

ॐ DHARMA MITTRA YOGA ॐ

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Ask Our Expert: Dharma Mittra
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HOW TO CHOOSE A PATH

I am at a crossroad with career, yoga, education, and the next step, and I need guidance. I have been practicing yoga for about 10 years and teaching for the last four. I also work as a health care researcher and am passionate about healing, especially chronic conditions. I would like to deepen my teaching to incorporate more therapeutic yoga, but I am not sure how. I am yearning for the teaching that will help me practice what I am passionate about. I have considered going to India to study. I have also considered Ayurveda, nutrition, and anatomy and physiology studies. Which way do I go?

—*Ritu*

Read Dharma Mittra's response:

Dear Ritu,

First you must listen to your own heart: unchanging, effulgent, and golden. All the answers you seek lie deep within you. It is so easy to forget this in our fast-paced culture, which constantly demands our attention. But I always teach that, in reality, the wisdom you seek is inside you, and by accessing it you will quickly find a course of action that serves you and everyone around you. Yogic practices help you change your gaze just slightly so that you may draw your focus within, where the truth lies, and everything becomes crystal clear. Then you will know what is best for you and how best to manifest your passion for serving others.

To help you realize your inner wisdom, it's important to look for guidance in the *yamas* and *niyamas*—the ethical rules of yoga. Without these, there is no hope of realizing your own inner truth. By building a foundation in the precedents of the *yamas*, which are compassion, truthfulness, contentment, and surrender, you will quickly be able to quiet your mind and experience a profound peacefulness. From this state of bliss, you can naturally access your inner wisdom and find the answers you seek, and more. In terms of your studies, I recommend that you study the *kriyas*, which are ancient yogic techniques that purify the physical and astral bodies of the practitioner. They are known as the *shatkriyas*, or the six cleansing techniques. You should also learn about the *mudras* (seals), *bandhas* (locks), pranayama (breath control), mantras (mental seed power), and of course the *asanas* (steady posture). An excellent guidebook for these many techniques is the classic *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*.

Be aware though, that there are certain aspects of these practices that you cannot learn through books alone. So as you deepen your practice, you must seek out the care and



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guidance of an experienced teacher, or guru. Through deep intuition, you will know what teacher is right for you and you will quickly be able to learn both the physical and therapeutic benefits of each technique. Once you have done this, you will have all the tools you need to help others as you so desire. With sincerity and humility, you can and will certainly become a "celestial doctor." And you may not have to travel too far to do it.

WASTING AWAY

I have a student who has been practicing yoga with me for more than three years. When I first met her she was very slim. I have watched her lose weight over time, and I am becoming increasingly concerned. She is now like a skeleton, and her face has a sunken appearance. As her teacher I feel some obligation to ask her if she is OK, but she is private so I don't know how to approach the subject. I don't know if she has an eating disorder, but I am afraid her body is wasting away. How can I approach the subject of extreme weight loss with her? I don't want to be intrusive and risk losing her as a client.
—Anonymous

Read Dharma Mittra's response:

Dear Anonymous,

One of the main purposes of practicing asana is to strengthen and purify the body. Of course, diet plays an integral part in this. The serious student must follow a healthy vegetarian diet, for health and more importantly for the sake of developing compassion to all living beings—including our selves. The sacred text, the Bhagavad Gita, clearly states, "Yoga is not for him who eats too much nor for him who eats too little. It is not for him, O Arjuna, who sleeps too much nor for him who sleeps too little. For him who is temperate in his food and recreation, temperate in exertion at work, temperate in sleep and waking, yoga puts an end to all sorrows." This is a very important teaching for practitioners of all levels. Constant practice is the key to success in yoga, not going to great extremes. The yogi who goes to extremes in his practice will make slower progress than the yogi who is more moderate and consistent.

For this specific situation, your course of action depends on the student's level of receptivity. If she is really listening and open-minded, it may be enough to speak in general terms to the class she attends. You can say, "If any of you have any difficulties or problems, please feel free to speak with me about them. I am happy to share whatever I may know in order to help the advancement of your practice. I am here to help you to the best of my ability."

If she comes to speak with you, then I would recommend that you have her find the proper suggested weight for her specific height and body frame. Recommend that she establish a healthy vegetarian diet that includes include lots of ripe avocados, brown rice,



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whole grain breads, nuts, baked potatoes, fresh green juices, oatmeal, fresh salads, and protein shakes. Also, recommend to her a daily Headstand and Shoulderstand practice as well as alternate nasal breathing exercises, which will help increase her appetite. If your student is less receptive, keep in mind that every person is operating at a different level of consciousness. It may not matter what you say to her; if she is not ready to hear you, there is nothing you can do about it. As with any of the yogic teachings, you can only offer the students what you know, as clearly as you possibly can. What each individual does with that information is up to him or her. As you gain more experience teaching, you must cultivate a deep faith that all your students will find what they need at exactly the perfect time.

It is also important to remember that you, as the teacher, are responsible for keeping all the students safe in your class. If you have a student who is about to seriously hurt himself doing a posture, you are the one who must tell him to break the pose before he breaks his arm! In each situation you must use great discrimination to act responsibly and compassionately. Let yourself be guided by your own divine truth, and from this place you will never go wrong.

LEAD BY EXAMPLE

In my teaching classes I keep trying to remind people that the physical side is just one aspect of the realm of yoga. I try to incorporate philosophies and provocative thought in the sessions hoping to help everyone, and myself, better understand why we are there. However, in the process I see some people looking bored and anxious to get back to the more dynamic practice of hatha yoga.

Is there a better way to achieve my goal of passing on the deeper concepts of yoga without boring the students to death? I understand that just because I find reading and attending lectures on Eastern and yogic philosophy fascinating, not everyone will. But I can't in good conscience just lead everyone in movement and call it yoga. Any suggestions?

—Megan

Read Dharma Mittra's response:

Dear Megan,

There are certainly those who come to class only for exercise, and that may be the ultimate challenge for you as a practitioner and teacher of yoga. But don't worry! In the West, the quest for the Supreme Self often begins with the postures. Serious study of any one of the eight limbs inexorably leads to study and knowledge of the other seven limbs. Remember that the majority of students do come in for exercise and are *rajasic*, always



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involved in the need for activity. Many are not ready or yearning for knowledge of the self, or even for meditation practices.

One simple way to inspire students to learn more about the philosophical aspects of yoga is by establishing yourself in a deep state of *sattva*. That is to say, through years of your own dedicated practice, you can establish yourself in a state of bliss where there is no ego, no me, and no you. From this place, you will be endowed with some knowledge and realization. This alone can act as a catalyst for the students you teach. You are not indoctrinating them with any philosophy or so-called religion but rather being the living truth and proof that is yoga. Those around you who are more receptive will begin to wonder what you are doing to be in such a peaceful and loving state. Soon they will come to you to find out what they can do to attain such peace.

Furthermore, as you become more spiritually inspired, you will be able to choose pleasant asanas, breathings, mantras, and meditation techniques that will serve students best. This will naturally prepare their bodies and minds to be still, look inward, and become receptive. At the close of each class, the students are often more open to hear about the amazing powers of yoga techniques and how beneficial the philosophy can be to inspire and change their lives.

Try choosing one topic to teach on briefly, such as the importance of a vegetarian diet. Think of it as if you were planting small seeds in the students. For some students, it may take a long time for the seeds to blossom. For others, there may be more fertile ground, and they will make rapid progress. But always keep working with them, planting, nurturing, and tending to the students. Over time you will notice that even the students who initially came to class for a "great workout" will be happy to sit still, meditate, and study the sacred yogic texts.

This is the joy of teaching. But be patient—it can take a long time. With perseverance, you will eventually have a room full of enthusiastic students, hungry for higher knowledge. May patience be your golden strength.

Sri Dharma Mittra, who has been teaching since 1967, was the first independent yoga teacher in New York City. In 1984, he created the famous Master Yoga Chart of 908 Postures, which has become an invaluable teaching tool. Dharma is the creator of more than 300 postures and is the author of the book *Asanas: 608 Yoga Poses*. He is also the inspiration for the Yoga Journal coffee-table book *Yoga*. His Maha Sadhana DVD set (*A Shortcut to Immortality*, for Level I, and *Stairway to Bliss*, for Level II), has been widely acclaimed as preservations of the main teachings of yoga. *Dharma Mittra: A Friend to All*, is a biography documenting experiences of his students from the 1960s on. *Dharma Mittra: Yoga Life of a Yogi* teacher trainings (200- and 500-hour) are held in New York, San Francisco, Japan, and at workshops worldwide. For more information, visit www.dharmayogacenter.com.



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