yoga, there is no clearly-delineated hierarchy or authority. No iron-clad rules for practice. No laws or regulations governing our field. For every rule, there's another teacher, and sometimes even another tradition, who holds the opposite view.

There are no rules, so why bother getting trained to teach yoga at all? Why not just hang out a shingle and start teaching whatever floats your boat? Many teachers take this approach these days. Unfortunately, when you've had no training in yoga, or very poor training, you are easy prey for what's known as the Dunning-Kruger effect.¹

Dunning and Kruger were psychologists. They discovered that people who are unskilled at a particular task have the illusion that they are better at it than they are. Unskilled people not only fail to recognize their own lack of skill, they

¹ Kruger, Dunning, 1999. "Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments" <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/summary?doi=10.1.1.64.2655>

also fail to recognize skill in other people. Plus they underestimate how unskilled they are! This is a real problem. How can you improve at anything if you think you're already great at it?

The good news from Dunning and Kruger is that training reverses the effect—an unskilled person can recognize and acknowledge their lack of skill after they've received training. The South Mountain Yoga Teacher Training teaches you a set of skills that I believe are essential for yoga teachers. I do not regard my opinions as final or definitive. But like anybody else, I think my opinions are pretty good! They are backed up by many years of experience, a ton of training across a range of yoga-related disciplines, and a rational analysis of what is effective and why.

I wish I could tell you that in my training, you'll get all the "right answers" about yoga. Unfortunately, as I've explained above, there are no "right answers." Some of what I'm going to teach you in this manual is obvious, pretty much universally agreed upon stuff. Most of us can agree on what makes a good public speaker, for example. And many in the yoga community agree on the same names of many poses. And information on physical anatomy (but not energetic anatomy!) is standard and universal. However, some of what you'll get from this manual are my personal, sometimes idiosyncratic opinions on what makes a good yoga teacher.

In order to get the most out of this manual, I suggest you decide from the beginning that while you're not going to learn the "right answers" from me (unless there's a "right answer" to be had—like your big thigh bone is called the femur, or Patanjali's Yoga Sutra were compiled in 100-200 CE), you will learn quite a few answers that work for you, a new teacher, for the time being. While I can't say you that my answers are "right", I can tell you that virtually everything I consciously do in the classroom has a rationale behind it. My hope is that this manual gives you a foundation to grow on. My expectation is that as you evolve, you'll come up with your own questions, your own answers.

At the very least, when you're done with this training, you will no longer be lost in the ignorance of the unskilled. You'll have a clear idea of what skills a very-experienced teacher (me!) regards as important. You'll be more qualified to decide for yourself which skills are important to you. And you'll be better able to evaluate how close you are to mastering them.