

# Getting Creative with the Competition

How to work with, not against, your fellow yoga instructors.

By Sara Avant Stover

Many of us turned to yoga for its promise of happiness. The four walls of a studio and its community of like-minded Sun Saluters offered solace from the rat race outside. When we stepped onto our yoga mats, we stepped into a world where joy and harmony reigned.

Later, we became yoga teachers. Sometimes this entailed leaving behind careers that brought big paychecks (for some) and even bigger burnout (for most). Ready to serve students by offering them the scrumptious fruits of yoga, we were bright-eyed, enthusiastic, and, in hindsight, naïve.

Now we know that our egos follow us to the yoga mat, especially because yoga today means big business. The competition for students, prime-time slots, fame, and simply earning a living can be fierce.

So can we bid the rat race farewell once and for all? Despite the frenzy of yoga's big boom, can we be humble and harmonious within ourselves and with each other? Anyone who practices yoga knows that ultimately this is what it's all

about. Yet it's easier said than done.

## Accepting Human Nature

"Competition is inherent in our genes," explains Eileen Muir, director of Karuna Center for Yoga and Healing Arts in Northampton, Massachusetts. "It is highly reinforced by our culture.

"The nature of the mind is to divide, compare, and judge, and the nature of the ego is to identify with this process. However, yoga is the antithesis of separateness and competition."

We can use yoga first to become aware of those parts of ourselves that are competing with others, and then we can investigate, accept, and work with them skillfully.

"The unpleasant reactions, the pangs of threat, and the potential for feeling inadequate that surround competition are all great excuses to look more deeply at our true selves," says Amy Ippoliti, a world-renowned Anusara Yoga teacher based in Boulder, Colorado.

## Transform Negative Emotions

Zack Kurland, a yoga therapist at New York City's OM Yoga and author of *Morning Yoga Workouts*, recalls how he used his own feelings of inadequacy as catalysts for personal growth.

"A couple of years into teaching yoga, I used to get anxious when reading *Yoga Journal*. There were all of these teachers

in the magazine, with articles and photos. They were teaching at conferences, producing books and DVDs, running successful studios."

"I was jealous and insecure. I became jaded. I would say that I really didn't experience joy in being a yoga teacher for a good long while."

To liberate himself from this unhappiness, Kurland took an honest look at his feelings, relationship to yoga, and finances.

"I realized that these feelings had nothing to do with the magic I had experienced through my practice," Kurland continues. "I needed to reassess my relationship with yoga."

As a result, Kurland stopped teaching full-time and resumed a former career of website production and freelance design. This, Kurland says, "took the financial pressure off the yoga and let it breathe."

"I could rediscover yoga as a gift that brings me light and levity and allows me to share that," he says.

Praise Yourself and Others

Yoga's popularity has seemingly reached its zenith, bringing streams of teacher training programs—and their graduates. The abundance of talented teachers (and sometimes not-so-talented teachers) can make us feel catty, insecure, and judgmental.

"The wave of popularity of yoga in our contemporary culture," asserts Muir, "brings with it the very limitations

and obstacles from which we are trying to free ourselves.

"The real issue is for us, as teachers, to embody the teachings of yoga in our inner and outer lives, so that we and our students can be inspired to move beyond ignorance and to trust in our true natures."

With awareness of our actions on—and especially off—the mat, yoga can teach us to act in ways that generate union and harmony. Ippoliti shares specific ways to embody these teachings in professional relationships.

"When I find myself in the company of a great colleague," she says, "if my threatened self shows up, I immediately look to and praise [my colleague's] gifts as a teacher and a great being."

"This fills me with gratitude that students are able to experience that gift, one that perhaps I could not offer. When I focus on it from this perspective, there is truly room for the two of us. Love and respect increases and any threat dissipates."

Then, to strengthen her own sense of self-worth, "I contemplate my own talents and gifts and the distinct ways that my teaching and personality offer an angle that could benefit my students in a whole other way," Ippoliti says. "It's all about becoming more secure in the distinct things we offer the world, which is exactly what yoga teaches us."

Think Abundance, Not Scarcity

As human beings, we can choose how we wish to view the

world. We can focus on limitations and scarcity, or we can open up to the reality that the world is infinitely abundant. In the long run, the latter is a much healthier outlook.

"In my studies of yoga, I have learned that one of the promises of the manifest world is that there is always more," says Ippoliti.

"The best example of this is the energy crisis. We are running out of fossil fuels, but if we are creative enough, we can use our magnificent minds to come up with innovative ways to harness energy. Fighting over what is left of our fossil fuels makes war, but creativity creates solutions."

We must employ this perspective in all our endeavors—from how we run our cars to how we market ourselves as teachers.

"We can call the plethora of teachers a terrible and lamentable problem," urges Ippoliti, "or we can choose to get creative and find new ways to reach brand-new students."

Take the High Road

Amy Ippoliti offers teachers the following advice:

Remember that we teach to serve. When you are teaching because of your deepest desire to serve your students, not to earn a living, then you can truly enjoy your job and focus in the highest way on helping others feel good about themselves. Don't rely on yoga to pay your bills until that happens naturally. Take on another job if you have to, or investigate alternative streams of income that can support

you.

Be willing to let go. When you find yourself in the midst of a conflict with another teacher, be willing to let go rather than cling to or become overly invested in your own position. Take the high road, and trust that other doors and opportunities will open to you. Strive to be so confident in what you have to offer that others will seek out your skills and talents.

Create community. It is much easier to feel threatened by or separated from other teachers when they are strangers. Getting to know others helps develop feelings of unity while celebrating diversity. Another key tool to creating peace among teachers is meditating as a group to foster harmony and love.

Communicate. Even internationally, conflicts arise over workshops and trainings when two people schedule events in the same region at the same time. Do extensive research online prior to booking events, and pick up the phone (rather than turning to email) to check in with other teachers and hosts. This keeps lines of communication open between every possible person involved-and showing that kind of respect goes a long way.

Make it personal. Never try to resolve a conflict via email. Always reach for the phone and talk or, better yet, meet in person if you can. When you are upset, your feelings can often be misinterpreted via email. You don't want to put anything in writing that may come back to haunt you.

Don't compete, create. Remember there is always "more," and it may be something you have not yet considered.

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