

Teaching yoga to large classes, multi-level groups, and beginners

by Donna Martin

I have taught yoga for three decades at retreat centers around the world, where the yoga classes are often attended by a wide variety of people of all ages and fitness levels with a wide range of experience in yoga... and I love it! What fun to introduce someone in their sixties or seventies to the benefits of yoga... to encourage a middle-aged man to return to yoga after a discouraging first attempt with an unskillful teacher... to inspire a twenty-year-old to add yoga and meditation to her love of nature and mountain climbing...!

There's nothing more satisfying for me than to bring this ancient practice to more people in a way that makes them feel good about themselves and more open, and open-hearted, towards themselves and others and to life... to be nourished body and soul.

When people attend different workshops at a retreat center, such as Hollyhock, in Canada, they often find that an open yoga class is offered, probably first thing in the morning. Having come for very personal reasons - to learn, to take care of themselves, to be inspired, to relax - they are usually open to trying whatever the place has to offer. Whether or not they've ever practiced yoga before, they roll out of bed that first day and hurry up the path to the yoga place, excited, apprehensive, and curious. Whatever experience awaits them is likely to set the tone for their day, perhaps for the whole week, and will influence their perception of the place, of themselves, and of yoga (especially for the newcomers).

Either they'll feel inspired and nourished by the class and the practices offered to them, or they'll feel discouraged, disheartened, even humiliated. I've seen at least one world famous yoga teacher unintentionally (I hope) but insensitively embarrass a hopeful beginner to the point of driving him away from yoga after one class.

After teaching thousands of people the joys of yoga practice and the life-changing benefits of meditation, I have discovered a few simple ways to present a yoga class to a multi-level group, or to beginners, or to a large group of people involved in some kind of retreat or seminar. It's very different from teaching an ongoing weekly class to people divided into beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels.

If you are a yoga teacher, you may find yourself teaching at a retreat center, or invited to offer a yoga class to a group of meditators, or to prisoners or drug addicts, or corporate executives, or people at a conference.

Here are some of the simple guidelines I've found which help to make the experience more enjoyable and successful for everyone.

Twenty Simple guidelines for teaching at a retreat center:

1. Welcome people to the class as they come in... they are away from home, entering a new experience, excited, nervous, and vulnerable. Find out their names and make them feel welcome.
2. Keep it simple. Just begin with a few simple props: a mat for each person and a small cushion. Have some chairs available.
3. Start by demonstrating a simple position to get the first people relaxed as the others are still arriving... sitting cross-legged, lying legs against the wall, or a simple forward bend with the hands resting on the seat of a chair, for example.
4. Look at people as they come in and get into the position... you'll be able to tell who the beginners are, or what the special needs are. If there is anyone who seems disabled, elderly, very stiff, or fearful, speak quietly and personally to them just to greet them in a friendly way. This will let them know you see them and will attend to their needs.
5. When it is time to begin, introduce yourself, welcome them, and let them introduce themselves by name if there are fewer than twelve. If the class is large you can have them work in pairs or threes with something simple and start by telling each other their names. One example is in pairs, standing in tree pose with a partner, or in threes with two people supporting the outstretched arms of the third so their shoulders can relax.
6. Say a little (be brief) about the style of yoga you'll be teaching, and your intention. Ask if anyone wants to let you know about a health issue and invite them at any time to tell you about personal concerns or needs. Some will feel shy about saying it in the whole group so invite them to make you aware privately at some point of anything you should know about their health.
7. I like to tell people that the most important benefit of yoga is that they will get more in touch with themselves and more in touch especially with their bodies. This class will help them to relax and to more fully experience the pleasures that this week can offer them. The most important thing to remind them is to listen to and appreciate the wisdom of their own body. This is the ultimate teacher and expert on what they need to be doing or not doing. It's important that they not do anything that doesn't feel right for them. Keep reminding them of this.
8. Here is a big one: don't tell people not to do what you do. Because they will anyway. So don't do anything as a first demo unless you think everyone in the class is able to do it safely just the way you are doing it. This means you must begin with the modified versions, not the advanced versions of the poses. Put your ego aside and invite the class to experience some positions or movements that will be possible and satisfying for everyone.
9. If, by chance, someone can't do a simple version of a position you teach, explain that the tradition in yoga is that there are 84,000 yoga poses and 100,000 variations of each...! You won't be teaching them all this week but you are bound to find a variation of each pose taught that will be right for their body!
10. It's useful when offering variations to talk about the point of each of the poses (such as releasing the neck or loosening the hips) and show everyone a couple of simple ways to experience the same thing in a way that feels right for them.
11. Begin the postures with a one-breath movement in and out. Don't have people stay longer in the pose the first time. Show them and watch them do it first as a

movement with the breath. If further instruction or modification is needed, you'll see it. More people hurt themselves going into and coming out of the poses than in them. Take your time and move mindfully.

12. Invite them, after a couple of times moving into and out of the pose, to stay in it for two or three breaths if that would feel satisfying to them. Offer the choice of moving into and out of the pose on one breath cycle or of staying in for two or three breaths, softening into the pose with each exhalation.
13. Don't imply or suggest that going further into a pose or staying longer is better. People in this western culture are already conditioned to be competitive and goal-oriented. This will be a strong enough temptation no matter what you say or do. Don't encourage this striving attitude. Encourage instead mindfulness and sensitivity. Encourage respect for the body's limits and needs. Encourage and model patience, humour, and calm self-acceptance.
14. A word about the more advanced and experienced people coming to the class – they won't get bored. When you see that someone can do the simple movements and poses easily, go over to them and quietly suggest a way they can move further. The experienced yoga people will do this anyway usually. Just let them know it is fine. Ultimately it's ideal if everyone in the class is doing something slightly different, as their bodies and levels and needs are all different.
15. Watch them as they practice. Don't demo with your back to the class. Don't do the poses in a way, with them following, that makes it impossible for you to see what they are doing. You might consider not even beginning by having them watch you but instead help them tune into themselves and close their eyes. I like to start with people lying on their backs, eyes closed. Then I give them clear enough and simple enough instructions that they don't need to look at me to do the movement. Here are some examples...

i) With the knees bent, let the head roll side to side, then take the knees side to side... then the head moves opposite the knees. Feel the feet, low back, the neck. What seems to change in the back?

ii) Arms start by the sides, knees bent, feet standing. Inhaling, bring the arms up and behind the head toward the floor, then exhaling, bring the arms down to the sides... then alternate the same movement, first one arm, then the other, then both together.

iii) Knees bent, place one hand on each knee. Draw the knees to the chest, first both together, then one knee at a time... knees to the chest exhaling, knees arms length away inhaling. Bring attention to the sensations in the lower back.

iv) Lying on the back with the knees bent, the feet standing, lift one foot and extend it toward the sky, straightening the leg. Lower the foot bending the knee. Repeat with the other leg.

16. After some initial movements, begin to bring attention to the sensations in the body. Do a simple brief body scan. With people still lying down, eyes closed, have them raise their hand if you name a part of the body that they notice feels tight or stiff... neck, shoulders, mid-back, low back, hips, legs... Ask for an indication of previous injury or concern with knees, back, neck... ask about high blood pressure

(hypertension), detached retina, pregnancy. (You should know the contraindications for these and other conditions.) Lighten it up a little by asking for a show of hands if anyone has ever felt.

Use your sense of humour. Let them know this will be playful, gentle, and healing.

17. At a retreat center, people are just getting to know each other. The yoga class can be a wonderful starting place to help people feel connected. Use the opportunity (and if the class is big for the space, the necessity) of having people work in pairs or threes... be sensitive to their shyness and start with some simple non-threatening partner poses, like the tree pose.
18. It is imperative to model and teach that when they work with each other, they are offering support, taking the effort out, not pushing each other into the pose. Pushing only evokes resistance. Support invites release. Here's an example: *in pairs, one person clasps hands behind their back (chest expander without the forward bend). Rolling the shoulders back, they open the chest (the heart center) and stretch the arms back... the partner is standing behind and offers support under the person's wrists to take the weight of the arms. Now as the person begins to lift their hands a little higher, the supporting partner keeps taking the weight of the arms but doesn't lift the person's arms... she lifts herself into the pose, inhaling, then rests on the exhale with the weight of her arms resting onto the support of her partner. She just goes as high as she wants to, then indicates when she is ready to come down. The partner gently lowers her arms back down, until the hands separate and hang again at her sides. If everyone in the class does this movement by themselves first, before they pair up, most people will find that the arms go further without effort with this kind of support.*
19. Learn a little about what the folks are doing this week. What workshops are they taking? Can you reference them in the way you teach yoga? If it is a meditation retreat, these folks can be reminded to bring meditation and mindfulness to the poses and movements, and to pause after each pose to pay attention to the experience that's been evoked. (Have you read Tarthang Tulku's Kum Nye books?) If it is a group of corporate executives, remind them that this is a chance for them to shift their pace, to discover that they can accomplish something by doing less, be successful without competing, and to recharge their batteries.
20. In a retreat center, people coming to the yoga class will appreciate some repetition. Especially the newcomers will be glad to have repeated something often enough (every day) that they can easily remember it when they go home. I like to build up a program, developing it over the week and repeating it a few times the last two days. For example, I sometimes teach a simple version of the sun salutation and start with a few of the positions the first two days, building on it each day, then offer the whole thing, and repeat that with some additional practices the rest of the week. I like to have a simple but consistent way of beginning and ending the class, and I have found that people love to end with some kind of guided relaxation, like savasana.

The practice of yoga is an art... the art of living with a sense of unity, of connectedness to all things. The true practice of yoga is one of learning to be at ease in all kinds of difficult life situations, not just in uncomfortable body positions. The people in your classes will benefit from reminders to notice their "edges"... the places where the body says to stop... and to pause and breathe at the edge... just to breathe and to soften. Flexibility can change in a

matter of minutes when someone's state of mind shifts and when habitual tension patterns become conscious.

Think of your teaching role as two-fold: one, you are modeling an attitude of respectful awareness of the body, of being good to yourself. And two, your instructions, more than anything else, help to direct and expand awareness.

Perhaps the most value anyone will get from the practice, whether they continue beyond this class or this retreat or not, is a sense of being more fully connected to the sensations of the body: learning to listen to the body's wisdom and to have more appropriately nourishing ways to respond to what they hear. If you instill an interest in yoga that continues, you have given them a life-long gift.

Teaching beginners, large classes, and multi-level groups, in retreat centers or at conferences and other such events, is a wonderful opportunity to share your gift of yoga. It requires sensitivity, humour and playfulness, and paying attention to what's needed. It is a way to bring your own practice to the experience— the yoga of mindfulness and interconnectedness, of being at ease in a difficult situation, of seeing the divine in everyone. Nothing is more important in this kind of situation than people leaving the class feeling better about themselves. Remember, if you offer what you love, from your heart, the shared experience will nourish your soul.

Donna Martin has been practicing and teaching yoga since 1970. She has studied with teachers of Iyengar, Desikachar, and Tibetan yoga as well as Kum Nye, Feldenkrais, and yoga therapy with A.G.Mohan. Donna was a charter member of the International Association of Yoga Therapists and she was, for several years, the assistant editor (with Richard Miller) of the IAYT Journal. Donna is a certified senior trainer of the Hakomi Method (experiential mindfulness-based psychotherapy) who teaches internationally. She has developed an original method of yoga as psycho-spiritual therapy which she calls Remembering Wholeness. Donna has taught yoga at Hollyhock Retreat Center in Canada for many years. She has also taught at other retreat centers, including Esalen, Kalani Honua and Hui Ho'olana in Hawaii, Omega Institute in Texas, and at a variety of large conferences including the Institute of Noetic Sciences. Donna currently teaches throughout Canada and the US, England, Japan, Argentina, and Mexico, and is a frequent contributor to Outreach, a newsletter for yoga teachers. She specializes in teaching mindfulness-based bodymind practices to large multi-level groups, psychotherapists, bodyworkers, meditators, yoga teachers and teachers-in-training, as well as beginning yoga students. She has a yoga video called Yoga for Women and is writing a book on her original approach called Remembering Wholeness Yoga as Therapy.