

Adjusting Students – Theory and Practice

by Paul Fox

I vividly remember the second assessed teaching practice I did for my BWY Diploma. I received some encouraging feedback, but the assessor pointed out that I had been rooted to my mat for the whole class. I realised that teaching was so new and frightening to me that I was using my mat as a refuge to keep away from the students! After that I tried to get around the room more to break down the boundaries between the teacher and the student.

Nowadays my teaching has evolved in such a way that I am rarely on my mat, except to demonstrate postures. I now see one of my main roles as adjusting students in the postures to help them achieve a deeper experience in asana practice.

In this article I want to share with you some of the principles and techniques I have been learning with my Ashtanga Vinyasa teachers, John and Lucy Scott. For them, yoga is very like hands on bodywork and they have developed a wonderful range of sensitive and safe adjustments for students. It seems to me that the work I have been doing with John and Lucy over the past two years is relevant and of interest to BWY tutors, not just those teaching Ashtanga Yoga. During the BWY Diploma course there is not a great deal of emphasis placed on learning how to adjust students physically, although some DCTs cover this area. As a result, many BWY teachers feel that they lack the skills to take a hands-on approach. That is one of the reasons why I offer an approved IST Day called “Adjusting Students with Confidence”.

Everyone learns in different ways. Some people are visual learners, others like to work conceptually. Good teachers mix their approach, using visual aids and demonstration as well as verbal instruction. A powerful additional way of imparting knowledge about asana is to adjust the student so that they feel the essence and purpose of the asana in their bodies. It can be a revelation to be adjusted, and often students will say – “wow, so that’s what it’s meant to feel like”. In hatha yoga we work on the mind through the body and the body remembers the patterns of movement that we put into it. Adjustments can take the student out of their habitual pattern and ensure that asana practice remains a journey of exploration.

Theory of adjustment

As yoga teachers we appreciate that every student is unique. They are the product of a convergence of many different histories:-

- Evolutionary history – some are born with longer hamstrings than others etc
- Physical history - injuries, accidents and illnesses take their toll in different ways
- Social history – lifestyle choices, working at a desk, drinking or smoking etc
- Mental history – how the mind has evolved – is it rigid or flexible?

- Emotional history – highly strung, or chilled out

This list could be extended ad infinitum, but the point is well made that you cannot have a fixed adjustment for any particular posture because every student's needs are different. The skill of the teacher is therefore to approach the student and to use his or her knowledge to give an appropriate adjustment. To do this you need to develop **body reading skills**.

Teachers who are lucky enough to work with the same group of students week in and week out, get to know them and their bodies very well. This makes adjustment much easier. But there are also body reading skills that can be developed to make this process faster and more precise. Often this simply means using your eyes, taking in information and processing it. For example, it is very clear that two students doing Paschimottanasana will have totally different experiences if one has short hamstrings and the other is able to lie flat on their thighs and relax there. The student with short hamstrings will quickly reach the limit of their stretch – and will certainly let you know if you try to take them too far forward! The other student will probably take any extra adjustment in their stride because they are relaxed and (on a physical level) fully in the posture.

Simply by looking at how rounded the back is and the angle of the pelvis in forward bends, we can see at a glance whether the student is tight or loose in the back of the legs and/or the lower back.

Having developed some basic body reading skills, teachers will also want to bear in mind that they must take into account any possible injuries or chronic conditions, like lower back pain, when giving adjustment.

It is not surprising that teachers who are gifted at adjustment often have a background in bodywork, such as massage. They are used to receiving information through the hands and feeling the tension, or lack of it, in students. A massage course is great preparation for learning adjustments.

For those who have not developed their body reading skills, it is very useful to carry out a full postural analysis on a willing student or friend (and have one carried out on yourself). This is something that I offer on the IST Day. It involves using a plumb line and charts to establish every point where a person deviates from anatomical position. It is quite an eye opener when people see that very few shoulders or hips are completely level, whole sides of the body can be tight and feet and thighs turned out. Once you raise your awareness of differences in body structure, you will never look at your students *in* the same way again, or even people standing at the bus stop! All you see are body patterns and shapes, high shoulders and misaligned hips.

The growing body of knowledge about adjustments has been informed and influenced by the work of the Rolfing Institute and the American writer, Tom Myers, who has published the book *Anatomy Trains*. We are moving towards a deeper understanding of human anatomy that recognises the vital importance of fascia, or connective tissue, in determining posture, mobility

and movement. For most adults, the body has very well established patterns of movement which are hard to break out of. Yoga is a great way to bring balance back into the body, but the fact is that most people practice within well established patterns of movement. They do not generally challenge these patterns. A person with a shortening down one side of the body leading to misaligned hips will always find Trikonasana easier on one side compared with the other. They are working within their pattern. Even if they develop awareness of what needs lengthening, they may also need to seek extra myofascial work, like Rolfing, to break down the old patterns. One yoga class a week is unlikely to bring about dramatic change to patterns that are deep seated.

Receiving adjustment from a teacher who understands your pattern can be the first step to developing awareness of it and working in the posture more effectively as a result.

Of course the purpose of any adjustment is to benefit the individual. Teachers should not have an idea in their mind about a particular shape that they wish their student to make, and then impose it on the student. That would be wrong and would take the posture away from the student. Instead, the adjustor is seeking to expand awareness and give the student more of the asana to work with. It follows from this that the most important thing to give in an adjustment is foundation. If the student feels that you are helping to ground them in the pose then they will also feel the freedom to explore. An adjustment that takes a student out of their foundation – for example a feeling of overbalancing in the standing postures – will leave them feeling confused and unsure about what they are meant to be doing.

Professional issues

Adjusting students requires you to move into their space and, in some cases, get up close and personal. It's important to respect their space and observe clear professional boundaries. These include:-

- Always get permission from the class to adjust and give students the choice to opt out of being adjusted.
- Do not adjust children in any way that could lead you open to accusations of inappropriate behaviour. I do not adjust children unless they are my own or their parent is with them in the class.
- Touch students in an appropriate way. Some adjustments taught in India are not appropriate in the West. If you make a mistake and accidentally touch someone in a place you did not intend to, apologise immediately to show that it was an accident.

I have never injured anyone while adjusting them, but the possibility of injury should be considered. Even with the most sensitive adjustments, some students may be ticking "time bombs" waiting to go off. You don't know what they are doing in the rest of their lives, so if they come to you on the point of something going in their knee or back, then even the most experienced yoga teacher in the world may set it off. Clearly one of the purposes of adjustment is to take students deeper into a pose, so that does involve slightly higher

risks. But I believe the risks are very low and we should not allow fear to prevent us from exploring this work.

One of the ways of ensuring that you adjust safely is to develop your understanding of the “therapeutic edge”. In any asana there is a comfort zone where a student is working well within their capabilities and not challenging themselves. After the comfort zone comes the area of stretch and at the end of this, at the maximum stretch, is the therapeutic edge. Here the student is exploring his or her limits of flexibility and freedom. It is an edge – like the edge of a cliff – so can be a scary place to be. A good adjustment will take students to their therapeutic edge and allow them to experience and explore it. A gross adjustment might take students beyond the therapeutic edge into the “danger zone” where injury could occur. However, if you listen to your students you will know how not to go too far. Beyond the therapeutic edge the breathing becomes shallow, jagged or held and the body begins to tighten up to protect itself. If you listen for these signs and back off, then you will not harm your students.