

On Teaching

By Kim Roberts

There is an old saying in the academic world, those who can't do, teach. I hope the opposite is true when teaching yoga, as my teacher once explained, "when you can do it, you can teach it."

What is this "it" we are teaching? If yoga is union with our divine nature, enlightenment, freedom, samadhi, or whatever you call it, and we don't have first hand experience of it, how can we claim to teach it? How can we call ourselves teachers of yoga, if, in fact, we have not understood what yoga is? And, I humbly admit that I don't really know.

Of course there are basic skills that are very helpful to teaching yoga: the practices of asana and pranayama and meditation. But this is not the yoga. This is the practice that may (we hope) lead us to yoga. It is possible to teach others how to structure the practice. But suddenly, as teaching yoga becomes fashionable, many instructors might not have the understanding of the subject we claim to teach.

There is a solution to this dilemma. It is called practice. So the answer to the question "what are we teaching?" is, "what are we practicing?" This, whether or not we are aware of it, is what we are teaching. So if you want to teach, practice. If you want to deepen and expand your teaching, deepen and expand your practice.

We can only teach from our experience, from what we know. If we try to go beyond, then we may end up parroting concepts and ideas about what we think we know. If we practice strictly adhering to someone else's guidelines about practice, lacking the courage to examine our own unique approach to walking the path, then might teach rigidity. If we focus exclusively on strengthening muscles, striving for physical perfection, then we could be teaching gymnastics. If we practice fear, avoiding our inner voice guiding us to further depths, and instead follow what everyone else is doing, we may teach fear. If we cannot be alone with our experience, then how can we teach others to relax into their experience?

If we practice confusion about our personal boundaries and need our students to reinforce our egos, then we risk teaching confusion and ego reinforcement. We cannot "teach" others to be fully awake beings, especially if we are not there ourselves. We can practice wisdom and compassion; we can model it, or create structures to reinforce it. We have yamas and niyamas, and Buddhist precepts. We have tools, such as asana and pranayama and meditation practice. But how can we teach someone to behave? We cannot. Each must discover for herself where these practices are leading us. One

sure thing is that we will never find our own way by following someone else's path.

There are no rules in life! There is cause and effect, or karma. So if a teacher is trying to impose her view on you or discouraging you from doing your own personal investigation, then you might wonder why. Our wisdom comes from within; by training ourselves (through practice) to listen to our inner guide, this guide becomes stronger and more reliable. As Mathieu Ricard points out, "The Buddha always made it clear that his teachings should be examined and meditated on, but never simply accepted as true simply out of respect for him."

Cultivating the qualities of compassion, generosity, peace, strength, patience seems to have a positive effect on the quality of our life, moment to moment. Cultivating anger, hatred, greed, anxiety, intolerance, and jealousy seems to make us miserable. We have a choice, each moment of which to practice. We can either accept and live with life's present manifestation, or we can struggle against it, reject or deny it and further our own suffering. We have this choice each and every moment of our lives. We can choose any moment to start practicing acceptance; why not this one?

At a certain point the practice becomes the teacher and our allegiance shifts from external to internal. This does not mean that we disregard the external teacher. Just as we trust our teacher, we must trust our inner guide. Our trust in our inner guide then leads us back to trust in the teacher. If not, then we need to examine the discrepancy and see which one is false. Over-reliance on the teacher can become a lack of responsibility to oneself at a certain point. The teacher is a guide, not the leader.

As students, we must make distinctions between gurus and spiritual guides. A teacher who does not have realization of enlightened mind cannot guide you there as a realized guru can. But she can show you techniques and practices learned from her teachers. It is extremely important to recognize this. Teachers who earn my respect are those who freely admit their limitations. If there are areas where we are still unclear, be honest, rather than drawing unsuspecting students into the drama. We can only take students as far as we have come.

But as a yoga teacher without realization in the fullest sense, what I can offer is a sincere devotion to the practice of increasing awareness and acceptance. I can share my experience of the path; the path that leads us to become fully awake, wise and compassionate human beings. What makes you feel fully alive? Do that. And if you can do it, you can teach it.