



Assessing Your Student's Practice Part 1

Yoga can result in dozens of benefits, some of which your students may not be expecting.

by Timothy McCall, MD

When I first came to yoga, I was incredibly stiff and had great difficulty doing most of the poses. When I first set the intention to commit to a daily practice, I envisioned that doing so would result in marked improvements in my asana skills. While I did make some progress, the results after one solid year of a 90-minute daily practice weren't even close to what I'd hoped for.

But what did happen was in many ways much better than I had imagined. The biggest difference was in equanimity. Little things didn't seem to get to me as much. If I couldn't find my keys or spilled a tray of ice cubes all over the floor, I wasn't getting bent out of shape as I once had. This made an enormous difference in my quality of life.

Students often come to yoga or yoga therapy looking for a specific result, such as being relieved of back pain or losing weight. But while yoga can often result in these outcomes, other factors could intervene to thwart progress, so that results can never be guaranteed. Rather than promising a specific outcome, yoga advises us to do the practice and see what happens. And most people discover, as I did, that even if what they wanted (or thought they wanted) doesn't happen, the practice is still worthwhile.

Yoga Is Strong but Slow Medicine

Even if you can't guarantee a specific result, it's absolutely appropriate to design a practice for your students that you hope will be effective for the health problems that bring them to you. What you are doing is trying to set up the conditions that allow healing to occur. But whether it happens or not—or how quickly it happens—depends on factors that may be beyond your or your students' ability to control.

In the modern I-need-it-now world, you are likely to encounter students who are impatient for results. They may be accustomed to visiting doctors who give them pills that start to work almost immediately. (Of course, one of the reasons patients come to yoga therapists is that drugs often don't provide lasting solutions, or they cause intolerable side effects.) Remind your students that yoga



is a powerful modality, but that it works in a different manner than conventional medicine. Rather than simply treat a specific complaint, yoga seeks to improve, in a holistic manner, the functioning of various systems of the body: lowering stress, improving immunity, relaxing muscle tension, improving posture, boosting mood. Do all these things (and more) through a yoga practice, and the body is able to correct many problems on its own.

Though gentle holistic approaches such as yoga take more time to be effective than drug therapy, they tend to become more effective over time. One month of yoga is likely to work better than one week of yoga, one year better than one month, and five years better than one year. If you choose the yoga regimen wisely, avoid contraindicated practices, and don't get impatient and push too hard, almost all the side effects are positive. And most specific conditions will indeed improve.

Progress in Asana Does Not Necessarily Mean Progress in Life

Yoga and yoga therapy should be tools to help your students function better in their lives. Those of us who place a premium on good anatomical alignment in asana need to remember, however, that alignment is mostly a means to an end, not an end in itself. If you get too hung up on achieving "perfect" alignment, you may beat yourself up if you can't do poses that look a certain way, or you may subtly judge students who don't progress much, which may discourage them—even if they are finding the practice to be of value in their lives.

What good is being able to do an impressive-looking Eka Pada Rajakapotasana (One-Legged King Pigeon Pose) if the student has ongoing back pain that the pose may be contributing to? Another student's Utthita Trikonasana (Extended Triangle Pose) may not look much better than the first day they wandered into your studio, yet they may be breathing better, be less stressed, or seem less angry. So which student has actually developed the more skillful practice?

Sometimes, focusing too much on alignment can lead to negative consequences. In working with students struggling with anxiety or depression, for example, you're likely to have much more success asking them to flow gently through practices, feeling the energetic effects of the breath. If you slow down and focus on the minutiae of the poses, they may find themselves brooding or becoming anxious.

This isn't to say that you should forget about alignment. We know that better form in the poses does tend to translate into better results in the real world.



When your bones are well aligned, there is less wear and tear on the joints, blood flows better, and nerve conduction improves. When posture is better, it's possible to breathe more deeply, slowly, and efficiently. Breathing in this manner improves oxygenation of the tissues and relaxes the nervous system, and in our stressed-out world, this alone can be therapeutic for a wide variety of conditions. But never lose sight of the fact that if a focus on alignment isn't serving these ends, or if it's leading to unfortunate consequences such as negative self-talk or low self-esteem, it may be counterproductive.

In Part 2, we'll focus on other measures that can broaden how we view success in yoga and yoga therapy.



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