



# Making the Grade

## Become an A+ yoga student by copping a humble attitude and minding your manners.

By Tim Noworyta

Whether you're a total beginner or an advanced practitioner, a healthy respect for your instructor and fellow practitioner is necessary to truly practice mindful yoga. So as you're unrolling your sticky mat and getting ready for class, remember to focus on your attitude, attention, and application.

### Cop the Right Attitude

Perhaps the most important factor in your study of yoga is not your physical alignment but your mental alignment—your attitude. If you're not clear about why you're going to class, you're probably not going to get the most out of it. That's why it's a good idea to take a moment before class to close your eyes, focus inward, and remind yourself why you're there.

A well-aligned yogic attitude requires a good degree of acceptance and humility—traits that can be difficult to cultivate in a social setting like a class. It's easy to be hard on yourself when you're the only one who can't do a pose, or the one needing the most props to do it. And it's easy to feel superior when you're deeper into a pose than anyone else, or you know a "better" way to get into it than the teacher is suggesting.

The trick is to be nonjudgmental about yourself or others and to cultivate one of the best study habits you can possibly acquire: a beginner's mind. This means entering every pose as if it were for the first time, exploring a new way to stand, breathe, and move your body. Copping a beginner's attitude is a wonderful way to connect with an asana and keep your yoga fresh and exciting, no matter how many times you do the same pose.

### Hello? Is Anyone There?

What you get from a yoga class is what you give to it. And if you give it your full attention, you'll get a lot out of it, regardless of the teacher, the place, or the other students.

Of course, staying attentive is not easy. Even under the best of circumstances, there are so many internal and external distractions that it can be hard to stay focused on your practice. Attentiveness, however, is what your whole yoga practice is really about. Become more fully aware by paying attention to the present moment.

### Teacher's Pet

In class, this means paying attention to both the teacher's instructions and to what happens when you

follow them. It means noticing how you're aligned, where you're tight, how you're breathing, where the energy is. Most important, it means not comparing yourself to other students or to some idea of how deep you should be in a pose. A yoga class is a learning experience, not an athletic competition or a beauty contest. There are no grades, no prizes for best pose or most flexible. There's only practice.

I often remind my students that it's not where you are in a pose that's important, but how aware you are in a pose. By focusing your attention on sensation, alignment, and movement, you begin to unite mind, body, and breath to become the pose. This requires a willingness to accept your limitations as the basis of your practice.

By acknowledging your limitations and working with them, you learn how to move yourself a little closer to greater openness, purer lines of energy, and deeper stillness. That's yoga.

### **Use What You Learn**

Smart yoga students pay attention to the teacher and to themselves and apply what they learn to their practice. This means heeding the teacher's instructions or adjustments and seeing how they affect your pose and your awareness of it. Then, if the instruction or adjustment seems to work or make sense, try to make it part of the way you do the pose.

For example, an instruction that continues to work for me is one I remember getting from Patrina Dobish, an Iyengar teacher in Chicago. The instruction is simple: When you're in Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend), roll the bottom part of the buttocks up. Wow. Not a big movement, but one that really deepens the stretch. I do it all the time now as a way to get more connected to the pose.

Application is often easier if you mentally go over or even write down an instruction that you found particularly helpful. Then follow it when you do your own practice, or when you're back in class. This helps to internalize the instruction and make it part of your pose. Notes also help you recall an instruction you may have forgotten, or to compare instructions from different teachers and see how they can all help you experience a pose more deeply.

Each perspective reveals some new facet, some feature you might not have seen on your own. That's why going to classes with the right attitude, focused attention, and thoughtful application can increase your understanding, enrich your practice, and make it more enjoyable. That's mindful yoga.

Tim Noworyta has been studying yoga for 15 years and, of course, has never been late, talked loudly with friends, overworked a pose, or eaten right before class. He teaches yoga in Chicago at the Body Mind Connection, Galter Life Center, and Narayanananda Universal Yoga Center.

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