

The Power of Touch

Explore the pros and cons of hands-on guidance and learn to use skillful assists to empower your students.

By Sara Avant Stover



"Come on! Extend, Karl! Don't be so stingy!" exclaimed Sharon Gannon, cofounder of Jivamukti Yoga, to student Karl Straub, as she assisted him in [Ardha Chandrasana](#) (Half Moon Pose).

Straub, a Jivamukti Yoga teacher himself, as well as a Thai Yoga Bodywork practitioner, recalls the potency of Gannon's assist—one that he revisits every time he practices that asana.

"The [combination] of challenge and support was extremely powerful," he says. "It's a reminder of the potential of assists." When in the presence of a master yoga teacher, a student, like a flower basking in the sunlight, can grow by leaps and bounds.

As a teacher, how can you refine your assists to help your students reach their full potential? How can you serve others as you have been served?

Why Assist?

"Assisting is teaching," asserts Leslie Kaminoff, author of *Yoga Anatomy* and founder of the Breathing Project in New York City. "These are just different words for the same thing. It's all communication that takes various forms—whether verbal, tactile, visual, or proprioceptive."

Sianna Sherman, a globe-trotting senior certified Anusara Yoga teacher, elaborates on the merits of assisting.

"Everything about assisting, whether verbally or physically or both," she explains, "is to help the spirit of the student to shine fully so that their innate radiance adds more light to the world."

Sometimes a soft suggestion can dramatically shift a student's experience of the class, and of themselves.

"The transformation that can happen," Sherman says, "reaches deep into the human heart and helps to expand the limited notions we often hold onto about ourselves."

Different Traditions, Different Approaches

In the Anusara tradition, assisting pivots around the maxim that each person is the perfection of the universe, and this perfection keeps on becoming more perfect.

"We look for the beauty in every person and are not 'fixing' but rather helping to enhance," Sherman says.

Kaminoff, who teaches individualized, breath-centered yoga in the tradition of T.K.V. Desikachar, explains, "The philosophy behind assisting in my approach is that it is completely dependent upon the needs of the individual we are working with."

He explains that some people should not be touched at all, while others require significantly more contact.

"Most people are somewhere in between," he says, "and it is the job of the teacher to be sensitive to where students are on that spectrum."

Karl Straub adds that, in Jivamukti Yoga, teachers approach assists in the same way they approach all of their relationships, "with great compassion, awareness, and deep respect."

"Yogic assists [are] a creative process between two people, not something that a teacher does to a student. [They] are opportunities to deepen and perfect relationships," he elaborates.

The Tools

A solid understanding of anatomy and biomechanics as well as creativity, awareness, sensitivity, and a spirit of playfulness are essential tools that every yoga teacher should have before assisting.

Kaminoff finds that creativity helps him determine who needs what, and when. This spurs him to use "imagery, props (like balls, blankets, sandbags, straps, and cushions), touch (both light and strong), dialogue, and silence," depending upon the context.

When Sherman applies physical adjustments, she remembers Anusara Yoga's assisting methodology of SSA: sensitivity, stability, and adjustment. The teacher sensitizes by first finding her own breath, and then listening to that of her student. Then the teacher stabilizes herself and the student to make a safe and supportive base.

For stability, "we try to remain standing," Sherman explains, "which also helps us to see the other students and to be ready if anyone needs us in the room. We may position ourselves to the student's back body, especially in standing asanas."

Straub has also learned that a sense of humor is essential amid all the technical instructions that teachers usually give students.

"An assist I learned from my teachers," Straub recalls, "is, 'relax your face, smile a bit! Furrowing your brow doesn't make this any easier!'"

Verbal versus Physical Assists

In Anusara Yoga, the teacher will first try to communicate with verbal assists, and then, if the student needs more support, with physical ones.

"With our verbal assists, we move near the student and soften our voices so the cues are directive," explains Sherman. "We try to use the [students'] names, [and] if we know the students well, we may give them verbal cues from a distance."

If the teacher sees that a verbal assist is not effective, she will then give a hands-on adjustment. Here she will employ one of several different types of touch, ranging from soft to firm.

Straub finds that his training in Thai Yoga Bodywork has been instrumental in teaching him a skillful touch, while Jivamukti Yoga has taught him to move throughout the room to better observe all the students while he gives adjustments.

Straub adds, "If the asana I'm assisting has a [left] and right side, I will come back to the same student to give the same assist on the opposite side."

When Not to Assist

For some people, any physical adjustment, no matter how skillful, can feel like an invasion of personal space. Sherman advises that teachers first ask students, especially those new to the class, if they are comfortable receiving physical assists.

Bobby Clennell, senior Iyengar Yoga teacher at the Iyengar Yoga Association of Greater New York and author and illustrator of *The Woman's Yoga Book: Asana and Pranayama for All Phases of the Menstrual Cycle*, advocates adjusting beginners as little as possible.

"As long as they are not doing anything dangerous," she says, "I leave them alone."

She lets students learn visually by demonstrating poses and giving simple instructions.

"For the inexperienced student," she explains, "insistence that they do things 'properly' is a pressure they do not have the experience to deal with yet. Plus, a beginner may misinterpret a teacher's or an assistant's touch as an invasion of space."

Custom-Made Assists

In all instances, a teacher must think on her feet and act quickly, tempering her words and mannerisms moment-to-moment.

"Assists are custom made," reports Straub. "The best ones are individually tuned, based on the teacher's appraisal of the student's unique needs and conditions."

In this way, assists are never mechanical or one-size-fits-all.

"Sometimes, I will notice that a student is feeling a little down or depressed, and I will assist them in a very supportive and encouraging way so they know that I am with them," Sherman says. "I try to help them create a supportive environment to feel their inner strength and buoyancy once again."

At other times, when Sherman has an enthusiastic student, she might give a lot of verbal cues to challenge that student and to help her practice evolve.

"I try to remember that every student has a complexity of feelings, challenges, yearnings, and dreams that they come into class with," she adds.

From Theory to Practice

Before assisting a student, Straub advises that we consider our intentions by asking ourselves the following questions:

1. Is this assist for the student's benefit, or am I just showing off or exerting power?
2. Does this student require an adjustment or am I just restless?
3. As I carry out the assist, am I in a hurry?
4. Am I really focused on this student, or am I thinking of something else?
5. Am I properly trained to safely and effectively apply this assist?

Sherman backs up the importance of this thoughtful approach.

"Every single assist matters and must be filled with our attention and supportive care," she explains. "Every assist is the opportunity to help someone realize their full potential in that moment, and to support someone in this journey of our shared humanity."

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