

PRINCIPLES OF TEACHING

WHAT MAKES A GREAT
YOGA TEACHER?



Principles of Teaching

Key Teaching Concepts

Optimal Alignment

Each student's ideal embodiment of a pose at this particular moment.

Path of Least Resistance

Through time and life, we have developed habitual compensations and movement patterns in the body. When practicing asana, the body will naturally take the path of least resistance.

Human Variation

There is natural diversity in the human body. For example, human variation (differences in bone and joint shapes) will lead to different optimal expressions of a pose. However, human variation is infinite and extends to all layers of the body, including muscle tissue, connective tissue, organs, endocrine systems, nervous systems, etc., which may all lead to different expressions of the practice. Start from seeing the individual, rather than an artificial ideal.

Best Practices

We teach based on what will serve the majority of students, and do our best to give individualized instruction when needed.

Stability & Mobility

There is an inverse relationship between stability and mobility. If one goes up, generally the other goes down.

Position | General Form

How body parts are placed in space. The General Form is the position of a given pose.

Actions: Simple and Paired

Actions are the muscular engagement and intelligence that brings the pose into its optimal alignment. There are simple actions and paired actions. A simple action is unidirectional, cannot be reasonably overdone, and may be cued on its own. A paired action requires an equal and opposite action to support the body in optimal alignment and often needs a cue to balance it.

Balanced Action

The state of equilibrium, balance, strength, and ease that is created when paired actions work effectively together to create optimal alignment.

Universal Actions

Actions that can be taught in every yoga pose to create optimal alignment; they are universal no matter which pose is being practiced. Tadasana (Mountain Pose) is the “blueprint” pose for all other asana; when we teach, we can cue the universal actions of tadasana in every pose. Tadasana is the foundation of all standing poses and makes a great starting position, resting pose, or tool to improve posture.

See the Whole Person | Inclusion

When observing students, start with the big picture. Take in the student as a whole, including their emotional state, energy, and aspect. Remember that they are humans with a full life outside of the yoga room. The wonderful diversity of Human Variation is not just physical; it extends to all layers of our beings: mental, emotional, spiritual. As teachers, we commit to creating a supportive environment for all students to safely practice.

Universal Actions

Universal Actions are the essential muscular engagements that help to create optimal alignment in every pose. Although the external form of all yoga poses is different, the Universal Actions are alive and active in every shape. While they do not express the totality of the actions that a pose may require, they are a very firm scaffold upon which to build your cueing.

Tadasana is the “blueprint” pose for all other asana. Teach the Universal Actions of tadasana in every single pose.

Universal Simple Actions

Here are some universal simple actions that are helpful in every pose:

- Root through the four corners of your feet (when your feet are the foundation)
- Press through the four corners of your hands (when your hands are the foundation)
- Lengthen through your spine
- Reach through the crown of your head
- Spread your chest
- Relax your face, soften your jaw
- Engage your core
- Hug your inner legs towards each other (stabilizing cue)
- Lift through the four sides of your waist

Universal Paired Actions

Paired actions work together to create oppositional action that supports the body in its optimal alignment. These powerful tools work in pairs to create both spaciousness and support. Below you will find the cues for helpful paired action, as well as the anatomical action each cue creates.

Feet and Ankles

“Lift your inner arches up as you...”

- Engages the medial arch of the foot

“Hug your outer ankles in.”

- Engages the lateral arch of the foot

Pelvic Girdle

“Press the top of your thighs back as you...”

- Creates anterior pelvic tilt
- Creates slight internal hip rotation
- Creates space in pelvic floor

“Lengthen your sitting bones down.”

- Creates posterior pelvic tilt
- Creates slight external hip rotation
- Creates stability in pelvic floor

Shoulder Girdle

“Soften your front ribs in as you...”

- Creates space in upper back (serratus anterior engages)
- Creates slight engagement in anterior core

“Broaden your collar bones.”

- Stabilizes shoulder girdle by hugging shoulder blades together (rhomboids engage)
- Creates slight engagement in spinal extensors

Neck and Head

“Lift your chin as you...”

- Lightly engages neck extensors

“Lengthen the back of your neck.”

- Lightly engages neck flexors and creates axial extension

Students usually favor activating one half of a paired action over the other. For example, some students will tend to tuck their pelvis under, while other students may naturally tilt the top of their pelvis forward. By cueing both sides of the paired action, you will address the alignment needs of the majority of the room (an example of a “best practice”) while helping students to find their own optimal alignment.

Cultivating your ability to see paired actions at work in the body will also help you to quickly identify common compensatory patterns in your students.

Cueing Tips for Paired Actions

- Use linking language
- While it is a general best practice to cue both sides of a paired action together, you may make an exception and cue only one side when:
 - The position of the pose makes one side of the action so natural that you only need to cue its opposite.
 - For example, in cat pose, you wouldn’t need to cue “draw the front ribs in” since the pose itself creates this action.
 - In downward facing dog, most students only need the first half of the paired action, “press the upper thighs back” because their hamstrings are tight. Only students with very flexible hamstrings would also require the second half of the action, which is to “lengthen the sitting bones down.”
 - You are giving a verbal assist to one student who needs to focus on one side of the action.
 - The majority of the room is falling into the same compensatory pattern and only needs one side of the action. For example, when students lift their arms up into urdhva hastasana, it’s a common human tendency to pop the ribs forward. In this instance, you may choose to cue everyone to “draw the front ribs in.”
- Cue directionality accurately
 - Example: When standing in tadasana, the inner thighs go “back” and the sitting bones move “down.” However, adjust your directionality according to the relative position of body.
 - Example: When you are cueing the pelvis in locust pose (salabhasana), the inner thighs would now be directed to roll “up” and the sitting bones “to the heels” in order to create tadasana alignment.
 - Example: In bridge pose (setu bandhasana), the inner thighs would be directed to roll “down [towards the floor]” and the tailbone “to the knees” in order to create tadasana alignment.

Diagonal Paired Actions

Diagonal paired actions create opposing rotations. These cues are extremely useful in poses that require external rotation of the upper arm or the thigh. To create a diagonal paired action, you root the medial foundation of either the hand or foot down to anchor the foundation, then cue the external rotation at the shoulder or hip.

Examples:

1. Downward facing dog: “Root the inner edge of your hand down (forearm pronation) as you wrap your outer arm in (external rotation at shoulder).”
2. Warrior two: “Root the inner foot down (eversion) as you wrap your right sitting bone under (external rotation).”
3. Triangle: “Press your right big toe mound down (eversion) as you pull your outer right hip back and under (external rotation of hip).”

Although these cues are particularly effective when the shoulder or hip is externally rotating, this diagonal action can work well in poses that are neutral at the hip as well:

1. High lunge: “Press the inner heel down as you pull the outer right hip back.”
2. Half splits: “Press the right big toe mound forward as you pull the outer right hip back.”

Fine Tuning The Paired Actions: Pelvis

The paired actions for the pelvis are:

- “Press the top of your thighs back as you...”
- Lengthen your sitting bones down.”

However, when you are practicing a pose that is asymmetrical in the lower body, the paired actions may be separated so that you can cue each half specifically to a different leg. You would teach “press the top of the thigh back” to one of the legs, and “lengthen the sitting bone down” to the other leg.

Generally speaking, the back leg in standing poses needs more “press the top of the thigh back”, while the front leg will need more “anchor the sitting bone down.”

Examples:

1. High lunge: “Lift your back inner thigh up as you draw your front sitting bone down.”
 - a. As a path of least resistance, the back thigh tends to externally rotate; cueing the back inner thigh up to the ceiling addresses this compensation.
 - b. As a path of least resistance, the low back tends to backbend; cueing the front sitting bone down helps to counter this tendency.
2. Warrior two (virabhadrasana two): “Press your back thigh back as you wrap your front sitting bone down.”
 - a. As a path of least resistance, the back thigh tends to pop forward; cueing the back thigh to engage helps to align the hip and the ankle.

- b. As a path of least resistance, the front sitting bone tends to swing wide; cueing the front sitting bone to wrap down helps to create external rotation and balances lower back extension.
- 3. Warrior three (virabhadrasana three): “Roll your lifted inner thigh up to the sky as you reach your standing leg sitting bone to your lifted heel.”
 - a. As a path of least resistance, the back leg tends to externally rotate; this cue helps engage the adductors and maintain neutrality in the hip.
 - b. As a path of least resistance, the standing leg hip tends to swing out to the side; this cue helps pull the hip in.
- 4. Standing hand to foot pose (utthita hasta padangusthasana A): “Press your standing thigh back as you anchor your lifted leg sitting bone down.”
 - a. As a path of least resistance, the standing thigh tends to pop forward; this cue helps to straighten the leg.
 - b. As a path of least resistance, the lifted leg hip tends to pop up; this cue helps to level the hips.

Foundation

Consider a building: when the foundation is not stable, balanced, or well-maintained, the structure will lack integrity. Misalignments in the foundation will cause compensations in the floors above. However, when the foundation is stable and well-balanced, the building has an underlying base of support that creates steadiness through the whole structure.

The foundation in yoga is the same.

The foundation for most yoga poses is the feet and hands. By learning to establish a well-aligned and balanced foundation, you will set the pose up for optimal alignment.

We look at foundation in two steps:

- Position (where the feet and hands are in space)
- Action (the muscular engagement required for optimal alignment)

Feet

Position: hip distance apart

- The most stable standing position is found by placing the feet under the hip sockets, or “hip distance apart.”
- Although you can’t see your hip sockets from the outside, you can landmark the location by feeling the bones of your pelvis.
- Landmark the space just medial of the ASIS (anterior superior iliac spine).
- Drop a plumb line from this point to the center of the ankle.

Position: feet together

- Placing the feet together is often used in classical yoga positions.
- Although this position is less stable, it encourages more muscular engagement through the legs, particularly through the adductors (inner thighs).

Position: parallel

- Parallel can be found by drawing an imaginary line on each foot from the center of the ankle to the base of the second toe, then making the lines on each foot parallel to each other.

Actions:

These actions help to activate the medial, lateral, and transverse arches of the feet

- “Press through the four corners of the feet.” (Simple action)
- “Lift your inner arches up as you hug your outer ankles in.” (Paired action)

The four points of the foot:

- The base of the big toe mound
- The base of the pinkie toe mound
- The inner heel
- The outer heel



Hands

Unlike our feet, our hands are not designed to be weight-bearing. While using our hands as the foundation lets us explore a variety of fun and interesting postures, we must take particular care to align the hands and shoulders well to support the upper body and the joints.

Position: outer shoulder distance apart

- The most stable position is to place the hands slightly wider than the shoulder (glenohumeral) joint, as this helps to stack the weight through the arms.
- This is called, “outer shoulder distance apart.”
- Align the outer edge of your upper arm with the center of your wrist.

Position: Parallel

- Parallel can be found by drawing an imaginary line on each hand from the center of the wrist to the space between the second and third finger, then making these lines parallel to each other.
- Spread the fingers reasonably wide.
- Be careful to not over-widen the thumb, as this can aggravate the joint.

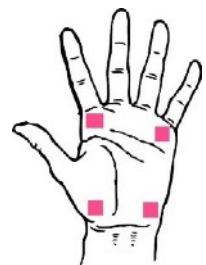
Action:

These actions help to distribute the weight through the whole surface of the hand, which protects the more delicate structures of the wrist from over compression.

- “Press/root/anchor through the four points of your hands.” (Simple action)
- “Root into your fingertips.” (Simple action)
- “Anchor your index knuckles down as you hug your outer arms in.” (Diagonal paired action)

Four points of the hand:

- The base of the index finger mound (on the palm)
- The base of the pinkie finger mound (on the palm)
- The inner heel of the hand
- The outer heel of the hand



How to See Your Students



Ready to learn more? Call 866-624-8947 to speak with a Fitness Advisor.