

Bringing It Home

Encourage your students to develop a home practice—and stick with it.

By Sara Avant Stover

I moved to Chiang Mai, Thailand, from New York City when I was 21. I had been practicing yoga for three years, attending group classes four times a week. When I moved, though, things changed. Chiang Mai's yoga scene didn't compare to the abundant supply of classes I had grown so used to in New York. If I wanted to keep practicing, I had to do it alone.

Forced by circumstance to foster a home practice, my relationship with yoga quickly deepened and became more intimate, more connected. Equipped with a solid foundation from the group classes I had attended, both my insights and physical prowess quickly evolved. That was 10 years ago; the ritual of unfurling my mat continues to this day.

But most students won't be faced with the necessity of practicing at home. Often the only way they'll begin to explore a home practice is when a trusted teacher gives them a push in the right direction.

As a teacher, you know that inspiring your students to practice at home is the most effective way to help them grow, both on the mat and in their lives. The tricky part can be convincing them of that. Here's how to motivate your students to turn inward and approach their yoga mats—alone.

The Boons of Being on Your Own

Remind your students that developing a regular home yoga practice is an essential stepping-stone on the path toward embracing the gift of self-illumination through yoga.

"When we practice alone, we're allowing ourselves the opportunity to embody what we've been taught," says Jill Satterfield, founder of Vajra Yoga in New York City. "We empower ourselves with personal experience, which is essential to truly know something."

The independence students gain from practicing at home will strengthen their overall practice and seep out into all areas of their lives.

"I can immediately tell when students are practicing at home," says Rodney Yee, who leads yoga workshops all over the world. "There is an authenticity to their practice and a depth to the way they are feeling their own bodies—a much more direct connection to the poses."

Home Practice versus Group Classes

While you never want your student to give up group classes altogether—they give students a foundational understanding and add to their yoga repertoire—the experience of being under the supervision of a skilled teacher in a classroom setting can, at a certain point, become a limitation.

"A teacher can introduce us to our practice and offer some advice," says Ashtanga teacher David Swenson, "but the real learning comes from personally experiencing the subtle nuances that accompany the internal journey of yoga."

In a group setting, it's more difficult to turn inward to listen to and answer one's own needs than it is when practicing

alone.

"Often in a class we can get swept away by the group energy, because it's so powerful," Yee says. "While this is often fun and exhilarating, it takes us away from our own true rhythms and needs."

Step by Step

Those students with good body and breath awareness, a solid understanding of alignment, and a steady attendance in group classes are ready to start a home practice. But it's imperative to broach the topic skillfully and with care.

"The relationship with the student is key," says Susanna Nicholson, a teacher who runs a private studio at Martha Jefferson Hospital in Charlottesville, Virginia.

"A teacher offers the student compassion and understanding while holding firm to the importance of daily personal practice," she says. "For certain students this means telling success stories, or it may mean simply making the program very doable and making oneself very accessible for advice and feedback along the way."

Instead of overwhelming them, ease students into a personal practice slowly. It should become a pleasure rather than a chore. Encourage students to practice for short periods at a time to give them a taste of success.

"Begin with just one day a week, or twice a month, and then add some more gradually," Swenson suggests.

Nicholson gives her students a 10- to 15-minute sequence, with a longer option for weekends.

"I ask students to forgive themselves for missed days, while insisting that the practice needs to be done regularly and with dedication," she says. "Often I put the fault on myself to take away guilt. I say, 'If you're not doing it, I've made it too long—so call me, and we'll work it out.'"

Making a Plan

Having a private session with your student could be a way to provide him or her with the extra support needed to develop a regular routine and stick with it.

"There are many asanas to work with, and many meditation techniques," says Satterfield, who meets with all of her teacher trainees privately to look at alignment and emotional needs. "One size definitely doesn't fit all!"

Nicholson meets draws from a variety of tools, including pranayama, asana, chanting, meditation, and imagery. This way she designs a practice that suits the individual needs of the student.

Then she diagrams the practice, adding notes and the date, and she always asks for a follow-up meeting within one week to confirm that the student has understood the practice—and to ensure that it will remain appropriate for the following two to three months.

After that, Nicholson requests that her students offer feedback about how they're progressing, especially if their situation changes, they outgrow the practice, or they have further questions or difficulties.

By giving your students a set sequence to practice, they will feel supported and structured when they step on the mat

alone for the first time.

Working Through Resistance

No matter how well equipped your students are, they will inevitably face obstacles. Resistance afflicts everyone at times—even the most seasoned yogis.

"One of the most challenging aspects of home practice is finding the motivation to get on the mat and begin," Swenson says.

Having an informal practice group with friends at home once a week, in addition to your private home practice, can be a great motivator.

Another way to keep students motivated is to have them set aside a regular time and place for practice. Ask them to stick to a specific goal or intention to return to daily. Steeping themselves in the "bigger picture" will remind them of their highest priorities for practice.

Encourage your students to continue attending classes once or twice a week to learn new things that they can bring home with them. During class time, speak of the importance of having a personal practice. Share with them your own successes and tips about how you have learned to work through resistance.

Getting Them Started

These tips will help your students get started:

1. Set aside a place and a time to practice every day. Start with a short amount of time, such as 15 to 30 minutes.

2. Identify an activity that is no longer valuable in your life and remove it, so that your home practice doesn't just add another task and make your life more complicated and full.
3. Commit yourself to being consistent in your practice for six months.
4. Find an occasional practice partner.
5. Have several planned sequences in the back of your mind as a backup.
6. Continue to go to class weekly for inspiration and ideas on how to change your home practice or what to focus on at home.
7. Recognize how much yoga has already helped you, and trust that your daily life will be better with a daily practice.

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