

Are you a well-adjusted yogi?

By Rob Schütze

“Adjusting is like being a Hindu deity – you need four arms, two legs and many heads to keep track of it all!”¹



If you've been to any kind of hatha yoga class, chances are you've been 'adjusted' or physically manipulated in a pose (*asana*), whether it was a gentle hand on the back in a forward bend or the teacher's full bodyweight bearing down on your knees in Baddha Konasana (Bound angle posture).

Yet while some teachers may be Ganesh-like in their ability to gracefully remove the obstacles ensnaring us in certain poses, others are more reminiscent of Shiva, the destroyer, leaving a trail of injuries and litigation in their wake. So the question arises, just when should a teacher physically manipulate a student's body? And how much pushing, pulling, standing and lying on you is enough?

As a keen yoga practitioner who has been to countless teachers across Australia, Asia, America and Europe, I have encountered a range of approaches to adjusting and a range of attitudes to receiving adjustments. I know many yogis who absolutely love being pushed and pulled into poses and seem to measure the worth of a class according to how many adjustments they get. But I have also met several practitioners who are bitter after being injured by bad adjustments.

With this in mind, I was interested to hear different yoga teachers' perspectives on the rationale behind making adjustments. Is it to correct dodgy alignment, to draw one deeper into a pose, or perhaps even transmit spiritual energy, as some ancient yoga texts² proclaim? I took my questions to the Australian yoga community, speaking to students and teachers of three popular styles of yoga – Iyengar, Ashtanga and Satyananda – in search of answers.

Well-known Sydney Ashtanga yoga teacher Eileen Hall is quick to point out that after years of practice and teaching, as well as recently overcoming breast cancer³, she has come to view adjustment in energetic terms. “I see it as an exchange of energy... Yoga is not about relaxation, it's not about losing weight, it's not about learning meditation. It's about discovering that divine being within ourselves.”

Hall says her own teacher, 90-year-old Ashtanga founder Pattabhi Jois, or 'Guruji' as he is affectionately known, has shown her that the student-teacher relationship is about an exchange of spiritual energy, or *shakti*. “It's certainly nothing to do with alignment,” the

founder of Ashtanga Yoga Moves says. “It's to do with Guruji putting the divine in you. It doesn't happen all the time now – he's pretty old – but sometimes he just switches on and it's like this rocket going up your spinal column. It's extraordinary.” Sharath Rangaswamy, Pattabhi Jois's grandson and assistant, concurs with this idea of transmission, saying, “When Guruji helps me in the practice, I think energy flows from him to me”⁴.

Perhaps this is one of the reasons why the physical aspect of the student-teacher relationship is central to the Ashtanga yoga

But Roche says... “You have to know when and how to use an adjustment. It can be very helpful in the right hands, but it can be dangerous in the wrong hands,” she cautions.

system, where deep breathing (*ujjayi pranayama*), muscular locks (*bandha*) and gaze points (*drishti*) are synchronised with a flowing sequence of postures. This sequence is eventually practised in silence – ‘Mysore style’ – so the teacher can individually adjust each student physically. At the end of practice, students who come to study with Pattabhi Jois in Mysore, India, will kneel down and touch their guru's feet, which are thought to be the repository of divine knowledge.

The idea of transmission (*sancara*) is also emphasised in much of the traditional yoga literature. As Shiva says in the *Kula-Arnava-Tantra*, “He is a true guru by whose very contact there flows the supreme Bliss (*ananda*).”⁵ This spiritual transmission can take many forms, but one of the most powerful is through physical contact or *sparsha*.

Another senior Iyengar teacher, Simon Marrocco, says that although he doesn't see transmission as the main function of physical adjustment in *yogasana*, he feels a similar charge of energy in the presence of his teacher, BKS Iyengar. “Iyengar doesn't have to adjust me,” Marrocco says. “If he's only a few metres from me my hairs will stand on end because I can feel his energy. But the adjustment he gives me is an intelligent touch to wake up that part of

the cellular body that is not working,” says the director of the St Kilda Iyengar Yoga School in Melbourne.

Marrocco says that in the Iyengar tradition, well known for its focus on alignment and precision, adjustments are used mainly to correct a student's execution of the posture. “Adjustment falls under the umbrella of correction – observation and correction. The adjustment is given to the muscle, to that part of the body that is stiff, that's not getting the pose. The cellular body, the muscle fibres, have to get the imprint,” he says.

But for other yoga teachers, an adjustment doesn't have to ‘improve’ the pose to be effective. Peter Scott, senior Iyengar teacher and director of Noosa Yoga Centre in Queensland, says he adjusts “to give the student more of a sense of centre of gravity and direction” in a posture. “My adjustments are not necessarily to make the pose a lot better,” he says.

This distinction reminds us that while we are using a physical form to achieve physiological effects in performing *asana*, an important aspect of this practice is the cultivation of awareness and mental clarity. So those ex-dancers and gymnasts that breeze into your yoga class for the first time and flop their chests to the floor in *Upavistha Konasana* (Seated angle posture) are not necessarily any ‘better’ at yoga than the daily practitioner who struggles to do a backbend but has excellent focus. What matters is our *relationship* to the body and our attitude to the practice as it manifests in breath and concentration.

Adepts of the Satyananda tradition are quick to point this out, stressing the importance of subjective experience in *asana* classes, rather than how a pose might look from the outside. “It's very much about being non-competitive and being in your own experience of the pose and the practice,” says Satyananda

teacher Kriyadhara, who teaches in Katoomba, NSW.

Swami Kriyatmananda Saraswati, Director of Education at Satyananda Yoga Academy Australasia, agrees, saying adjustments are rarely, if ever, given because they direct the students' awareness to the external world. "To directly experience the inner life, experience of *pratyahara* [sense withdrawal] is a prerequisite and hence minimal outside distraction is desirable," he says. "Talking, touching and demonstrating oblige the student to extrovert awareness... Only where a practice is being done in an unsafe manner would the teacher directly intervene."

Swami Kriyatmananda says Satyananda yoga focuses on subjective experience because it comes from the more meditative northern school of raja yoga. The southern school, propagated by Shri T. Krishnamacharya and his students Pattabhi Jois, BKS Iyengar and TKV Desikachar, is associated with hatha yoga and focuses more on the body as a gateway to liberation. "Asana in a raja context is utilised to facilitate sitting in a comfortable and relaxed upright position

for an extended period. In hatha yoga asana is utilised for balancing *ida* and *pingala*. Both have the same destination... As is often said: 'there are many pathways up the mountain'."

Matthew Sweeney teaches Ashtanga yoga in the tradition of the southern school's Pattabhi Jois. While he regularly gives physical adjustments, he agrees that external intervention should not detract from a student's subjective experience of a posture by making him or her feel they are doing something wrong. He says receiving too many nit-picking corrections from a teacher can be psychologically damaging.

"If you get a lot of those then psychologically they're a lot harder to deal with. It creates a constant, 'I can't do that, I'm not good enough' feeling," the Byron Bay-based teacher explains. "The physical side of that is the student will continue to push themselves in a posture in a way that's actually not supportable."

Sweeney sees the role of adjustments being to provide support in a posture so that students can discover how to maximise the benefit of that pose for themselves. He says often it is only through physical contact

that people come to experience that benefit. "Touch itself is one of the most beautiful forms of communication that bypasses the mind. And without that in a yoga context I think a lot is missing. Otherwise you have to just engage the mind and for a lot of people that bypasses the body, in which case they won't get it. The experience is missing. Intellectually they might get it but the physical experience loses all effect."

Fellow Ashtanga teacher Simi Roche agrees that for a lot of students physical touch is best in bringing a deeper awareness to the body, although different techniques suit different students. "I will do everything between verbally coaching someone on how to open the body to actually standing on their legs," the co-director of Adelaide Ashtanga Yoga Shala says. "That works for some people. I know them for years so I will stand on them. And they love it. They respond to it and they open to it... Many bodies will melt underneath your hands. They can just submit and allow you to take them to a new place. And that's when adjustments are a very positive thing."

But Roche says the opposite can also be true if a student tenses up or panics during



Photos from Book Title by Jessie Chapman.

an adjustment or if the teacher is inexperienced. "You have to know when and how to use an adjustment. It can be very helpful in the right hands, but it can be dangerous in the wrong hands," she cautions.

That danger is now lingering menacingly in the back of many yoga teachers' minds as insurance premiums skyrocket and stories of yoga injuries proliferate in a mass media machine intent on sensationalism regardless of the reality behind labels like 'yoga nazi'. While Medibank Private's claims last year that "more than one quarter of all participants surveyed have been injured while practising yoga"⁸ may be based on dubious statistics⁹, anecdotal evidence suggests yoga can indeed cause serious injury, especially in the case of bad adjustments.

Just ask David, a former Ashtanga yoga student who had been practising daily for more than a year at a reputable Australian Ashtanga school when he sustained a crippling back injury from an over-zealous adjustment. "The teacher came up and stood on my hands and said, 'Don't panic, I'm just about to give you an adjustment'," David tells me. "So he put his hands under my back and pulled my chest up and forward until I heard a click in my spine... When I woke up the next morning I couldn't get out of bed. I had to drop onto the floor and pull myself up."

After numerous X-Rays and medical appointments, David discovered the adjustment had hyper-extended his spine, crushing the root of a nerve in his thoracic vertebrae. It took six months of intensive physiotherapy to function normally in his

day-to-day life and only now, after two years of rehabilitation, does he feel ninety percent healed.

David blames the owners of the school for not properly training the apprentice who gave the adjustment, and for not giving him any support after the accident. "They just dropped me like a hot potato. I actually get the impression they were really quite embarrassed about it," he says. His advice for teachers is to explain to students exactly what they are about to do before they give an adjustment, so that the student can soften into it or refuse the adjustment.

This is something most of the teachers I spoke to stressed – the need for open dialogue between students and teachers. "When I put my hands on someone I say, 'Are you alright? How does that feel?'" says Adelaide Ashtanga teacher Simi Roche. "And they'll generally give me the feedback – 'That feels fantastic,' or, 'It's a little bit too hard.' There is a dialogue that goes on without a whole conversation, without stopping the rhythm of the practice."

Iyengar teacher Peter Scott says students should tell teachers before class if they don't want to be adjusted and should discuss any injuries they may be nursing. Fellow Iyengar teacher Simon Marrocco says if a student feels uncomfortable with an adjustment, they should let their teacher know after class.

But for many yoga students, refusing an adjustment or even giving feedback on it, can seem daunting. "I've had instances where I've been adjusted and have not really understood the adjustment, I've felt like it hasn't been effective," says Perth yoga student Nick. "But I haven't really

<tips for students>

- Speak up – tell your teacher if an adjustment feels wrong.
- Let your teacher know before class if you have any injuries.
- Feel free to refuse an adjustment.
- Find a teacher who you trust and connect with.
- Apply what you learn from an adjustment when you next do the pose yourself.
- During an adjustment breathe deeply and soften the body while maintaining core strength.
- Trust your own inner wisdom.

<ideas for teachers>

- Don't over-adjust beginners – let them detoxify and build awareness first.
- Explain to beginners that at some point they may be adjusted and that they can refuse.
- Ask permission to touch someone and explain before giving a strong adjustment.
- Strongly adjust only regular long-term students.
- Adjust with purpose, not because you can or because you feel you should.
- Always give the student a way to release out of the pose if the adjustment is too intense.
- Observe a student's breath and skin colour during an adjustment.
- Observe your own body and breath while adjusting to avoid injuring yourself.

dialogued much about it and I probably should. I guess I feel a little bit uncomfortable because it feels like it might be a criticism in a way.”

Matthew Sweeney says “It’s difficult for students to speak up in class because there is a power imbalance. Nevertheless, they have to know when to say ‘stop’. “If you’re in pain and it just doesn’t feel right, then stop. Don’t ever go past that... But to *meet* pain somewhere, that’s OK.”

This seems to be the crux of a good adjustment – the student and the teacher finding that meeting point, that personal boundary, together. Most of the teachers I spoke with suggest listening to the student’s breath and observing the colour of their skin to gauge how they are handling an adjustment. “If their breathing becomes better you know you’re doing the right thing,” says Simi Roche. “If their breathing becomes shallow or shortened or panicked or anything I release them quite slowly and back off.”

Long-term yoga practitioner Sarah, who has studied both Iyengar and Ashtanga intensively, says students as well as teachers need to develop sensitivity and

self-awareness as they try to meet and expand their own boundaries. “I think it’s important for yoga students to trust their own inner wisdom and to know the difference between an injury and an opening even though on the surface they might feel the same,” she says. “I must admit that from some adjustments I’ve experienced ongoing pain which is not an injury but a deep realigning of the body.”

This highlights the crucial issue of trust in the student-teacher relationship. It is only by placing trust in ourselves and our teachers that we can soften into an adjustment and allow its healing, transformative work to take effect.

Like in any relationship, building trust takes time, consistent practice and a degree of grace. For a student, this means finding the right teacher, one who is well-trained, experienced, compassionate but firm, and dedicated. Of course, finding the right yoga teacher might not be the same as finding a good mechanic, but once you find that special spark with a teacher, stick with them and allow that spark to traverse the flesh in touch, and rekindling your flame of inner wisdom.

1. Vanessa King, Ashtanga yoga teacher from Downward Dog Yoga Centre in Canada.
2. For example, the *Kula-Arnava-Tantra*.
3. See *The power of yoga: the story of Eileen Hall* in AYL Issue 10, 2004.
4. Caroline Laskow & Mary Wigmore, 2004, *Ashtanga, NY - a yoga documentary*: First Run Features.
5. Georg Feuerstein, 1998, *The Yoga Tradition - its history, literature, philosophy and practice*, Prescott: Hohm Press, p.15.
6. Hatha yoga, or 'forceful' yoga, aims to bring about liberation (*moksha*) by raising our dormant serpent power (*kundalini-shakti*) from the base of the spine to the crown of the head. To do this, the two *nadis* (energy channels) which spiral up the spine – ida and pingala – must be balanced and purified.
7. John Birmingham may have used the terms satirically in his Bulletin articles on March 30 - July 20 2004 but yoga backlash is a real phenomenon.
8. Medibank Private, 2004, Sports Injuries Report 2004.
9. See *Yoga injuries don't add up* in AYL Issue 10, 2004.

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