

JOURNAL OF YOGA SERVICE



A publication of the Yoga Service Council
2014

Editor in Chief

Kelly M. Birch, ERYT-500, PYT500

Assistant Editor

Stephanie M. Shorter, PhD

Volunteer Proofreaders

Susan Birch

Stephanie M. Shorter PhD.

Original Journal Design

Susanne Murtha, RYT500, PYT1000

Contact

Editor in chief: Kelly Birch, ERYT-500, PYT500

editor@yogaservicecouncil.org

Membership information: Sarah Johnson, JD, RYT

membership@yogaservicecouncil.org

Conference director: Jennifer Cohen Harper, MA

jenn@yogaservicecouncil.org

Submissions Information

Please visit our website for guidelines for submitting to the *Journal of Yoga Service*. Submissions are on a rolling basis and may be submitted at any time. Publication is twice yearly.

For further information, please contact Kelly Birch at editor@yogaservicecouncil.org or visit www.yogaservicecouncil.org/journal-submission-guidelines

Peer Reviewers for Vol. 1, No. 2

Robin Carnes, MBA

Jasmine Chehrazi, ERYT-500, PYT500, DY800

Leslie Daly, MS, MA, LCAT, RYT

Michelle J. Fury, LPC, RCYT

Patricia L. Gerbarg, MD

Andrea M. Hyde, PhD

Kerrie J. Kauer, PhD

Mark Lilly

Kelly McGonigal, PhD

Shari Miller, PhD

Amy C. Moran, MA, RYT

Amy Pancake, MA, ERYT

Crystal L Park, PhD

Colin Pearsall, MA

Neil Pearson, MSc, BScPT, BA-BPHE, CYT, RYT500

Geri Portnoy, MA

Michael J. McKenzie, PhD

Rob Schware, PhD

Stephanie M. Shorter, PhD

Karen Soltes, LCSW, RYT

Jennifer J. Stanigar, MEd, RYT

Jennifer Turner, RYT, LMHC

If you would like to be a peer reviewer for the *Journal of Yoga Service*, please contact Kelly Birch at editor@yogaservicecouncil.org.

Membership

The Yoga Service Council's mission is to develop a community of professional support in the field of yoga service and to engage in helping YSC members move from inspired to effective in using the tools of yoga and mindfulness to reach underserved and vulnerable populations.

Mission

By joining the Yoga Service Council (YSC) you help affirm four goals for 2014–2015: to increase connection between people active in the field of yoga service; to broaden the reach and effectiveness of our community; to deepen the professionalism of our collective work; and to strengthen the YSC's capacity to provide leadership and opportunities for members. To become a member of the YSC, visit our website at www.yogaservicecouncil.org/join-the-yoga-service-council. Benefits of membership include subscription to the *Journal of Yoga Service* (JYS), discounts on conferences, and free listing in the JYS of your workshops and trainings.

YSC Board

Rob Schware, PhD, *President*

Jennifer Cohen Harper, MA, ERYT, *Vice President*

Sarah Johnson, JD, RYT

Chandlee Kuhn, JD, RYT200

Mark Lilly

YSC Advisory Council

B. K. Bose, PhD

Jasmine Chehrazi, ERYT-500, PYT500, DY800

Molly Lannon Kenny, MS-CCC

Kelly McGonigal, PhD

Ali Smith

Kerri Kelly

ADVANCING THE FIELD

Teaching Yoga in Service Settings Best Practices and Common Mistakes

Jasmine Chehrazi, ERYT-500, PYT500, DY800

Instructor, George Washington University | Founder, Yoga Activist | Founder, Yoga District
jasmine@yogaactivist.org

Abstract: This article provides a glimpse into the comprehensive approach necessary to teach effective yoga practices to service communities. Yoga service teachers must acknowledge and understand that they are there to serve the community, not to fix or help it. Service is best perceived as a relationship among equals. Using yoga therapy as a model, the author asserts that yoga service teachers should educate themselves about the service community's strengths and needs in order to teach relevant practices. Proper yoga service teaching requires avoiding dogmatic devotion to particular traditions and providing modifications that take into account the community's culture and therapeutic goals. The author offers advice on communicating a practice's relevancy by letting the yoga "do the talking" and avoiding cues that too literally draw parallels between the practice and students' daily lives. The author also advises service teachers to customize meditation practices for newer students in service settings and asserts that meditative practices for new students should be guided and should focus on concentrative rather than expansive practices.

Each yoga tradition emphasizing asana offers guidelines or specific methods for asana practice. Variables include sequencing, pace of movement, integration of breathing, relaxation, concentration, and meditation practices. Some practices from various yoga traditions translate well into particular yoga service settings, whereas other practices are not as relevant. For instance, learning the Ashtanga Primary Series might be irrelevant or even harmful for individuals battling advanced stages of cancer participating in a yoga service class in a hospital. However, more basic movements, such as those featured in Mukunda Stiles's Joint Freeing Series (Stiles, 2000, pp. 132-133), when harmonized with breath, may promote harmony and a sense of well-being. This example reflects some of the considerations that are necessary to teach effective yoga practices to service communities. This article was written to address common issues that arise in yoga service settings and to explore best practices for yoga service teaching. Although it is by no means comprehensive, the article provides a glimpse into the holistic approach necessary to teach effective yoga practices to service communities.

My approach to yoga service teaching draws on my years of experience in commercial, academic, and service yoga settings. I have taught yoga in detention facilities, schools, hos-

pitals, and various social service settings. I lead the yoga teacher training program in the Exercise Science Department at George Washington University in addition to leading approximately ten trauma-sensitive yoga teacher trainings annually at Yoga District, the Washington, D.C.-based yoga studio collective I founded in 2006. I am a student of a wide variety of yoga traditions, including Dharma, Power, Vinyasa, and Sivananda Yoga. Like many others, I have my preferences in traditions and practices. When it comes to yoga service teaching, however, teachers must be prepared to table their personal or stylistic preferences and, at times, diverge from the general recommendations of the traditions from which they draw. That is why I founded Yoga Activist, a nonprofit outreach organization dedicated to expanding access to yoga and meditation, as well as improving trauma sensitivity in yoga and meditation instruction.

In this article, I will discuss best practices in yoga service settings, starting with how we may comprehend the concept of “service.” I will then advise on how yoga service teachers can educate themselves on the needs and strengths of service communities. I will approach common conditions in service communities and how teachers may customize practices to best serve those communities. Finally, an appendix will provide a modification guide for group asana classes and common health conditions.

Understanding Service as a Mutually Beneficial Relationship Between Equals Without Attachment to Outcomes

An essential element of effective yoga service teaching—indeed, all yoga teaching—is the perception of service itself. Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D. describes service as “a relationship between equals” (1999, para. 3). Equality is a concept built into yogic philosophy (The Bhagavad Gita, pp. 305, 321) and requires acknowledgement that the service teacher and the service community share the same essential nature. However, equality does not imply sameness. For instance, yoga service teachers may present themselves as knowledgeable about yoga practices conducive to self-empowerment, yet neither this knowledge nor the leadership required to effectively perform in a yoga service role places yoga service teachers at a level superior to the communities they serve.

If the relationship between yoga service teacher and service community is not experienced as a rela-

tionship of equals, negative consequences may result. A yoga service teacher identifying as a “helper” or “fixer” implies superiority to those “helped” or “fixed.” According to Dr. Remen, “Serving is different from helping. Helping is not a relationship between equals. A helper may see others as weaker than they are, needier than they are, and people often feel this inequality. The danger in helping is that we may inadvertently take away from people more than we could ever give them; we may diminish their self-esteem, their sense of worth, integrity or even wholeness” (Remen, 1999, para. 3). A study from the University of Arizona confirmed that service communities “may interpret their seeking and receiving aid as a negative reflection on their own capacities” and that “indebtedness to a helper creates an unpleasant psychological state, resembling cognitive dissonance” (Rubin & Thorelli, 1984, p. 225). Continuing, the authors stated that “recipients may feel most hostile towards those helpers who most expect demonstrated progress and gratitude. If so, then this offers more reason to suppose that service volunteers with the greatest anticipation of receiving psychic benefits may be the least likely to sustain their participation. Not only would their more extensive expectations be harder to meet under normal circumstances, but the detection of those expectations by the recipient would reduce the recipient’s propensity to reciprocate [emphasis added]” (Rubin & Thorelli, 1984, p. 225).

To avoid such undesired consequences, yoga service teachers should provide service while making clear that the relationship is between equals and that the relationship benefits the yoga service teacher just as much as the service community. Remen (1999) explored the mutually beneficial nature of effectively performed service, explaining that “our service strengthens us as well as others” (para. 5). Research verifies the mutually beneficial nature of service. The Corporation for National and Community Service’s 2007 review of seven research studies showed that “[t]hose who give support through volunteering, experience greater health benefits than those who receive support through these activities” and that “research also suggests that volunteer activities offer those who serve more than just a social network to provide support and alleviate stress; volunteering also provides individuals with a sense of purpose and life satisfaction” (Grimm, Spring, & Dietz, 2007, pp. 3-4). Shared understanding that yoga service teachers ben-

efit from the act of yoga service can clarify misperceptions of inequality.

Although yoga service also benefits the yoga service teacher, traditional texts of yoga philosophy counsel us to act without allowing benefits to be the motivation. A foundational text of yogic philosophy states, “Desire for the fruits of work must never be your motive in working” (Bhagavad-Gita, 2002, p. 40). In other words, the motivation to serve should come first. Actions performed with attachment to the benefits generate karma that binds us more tightly to a cycle of suffering (p. 41). Distinct from this cycle of attachment and suffering are actions performed as service without attachment to the results (p. 107). Such action constitutes karma yoga, the yoga of action, one of the major paths to enlightenment in the yoga tradition. Although actions performed on the path of karma yoga may employ the ego as a tool, they are not acts to please the ego. In fact, the ultimate goal of yoga is to surrender ego consciousness to universal consciousness (p. 41).

Therefore, it is a priority for yoga service teachers to share yoga practices with service communities with great care for the process, yet without expectation of any particular result. Otherwise, yoga service teachers can cause more suffering for themselves through attachment to specific outcomes of their service, such as how many students participate in a class, the community’s ability or desire to participate in the practices being taught, the teacher’s self-identification as charitable and helpful, and so on, which in turn will likely diminish the teacher’s ability to offer effective yoga service in the long term.

Making self-sacrifices as a teacher to the point of harming one’s self is a misunderstanding of service, a misunderstanding that can eventually limit what the teacher has to offer in support and service of others. The sustainable practice is to focus on your yoga service teaching as an act of service and of putting yoga into action for the benefit of all. It is also important to understand that it can still be yoga service when the intention is there to increase others and one’s own experience of connectedness with each other and with

all of life.

Research in the fields of social work, behavioral science, and volunteer management supports yogic philosophy’s recommendation that service be performed without attachment to ego-based results. For instance, Rubin and Thorelli (1984) suggested that the duration of volunteers’ service lessens when they feel motivated to volunteer by the need for—or expectation of—egoistic benefits.¹

It is essential for yoga service teachers to explore the extent to which their motivations to serve reflect the definition of service as a mutually beneficial relationship between equals without attachment to particular outcomes.² Yoga service teachers must unflinchingly reflect upon their motivation for sharing each practice with the community they serve. For example, if a teacher wants to share a practice, such as alternate nostril breathing, because it makes him or her feel knowledgeable and powerful in relation to the students, then it is an act of the ego attached to self-identification rather than an act of service. Or perhaps a teacher shares alternate nostril breathing because it helped transform him or her, and the teacher wants the students to be similarly changed. Although this appears to be a more honorable motivation, on deeper reflection it is still an act of the self-referential ego. However, it *is* an act of service to skillfully share alternate nostril breathing because it is relevant to the community based on the teacher’s understanding and connection with the community’s strengths, needs, and lifestyle—including the teacher’s first-hand experience of the effects of the practice of alternate nostril breathing.

Understanding the Needs and Strengths of the Community

When we take yoga out of stereotypical yoga studio communities and traditional ashrams—when we take it to the larger world—it is incumbent upon teachers to be conscientious of the application of our practices to a broader population. In particular, it is the duty of those in the field of yoga service to present

¹ While this study focuses on volunteers, its findings remain relevant whether yoga service teachers are serving in paid or unpaid positions.

² Yoga service teachers may wish to explore the Volunteer Motivation Inventory (VMI) developed by Judy Esmond, PhD, in her report available at <http://www.morevolunteers.com/resources/MotivationFinalReport.pdf>

the relevancy of the practice to participants in service settings. Below I discuss valuable lessons from yoga therapy, best practices in determining the strengths and needs of service communities, and the common mistake of dogmatic devotion to particular traditions, which can interfere with presenting relevant yoga practices.

Lessons from Yoga Therapy

Although yoga service draws from the fields of yoga therapy and public yoga classes as taught in studios, gyms, ashrams, and so on, the effective yoga service teacher should incorporate the emphasis of yoga therapy on understanding the needs of clients. Public yoga often aligns with a consumer culture in which students act as customers and the product (yoga classes) aims to please the customer by providing a particular kind of “yoga experience.” Public yoga classes are often taught in a group setting, where individually prescribed therapeutic applications of yoga are rarely possible. Due to shortcomings of some commercial yoga teacher trainings and certification requirements, many commercial yoga teachers in yoga studios and gyms struggle to provide modifications for students to avoid injuries. During group yoga classes teachers are often unable to share prescriptive variations as therapy for injuries, health conditions, and other therapeutic needs of students. Commercial yoga classes also include students with a variety of goals and needs; a general yoga class in a yoga studio might have students with many years of yoga experience alongside someone entirely new to yoga and someone with severe arthritis next to someone aiming to practice handstand. The variety of students in some commercial yoga classes makes it challenging for teachers to customize classes to meet the diverse individual needs of all attending students.

The field of yoga therapy, on the other hand, usually features a yoga therapist working one-on-one with an individual student or with private, small groups with a common health condition. Many in the field of yoga therapy are working hard to align themselves more with the healthcare industry than with commercial yoga. Students are perceived less like customers and more like clients. Yoga therapy teacher training requirements are increasingly robust, thanks

to the International Association of Yoga Therapists, the organization that has developed standards and accreditation for yoga therapy educational programs. Currently, yoga therapy students may enjoy prescriptive, therapeutic applications of yoga, sometimes in conjunction with western medical care, to address their personal holistic health needs.

The field of yoga service lands somewhere between the fields of public yoga and yoga therapy. Yoga service teachers are often able to arrange yoga service programs in which the service community shares a common culture or type of experience, potentially with specific, shared therapeutic needs. Knowing the community’s common needs gives yoga service teachers the opportunity to choose practices more relevant to these needs to a greater extent than possible in some commercial yoga classes, yet does not require the one-on-one setting common in yoga therapy. For instance, a yoga service class for a community of active service military returning from combat can be customized to feature trauma-sensitive yoga practices that foster students’ ability to sleep, relieve stress, and rebuild a sense of trust in the body.

Determining Relevant Practices

In order to steer away from the specifics of particular yoga traditions when they are not relevant for a particular community, yoga service teachers first must determine which practices are relevant to the strengths and needs of each community. A yoga practice is relevant to a service community if it engages students as it furthers their realization of their naturally more cohesive, unified state. In other words, a practice is relevant to a service community if it brings to the students a sense of their innate capacity for well-being and connection. To determine when a particular yoga practice or style is or is not a good match with the community being served takes common sense, observation, and research. Yoga service teachers would benefit by learning as much as possible about the day-to-day lives of their students. Reading general information on the Internet about various communities is helpful in establishing a background, but yoga service teachers should not rely too heavily on general statistics. Statistics do not take into account each student’s particular situation, and over-reliance on

statistics can lead yoga service teachers to stereotype, objectify, and disrespect their students.

For instance, knowing that between 15% and 20% of Iraq and Afghanistan war veterans have PTSD and/or depression prompts teachers to be prepared for what they might encounter in this population, but yoga service teachers must go another step. Yoga service teachers will develop a better idea about what practices may be more relevant if they meet the veterans and discuss practice options with them, in addition to spending time at the facilities where these veterans receive care, learning about the institutional culture, and understanding expressed values. One method of asking students what they would like to learn about is through surveys, an example of which is available on the Yoga Activist website.³

Through discussions with the community they serve and appropriate staff of the hosting organization, yoga service teachers can also learn what practices might be more relevant to the community on a more conceptual level. Street Yoga, a renowned yoga service organization that leads trainings on yoga service across the country, uses this approach by asking its teacher trainees to consider community members' strengths and needs. Teachers can learn about students' strengths and needs through their direct observation and conversations with students and others who serve the student community, as well as through online or literature research. As discussed below in the section titled "Effective Communication and Cueing," sharing yoga practices and methods of cueing that highlight community members' strengths and practices, which help foster qualities addressing their needs, can immediately make the relevancy of the practices more apparent to community members.

It is also helpful to know any routines or rituals of the community members. For instance, at a shelter, is there a check-in time to report to the shelter to get a bed for the evening? In a hospital community, is there a set time that the community gets medication? When does the community eat, sleep, rise, have group ac-

tivities, and so on? Yoga service teachers can gain information about such daily rituals directly from community members, the organization hosting their yoga service programs, direct observation, and research. A teacher considerate of a community's daily rituals has more of a foundation from which he or she can connect with the student community. Developing such connections may aid teachers' abilities to operate from that place of equality inherent in Dr. Remen's definition of service, and may be extremely helpful to yoga service teachers' abilities to realize union expressed in yoga's definitive state. Failure to understand the needs and strengths of a service community may lead to ineffective yoga service teaching.

Avoiding Blind Devotion to the Practices of Particular Traditions

A common challenge to effectively sharing yoga in service settings is teachers' devotion to practices in their tradition of yoga without the desire or knowledge of how to modify their tradition's practices. Unfortunately, as some teachers become dogmatic and insist on following asana practices unique to their tradition, regardless of relevancy to the service community being taught, they may hold students responsible for their ability, or lack thereof, to perform the practices presented due to a belief in the universal efficacy of the practices. Such teachers may erroneously blame the students if the students are hurt physically or emotionally by the practice by assuming that the students performed it incorrectly rather than questioning the appropriateness of the practice for the student.

Of course, students do bear some responsibility for taking care of their own safety during class. However, holding students entirely responsible for how they perform practices that may be inappropriate and possibly incorrectly or insufficiently presented to them is an evasion of responsibility on the part of yoga teachers. Perhaps the sentiment that students are entirely responsible for their own reactions to the practice and responsible for their own well-being may be appropri-

³ See also Chehrazi, Hirono, and Vuxton (2013).

ate in some situations, but it is less so in many yoga service settings where students are newer to the practice and may also have more need for customization due to health issues or other challenges commonly found in such settings. The cultural, physical, and psychological assumptions teachers make when they command students to “just modify your practice if it doesn’t feel right to you” can be downright alarming to some.⁴ The yoga posture modification guide presented as an appendix in this article may help yoga service teachers and service communities effectively adapt practices to increase practice relevancy and safety.

Customization of yoga practices beyond the usual dictates of a particular yoga style are especially important to service communities when they are not only new to yoga but also survivors of physical or emotional trauma. Trauma may increase the likelihood that students experience symptoms of dissociation, post-traumatic stress disorder, limited proprioception, or similar disorders, any of which may present serious challenges to a student’s ability to sense the body and safely self-modify his or her yoga practice without proper instruction. The World Health Organization defines dissociation as “partial or complete loss of the normal integration between memories of the past, awareness of identity, immediate sensations, and control of bodily movements” (Spitzer, Barnow, Freyberger, & Grabe, 2006, p. 83). Dissociation is often related to depersonalization, “the feeling that one’s own body does not belong to oneself” (p. 83), which may have been a useful adaptation by aiding an individual’s ability to disconnect from painful trauma while it was happening, but no longer serves the individual. Some physical manifestations of dissociation and related conditions may include locking or freezing of the body or parts of the body, trembling, and/or a numbing or dulling of bodily sensation (Yalom & Yalom, 2010), all of which can limit a student’s proprioceptive faculty.⁵

Yoga service teachers observing limited proprioception in students should provide specific guidance on when and how to modify practices, such as the modification recommendations in this article’s appendix, regardless of their personal yoga tradition’s standard recommendations. It is incumbent upon yoga service teachers to educate themselves about the likelihood and general nature of trauma experienced in the community. Yoga service teachers may learn about this through interaction with the service community and the organization hosting the yoga service classes, as well as through general research.

Effective Communication and Cueing

Reflecting upon the service community’s needs and strengths better enables a yoga service teacher to effectively communicate relevant teachings to that community. A teacher does not necessarily have to tell students how the presented practices may speak to their strengths and needs, nor should teachers provide analytical justification for their teachings because these tend to take the student away from his or her own direct experience. Rather, teachers should let the yoga do the talking. If teacher cues are sufficient, the relevancy of the practices to student strengths and needs may be experienced without being specifically discussed. The student yoga experience fostered by such sufficient cues can increase student familiarity with and frequency in experiencing certain emotions, sensations, and thoughts in relation to yoga practices, which may then be more readily experienced in day-to-day life beyond yoga practices. Like exercising a muscle, the more frequently we become aware of certain emotions or have certain thoughts, the more accessible and readily experienced they become.

Effective cueing methods include fewer results-oriented commands (just as we may hope to experience life in a less results-oriented manner, according

4 William J. Broad wrote *The Science of Yoga: The Risks and Rewards*. In January 2013, *The New York Times* adapted Broad’s book into an article with the telling title “How Yoga Can Wreck Your Body.” The article served as a reminder to some yoga teachers about the need for safe modifications in their classes. Certainly, if yoga isn’t deemed safe in public settings like gyms and studios, social service organizations will be wary of integrating yoga service programs in their offerings. This is unfortunate given the

documented physical and psychological benefits proper yoga instruction can foster, and it is all the more reason why yoga teachers should learn how to modify the practices of yoga to the populations they are teaching.

5 Proprioception relates to the perception of bodily sensations and the sense of how one’s body is occupying space relative to neighboring body parts.

to yoga philosophy; Bhagavad-Gita, 2002, pp. 40-41) and more cues that promote open-ended, descriptive journeys into the practice experience. Cues should emphasize exploration of sensations perceived while practicing the pose rather than compliance with a textbook expression of the pose form. For instance, a teacher sharing *chakravakasana* (sunbird pose) in a manner designed to emphasize students' stability could share the following phrases to support the sensation of stability and life balance while acknowledging physical challenges to the form:

- You may wish to notice how the body naturally shares weight between the grounded leg and hand. See if you would like to shift more weight into the grounded leg or into the hand. If you choose to do so, how does this shift change your balance? Where do you feel most stable?

- Even if the raised arm and leg move around or start to shake, imagine your foundation is solid—your grounded leg and hand are steady and supportive.

If a teacher were to add a cue to the above pose, asking students to consider what in their day-to-day life serves as their solid foundation or where they feel most stable in situations beyond the mat, students' attention may shift from their current experience in their body and breath in the present moment to their larger life concerns. It is generally neither the time nor the place for such explorations. Yoga service teachers should generally avoid cues that too literally draw parallels between the practice and daily life because such cues may be presumptuous and distracting. Cues should try to keep students close to what is happening in the present moment on the mat.

The above cues and effective cueing in general do not command students to feel a certain way. This is not to say that yoga service teachers should not articulate their observations about the symbolism, effect, and relevance of a practice, but to command an interpretation, reaction, or results-oriented movement can, in many instances, be contrary to the nature of yoga, service, and the relationship of equals intrinsic to the yoga service setting. Nonviolent communication (NVC), employed internationally as a tool for positive social change in service settings and beyond, teaches that judgments and demands may be less effective in fostering understanding and connection compared

to reliance on honest expressions of the basic components of NVC: observations, feelings, needs, and requests (Kashtan & Kashtan, 2006).

To learn more about effective methods of cueing, yoga service teachers can study non-violent communication or expressions of it. *Nonviolent Communication* by Marshall B. Rosenberg (2003) is the definitive text on the subject. Effective yoga service teachers implement concepts of nonviolent communication, including leading yoga service teachers such as Mark Lilly and David Emerson. Lilly's nationally attended trainings on yoga service include samplings of yoga service class instruction in which Lilly shares relevant pose cues in alignment with NVC principles. Emerson's book *Overcoming Trauma Through Yoga* (2011) describes the use of the language of invitation and exploration, similar to NVC recommendations to avoid demands and explore non-judgmental observations.

Returning to the conceptual relevancy of strengths and needs of a student community, if someone in an emergency homeless shelter attends a yoga service class, adaptability and resilience may be strengths while stability and grounding may be needs. The sequence that is taught and the manner in which it is taught will be more effective if it addresses these strengths and needs on some level. For example, to emphasize resilience, a yoga service teacher could alternate between challenging and resting practices that emphasize recovery and restoration after a challenging pose or practice. One example of many might be to cue *ardha shalambasana*, (half-locust pose), yet alternate it with resting *makrasana* (resting crocodile pose).

A yoga service teacher could ask the students to notice that they can make the decision to rest completely in *makrasana*, even though they know another round of *ardha shalambasana* is coming, to cultivate the students' sense of responding fully to the present moment. Cues may guide students to imagine that their periods of rest fortify and prepare every part of their body for activity. We can invite students to imagine that they carry the peacefulness of *makrasana* with them into *ardha shalambasana*. Teachers may even directly mention to students that such a practice can help emphasize their natural resilience. But to draw a parallel between resilience in the pose with resilience

in day-to-day situations could be a serious distraction—if a teacher must draw this parallel, it might be best to do it after or before the asana practice.

To cultivate the qualities of grounding and stability, the teacher may teach contrast, for example, by cueing postures and practices that encourage the students' reliance on the ground beneath them by presenting challenges to this reliance. With effective cues, students may become more aware of their grounded, stable nature in a standing position when there is a slight challenge presented to it, such as stepping one leg back significantly further than the other as is done in many standing yoga poses. Again, teachers need not provide an analytical justification of the practice and its relevance to day-to-day needs of grounding and stability. With appropriate cues, teachers can emphasize students' grounding and stability during class time, which may automatically endure in some subtle form beyond class time.

Sequencing Concepts

Safe and effective yoga service classes must take standard sequencing concepts into account, but yoga service teachers should go further and make additional considerations for service communities new to yoga or movement in general, as well as service communities with high likelihood of physical or emotional trauma for reasons mentioned above (i.e., challenged proprioception, dissociation, and other trauma-associated conditions and symptoms).

Grouping Pose Orientations

If they do not have significant experience in yoga, students may practice yoga with more ease and greater safety if the yoga service teacher sequences the practice with poses of similar orientation grouped together. Pose orientations, in the order in which they are often presented to beginning students, include standing, balancing, seated, prone, and supine poses. A service community including students new to yoga and students with mobility challenges may prefer to practice standing and balancing poses as a group, move to the floor for all desired seated poses, transition to lying on the stomach for a group of prone poses, and finally transition to lying on the back for supine poses, ending with *savasana*, the final relaxation pose in most yoga classes.

Grouping poses in this manner allows such a service community to avoid moving back and forth between the same pose orientations repeatedly. Repetitious movement between pose orientations without proper alignment or support can cause strain on joints or discomfort, which can lead a student to feel unsuccessful or unsafe in the practice. The unorganized grouping of poses without regard for pose orientations may also lead to students' perception of a disorganized class experience. Moving from standing to prone to standing to seated to supine to standing to supine, or other repetitious groupings of pose orientations, might be appropriate for youthful students with no exceptions to mobility or for students who have sufficient experience in yoga. Otherwise, grouping pose orientations together is often a more considerate option.

Some yoga service classes or individual students in such classes might need to do without entire pose orientations due to certain health conditions. For instance, in preparation for a yoga service class at a needle-exchange service organization, I arranged yoga mats on the floor and then sat down on one of the mats to wait for students' arrival. A passerby peeked in the room and repeatedly exclaimed, "I can't do that!" After I asked him exactly what he meant, he explained that he couldn't possibly sit on the floor. I assured him we would avoid sitting on the floor and could do plenty of other practices together. We ended up having a complete yoga practice while easily avoiding floor-seated postures. In another class with a community served by a transitional housing organization, we avoided prone and supine poses for a student with emphysema, prone and supine poses for a student who was in her third trimester of pregnancy, and single-leg balancing poses for a student with limited mobility in one leg due to an old puncture wound. Aside from individual practice variations offered to these students whenever appropriate, the entire class could practice standing and seated postures together. It can be good practice for yoga service teachers to regularly assess how they would avoid one or a few pose orientations in a class while still offering a complete yoga posture practice.

Families of Poses

Aside from grouping poses according to their

orientation, sound yoga sequencing acknowledges families of poses—types of poses presenting similar physical and subtle effects on the practitioner. Examples of pose families include hip openers, backbends, forward folds, twists, lateral bends, stabilizers, inversions, and standing poses. Inversions and standing poses may be considered pose orientations as well as families of poses.

Families of poses are not necessarily performed as a group. For example, all forward folds may not be grouped together or all backbends grouped together, but they are usually presented throughout a class with progressive depth. For instance, a class could feature a gentle forward fold early in the practice and include forward folds with increasing depth and complexity later in a practice. Yoga service classes are no exception to this general guideline in sequencing.

Yoga service instructors can also consider how the strengths and needs of the service community influence what pose families are most relevant. For instance, a group of students with sleep complications might benefit from calming, gentle forward-folding poses. Students needing more wakefulness may find energizing, stimulating back-bending poses more relevant. One physical reflex in response to potential or realized trauma is flexion of the body or related areas of the body as the individual braces for emotional or physical pain. This flexion may become habitual if the trauma, whether actual or perceived, is repeated. Service communities coping with such habitual flexion may benefit from practicing families of poses that emphasize controlled release and activation of those parts of the body that students tend to flex in response to actual or perceived physical or emotional trauma. Thus, practicing gentle hip openers may be relevant to a service community that includes survivors of sexual trauma experiencing symptoms similar to pelvic floor tension myalgia, “a chronic pain condition related to chronically increased tone and tenderness of one or

several of the muscles that compose the pelvic floor” (Marvel, 2008, p. 133). Overall, a careful study of a service community’s strengths and needs will reveal much about which families of poses may be most relevant to them.

Meditation and Concentration Practices and Modifications

In addition to ensuring recommended asana practices are relevant to the service community, an effective yoga service teacher should present relevant meditation and concentration practices.⁶ This is especially true given the longstanding evidence of meditation benefits (Sedlmeier, 2012) and given that meditation and concentration practices are central tenets of the yoga tradition.⁷ Just as their maintenance of a regular asana practice is essential to their ability to effectively share asana with service communities, yoga service teachers should maintain a regular meditation and concentration practice, allowing them to teach from experience.

Improperly guided meditation and concentration practices may engender a state of imbalance, which may be particularly dangerous to yoga service communities with higher rates of emotional and physical trauma. Peter Levine, Ph.D., a somatic therapist who developed a body awareness approach to the treatment of trauma, described concerns about meditation relevant to much of the yoga service teaching and student community (Yalom & Yalom, 2010):

...[The] problem is when people go into their inner landscape and they’re not prepared and they’re not guided, sooner or later they encounter the trauma, and then what do they do? They could be overwhelmed with it, or they find a way to go away from the trauma. And they go sometimes into something that resembles a bliss state. But it’s really an ungrounded bliss state (Yalom & Yalom, 2010).

⁶ The ability to sustain concentration results in what is classically referred to in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali as meditation or contemplation. The identification of subject (the student concentrating), object (the object of concentration), and the relationship (the act of concentration) begin to fade as a more integrated quality of perception arises in a state of meditation.

⁷ Concentration (dharana) and meditation (dhyana) constitute two of the eight limbs in the path of yoga codified in the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali.

Rather than fostering an “ungrounded bliss state,” yoga service teachers should use some of the modification considerations below to guide their communities to grounding and concentrative practices that help strengthen students’ connection with their sense of self.

Amount of Guidance

With regard to meditative practices, yoga service teachers may find better success if they provide newer students with more closely guided meditation, rather than asking them to sit in silence and work on the practice by themselves. Guided meditations can have constant instruction with little pause or instruction alternating with short periods of silence. Yoga service teachers might start with more guidance and decrease verbal guidance as they feel students engage in the experience. Some signs that students are engaging include steadiness of gaze, breathing, body position, and facial expressions, although students can certainly be thoroughly engaged even if they do not exhibit such steadiness.

Concentrative vs. Expansive Meditation

For newer students, guided meditations focusing on concentration, also known as “concentrative meditation,” may be more accessible initially compared to meditation practices in where there is no point of focus, also known as “expansive meditation.” Expansive techniques do not have a point of concentration to ground and settle newer practitioners and as a result, it can be difficult for newer yoga service teachers to teach effectively and safely. Asking service communities to simply develop witness consciousness or “awareness of awareness” without adequate preparation and guidance can lead students to states of anxiety and disconnection with their body and breath—this disconnection is the opposite of the union and integration we are working to cultivate. Expansive

techniques should be taught only by experienced teachers who can ensure that the practices are presented in a manner that is relevant and safe for their student community.

Subtle vs. Gross Concentration

It may be difficult for some newer students to concentrate on something subtle instead of something more gross. Examples of subtle points of concentration include focusing on the nature of thoughts, light within, the flow of energy in the body, a silent mantra, and other foci beyond the physical realm. Gross concentration may include the rhythmic tapping of the finger on the knee; the movement of the navel with the breath; repetition of a mantra or short, positive affirmation out-loud; visual concentration on a physical object such as a *mandala*,⁸ their thumb, a light; and other more physical experiences.

Progression of Concentration Techniques

As students become more acquainted with gross, physical points of focus in concentrative meditation, yoga service teachers can explore whether students respond well to increasingly subtle points of concentration. Methods of transition to more subtle points of focus may include concentration on a mantra or short, positive affirmation mentally/silently rather than aloud; concentration on the energetic rather than physical quality of breathing; concentration on an imagined/visualized or mystical sense of a mandala; or concentration on the movement or quality of thoughts.

However, concentration on the subtle vs. gross is not necessarily preferable or more advanced. It is simply important to provide different options for some students until they find a technique that works for them. A student might find limited success with one technique yet readily connect with another. For instance, one group of individuals recovering from addiction I worked with readily connected with a guided

⁸ The Chopra Center website offers instruction on mandala-focused meditation, defining mandalas as a “chart or geometric pattern which represents the cosmos metaphysically or symbolically, a microcosm of the universe from the human perspective” (Chopra Center at <http://www.chopra.com/community/online-library/terms/mandalas-sri-yantras>).

rotation of concentrating on different parts of the body, whereas many of them felt they did not connect with concentration on the breath.

Whatever concentration technique works for a student is what should be sustained because in the beginning it can be too confusing for students to practice a variety of concentrative practices. Often, it is more helpful to find what works and keep at it with consistency until or unless the need for another technique arises. For instance, at the beginning of a short meditation practice, a teacher can offer students the technique of a breath-focused meditation, and after a while the teacher can offer an alternative technique such as a silently repeated mantra. Each student can try both techniques and then choose the method most suitable for his or her individual needs and preferences.

Decreased Duration vs. Increased Repetition of Concentration

When students are newer to meditation and concentration practices, it is usually difficult for them to practice concentration techniques for longer than a few minutes. Rather than abandon a practice because it cannot be sustained, yoga service teachers might create an opportunity for success and endurance by increasing repetition and decreasing duration. For instance, a yoga service teacher can ask students seated in chairs to concentrate on the naval rising and falling with the breath, alternating with short periods of movement or relaxation. Alternating concentration practices with periods of movement or integrating a consistent concentration practice within periods of movement are excellent ways to introduce concentration practices to what might otherwise be a more physical yoga asana class.

Conclusion

The information in this article is just a glimpse into the comprehensive approach necessary to conduct effective yoga service teachings to communities in need. Yoga service teachers must first acknowledge and understand that they are there to serve the community, not to fix or help. Yoga service programs are most effective when they strike a balance between techniques employed in stereotypical commercial

yoga settings and those found in yoga therapy. Service practices need to be modified (no matter what the traditional guidelines dictate) depending on the specific culture, experience, and needs of the community being served. In order to do this, the yoga service teacher must first make an effort to better understand that community and then adapt the class to include practice variations sensitive to their common conditions while creating sequencing that is relevant. Teachers need to let the yoga do the talking and avoid cues that too literally draw parallels between the practice and the daily life of students. Additionally, meditative practices should be guided for new students and should initially focus on concentrative rather than expansive practices to ensure that the students are engaged and have the best chance of benefiting from participation.

Yoga service teachers have an obligation to educate themselves on the needs of the community and adapt their personal styles to best fit those needs—without ego or predetermination. This will most likely mean looking outside the specifics of traditional practices and adjusting techniques and routines, and a yoga service teacher must be open to this. The beauty of yoga service is that, beyond enriching and broadening the yoga community, outreach programs allow more individuals to realize the positive benefits of a yoga practice and guide them toward more union between the universal sense of self and the individual.



References

- Burt, R. (2004). Structural holes and good ideas. *American Journal of Sociology*, pp. 349-399. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/421787>.
- Bhagavad-Gita: The song of god (2002), S. Prabhavananda & C. Isherwood, (Trans.). New York: Signet Classic.
- Bhagavad-Gita (1964), S. Nikhilananda & W. Hocking, (Trans.). New York: Haddon Craftsmen.
- Chehrazi, J., Hirono, K., & Vuxton, E. (2013). What to teach, where, and how: Yoga class preferences of a non-studio-based outreach yoga community. Washington,

DC. Retrieved from <http://www.yogaactivist.org/about/development/141-2/what-to-teach-where-and-how-yoga-class-preferences-of-a-non-studio-based-outreach-yoga-community/>

Chopra Center (2014). Mandalas and yantras. Retrieved from <http://www.chopra.com/community/online-library/terms/mandalas-sri-yantras>.

Emerson, D., & Hopper, E. (2011). *Overcoming trauma through yoga: Reclaiming your body*. Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books.

Grimm, R., Spring, K., & Dietz, N. (2007). The health benefits of volunteering: A review of recent research. Washington, DC: Corporation for National and Community Service. Retrieved from http://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/07_0506_hbr.pdf

Kashtan, I., & Kashtan, M. (2006). *Basics of nonviolent communication*. Oakland: Bay Area Nonviolent Communication. Retrieved from http://www.baynvc.org/documents/nvc_basics_handout.pdf

Marvel, R. (2008). Pelvic floor tension myalgia. In A. Bent, G. Cundiff & S. Swift (Eds.), *Ostergard's Urogynecology and Pelvic Floor Dysfunction* (6th ed., p. 133). Philadelphia, PA: Lippencott, Williams & Wilkins.

Remen, R.N. (1999, September). Helping, Fixing or Serving? *Shambhala Sun*. Retrieved from http://www.shambhalasun.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2328

Rosenberg, M. B.. (2003). *Nonviolent communication a language of life*. 2nd ed. Encinitas, CA: PuddleDancer Press.

Rubin, A., & Thorelli, I.M. (1984). Egoistic motives and longevity of participation by social service volunteers. *Journal of Applied Behavioral Science*, 20, 223-235.

Sedlmeier, P. (2012). The psychological effects of meditation: A meta-analysis. *American Psychological Association Psychological Bulletin*, Vol 138(6), 1139-1171.

Spitzer, C., Barnow, S., Freyberger, H.J., & Grabe, H.J. (2006). Recent developments in the theory of dissociation. *World Psychiatry*, 5, 82-86.

Stiles, M. (2000). *Structural yoga therapy: Adapting to the individual*. York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser.

Yoga Sutra of Maharsi Patanjali (1999), S. Venkatesananda (Trans.). Sebastopol: Anahata Press.

World Health Organization (1992). *The ICD-10 classification*

of mental and behavioral disorders: Clinical descriptions and diagnostic guidelines. Geneva: World Health Organization.

Yalom, V., & Yalom, M.H. (2010). Peter Levine on Somatic Experiencing. Retrieved from <http://www.psychotherapy.net/interview/interview-peter-levine>

Appendix

Yoga Posture Modification Guide for Common Health Conditions in Group Classes

The need for yoga service teachers to be knowledgeable about modifying practices was described in detail in earlier sections of this article. This section is a printable guide that can be handed to and discussed with students. Yoga service teachers and teachers-in-training may also wish to review this guide to help orient themselves on some basic modification principles. Although this section may be review for some, there are many yoga service teachers, yoga teachers, and yoga students unfamiliar with some of the modification issues presented below.

General Practice Guidelines

1. Listen to yourself: Avoid movements or practices that cause pain or make you feel strained, regardless of what any teacher, student, or staff member says. If you can't maintain steady breathing in a pose, that is a reliable signal to change something.

2. Accept the limits of group instruction: Group classes are not appropriate settings for you to receive customized, therapeutic advice on how to treat your injury or health condition with yoga. If you have an injury or condition for which you are seeking treatment, you might ask your yoga service teacher to connect you with a yoga therapist or ask a staff member to connect you with a health care provider.

3. Avoid areas of pain: If you experience pain in a certain area of the body, you may need to completely avoid poses that involve that area of the body during group yoga classes. Instead, try focusing on poses that help strengthen and stretch surrounding areas. For example, if you have knee pain, you might benefit from strengthening and stretching the quadriceps, hamstrings, and other muscles near the knee, without actually working the knee itself. Or if you have back pain, you may benefit from engaging the abdominal muscles and stretching the hips and shoulders, avoiding positions that compromise the spine's natural curvature.

4. Ease out: Don't go as "deeply" into a pose. Appreciate the process happening in your yoga practice rather than pursuing any form-based end goal. For example, in seated forward fold (*paschimottasana*), rather than trying to bend at the waist to touch the toes, you may wish to reach forward, bending from the hips, letting the hands fall where they may and focusing on the lengthening of the spine rather than where the hands fall.

5. Evenly distribute weight and try padding: You can lessen pressure on any one part of the body by sharing weight more evenly to more points. Try using a blanket, extra yoga mat, towel, or other available cloth for padding to reduce pressure. For instance, in a lunge pose (*ashwa sanchalana* or *anjaneyasana* with the back knee lifted), ground the back knee to distribute weight more evenly and, if desired and available, place a blanket or other padding under the back knee.

6. Find a safe resting pose: Some teachers offer child's pose (*balasana*) as a resting pose. This pose involves placing the hips on the heels, forehead on the ground, and arms alongside the body or in front of the body. However, this may put too much pressure on your hips and knees. To avoid this, you may wish to practice a resting pose of your choosing. Any comfortable, sustainable position you like would do. Please return to your resting pose at any time you need to during a group yoga class, no matter what a teacher, staff member, or other students say—this is an important expression of self-care, control, and choice in the classroom. A successful practice is a safe one!

7. Decrease duration and increase repetition: You can decrease stress on joints when you find yourself unable to sustain a pose due to fatigue or other issues, simply by not holding the pose as long. Come out of poses when you feel you need to. Repeating the pose but holding it for shorter periods of time may be a safer option.

Pose Modifications

Here are some general ideas about modifying types of yoga poses, but please remember none of this constitutes medical advice and that students practice at their own risk.

- **Back issues:** Consider bending your knees in all forward-folding poses, engaging your abdominal and seat muscles throughout your practice, and keeping an elongated spine. Entirely avoid back bends, forward folds, or any other poses that agitate your back.

- **Knee issues:** Avoid locking the knee joint, try to engage the muscles around the knee, and always keep both of your knees pointing in the same direction as the second and third toes of each foot. Try bending the ankle to 90 degrees to engage muscles around the knee, potentially preventing unnecessary knee pressure. In standing poses, you can keep the back knee straight or on the ground (perhaps with a blanket cushioning the knee). The front knee in standing poses can be straight (but not locked), softly/slightly bent, or bent directly above your ankle (and never beyond or to either side of the ankle).

- **Prenatal:** Avoid lying on the back or stomach. Lying on the left side is appropriate for many. Widen the distance between the feet and point the toes out 45 degrees when standing or when doing a forward fold. The hormone relaxin is secreted during pregnancy and can increase your flexibility, so ensure you remain in control while stretching to avoid over-stretching. In twisting poses, ensure nothing (including your legs) is in the way of the abdomen, and try to keep the naval pointing forward by twisting from the chest upwards. You may wish to gently engage the abdominals and focus on hip-opening poses and breathing.

- **Arthritis:** Move slowly, focus on range of motion instead of intense speed of motion, and consider avoiding the more fast-paced types of yoga including vinyasa or flow classes. Try Gentle Yoga, Restorative, and other slower-paced practices.

- **Menstruation:** During heavier flow, avoid inversions where the hips are above the heart. For instance, some easy modifications include replacing downward-facing dog (in which the position is an upside-down “v” shape with the body on hands and feet with the seat raised) with table position (simply on hands and knees), and replacing shoulderstand or headstand with legs-up-the-wall pose (lying on the ground with the legs extended up a wall or on a chair). Gentle hip openers and restorative practices may be particularly soothing during your period.

- **High blood pressure (unmedicated or under-medicated):** In general, avoid all inversions (any pose where the head is lower than the heart), holding your breath, and fast changes in elevation in relation to the heart and head (e.g., don’t quickly move from lying down to standing up).

- **Headaches or migraines:** Explore the same practices described for high blood pressure above.

- **Low blood pressure:** Avoid going from an inversion (any pose where the head is lower than the heart) to an upright position quickly or at all. For instance, move from standing forward fold to standing slowly, or avoid the inversion of standing forward fold by replacing it with half forward fold, keeping the upper-body parallel to the ground with the hands on the thighs or at the wall.

- **Sinus pressure or congestion:** Try the same practices suggested for low blood pressure. Consider a supported inversion such as downward-facing dog with a block or cushion under the forehead. Avoid classes with quick transitions between inversions and upright positions, such as some vinyasa flow classes.

- **Wrist pain:** Avoid bearing weight on your wrists entirely. You can practice poses like downward-facing dog, plank (looks like the top of a push-up), and cobra (lying on the stomach, lifting the head and chest off the ground) by placing the elbows, forearms, and palms on the ground with the palms facing down.

- **Neck pain:** Keep your head neutral (in line with the spine) and avoid collapsing into the neck by engaging the neck muscles gently. Avoid turning your head while the neck is bearing weight, or avoid turning it entirely. For instance, in cobra pose you could keep your gaze downward or straight ahead rather than upward. Consider avoiding poses in which you could accidentally put pressure on the neck such as bridge, shoulderstand, fish, and plow.

- **Anxiety:** Engage a practice that features periods of rest alternating with more vigorous activity, avoiding overly fast-paced movements and fast-paced breathing exercises if they agitate you. Focus on exhaling when concentrating on the breath. Be careful with backbends, approach them slowly, and perhaps ask

your teacher to help you with supported backbends to start. Explore yoga classes that feature set sequences if knowing what comes next puts you at ease. Steer your focus towards your personal, internal experience.

- **Depression:** Engage a vigorous practice and avoid overly slow-paced classes. Try light, well-paced classes such as vinyasa flow styles. Steer your focus towards your personal experience. Consider engaging backbending postures more frequently as familiarity with the practice grows. Focus on your inhalations when concentrating on the breath. Avoid holding *savasana* (the resting pose at the end of yoga classes) longer than five minutes. Guidance during *savasana* may be preferable, and practicing *savasana* with the eyes slightly open may be an aid.

Remember: These are just broad ideas that you might try out at your own risk.