

THE ART OF ADJUSTMENT

*“To touch someone else you must first
be able to touch yourself.”*

Roberta DeLong Miller

Effective yoga adjustments are beneficial to body, mind and spirit. They can enhance a person’s awareness and really develop their yoga practice, some even consider them to be spiritual transmissions, like a form of Darshan, meaning a moment of connection, or insight into one’s Divine Self.

Adjustments are both art and science. Knowledge of the body’s anatomy and physiology is essential, plus understanding the body’s range of movement and its limitations. These are general considerations, before taking into account the individuals unique anatomy and physical limitations.





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I’m not writing about the science here; rather I’m focusing on the Art of Adjustment. The sensitivities required when making physical contact with students in a yoga class. I think we all know the difference between good touch you can relax into and, what I have heard called ‘ninja touch’, the painful one and abusive touch, which is just wrong.

I relate these forms of touch to the three yogic principles called Gunas, Sattva, Rajas and Tamas. The three gunas are found in everyone and everything to a lesser or greater degree, they are qualities, Sattva is steady, constructive and harmonious; it has a pure energetic quality. Rajas is fast, active and chaotic, it is the busy energy we live in most of the time. A yoga class should not feel rajasic. Tamas is slow, destructive and incongruous, this energy in a yoga class creates doubt and suspicion and tamasic touch can add to existing trauma. I’m describing three kinds of touch, but the gunas relate to the whole class and how it is taught. It is good to create a sattvic environment and an overall feeling of peace, as well as utilising the quality of Sattva when making adjustments.

The dictionary definition of adjustments is ‘to change something slightly.’ I personally break it down as, Add – Just – Ment, meaning to add in a sattvic manner, just what is ment, and nothing more. The intention is to make a slight change, and sometimes only a suggestion is needed and the student will respond with improved alignment and a deeper posture.

I trained as a yoga teacher in Sri Lanka and India in the early 1980s with Swami Jyotimayananda, a master of Ayurveda and yoga, and Swami Vishnudevanada, a Master of Hatha yoga and Vedantic Philosophy. I give thanks for the teachings I received that completely transformed my life and provided the foundation of my life and work ever since. I also have a Psychology degree and taught therapeutic bodywork for many years, before eventually focusing my work on energy and wellness. I now train people to be Wellness Coaches.

So I bring a broad perspective to the Art of Adjustment, I consider the physical, psychological and energetic aspects. Here I share ten guidelines to enrich your adjustments.

1. GIVE PERMISSION FOR PEOPLE TO OPT-OUT OF ADJUSTMENTS

Let your class know you offer adjustments and ask if anyone has any injuries. Respect your students right to choose to be touched or not. Make it clear they do not have to receive adjustments. There are numerous reasons, personal and cultural why students may not want to be adjusted, all valid and not personal so don't feel rejected, it's not about you.

2. REQUEST FEEDBACK

As you make contact and start to adjust, get feedback from students. Quietly ask, "How does that feel?" "Is that enough?" You will have a sense as you engage and get to know students, however nothing beats the accuracy of asking a question and listening to feedback.

3. HONOUR SACRED SPACE

Consciously or unconsciously students are creating sacred space as they practise yoga. Plus all bodies are temples. Be conscious of this as you make contact. Be sure the posture is stable, and that they know you are approaching before adjusting. Be in their peripheral vision, or say something quietly. Sudden touch can be very startling, so always honour sacred space as you approach.

4. BE MINDFUL

Cultivate mindfulness in yourself; avoid being loud and rajasic. Adjust at a gentle, calming and steady pace. The energy of your hands should be felt before they rest. Even when time is running out, don't rush adjustments, simply do less in your class, and maintain a sattvic pace.

5. DON'T GROPE, MOUNT OR HESITATE

I have seen teachers do all three, because they are ambiguous and not mindful. Yoga is not access all areas. So be careful where you place your hands and your body, operate with extreme awareness. Yes, when students know you well and request adjustments you can stand on their legs in Badhakonasana – Cobbler pose, but not appropriate for the inflexible newby in your class.

6. BE COMPASSIONATE

There are several ways to show compassion when adjusting. Be non judgemental, encourage beginners and advanced students and don't be intimidated by either. It's easy to have a preference for beginners or advanced students with great postures. Try to be balanced as you teach and learn to adjust all levels. This takes a bit of awareness to see where your preference lies and then balance it.





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7. MAINTAIN BALANCE

Speaking of balance be sure to adjust both sides, obvious I know, but when teaching it can be easy to get distracted and move on before adjusting both sides. Stay present with your student in order to maintain balance. Few things are as uncomfortable as your teacher disappearing, having stretched only one side.

8. WORK WITH THE BREATH

Be aware of your breath and that of your student. Deepening your own breath can instantaneously deepen your student's breath and they become synchronised. This is called resonance. In physics, resonance is a phenomenon where one oscillating system drives another system causing it to oscillate in harmony with the first. In Paschimottanasana (Seated Forward Bend) for example, make contact on the inhalation and apply gentle pressure with the exhalation, allowing the student to deepen into the posture with the adjustment.

9. BE PATIENT

Wait for students to do as much as possible themselves before adjusting. Some teachers are great at this, they hover for a moment, waiting and encouraging you to do your best, before they assist with an adjustment. Less experienced teachers may rush to offer support. Be patient.

10. CONSIDER THE ENERGETIC AS WELL AS THE PHYSICAL

Energetically, less is more. Sometimes all that is needed is a suggestion, a light directional touch that triggers muscle memory and automatically improves posture without applying any physical pressure. This is the case with the shoulders in Bhujangasana (Cobra pose) or the upper back in Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward Facing Dog). Simply use your hands as another language gently whispering to the body.



Touch is our first language and the first sense to develop in the womb. So we are responsive and well versed in its subtleties. Explore a range of touch, reaching from strong adjustments with the breath that gently pull students into advanced Matsyendrasana series (spinal twists), through to firm yet malleable touch used in inversions, such as Sirsasana (Headstand), all the way through to a light relaxing touch used in Balasana (Child's pose), resting the hand with no pressure on the sacrum to melt tension and induce deeper relaxation.

Always remember the rest of the class as you make adjustments, stay present with everyone and enjoy. Know that to touch and be touched is a profound gift.

CAROLINE SHOLA AREWA

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