

A vinyasa krama approach to teaching asana utilizes several different tools:



1) Good preparation for asana is necessary so as students move through the class the body is getting ready for more challenging asana later in the class. For instance if the peak posture requires an external rotation of the shoulders then earlier in the class we will teach some warming exercises for the shoulder joint which include lateral rotation plus one or two simpler asana where lateral rotation of the arms at the shoulders can be practiced.

2) Good preparation of knowledge where important teaching points are given earlier in the class so we can build on them through the class. So for instance if the peak posture requires an anterior tilt of the pelvis we can teach this movement earlier in the class perhaps teaching it in the cat posture, majrasana, or if the peak posture is a balance we can teach where the weight needs to be balanced within the foot in a simple version of tadasana the mountain pose.

3) Modifications of asana so students can adopt a modified version of asana when the stronger version of the asana is either simply too intense or contains an element which is contraindicated due to a health problem or existing condition. For instance a student with sciatica should not work into a seated forward bend with both legs straight because this will only aggravate the sciatic nerve as it is lengthened in the stretch meaning we will have to modify the forward bend by bending the knees to release pressure from the sciatic nerve. A definition of a modification is a pose possessing the essence of a particular asana but which has been consciously altered in one or more small ways in order to allow an individual to adopt and engage with that specific asana.

4) Staging of practices is a very useful tool for mixed ability classes, and it can certainly be argued that most if not all classes are mixed ability to varying degrees. Here we teach a simplified version or foundational version of an asana to the whole class and then those who can move onto the next more challenging version can do so whilst those who must remain with the first version can do this. This has two great benefits. The first of which is that the simpler versions are great preparation for later more complex versions, both physically, and by highlighting important teaching points, and the second of which is that students with less experience, who are less flexible or strong or have health conditions can simply stay at their correct level. An example is where we might teach utkatasana, the squat, by lifting arms to shoulder level, highlighting how the knees must not go forwards of the toes and the legs must remain aligned, then in the second following version we can ask that those for whom this was enough stay here and others can raise arms vertically, and for the final time as before students can stay at either of the previous stages or sit much lower bringing greater intensity to the asana. Our challenge is to teach our students to be aware of the signs of working at the correct level of intensity and educate them as to what is most helpful when a health condition is present.

4) Alternatives for asana so when a student simply cannot perform an asana another asana can be taught instead. An example might be a pregnant lady who cannot lie on her stomach and should not perform backbends and so cannot perform bhujangasana (cobra). In this situation another asana should be taught instead. The alternative pose needs to be something that is helpful for that specific individual or a pose giving the benefits similar to the pose being practiced by the rest of the group. When we teach an alternative it is always best to ensure that individual does not feel uncomfortable by being singled out so as far as possible ensure they are not having to stand whilst others are lying down or are seated on the floor whilst others are standing.

5) Counterposes known as pratikriyasana are to be included where after practicing an asana excessive pressure has potentially been exerted upon a particular location within the body another asana is used to return the body to balance. For example after practicing ustrasana (camel), a strong back bend, we may choose to teach a soft forward bend as a counterpose.

Counterposes are usually:

- Less complex
- Less strenuous
- Working the body in an opposite way

We may wish students to feel the effects of a strong pose before moving into a counterpose so there may be a short period of stillness for inner reflection before moving on to the counterpose or we may decide to move directly into the counterpose. We must also gauge the necessary time to be spent in a counterpose as the length of time spent in a counterpose will make a great difference to the effect it will have upon the body and mind. We can best know this through our own familiarity with an asana!

For more advanced students the counterposes may be 'strong' asanas but even then at some point we will want to release effort and 'cool down' before any quieter work in the later stages of the class.

Note if the counterpose is placed earlier in the class maybe a counterpose can also act as a preparatory pose or carrier of a teaching point. Also there may be several counterposes bringing us back to balance.

Remember we want to leave the body and mind feeling balanced, relaxed and full of energy, ready for anything and the use of counterpose helps us to achieve this.

6) Developments of asana where we can teach a slightly more intense version of an asana to enable some students to work at a new level of intensity to keep their body working to a new edge.

7) Variations of asana where we can teach an asana in a slightly different way to maintain interest within a group by working the body into a slightly different physical and energetic matrix.

8) Short term and long term planning where we plan for development within one class but also plan for development over the weeks. This means students will also be progressing in their asana practice.

These different elements have been applied to asana but note we can also apply them to other yoga techniques such as pranayama and meditation where again we can use modifications or alternatives and there is development over the weeks.