

Ask Our Expert: Dharma Mittra
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TEACH MORE THAN ASANA

I have been teaching yoga for three years, and I find myself at a standstill. How can I rediscover my focus and my inspiration? I still love teaching my classes, but somehow I feel lacking, especially when it comes to teaching those students who have been with me for three years now.

—Adele



Read Dharma Mittra's response:

Dear Adele,

Over the years, I have seen many of my students become teachers and experience the problems you are dealing with now. I will tell you what I have told them:
The highest type of all charities and dharma (duty) is the sharing of spiritual knowledge. If you are teaching asanas, pranayamas, and meditation without a foundation in the ethical disciplines, such as the *yamas* (moral commandments), *niyamas* (rules of conduct or observances), and self-knowledge, it will eventually become boring for both you and your students.

To keep this from happening, it is of utmost importance that you continue your own growth in practice and strive to purify your mind. Evoke *sattvic*, or pure, thoughts and aim to cleanse the gross physical body and the subtle astral body (the body of consciousness and thought) of toxics. Also helpful in inducing a state of *sattva* is following a light, healthy vegetarian diet. You will immediately feel better and more inspired. And of utmost importance is the practice of right conduct toward oneself and toward others, through living according to the *yamas* and *niyamas*.

Ultimately, *sattva* comes from knowledge of the self, which you can achieve by understanding karma and reincarnation, relinquishing the ego, and letting go of attachments. When one is in this state there is no feeling of emptiness or boredom.

Remember, though, that the mental knowledge of these things is not enough. You must also practice silent meditation regularly to become calm and peaceful in order to personally realize that knowledge. The goal of yoga is knowledge, specifically knowledge that leads to self-realization established in *sattva*, or a state of bliss. Once you are firmly established in *sattva*, you will be able to share your spiritual experience and encourage your students to seek enlightenment as well.

A STINKY SITUATION

As a teacher, I get a diverse mix of students in class. Some don't approve of shaving body hair or wearing deodorant. It's fine for them to make that decision, but during a vigorous class, their body odor can become intense. I know that it distracts other students, especially when we're supposed to be breathing deeply. How should I handle this?

—*Adrian*



Read Dharma Mittra's response:

Dear Adrian,

An important teaching of the Yoga Sutra is to cultivate personal observances, or *niyamas*. One of these is *saucha* (purity), which encourages internal and external cleanliness. In addition to removing impurities of the mind, one must also keep the skin, teeth, tongue, ears, hair, clothes, home, and yoga temple in perfect condition. This is a given.

Like many yoga practices, the guidance of an experienced teacher is necessary in learning to live by the *niyamas*. A teacher should set an example for students. This means your asana classes must be held in a clean, clutter-free, and well-ventilated place with a comfortable temperature. The floor surface should be neither too hard nor too soft. If a student wants more air, open the windows more or turn the fans on. If it's a bit cold, make sure to turn up the heat to make the room comfortable.

Of course, in keeping with *saucha*, everyone should be clean. Otherwise the student with the odor can be gently directed to practice in a specific location in the room where he or she will not disturb anyone else. At a proper time after the class, when no one else is

around, you may compassionately tell the student about the problem. Explain that it is making others uncomfortable. You may also recommend that the student begin to read the Yoga Sutras, practice simple bathing, and moving to a more vegetarian diet. The root cause of many physical impurities may come from eating bad foods and animal flesh.

VIRTUES AND VICES

My question revolves around the eight limbs of ashtanga yoga, and the importance of a yoga teacher abstaining from alcohol, meat, and smoking. Can a student become a teacher of yoga if, for example, he or she eats meat? Fish? Eggs? Drinks wine? We all know the impacts of smoking—but what about having an occasional cigar? Do these acts disqualify a person as a committed teacher?

—*Marta*



Read Dharma Mittra's response:

Dear Marta,

There are all kinds of teachers to fit all kinds of students. Yes, one can be a yoga teacher and eat meat, drink wine, or smoke cigars, but I don't recommend it. It will throw off the health of your body and plant the seeds for future illness. You will not be able to be a clear-minded and truthful teacher and representative of the basic tenants and teachings of yoga as practiced for the past 2,000 years.

When the teacher learns to live by the yamas and niyamas (which will bring liberation from worldly desires and actions in union with the Divine) and gives up the ego, the students of that teacher will also progress. But as I always say to my students, "little by little." Remember that everything happens according to the Divine and natural laws that are written in the ancient scriptures, the Bhagavad Gita and the Yoga Sutras. You may not be able to give up meat or wine or smoking immediately, but it is something a yoga teacher should strive for.

Many people teaching today are not fully trained in the traditional yogic methods of self-discipline. I lived with my Guru for many years as a karma yogi, and my goal was to be

just like him, in every thought, movement, and action. Students will be drawn to teachers with the same qualities as themselves. For example, a suspicious teacher will attract suspicious students. In a sense, it's perfect! No matter what, though, it is best to learn to conquer old, negative habits. Once you remove your negative patterns, you will be able to dissolve all obstacles to your daily sadhana (spiritual practice) and receive new hope and joy in a healthy spiritual life.

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.