

ADJUSTMENTS

After many years of teaching, and like many Ashtanga teachers before and after me, my technique and attitude to adjusting has changed over time. In my opinion many Ashtanga teachers are known for their tendency to over adjust, to give particularly strong adjustments and to focus on the strict aspects of the tradition rather than a broader view. This may seem like a criticism but it is not. Coming from a traditional background myself, I have found great value in sticking to the system and focusing on teaching the practice in the traditional manner that I learnt. It is a good place to start, but it is a limited approach.

After some time most teachers, whether from injury, teaching too much, or simple conservation of energy, will adjust less and find different ways to convey the practice to a student, for example, offering more gentle adjustments and more time spent communicating with each individual. This will benefit both the teacher and student so that each individual's needs are met. The most holistic approach is to include both the needs of the teacher and the needs of the student.

A common example is providing an adjustment for Supta Kurmasana, or the prone turtle posture. This posture often needs an adjustment from teacher to student due to its difficulty. Yet if the teacher has to adjust thirty students every day in this posture, no matter how well he or she does it, this will usually begin to cause the teacher increasing discomfort. As a teacher you should take a break from adjusting strenuous postures from time to time. Little by little you can require your students to attempt it on their own. This may include verbal advice and prompting from you. Attempting a posture without help is one of the best ways for a student to ascertain their actual ability with the Asana and to begin to figure out the steps necessary to get into it without help. At the end of the day it is the teacher's responsibility to encourage the student to become self-sufficient.

As both a teacher and student I like to have an adjustment free day at least once per week where hands on contact is either minimal or nonexistent. Typically I like to do this on Friday when most if not all students are doing the Primary sequence. There are ways to conserve energy and maximise every adjustment. This means maximum results and no discomfort for the student with minimum effort on behalf of the teacher. One simple approach is to treat every adjustment that you give as though you are doing a posture. Try to keep a sense of your centre, with appropriate alignment and deep breathing. Minimise the tension in your shoulders and maximise the awareness in your belly.

At no time should you lose sight of the students needs by trying to get them into a posture at any expense. This means that your need to see a student achieve a posture is greater than their physical capacity, vastly increasing the risk of injury. It may also be that you are allowing the anxiety of the student to achieve a posture influence you when you should be cautioning them to pull back and slow down. You will also increase the chance of injuring yourself if you over extend by trying to push a student into a posture.

The format in which I learnt the sequence has what I call “core adjustments”. These are the postures that typically require more hands on help, adjustments that every Ashtanga teacher should learn and apply more often. From these core adjustments almost all other adjustments follow. There are seven traditional adjustments for the Primary Series:

1. Prasarita Padottanasana C
2. Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana
3. Paschimottanasana
4. Marichyasana (All)
5. Supta Kurmasana
6. Baddha Konasana
7. Back Bends/Drop Backs

Note: as handstand is not part of the Primary sequence it has been excluded from this list.

Prior to the opening of the new Shala in Gokulum, these adjustments were carried out on the students most of the time. If you could do a posture on your own you were left alone. If not, you would receive an adjustment in it every day. In the old days in Lakshmipuram, there were only twelve students practicing at a time so it was relatively easy for Guruji and Sharath to get around to everybody. Nowadays the Shala can be filled with over 50 people, so adjusting everyone in each of these Asana (whether you want it or not) is not feasible. The only core adjustment now remaining is back bending and getting a final squash in Paschimottanasana.

The core adjustments for the later series are the most common points to receive hands on attention. Other postures in these sequences may also be difficult to accomplish, but are either not as common to adjust, or simply too awkward to adjust all the time.

Intermediate Core Adjustments:

1. Pashasana
2. Bekhasana
3. Kapotasana
4. Eka Pada Shirshasana sequence
5. Pincha Mayurasana/Karandavasana
6. Headstand/Handstand

Advanced A Core Adjustments:

1. Kashyapasana
2. Purna Matsyendrasana
3. Viranchyasana A
4. Ganda Bherundasana
5. Supta Trivi Kramasana/Trivi Kramasana
6. Raja Kapotasana

Advanced B Core Adjustments:

1. Mulabandhasana
2. Vrschikasana
3. Shyanasana
4. Buddhasana
5. Eka Pada Kapotasana
6. Sama Konasana

Although Iyengar Yoga teachers do not focus on hands on adjustments in the same way as Ashtanga teachers, they do tend to focus on postures as Tadasana, Trikonasana and Svanasana, or downward and upward dog. Personally I have learnt a great deal from the Iyengar approach to adjusting these postures. Many Iyengar teachers will use props (the wall, belts, blocks and chairs) for these postures, but will also use a gentle guiding touch that allows you to lengthen in the appropriate spot and breathe freely. This can be of greater benefit than a strong holding adjustment that causes five forceful breaths. If an adjuster touches like a butterfly all the time however, it soon becomes like a lot of irritating mosquitoes buzzing around. Balance should be maintained between a light touch, a firm touch and not touching at all!