

Art of Teaching: Introduction & Overview of Foundational Skill Sets



Questions Answered Here

1. Name four or more general categories of skill that contribute to good yoga teaching.
2. While teaching, what are some priorities regarding presence and mindful awareness?
3. Describe specific objectives for teachers related to improving their knowledge of teachings.
4. Give examples of skillful teaching.
5. What tasks contribute to promoting student safety?
6. What are some practical tips for effective teaching?
7. Describe three levels of teaching.

Foundations Overview

Excellent teachers of any discipline shine with presence, humility, passion and wisdom. And they are able to teach according to what is uniquely called for in each situation.

We want to be sure that every teacher who strives to be their very best has a clear path to reach their potential. So we've worked hard to bring together both the big things and the little things that contribute to excellent teaching. We go beyond re-stating the obvious or simply giving "tips". Here we bring you inspiration and a pathway to help you mindfully direct your learning and practice to most efficiently and effectively reach your goals.

We have organized the foundational skills of good yoga teaching around these categories:

1. Mindfulness, Humility, Boundaries
2. Personal Practice & Knowledge of Teachings
3. Skillful Teaching
4. Promoting Student Safety

Don't Miss The Deeper Teachings!

Here we are simply introducing these topics, giving you a bigger picture perspective and the ability to choose your areas of interest. To delve into these topics, please select the links (if you have an online version) or go the relevant sections in your manual.

Mindfulness, Humility, Boundaries

1. Practice mindfulness while teaching: continue to return your awareness to your breath, thoughts, energy and expression.
2. Stay grounded in your body while teaching.
3. Be humble, honest and transparent.
4. Endeavor to truly see students, honoring their wholeness and respecting their individuality.
5. Allow students to have their own experience.
6. Create healthy boundaries between teacher and student while avoiding unnecessary distance.
7. Refrain from giving advice in psychotherapy or other areas outside of your teaching expertise.
8. When a student is potentially distracting other students, ask yourself mindful questions to determine whether and how to intervene.
9. When intervention is called for, do so with respect, empathy and clarity.
10. Protect the quiet of *Savasana* by ending class on time and requesting beforehand that those who need to leave early, leave before *Savasana* begins.

Go deeper here: [Mindfulness, Humility, Boundaries](#)

Personal Practice & Knowledge of Teachings



1. To be an excellent teacher requires prioritizing personal practice and self-study.
2. Remain a student: be curious and intent on improvement. Solicit feedback. Invite awareness of personal weaknesses and mistakes and enthusiastically embrace professional development.
3. Excellent teaching requires a wide and deep knowledge base and skillful application of yoga teachings.
4. Note the difference between “naive practice” (a form of repetition) and “purposeful” or “deliberate” teaching practice, which specifically builds on strengths and improves weaknesses.
5. Teach only what you know and have embodied. Do not teach what you don’t know, and that which you are in the process of learning.
6. Be prepared to refer students to other experts for topics beyond your capabilities.

Go deeper here: [Personal Practice & Knowledge of Teachings](#)

Skillful Teaching



1. Skillful teaching does not sacrifice the basics in favor of complexity or uniqueness. This includes embracing repetition.
2. With *asana*, a skilled teacher acknowledges the need for a balance of effort and ease, strength and openness.
3. A skillful teacher has honed her teaching objective to one thing that she can adequately teach in the time allowed.
4. A skilled teacher invites challenge while making teachings accessible.
5. Good teachers mindfully choose their words for clarity and effectiveness.
6. Knowing your *asana* sequence in your body before teaching will help you to teach it more effectively.
7. An excellent teacher allows pauses in teaching for students to process and go inward, and she watches to see if the teaching has been assimilated before giving another instruction.
8. Teachers reach their potential by uncovering their authentic voice.
9. Excellent teachers adapt or change a class plan to effectively respond to a particular situation.
10. Good teachers don't spout all they know about a topic, but rather teach based on what they see in students.
11. Skillful teachers individualize teachings for various student needs.
12. Teachers may wish to learn more about how to support intuitive practice in their students.

Go deeper here: [Skillful Teaching](#)

Promoting Student Safety

1. Undertake specialized study before teaching children or students with injuries or conditions.
2. Foster a safe, noncompetitive environment.
3. Provide variations, alternatives and personalized options.
4. If a class is too large to provide individual attention, avoid risky and/or complex postures.
5. Utilize safe sequencing.
6. Be cautious with risky *asana* and movement flows.

Go deeper here: [Promoting Student Safety](#)

More Tips & Inspiration



I'm not a teacher; only a fellow traveler of whom you asked the way. I pointed ahead—ahead of myself as well as you. – George Bernard Shaw, shared by Teachasana

1. Mirror students when demonstrating.
2. Greet students; smile sincerely.
3. Honestly, sincerely acknowledge students' efforts.
4. Address different learning styles.
5. Continue to learn how students communicate about their experience and sensation.
6. Experiment with different verbal cues; study responses.
7. Practice your sequence before class.

Do What It Takes to Learn to Mirror

For the first several months that I taught, I would write a letter R on my left index finger, and a letter L on the right, so I got used to pointing in a direction while having a simple reminder of which side I was indicating. – Florence Shih

Smile Sincerely

While we might develop the ability to hide our reactions to both smiles and scowls, we never outgrow the internal reaction that the facial expression of another evokes within us. When your students enter your class and see a teacher who is smiling, they will automatically feel at ease... There is one important thing to remember, however. The smile must be genuine... Of course, some days smiling honestly is easier than others. This is where the practice of gratitude can be very helpful. If you can find something you are genuinely grateful for, however small, you will smile sincerely. If, however you are simply flashing a toothy grin to hide the bad day you're having, you will simply amplify the negativity you are bringing into the yoga class. – Darren Main

Honestly, Sincerely Acknowledge Students

To honestly appreciate your students' efforts on the yoga mat is one of the best ways to inspire them to feel welcome in your class and to continue to practice. Ask any grade school teacher about the effectiveness of giving stickers so students can proudly go home and hang their work on the refrigerator. We all need to have our efforts acknowledged, and if you can learn to do that in an honest and sincere way, students will flock to your classes and also develop a passion for their yoga practice. – Darren Main

Learning How Students Describe Sensation

Learning how to ask how a movement feels is tricky because not everyone will say something hurts, so this includes learning which words your student uses to describe sensation changes. – Yoga for Healthy Aging, Helping a Student with a Hip Replacement

Be Grounded, Don't Rush

Take a moment to ground yourself before you start teaching. This will help you keep a better tempo and let students feel their own bodies more. If you're ungrounded or have too many thoughts, you'll rush through things quicker. Remember, there's no rush. – Vibekke Fausa

Practice Asana Sequence Beforehand

It can be easy to sub out a balance pose for another or think that reclined hip openers have the same qualities, but that simply isn't true. Each posture and transition changes the energy, fluidity, and quality of your class. The best way to guarantee a class that seeks symmetry, balance, and growth is to practice the class a few times and refine it as you go. – Kate Connell Yoga

Ensuring Your Words are Embodied

David Life told me to practice every time before I teach, so that my words are embodied and not just an idea. When I tell people to root their tailbones and lift their chests in trikonasana, the imprint is still in my body. – Colleen Saidman

Step into Your Power

Learn what you need to do hold the space energetically and vocally. It's a disservice to yourself if you are meek, too quiet, or apologetic about perceived failings. Be a conductor of that symphony of bodies. Move around the room and let students hear and feel your presence. – Michael Hoyer

Mindfully Preparing for Class with Personal Ritual

When you prepare for your... class, you might like to create a ritual for yourself. That can be a simple prayer of asking to be open to guidance, a brief meditation or a centering and calming breath. Of course you also want to make detailed plans, like sequences, specific techniques, desirable props, etc. Still, the details won't work nearly as well without attention to the deeper aspect of the yogic practice... Allow yourself to feel prepared for your class, so you can feel relaxed and fully present. Look inside to know what means for you. You might want to write out a sequence (or more than one), you might want to have an inspirational reading selected. – Sue Flamm (Puja)

Ana Forrest's Do's and Don't's

In this [article](#), Ana Forrest was asked, "How should we not teach yoga?" Her response:

- *Not breathing.*
- *Not seeing students.*
- *Teaching from automatic mode or a place of boredom.*
- *Using touch carelessly without paying attention—that is a turn-off for everyone.*
- *What I'd rather talk about is what to do. The first thing that I learned about teaching, is not to focus on what NOT to do, but on what TO DO.*
- *Leave your stuff at the door before you walk into the yoga room.*
- *Be present for your students.*
- *Breathe deeply when teaching.*
- *Punctuate your cues with silences, giving your students time to do the directions you gave them.*
- *Practice your sequence, giving it a 'road test' before teaching it. Make sure that it works physiologically.*
- *Do some yoga before teaching so that it is alive in your blood and you're warmed up and safe to demo.*
- *Now you can teach from a truly authentic place!*
- *Connect to your love of yoga and your desire to help people as you teach.*

Transmission & Levels of Teaching

Eric Klein expertly describes three levels of teaching: information, method and transmission:

Sometimes you listen to a teacher and, while what they say makes sense, it doesn't move you. Another teacher might say the same thing and it's like lightning – brilliantly illuminating the mind and piercing the heart. Same words. Totally different impact. Why? There are three levels of teaching.

1) The first level is informational. Information teachings provide you with models of reality that:

- *Expand your understanding of life*
- *Shift your conditioned view of who you are*
- *Point towards the possibility of living an awakened life*

2) The second level is methodological. These teachings provide you with methods and practices to:

- *Test the validity of the information teachings in your own experience*
- *Cultivate your capacity to embody meditative awareness*
- *Strengthen new patterns of thought, speech, and action*

3) The third level is transmissional (if there is such a word). Transmission teachings connect you directly with:

- *The innate wisdom of your soul*
- *The boundless radiance of your spirit*
- *The sacred nature of your life*

All Levels Are Essential

All three levels are essential. We need information – to expand our view of life and our own possibilities. We need methods – to cultivate our capacity for embodying what we've learned. We need transmission – to reveal that which is deeper than information and prior to all methods. – Eric Klein

Practice Leads to a High Vibration

Teaching yoga is not merely about conveying intellectual information or guiding students through physical practices. Those are good things to do, but the real impact comes through transmission of a high vibration. And for that, we ourselves need to have a high vibration, which is going to come only through our own deep personal practice and living the teachings. Then students will feel it in their hearts, and that's when great things begin to happen. – Nayaswami Gyandev McCord

More on Transmission

Once a psychic revealed to me that my words had little effect on other people, but that the energy we shared together could inspire them. That was when I stopped offering narration of yoga and started the conduction of prana. – David Life

Online Resources

Please see [online version](#) for links to more resources.