Often we can find ourselves having to teach a very mixed ability group, for instance we may find there are students who:

* Have a specific disease or condition e.g. hypertension, osteoporosis, diabetes...
* Are experiencing a condition for a while e.g. pregnancy, hamstring pull….
* Are generally inflexible or weak
* Are just beginning their practice of yoga
* Are more experienced having attended regular classes for some years

One of the great strengths of the Wheel is it recognizes that ideally all students must fully participate in the class to their own level of ability; this is also one of the reasons it makes our teaching very challenging sometimes!!

We must therefore find some strategies to help us fully engage and inspire all of our students.

Staging asana is a great tool for us when teaching our classes ~ here we teach a series of poses, gradually increasing the intensity, at first teaching softer, modified poses, leading to the main pose, perhaps going on to develop the pose.

In this way students can stay at the correct level of intensity.

Simple example: Stages to palm tree

1. mula bandha introduced
2. arms to sides of body as sidebend
3. one arm lift and lower as sidebend
4. as stay with one arm raised, lifting up second arm and lower /stay with both arms raised as sidebend

Benefits:

* + This approach means those who are inflexible, weak, pregnant, have hypertension, low back troubles, are less experienced and so forth can all be catered for!
  + There is less time devoted to demonstrating all possibilities so the class can flow better
  + We can offer teaching points bit by bit setting up for more intense versions
  + We are providing good specific short term preparation for the body
  + We can include developments for those who can work with them
  + There is opportunity for student self-reflection

To work in this way we need to determine:

* How we can offer the essence of the pose in a simpler way
* If the modifications make the asana possible for those who cannot perform the full practice
* If there are simpler modified versions which can relay an important teaching point
* How we can take the asana a stage further if necessary

Then at each stage as always we must give:

* Points on how to align the body properly with mechanical integrity
* Pointers on where we should not be experiencing a pose i.e. safeguarding vulnerable areas
* Pointers on where we may be experiencing the pose
* Ways of making small adjustments to work within the pose

Possible staging might be:

For example for Utkatasana (squat pose):

1. Tadasana: foot positioning (pada bandha)
2. Arm chair squat – arms to shoulder height i) dynamic (good for all)
3. Arm chair squat – arms to shoulder height i) static (HBP, Heart conditions, Older diabetes, elderly, pregnancy, shoulder injury etc. stay here)
4. Intense squat – arms fully flexed - static
5. Intense squat – arms fully flexed, hips and knees more fully flexed - static

For example for Parsvakonasana (Lateral Angle Pose)

1. Front forearm to front thigh, top hand to top hip – stay here aligning front thigh as open chest (good for all - HBP, Heart conditions, Older diabetes, shoulder injury etc. stay here)
2. Front forearm to front thigh, top arm over ear - stay here aligning front thigh as align top hand to back heel (elderly, pregnancy, general weakness and inflexibility stay here)
3. Lower hand to floor or block, top arm over ear – Stay stay here aligning front thigh as align top hand to back heel (may wish to stay here)
4. Loop top hand under front thigh, holding hands or lift both arms into flexion (if want a development)

There are always different combinations of staging we can use but once students have decided upon which level of intensity is best for them then they will always be able to adopt this whenever the pose is being taught at a later time.

We can offer these stages over the weeks and/or within one lesson and this method can be applied to all asana.

Our main job is provide staging when needed but also to help our students to choose the correct level of intensiy…..

‘The stumbling block’: engendering right attitude regarding asana

If we can instill right attitude in our students then they will be able to make appropriate choices in their practices. Often we may hear ourselves presenting this in terms of ahimsa and whilst this can be useful we need to ask ourselves what this really means. How can we in practice help our students make good choices for themselves in their asana practice?

* We can highlight that growth in yoga is the growth of self awareness or attention, asana forming the basis of training the mind where we are ultimately helping to free up energy and create a steady mind, meaning we are saying that development in asana is not simply the ability to move into ever more challenging postures – and if we work too intensively we will close down the body and mind, reduce the free flow of energy, strain the nervous system

and potentially injure ourselves.

* We can offer feedback methods to enable students to monitor their own effort and intensity such as asking students to:
  + Listen to their breath ensuring it remains smooth and even at all times
  + Use Ujjayi since it directly helps to monitor the depth and smoothness of the breath
  + Feel inside the body noting whether it remains open or it is closing down becoming compressed particularly at the joints
  + Experience the lines of effort with just the right intensity

If we can encourage such self-awareness then we will be setting our students free. It may however require us to also offer individual guidance as we progress; sometimes we will need to ask a student where they are primarily experiencing the movement, drawing them back to an earlier stage if necessary or gently placing a hand to guide them into experiencing the right line of effort.

At first it takes a little while to determine how to stage asana and then quickly much of this begins to be intuitive; we can also use this approach to choose possible alternatives and variations.

# Choosing valuable alternatives and variations

For our purposes an **alternative** is choosing another asana to provide the same primary benefits as a posture which is contraindicated or perhaps to give alternative benefits suitable for that student. This is especially useful when practicing asanas in a class situation.

For example there will be times when a student still cannot practice the modified poses such as offering shalabasana (locust) or bhujangasana (cobra) for dhanurasana (bow) when a student cannot lie prone so we might have to offer a seated backend or for ustrasana (camel) when a student cannot place pressure upon the knees we might have to offer a seated or standing backbend.

We must offer alternatives when an asana is not possible as students cannot be asked simply to wait. Students will quickly learn when others do a certain asana they will adopt their alternative.

A **variation** is another possible version of the same asana or a slightly developed version. It is often interesting to try different variations and we may find that another variation is perhaps a simpler version and can be used to prepare us for the stronger version or be more challenging as we need to increase the intensity; we may just enjoy the fact that each variation will work us slightly differently with the exploration of a new version helping us to refocus our minds.

**Summary**

We can lead our groups successfully through their practice whilst maintaining a good flow by consciously leading up to a main asana using stages, with students staying at the correct level for them. We can then offer developments for those who require this with the remainder of the class staying with the main pose.

At each level we must guide our students by asking them to refer inwardly and notice what is happening for them, posing questions to ask themselves, places of which to become aware etc.

Your own personal experience of asana and your studies will help you determine how each asana can be experienced, helping you give the right teaching points. You can pick up new ways of modifying postures, new variations and so forth and be creative exploring possibilities on your own mat!

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