

# Adjustment and the use of touch

## The meaning of the word ‘adjust’

“To move or change (something) so as to be in a more effective arrangement or desired condition.”

“To change so as to be suitable to or conform with something else.

<https://www.thefreedictionary.com/adjust>

It’s interesting to note that most of the online dictionaries define this word not simply as making a change, but a change towards something better. Adjustment isn’t a random change. The word implies subjectivity and opinion on the part of the person making the change, as to what a ‘better’ condition may be, ie. in this case, the yoga teacher.

## Why adjust students?

As yoga teachers, we could simply instruct students from one pose to another, and some of the time this is what we do. But other times we choose to adjust students, ie. we suggest that they change the way they are doing a practice. So why do we choose to do this?

a) Safety – if we observe that a student is in a position which, according to our anatomical knowledge, is potentially increasing their risk of injury, then in the spirit of ahimsa we would want to guide them to alter the way they are doing the practice to a safer way. For example, observing a twisted knee joint, and knowing that the knee is a vulnerable area in the body, and that it isn’t designed to twist, we would ask the student to change their position to relieve the torsional strain on the joint.

b) Refining a pose – students with some familiarity of a pose, can be given teaching points which help to lead them towards greater balance between sthira and sukha. They can be guided towards practising a pose with more anatomical and energetic integrity in the system. For example, in down face dog pose, someone with a rounded back can be guided towards a straighter back. This kind of refinement is often a long-term project.

c) Developing practice – we may offer adjustments to experienced students who have a well established practice to enable them to go a step further, or to explore a different way to practice a pose. This could be to provide a greater degree of challenge, or sometimes this may be to make poses less challenging, and to focus on more subtle aspects of yoga practice.



## How to adjust students

There are three ways to adjust students – using verbal instruction, demonstration or touch. Adjustment can be given to the whole group, or via one-to-one coaching.

### Whole group adjustment

When we are teaching yoga, we always have limited time. In order to offer students a range of practices, it makes sense to be economical with our time. The most time-efficient way to adjust students is to give verbal instruction to the group as a whole, whether the guidance is aimed at just one or a number of students. Addressing the whole group also has the added benefit that the person you are really aiming the instruction at doesn't feel singled out. For example, asking the group to check the back arm is at shoulder level in Virabhadrasana 2, even to those who do have the arm at the desired shoulder level, they are still learning something about the pose and are developing body awareness.

Demonstration can also be a good way to convey information quickly to a group. By stopping the students after a practice, asking them to watch you as you demonstrate an adjustment, and then asking them to repeat the practice incorporating the new guidance, is a useful teaching method. This also has to be balanced with the fact that students are interrupting the flow of their practice, and at the same time focusing outward, while they are watching you. So these demonstrations are best kept swift.

### One-to-one adjustment

Sometimes, you've tried all of the above, and someone's just not getting it! Or else, one student has very specific needs that can't be addressed by giving teaching points to the whole group. When working with one student, remember that the teacher still has a duty of care to the rest of the group, so it's important to be aware of what they are doing. Before approaching an individual student, giving the group clear guidance on what you want them to be doing and choosing something 'safe' where you don't need to be too vigilant, is wise.

Verbal instruction can work one-to-one, but sometimes a student can feel uncomfortable with this. Another very useful way of adjusting, is to say nothing, but to demonstrate next to or in front of the student to show the adjustment you would like them to make. For example, if you want them to move their hands in cat position, get down on the floor beside them, copy what they are doing, and then make the change you are wanting.

The third option for one-to-one adjustment is touch. There are many different ways to use touch, which we will explore at the workshop. Touch is a powerful communication tool, full of nuance. Awareness of the implications of touch in a yoga teaching situation is vital in order to ensure that the intervention is helpful for the student.

## Communicating with students

When we teach yoga, we are offering and sharing our own understanding of the practices and concepts with our students. We teach from where we are ourselves. We need to be mindful of the

fact that we are also sharing our misunderstandings and insecurities, as well as aspects of yoga that we personally have found useful but may not always resonate with others.

Whenever you give a hands-on adjustment to a student, it's always worth taking time to consider what it is you are communicating to them. Are you clear what your intention is? Have you considered how that might be perceived by another person with a different body and life experience? Are you aware that emotions are communicated by touch? Is it for your benefit or the student's? Are you listening to the student and responding to them?

Rather than simply telling, showing and touching students, it pays to always be aware of their response the whole time and never expect it to be the same as yours was when you received that information. Yoga teachers are in a position of authority and trust, and with that comes responsibility and a duty of care. To maintain the spirit of ahimsa we need to use our powers of listening and of empathy when giving adjustments to students.

## What does it mean to touch and be touched?

Touch is a form of communication. Like the other primates, touch between individuals reinforces bonds between pairs or groups and maintains cohesion. It is wired into our systems to the extent that lack of touch is detrimental to health

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0273229711000025>



In our culture we tend not to touch each other that much. Friendly touch is a very healthy thing to receive and helps us stay relaxed, happy and well, by stimulating production of oxytocin and endorphins. In our society we tend to mainly only touch our lovers, children and certain professionals, limiting touching others to the shaking of hands, which is generally regarded as acceptable touching.

The way touch is received is very context dependent. If you go and have a massage, you allow the therapist to touch you in a particular way that you wouldn't allow in another context. The clear context and boundaries is an understanding between you and the other person as to what will

happen and what the intention of the interaction is. If a stranger approached you in the street and started massaging your shoulders, your reaction would be very different! If we are going to touch our yoga students, there must be a clear context and boundaries, and there must be clear intention. If not, the intervention could be a negative one for the student.

Touching is giving and receiving – you touch someone, they are also touching you. How they respond is also going to inform you if you listen with your hands. The interaction will also have an effect on you, which is something else to bear in mind. Learning how to perceive with your hands the giving and receiving of information at the same time can be a useful skill to learn.

Even if students are happy to be touched, different people will respond to your touch in a different way. Some people may lean in to your hand, other will pull away. Some relax, some tighten up. Some might have physical limitations, ailments or emotional issues that you don't know about.

Touch, remember, is a gesture of communication, and not just between yourself and the person you are touching, but to the others around you too. If you do touch your students, consider the context you could be setting up within the group if you regularly touch some students and not others.

Touching students is a complex terrain that we need to navigate with sensitivity and awareness if we choose use it as a teaching tool.

## Inappropriate touching

BWY guidelines are that you ask permission before you touch a student. If you always use touch, you can tell students upfront and clearly set the context and they can either ask you not to touch or not attend if they don't wish to be touched. Asking shows that you respect the student's autonomy and right to say no.

In a class where a yoga teacher regularly touches all the students, even within that context there is still appropriate and inappropriate touching. What is considered appropriate will vary according to psycho-social influences, such as cultural norms and differing personal boundaries. As a rule, areas under underwear are always off-limits. Hands, feet and shoulders are usually considered acceptable.

## Direct and indirect hands-on adjustment

If you as the teacher see someone practising a pose and you think 'that student's knee is in the wrong place and I want it to be there' and you go and put it in the position you think it should be in, you're imposing an idea of yours on that person. What are you communicating to that person by that action? They might get the feeling that they are 'doing it wrong'. It's like saying 'I know, and you don't know'. It may make the student lose autonomy and become reliant on you the teacher. Consider what is the most empowering approach you can employ in teaching.

Children tend to respond well to a direct touch (eg. placement of a limb), but adults often will push back. So it can be more helpful use that impulse and to ask them to push against you (indirect adjustment). In that way, rather than using your hands to say 'do this', you are using your hands to help the student find the adjustment themselves. Some adults however do respond well to a direct adjustment.

We need to make sure that the language we use also matches the gesture. (We will be discussing language use at the next OGT workshop.)

If you adjust someone's position, you are hoping that they will remember it for next time. Some will, some won't. But they will remember better if they find the position for themselves. If you want to bring awareness to a part of the body, a simple touch can help them remember in future to bring their awareness there.

## Boundaries and relationship

We can touch each other with words as well as our hands. We sometimes say that someone's words are 'touching'. When we meet a person for the first time, that first conversation and interaction is in large part about establishing what the boundaries are. It's about working out what the context between two people and what level of intimacy is acceptable or unacceptable. We do this by observing body language and listening to what they say. Students may appear very confident and self-assured but in their life story they may have had experiences that you don't know about that make them feel uneasy about touch or sharing personal space or information.

So if we're going to be adjusting our students, we need to think about the context that we're in and how the students might perceive that context. What boundaries do you want to set for your yoga teaching space? What are the unspoken rules? Is touching to be expected or not? What is your role – to tell students what to do and correct them? Or to keep them safe, guide them, and invite them to explore? As yoga teachers, we set and maintain the boundaries for our own teaching space.

Another factor to consider is that relationship takes two and you are one half of the interaction. Svadhyaya – ask yourself - where am I when I touch? Where am I touching from? What is my posture and body language conveying to the student? Am I grounded? Is my breathing relaxed? Is the interaction about me showing my knowledge, or about the student developing their practice? Am I indicating where I would like the student to be, rather than where they are ready to go? Am I listening and attentive? How am I emotionally?

## Clear intention

Even if you're not trained in a touch therapy, it can still feel affirming to receive a friendly and supportive touch from a yoga teacher. But if the intention of the touch is unclear it can be unsettling for the person who is receiving, even if they are seemingly smiling and being polite. If

you are a little bit unsure and being a bit hesitant, it will tend to make the receiver tense, because they will sense immediately that your intention is unclear. If this is the case, the student will probably go into a mild stress response, rather than a relaxation response. If you notice this, the best things to do is to withdraw your hands immediately and use simple verbal instruction and positive body language (eg. a smile or gesture) instead.

When you do touch a student, it's important to be very clear what your intention is as that will come across. If you don't have a clear intention, it's best not to touch. Be confident about the intention that you have. Prodding and poking around or 'stroking' doesn't feel good or helpful. A direct hand in a purposeful way in a particular place can be very helpful.

## Possible hands-on adjustments

Following are a few possible adjustments that we will explore at the workshop, looking at intention and what is being conveyed, intentionally or unintentionally.

- Virabhadrasana 2 – using an indirect touch to correct knee alignment. Words may not help if it is a habitual stance. An indirect touch makes the student find her/his own movement and introduces muscle memory.
- Bhujangasana – holding feet (indirect adjustment). Helping the student find more length and lift in an indirect way.
- Vrksasana and trikonasana – finding the right hand-on support for differing needs of individual students.
- Cat – touch where you need to release – simply bringing awareness to a point on the body can be powerful.
- Sukhasana – direct adjustment applied sensitively will help some experience an unfamiliar upright position.
- Child pose – using pressure on a supported sacrum to help release.
- Down face dog – direct adjustment (gentle pulling or pushing) – to give a sense of direction rather than alter the posture – and help with grounding.
- Virabhadrasana 1 and 3 – light touch, taking care not to provide support to the student, but helping them to find their own orientation in space and with gravity.