

YOGA

Teaching Handbook

A Practical Guide for
Yoga Teachers and Trainees



EDITED BY SIAN O'NEILL

'This book sets the student right at its heart; it's about the learner, not the tutor. It enthuses on art, creating, balancing, simplicity and guiding with the learner at its centre...this is a book that will grace any yoga tutor's library.'

– Bob Insley, yoga traveller,
teacher and trainer

This trusted companion offers help and guidance on the day-to-day practicalities of teaching yoga and running a yoga business.

Featuring insights from renowned yoga professionals, including Liz Lark, Lizzie Lasater, Andrew McGonigle, Katy Appleton, Tarik Dervish and more, this book offers practical ways to hone teaching skills.

Featured topics include working with common injuries and conditions, the breath, sequencing, incorporating philosophy and myth into class, and the links between yoga, Qigong and Ayurveda. It also provides key information on how to get the most out of a yoga business, with advice on setting up and running a studio, and planning and leading retreats.

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SIAN O'NEILL is a British Wheel of Yoga (BWY)-accredited yoga teacher. Her classes incorporate alignment, a mindful flow and breath awareness.

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Yoga Teaching Handbook

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*Yoga
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Teachers and Trainees

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Introduction

Sian O'Neill

The idea for this book came when I was sitting in a café with a blank piece of paper, a coffee and a pen. I was experimenting with disconnecting from the internet and social media; phone to one side. I realised that what I would find really useful is a practical book on teaching yoga including tips and lessons learned from experienced teachers. Yoga teachers generally like yoga books. There are not many texts, however, on the practicalities of running your yoga business, large or small. This book is an attempt to meet that need. We have been fortunate enough to assemble a panel of some of the world's best-known and loved teachers. Every one of our contributors is a highly experienced yoga teacher and I am so grateful to them for sharing their knowledge and experience.

Yoga is more popular than ever with many also choosing the path of teaching yoga. It is a privilege to teach yoga, but as anyone who is already teaching or contemplating teaching yoga knows, it also comes with its own set of challenges and responsibilities. How do you come up with new and creative sequences each week? How do you safely incorporate students with injuries without overstepping boundaries? And for those of you thinking of expanding your yoga business to run retreats, how do you plan a safe and enjoyable retreat, from which students return refreshed, without burning out yourself? Our contributors address these and many other issues – I hope you take away some practical gems.

I write this having recently returned from the British Wheel of Yoga Annual Congress, the theme for which this year was ‘transformation’. The congress caused me to reflect on how yoga has changed me – from that first blissful feeling in *Savasana* to the recognition that yoga has changed both me and my relationship with the world. It is this, I think, that is so powerful about teaching yoga: the potential to affect people’s lives so positively. Perhaps it is the under-confident student who is helped through yoga, someone going through a period of intense change or the student managing to carve out that precious hour or so of yoga amidst a super-hectic schedule. We know that everyone who turns up in class has prioritised yoga over all the other possible options in a commitment to their wellbeing. Yoga offers this amazing toolkit to help us and our students through the vagaries of life with all of its ups and downs.

Rather than attempting to summarise the chapters that follow, I shall let the contributions speak for themselves. If there is one theme, though, that is repeated in different chapters and in conversations with contributing teachers, it is around intention and knowing why you are teaching yoga. What is it that has led you to want to teach? And what is it that you want to offer students? Each of us will have a different answer to these questions, which will inform how we shape our yoga teaching path.

I know that I have learned a great deal in putting this book together. I hope you also find something similarly useful inside to support your own yoga teaching career. Happy reading!



I would like to thank all of our contributors for their time, commitment and thoughtful chapters. Special thanks are also owed to Sarah Hamlin at Jessica Kingsley Publishers for her professionalism, support and thoughtful input, to Victoria Peters and Sophie Raoufi, and also to Jessica Kingsley herself for believing in and supporting the idea from the start. Last and not least, thank you to Alex.

Please do get in touch with any comments or feedback – I would love to hear from you (you can reach me on sianoneill@yahoo.co.uk).

A note on transliteration

In transliterating Sanskrit words into Western script, we have followed the convention of the International Alphabet of Sanskrit Transliteration (IAST) (except for words – such as ‘vinyasa’ – that have found their way into the Oxford English Dictionary, where we have used the common English form without diacritical markings). There are numerous guides to the correct pronunciation of transliterated Sanskrit words available online. Sanskrit nouns have been rendered in their base form without declension, irrespective of their function in the sentence. Accordingly, although the plural of Sanskrit nouns is not technically formed with the suffix ‘-s’, we have followed the widespread practice in English language texts of showing plurals by the addition of ‘-s’, to the base form of the noun.

Influence and Evolution

Lizzie Lasater

*The ethics of teaching yoga amidst the shifting
mediums of our profession.*

In the last hundred years, the profession of *yoga teacher* has undergone substantial transnational and cultural transformations. In this relatively short span of time, I can trace my lineage and my influence from one-on-one mentorship in India with Krishnamacharya, to co-ed group classes with BKS Iyengar, to mixed-style commercial studios like YogaWorks in Los Angeles, to digital learning platforms like YogaGlo.

To borrow conceptually from the modernist philosopher, Marshall McLuhan, this transformation indicates a shift in the *medium* of transmission.¹ Doesn't it therefore follow that the *message* itself has also changed? In other words, as we teach yoga differently, does *what* we teach also change? When I think about practicing and teaching yoga as a woman in the West, conflicts and questions arise about authenticity, ownership, orientalism, and ethics.

If we acknowledge that an evolution in both medium and message is underway, my question becomes: what does it mean to be a professional yoga teacher today? How can we best support our students to find silence in the midst of our cacophonous 21st century? How do we make space for the unseen inner work of yoga in a culture ever more mesmerized by materiality and consumerism? And how can we personally integrate a profession about slowing down into our accelerating lives?

In short, how can we honor the wisdom of the past while unabashedly living in the evolving present? An alternative title of this chapter might have been: ‘Can we teach *samādhi* on social media?’

My answer is to create an intention. I hope that our professional conduct can, in and of itself, facilitate a deepening of our personal yoga practice. The dream is to establish a dynamic of integration so that it becomes possible for our work to feed our practice and our practice to feed our work, thus ultimately enhancing our lives.

What follows is my personal manifesto: eight points on the ethics of teaching amidst the shifting mediums of our profession.

At the end of each class, my mom, Judith Hanson Lasater, says, ‘May we live like the lotus, at home in the muddy water.’ I’ve adopted this saying when I teach as well – partially as an homage to my lineage, but also because I like its honesty. I like the open acknowledgement that our life and our practice are muddy, but this bittersweetness is precisely what makes them rich.

My practice is at the heart of my teaching

When we moved into our current apartment, it was partially furnished with many attractive, mid-century modern pieces. My architect husband wanted to keep them all. But I insisted on moving half of the furniture out to make space for yoga. That’s exactly what I kept saying: ‘I need empty space to practice yoga.’

This physical space is a symbol for the mental, emotional, and psychological space that yoga practice both requires and creates. I sometimes think of my home practice as a controlled environment to experience emptiness. It is a way that I have found to step into the unknown each day – by creating a fence around an open field.

My practice is a unique time in my day when I don’t need to accomplish or produce anything. I’m not busy distracting myself by texting or talking or eating or cleaning. Instead, I can drop all of the roles I usually play: wife, daughter, sister, friend, business partner,

colleague, neighbour, citizen. For these few minutes, I don't need to be anything to anybody. I am simply in relationship with my Self.

In this way, my mat is a private laboratory for experimentation. Donna Farhi summarises this idea by saying: 'Yoga is a pragmatic science where everything is tested and verified through direct experience.'² It is precisely this *direct experience* that I want to inform my teaching. In my view, teaching yoga is 80 percent practice and 20 percent technique.

To teach from your own experience takes courage. It's a form of honesty to offer your students an idea or movement or sequence that you didn't receive from your teachers but instead developed in the laboratory of your own practice. But that's where it gets interesting. That's where it becomes juicy and wild and unknown. That's exactly where I want to live.

Becoming a mirror

We have the great fortune of teaching a subject that can have a profound impact on our students' lives. Encountering this ourselves is often what drew us more deeply into yoga in the first place. But it's important to remember that the yoga itself is the magic, not me as the teacher.

When I go home after teaching a workshop I sometimes receive emails from students expressing gratitude. They can contain touching accounts of a healing shift that the student experienced in my class. While these notes can be flattering, they are also tricky because they often give *me* credit for creating the positive experience.

Mom likes to say that the primary job of a yoga teacher is to 'mirror back the inherent wisdom and inner goodness of each student.'³ I like this image because it reminds me that I am not creating anything. Instead, my job is to help my students to find what is already there.

The image of a mirror also implies that on some level, my work is to disappear. This isn't meant to be self-effacing. But if I want my students to become independent, to be able to build their own self-sustaining practice, then I must help them to see that the deep inner work of

yoga has very little to do with the teacher. I want them to see that they themselves are capable of creating the healing magic of yoga.

The more I learn, the more I can teach

I sometimes think of myself as a professional yoga student. After all, when I attend a workshop or take a class or roll out my mat at home, I'm also working to become a better teacher. I like to remind myself that the more deeply I dive into my own practice, the more I have to offer my students. The more I learn, the more I can teach.

I was 22 years old when I completed a 200-hour yoga teacher training program and began teaching classes at YogaWorks in Los Angeles. When I think back to those early years, I sometimes cringe. My style was earnest but so inexperienced. But what I lacked in originality, I made up for in strenuousness. Once, after telling my mom about a sequence I'd just taught, she said with a laugh: 'Well, at least your students are young; you probably didn't kill them.'

This story illustrates a little discussed dynamic in our field. Completing a 200-hour teacher training program does not *make* you a yoga teacher. It is little more than an invitation to *begin to learn* how to teach yoga. It is an early step in a lifelong journey.

Cultivating curiosity and humility are core values that can enrich my teaching and my life. They help me remember to continually see myself as a *student* of yoga, no matter how many years I teach. I actively look for learning opportunities off the yoga mat that put me in touch with the sensations of being a raw beginner. In recent years I've focused on learning German and how to ski, for example. These experiences help me grow empathy for my beginning students.

Function follows form

Injuries are a dark side of our profession. I feel ashamed every time I hear another story of a student who has been hurt during a yoga class. In my analysis, the damage is often caused by misguided