

Ask Our Expert: Dharma Mittra
Yoga Journal – December, 2008

ADVANCED MOVES

I'm looking for positive ways to instruct students to go further in a pose but not make others in an all-levels class feel bad with where they are in their practice. Do you have any ideas? —*Beth-Aime*



Read Dharma Mittra's response:

Dear Beth-Aime,

For three decades, asana classes I taught were open to all levels of students. An all-levels class offers many benefits to the students—and presents a greater challenge to the teacher. In an all-levels class, the less experienced students will be able to receive a window into poses they may have never seen or tried to practice. It can also allow each student to work at her own pace, and at the same time all students can be greatly inspired by the level their practices could advance toward. If both the teacher and student have this positive view, there is no need for the student to feel bad.

However, it is important for the teacher not to leave a student behind in a mixed-levels group—in other words, you must help the first-time student while also offering the appropriate variations to more advanced students. By making sure you teach the main posture first, then show an easier variation followed by more advanced variations, you should have a satisfied group. This does take years of practice to teach comfortably, however. You may want to refer to my book, *Asanas: 608 Yoga Poses* as a resource. Please do remember that regardless of each student's individual level, the class should be reminded that being able to do advanced poses, like putting your legs behind your head, aren't necessary to achieve success in yoga, meditation, or good health. The most important poses do not demand any flexibility or skills. Sirsasana (Headstand), **Sarvangasana** (Shoulderstand), and Egyptian Pose (sitting in a chair, the spine vertical, the feet flat on the floor, and the palms facing down, resting on the thighs) are enough for the achievement of good health, well-being, and even enlightenment. It actually is that simple. If one is already flexible, go ahead and practice the impressive advanced postures, but don't forget that what truly counts is the amount of effort you apply and your mental attitude while practicing. Students should practice the poses without any

expectation of results. Simply do the postures because they have to be done. Make them as an offering to the Lord. This makes the practice better than meditation.

Always encourage the students to keep working to improve their practice. Teach them to stay longer in a pose, be steadfast, stretch, and move their joints well—otherwise their postures will look exactly the same for years from now. Remind them that doing the postures is not a competition. The ability to do fancy, incredible poses is all in vain if the foundation of yoga, the yamas and the niyamas, are not upheld.

By coming to class, all the students get to share the collective benefits of the entire group. Invite each student to see themselves in all the other students' bodies. I always tell the students that a portion of God became the soul of all living beings, so one Self dwells in all of us. Thus, if you see someone doing a difficult pose, don't feel envy! Rejoice because in reality you're in that body, too. That's you!

DOES STRETCHING MATTER?

I have a super-flexible student who says she rarely feels anything while stretching. How can I help her? Are there certain asanas that she could benefit from? —*Clay*



Read Dharma Mitra's response:

Dear Clay,

Asana was originally defined as "a steady and comfortable seated position." All postures as we know them today have been created from this original seated posture as variations to keep the body healthy and fit for meditation. There are hundreds of postures suited for different levels of practitioners, including the most flexible. One of the teacher's duties is to help adjust the asanas to fit the physical and mental condition of each individual student as needed.

A well-trained and astute, egoless teacher, with divine inner intuition—and after studying and practicing the poses for a good length of time—can learn a wide variety of modifications to offer the student. The student, having mastered the initial version of the pose, should then be encouraged to gently go beyond its limitations until a stretch is felt. For example, in **Hanumanasana** (Monkey Pose), if a student feels no stretch in the

complete pose, I offer one of the many deeper variations, such as folding forward completely so that the chest rests on the floor alongside the front leg, with the arms outstretched.

But please remember that, traditionally speaking, yoga poses are not about stretching. The asanas are a divine offering designed to bring a specific state of consciousness according to their shape, the style of breathing, and their point of concentration. The correct alignment or shape of each posture is more important than the stretch. For example, **Bhujangasana** (Cobra Pose) actually should be shaped like a cobra, with a nice curve along the length of the spine and the feet together like the tail of a snake. The practitioner should feel comfortable and steady, holding the pose long enough so that a specific state of consciousness is attained.

THE ROYAL ASANA COUPLE

Somewhere in my yoga studies I learned that within one practice, if Sirsasana (Headstand) is included, one also should always practice Salamba Sarvangasana (Supported Shoulderstand). I'm wondering if this rule should apply in classes I teach. Sometimes my sequence takes longer and I need to eliminate a couple of poses at the end. I don't believe I ever knew why the two poses are so linked, other than that Sirsasana is a "heating" inversion and Sarvangasana is a "cooling" one. What is your opinion?

—Anonymous



Read Dharma Mittra's response:

Dear Anonymous,

Sirsasana, or Headstand, is known as the "King of Postures" and has miraculous benefits. It allows large amounts of blood to enter the upper regions of the body, which vitalizes all the organs that usually do not receive it. Due to the reversal of the force of gravity, the areas of the body that usually support weight are rested, and the ones that don't are now exercised. Headstand strengthens the upper part of the spine, neck, and head and allows the heart to rest. The practice tones the brain, spinal chord, the entire nervous system, and the organs of digestion and elimination. As well as heating the upper body through increased circulation to the brain, Headstand brings clear thinking and mental and psychic powers. It also aids in maintaining *brahmacharya* (celibacy) and awakening the

kundalini (psychospiritual force).

Sarvangasana always follows Sirsasana to bring balance and harmony. The pair is described as married, as a husband and wife, mother and father, or king and queen. To receive the greatest benefits of the practice, they must be practiced together. Beginner students may start only with Sarvangasana as a preparation for doing Sirsasana as their future practice. Depending on students' fitness, and whether they are able to practice Headstand with stability, then both should indeed be practiced together. They may hold either pose for 45 seconds or 1 minute to begin with and, according to capacity, move toward 3 to 5 minutes.

Following the Headstand practice, one should move into Savasana (Corpse Pose) for at least 1 to 3 minutes in order to rebalance the blood pressure before moving into Salamba Sarvangasana. In the Shoulderstand, the upper vertebra are now stretched and made strong and elastic as the thyroid gland is flushed with blood and nourished properly through the chin lock, which is a natural part of the pose. The pose also tones and increases the circulation of the thymus, tonsils, ear glands, and the upper chest region. The husband and wife are working together in harmony with the massage of the thyroid that balances the metabolism and therefore brings a relaxed and cooling effect to the entire system.

Students should know this and be encouraged to do the postures in this order if conditions are available. I would be sure to recommend also that Sarvangasana be followed immediately by Matsyasana (Fish Pose) to bring the maximum benefit. It removes stiffness in the cervical region, opens the lungs, provides a reverse massage of the thyroid, and stimulates the spinal chord in the opposite direction. This will help prevent ossification of the vertebra and hunchback-type symptoms, and it will expand the chest and breath capacity. The pose is also the destroyer of many desires.

Most important, there are eight basic poses I recommend that will give you everything you need for good physical health: Sirsasana, Sarvangasana, **Matsyasana**, **Bhujangasana** (Cobra Pose), **Paschimottanasana** (Seated Forward Bend), Ardha Matsyandrasana (Half Lord of the Fish Pose), Maha Mudra (One Leg Back Stretch), and Siddhasana (Adept's Pose). Practicing these postures daily will help bring self-control and radiant health and will destroy the suffering and ravages of old age.

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.