

BASIC ART *of* ADJUSTMENTS



A BEGINNING GUIDE *to* MEANINGFUL &
SAFE ADJUSTMENTS *in* YOGA

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Basic Art of Adjustments

A Beginning Guide to Meaningful Adjustments in Yoga



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The Importance of Touch

Connect with Students

The Power of Connection

We are not a touch culture. When we greet someone we nod and smile or, at our most affectionate, shake hands. And that's the extent of physical contact we tend to get from the outside world. How many people do you really get to hug on a daily basis? How often are you touched with intention and caring? Genuine intimacy is a rare gem these days.

Let me share a story:

I had a student who came to a Monday night class of mine every week for years. One day she stayed after class and asked if she could talk with me. In this quiet moment she finally revealed why she attended my class so often. I was the only person who touched her, sometimes for weeks on end.

I was stunned. I had never even considered this possibility. But then I really looked at her. I saw a forty-year-old woman who – while vibrant and busy and with a thriving career – was also single with no pets or children and little time for socializing. Her family lived a thousand miles away and even when she got together with friends, a cursory hug was not enough to satisfy her need for human contact.

And we need human contact.

Touching others is an essential part of our health and well-being, and save for those with severe personality disorders, every person on this planet must connect. Without it, we suffer greatly, and studies have shown that a lack of human contact can result in a host of physical and mental issues. But where can we find this connection?

American culture is somewhat touch-phobic. Sure, if you have a loving partner you may share physical intimacy... but also, maybe not. And for those who are single, where can their weary hearts find such affection? In South America, a big kiss and a hug are waiting for you, no matter who you meet. In China, women and men regularly walk down the street holding hands in friendship. It all serves an incredibly important purpose – to show we are not alone.



Give the Gift of Hands-On Adjustments

Enter yoga adjustments. Adjustments are a form of physical contact that allow student and teacher to create a relationship of touch that is safe and nurturing. Romantic emotions do not enter into this. Rather, this is a safe, trusting connection that provides the support system for a student to practice surrender and move beyond the boundaries of what they thought they could do on their own.

Adjustments do not disempower the student. Through hands-on adjustments we can show students what is possible, and once we've shown them, they then have the tools to return to this new place on their own. Ultimately, our adjustments are not meant to hinder the student, or keep them coming back for the same help over and over, but to facilitate independence and the evolution of their practice. By giving students the support and trust they need to be able to move past their current boundaries, we open up new worlds of possibility for them.

This can be as simple as breathing calmly with them during an intense pose, or by physically supporting and guiding them through a moment of fear. However, turning a student inside out and upside down in a Wheel Pose, for example, can only happen when the student has full faith and trust in us as a teacher. We must do our part through diligent study of adjustments to warrant and earn that trust. Only then do we have the opportunity to lead students to places they may otherwise never venture without the support of another human being.

Address YOUR Doubts

These days, adjusting students can seem like scary business. For many reasons – from lack of confidence to fear of injury or lawsuit – teachers sometimes shy away from giving adjustments altogether. While verbal adjustments and even light adjustments have their place in a successful yoga class, any student who has had a transformational adjustment knows how important it is for this technique to be a part of a teacher's skill set.

Just as a picture can take the place of a thousand words, a confident adjustment can sometimes unlock a pose far more effectively than verbal cues. By reaching outside our own comfort zone as teachers and becoming adept at adjustments, we have the opportunity to deepen our students' experience of yoga physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Hands-on adjustments provide connection: between the teacher and student, between the students and their poses, and between the student, the teacher and what is possible.

Clarifying Your Intention

Maintaining Appropriate Boundaries

Everything we think can be transmitted and felt through touch. Thus as we place our hands on students, our intention and focus are critical factors in delivering an excellent adjustment. The power of an adjustment stems not just from the physical movement, but also from our ability to connect deeply with our students and offer them what they need most.

Just as you might set an intention for a yoga practice, so we also set an intention when giving hands-on adjustments. Before we place our hands on any students, we must be sure our intention is only to serve their “highest good.” We can interpret the meaning of that phrase any way we like as long as our focus is on what is best for the student.

Sometimes we harbor judgments about students. We may know this person outside of class, or we may think the student is cute or creepy, or we may have heard a rumor about this person. If we think the student is cute, they feel that in our touch, which might cross boundaries and elicit potentially inappropriate feelings from the student. If we think the student is creepy, the student senses that, too, and might feel hurt and judged. Many people attend yoga class to be free of any kind of expectations or judgments and if we muddy the waters with an unclear touch, we might break the student’s faith in the yogic process.

When in Doubt: Don’t touch

As teachers (and humans), we are not perfect. Judgments creep in. This is an opportunity for us to notice where we are having difficulty shedding our judgments and do some of our own inner work on these feelings. In the meantime, we wait until we can clear our minds before touching these students. Once the mind is clear and we are ready to serve, then the adjustments we give will be all the more powerful.

Remember, the correct intention is simply to serve the highest good. There is no specific desire or wish for what that means. If we approach the student thinking he or she should do this or that (she should be able to bind here, he should not go up into handstand) then we are also on dangerous ground.

In general, it's a good idea to remove "should" and "shouldn't" from the yoga room lexicon. We want to free students from the boundaries and limitations these words create. And students are often capable of so much more than both we and they initially think, which leaves room for exciting possibilities.



In the quest to serve the student's highest good in the yoga class, this does not always mean bringing the student more deeply into a pose or pushing them beyond their current state, but simply looking for ways to create more freedom and relieve tension. Sometimes this can manifest in making a posture more easeful or modified for the student so they feel a freer expression of the pose. It can be in supportive

ways like giving a student a block or a strap. Or, it can be to bring students beyond what they thought was possible and help them realize their full potential.

When we, as teachers, are unfettered by expectations or judgments, then our students are free to be whatever their hearts most desire. And, best of all, we become receptive to that.

Not All Adjustments Are Equal

Good Adjustments Serve the Mechanics & Alignment of the Body

As you learn adjustments, it's important to understand that some adjustments are more effective than others. Every adjustment is not a good adjustment, and so you are allowed to be cautious and discerning when choosing which adjustments make in the studio.

As a practitioner you've likely had a stellar adjustment that changed your life or the life of your practice and you've also likely experienced adjustments that have turned you off physically or emotionally. Adjustments can make or break a student's experience, so you must exercise extra care in your delivery and technique.

The Fundamentals of a Good Adjustment

A good adjustment starts with an understanding of the fundamentals of a pose and then serves to further these fundamentals. This means:

1. The adjustment serves the mechanics of the pose

In every pose the body channels dynamic forces that help sustain what appears to be a static shape. For example, in order to execute strong standing postures, it is helpful to draw energy up the standing leg to support the pose. Thus we can think of the “mechanics of the pose” as the tension of opposites (also known as tensegrity) within the body that help to support the structure of each shape. The job of an adjustment is to assist and enhance these natural mechanics rather than work against them. This includes the pose itself as well as how students enter and exit the pose and move through vinyasa sequences.

2. The adjustment serves the alignment of the pose

Simply giving verbal cues on alignment often doesn't inform the student's body and actions as well as an adjustment can. When we physically show students

how to do a posture properly in a way that is safe and effective, they gain an internal imprint of the alignment of the posture, and can more readily replicate it in the future. The benefits of proper alignment are not just safety, but also to fine tune proprioceptive awareness in students and help them access subtler nuances of alignment as they move more deeply into the postures.

3. The adjustment serves the anatomy of the body

The body's anatomy is largely fixed, and when we have a good grasp of how the joints, muscles and structures move and support one another, we can better understand how to adjust bodies in a way that compliments the body's natural structures and places no undue force on joints or tissues.

4. The adjustment serves the highest mental and emotional well-being of the student

Not everyone is ready or interested in being touched physically. That's okay! Many students have various reasons for not wanting to be touched, and space must be given to still engage the student in a way that is not physical. There are many ways to connect to students: through the breath, with a smile, by pointing to the mat to show them where to go, or even by demonstrating on your own body the adjustment that would create freedom in theirs. Be open to all the ways to connect with students.

Ideally we strive to make every adjustment fit these basic parameters, helping to ensure safety and a good experience for every student we interact with. Our common sense, knowledge of anatomy and even personal experience will help us determine which adjustments to add to our repertoire. As we hone our adjustment techniques and develop a variety of adjustments for our teaching tool kit, we must keep in mind the importance of always being ready to learn new ideas, shelve old ideas that no longer work, and maintain one of the yogi's best qualities – flexibility.

Clarifying Your Intention

Maintaining Appropriate Boundaries

This basic book teaches you the fundamentals of adjustment techniques. Given, however, that there are rumored to be 840,000 yoga postures (according to the Hatha Yoga Pradipika), this book does not show you every adjustment for every pose. Rather, I give you the tools, competence and confidence to extrapolate what you learn about basic postures and their adjustments to postures that have similar mechanics and alignment.

For a thorough understanding of adjustments, a comprehensive teacher training program is the best course of learning. The Kaivalya Yoga Method Online Teacher Training with YogaDownload.com contains a full module with video instruction, testing, and mentor feedback on this topic and can be found [here](#).

The Learning and Testing Process

When first learning any adjustment, there are a few rules to follow to make sure you maintain the integrity of your adjustment practice and the student/teacher relationship. Here are the guidelines to follow:

First, find someone (ideally an experienced teacher) who can do the adjustment on you. This will allow you to feel in your own body if the adjustment indeed serves the mechanics, anatomy and alignment of the pose. Be discerning! Direct experience always informs you more accurately and powerfully than mere suggestion or second-hand learning.

Second, practice on willing people who are not your students. For example, practice on a friend, partner or fellow yoga teacher – someone who is not afraid to tell you what you might do differently, such as hand placement or pressure. Students never give you the concise and honest feedback you need, nor is it their job to do this. Your students come to your classes having every confidence in you

and your knowledge. You must ensure you rise to their expectations by becoming experts at the elements you bring to class, whether it be dharma talks, alignment, clever playlists, or adjustments. Students see us as the guides, and just as a professor wouldn't ask his students whether he is teaching them calculus accurately, as a yoga teacher, you are there to impart the knowledge you've gathered to your students compassionately and confidently.

When you feel 100% confident with a particular adjustment, it is then appropriate to bring it into the studio. This complete level of confidence is important because students feel it subconsciously, and your confidence will allow them to be more receptive to the adjustment given. If for any reason and at any point you are not 100% confident, move on and either adjust a different student or go back to steps one and two. Students are best served by confident adjustments.

Thinking Outside the Box

As you learn the fundamentals of adjusting, you can begin to extrapolate your knowledge to different poses and new situations. Many poses look similar, with similar body alignment and mechanics. Many poses have pieces and parts that we can find in others. We can take what we know about how to adjust certain elements of the postures (alignment, mechanics, anatomy) and apply these elements to poses with related shapes.

Here are three examples of this “inter-applicability” of adjustments:

Tadasana

There are a couple of adjustments that are excellent for tadasana that are highly applicable in a multitude of situations.

Faucet-Shoulders: This adjustment broadens the front of the chest and sets the shoulders into good alignment. This adjustment can literally be done in almost

every posture where this would be helpful. For example, in cobra pose and in warrior 2.

To do this adjustment, place the hands on the top outer edge of the shoulders. The thumbs are placed on the shoulder blade, and the fingers wrap over the top of the shoulders. Just as you turn on a faucet, press the thumbs in and forward, and pull the fingers out and back. Perform this “faucet” turning at the same time to ensure equal and opposite force is placed on the shoulder to open and broaden the chest.

Head Lift: This adjustment aligns and creates length in the spine. It is fantastic for many standing balance poses including tree and utthitha padanghusthasana.

To do this adjustment, place the thumbs gently beneath the occipital ridge of the head. This is just below the skull on either side of the spine. Place the fingertips of the first two fingers just behind the temples near the hairline. With gentle, even pressure, simply lift straight up. This creates an awareness to lengthen the spine, and helps with balance and posture.

External Rotation / Upward-Reaching Arms

Any time the arms reach up, they are externally rotated and can always be adjusted in the same general way, even when the body is turned upside down! We adjust the upper arms in the same way whether a person is in downward facing dog or in urdhva hastasana.

To do this adjustment, place the hands on the upper arm with the thumbs toward the inner arm, and the fingers wrapping around the outer arm. Gently and firmly rotate the upper arm toward the fingers (external rotation). This helps the scapula to widen and allows the upper trapezius muscles to release.

Forward Folds

The mechanics and alignment of standing forward folds are generally the same across the board. Once we understand how to adjust uttanasana, for example, we

can do that same adjustment on a student in prasarita padottanasana (wide-legged forward fold).

To adjust uttanasana, place one flat adjusting hand on the sacrum, directly above the heels. Press straight down to ensure balance and stability. Place the other hand firmly on the back with the fingertips toward the head. Without sliding or moving the hand, press down and toward the legs to deepen the stretch. The pressure does not need to be great for the student to benefit from the adjustment. This adjustment helps to stabilize the student in the posture, and offer direction and insight into the experience of the posture.



Discovering Worthwhile Adjustments

When practicing with another teacher, they may do a new adjustment on a student next to you that looks intriguing. In this case, you have a stellar opportunity to learn something new for your repertoire! Everyone in yoga is always learning from one another – just make sure to follow the steps in learning and testing process to

ensure that any new adjustments you learn are learned properly and that you are fully prepared to perform these adjustments on your students.

And also remember, while this manual doesn't give you an adjustment for every single pose, it lays down some fundamental concepts. This is just the beginning of the journey in learning adjustments, and getting comfortable with a hands-on connection to students when it is appropriate. For now, practice the basic mindfulness described here and infuse it into your own practice, or as you teach.

Following the Breath

Breathing is the Best Adjustment

Breath is the foundation of our yoga asana practice. All our movements ride on inhales and exhales. Working with the breath during our adjustments not only conveys to the student that the breath is a primary focus of the asana, but it also gives us feedback as adjusters that the student feels free to breathe in the posture. When our hands are on students' bodies we are immediately receptive to the pace and flow of their breath, which in turn tells us if the student is following the pace and flow of the class.

Following the student's breath shows us where a student may be holding, forcing, or not applying themselves. We can feel if the student needs the reassuring touch that lets them rest, or an affirmative touch that propels them further into a posture. Either touch is appropriate as long as it serves the student's highest needs. Sometimes the best adjustment is one that simply addresses the breath itself. There is great power in placing a hand on a student's chest or back to ensure they are breathing steadily, allowing them to more freely experience the pose.

Since breath is the litmus test for the progress of each pose, if we pay attention to it during our adjustments, we can quickly determine the best course of action for the student: moving them further into the posture, or modifying the posture in some way. The breath pace is an indication not only of the student's physical abilities, but also of their state of mind. Every breath pattern has a corresponding mental attitude – a choppy breath can indicate frustration, a slow and even breath can tell us the student is calm – and when we pay attention to this, we can offer students not just a physical adjustment, but also an attitude adjustment!

One easy way to do this is to breathe with the student while adjusting them and allow the adjustment to vary a little with the breath. For example, on a forward fold

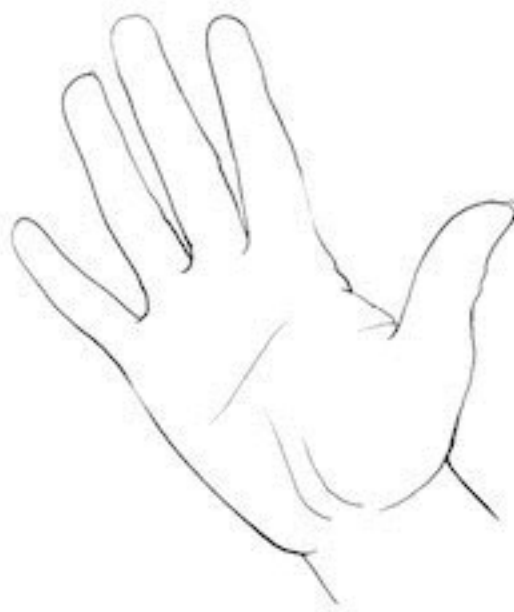
adjustment, allow the student to ease out of the pose slightly to facilitate an inhale, and press the student more deeply into the pose to encourage an exhale. These subtle maneuvers can be done in most adjustments and will help not only to smooth the student's breath pattern and create more physical ease in the posture, but also to facilitate the student's uplifted state of mind.

Basic Hand Positions

Mindful Mechanics and Appropriateness

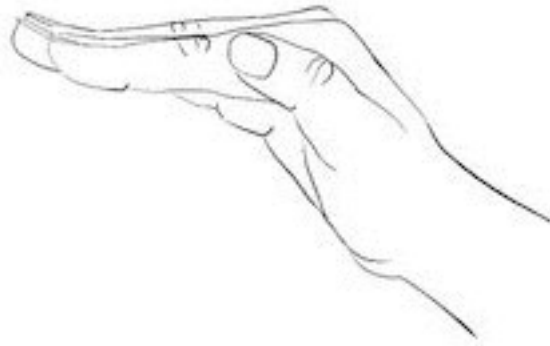
The way we lay our hands on a student's body as we're giving an adjustment conveys an enormous amount about our intentions, confidence and mastery. For the vast majority of adjustments, there are three hand positions that are effective and clear.

The Flat Hand: The Flat Hand is a great hand position anytime we place our hands flat on someone's body. It avoids the intrusiveness of "poky fingers" and prevents us from grazing sensitive areas (in the case of Uttanasana and Downward Dog, for example) by extending the fingers back away from the palm.

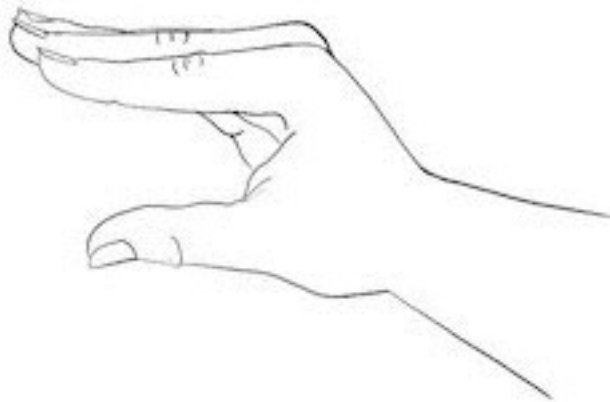


The Barbie Hand: The Barbie Hand, with straight, angled fingers and tucked in thumb, is effective for moving major body parts (generally the hips). In Utkatasana,

for example, the Barbie Hand allows us to apply firm, solid pressure while again avoiding gripping with the fingers.



The Barbie-Holds-the-Microphone Hand: This hand position is useful when grabbing extremities in a much more guiding and compassionate fashion than using a full grip. A gripping hand conveys force while the flat fingers and extended thumb of the Barbie-Holds-the-Microphone Hand conveys guidance and strength.



A Note About Appropriateness

In all of these adjustment techniques you do not find any instance where I recommend that hands slide from one part of a student's body to another. This kind of "petting" leaves too much room for misinterpretation and ambiguity and is not particularly effective.

When we offer clear, concise adjustments we do our job in the highest way possible. Petting leaves room for students to wonder about their social status with a teacher, whereas firm, stationary hands reinforce the critical student/teacher relationship and create a safe space. Our students are there to be guided and receptive and proper hand positioning and technique builds this relationship of trust.



To that end, we must always consider the highest integrity possible when using adjustments. Remember, adjustments come in all varieties! Sometimes the most powerful adjustment is simply to breathe with someone to encourage their breath.

Sometimes all a student needs is for us to point to where their foot should be placed. Under no circumstances do we ever cross boundaries sexually or otherwise inappropriately. We never use force that is painful or inappropriate, and we always employ the utmost care possible with every student. We are there to serve their highest good in all ways, and if we do this with our adjustments, their experience is enhanced in the most positive ways.

Conclusion

Adjusting Our Intention

This book lays out the fundamentals of a safe, effective adjusting practice. It gives you the tools that you need to build a foundation to connect with students.

Through this book you have learned:

1. The importance of touch and how it creates connection
2. Why overcoming doubt sets up confidence in you and your students
3. The fundamentals of a sound adjustment
4. How to serve the highest good of students in a posture
5. Basic concepts of how to apply adjustments to a wide variety of poses
6. Fundamental hand shapes employed in most all hands-on adjustments
7. The power of the breath in an adjustment
8. All types of adjustments are valid when used correctly

I hope that this serves as a jumping-off point for further inquiry, learning and exploration into the world of yoga, teaching, and connection. It is my hope that no matter whether we are teachers or students of the practice, that the yoga fundamentally helps us to connect to one another with empathy, integrity and respect.

May you always continue your yoga journey and never stop learning!

With Love,

Alanna Kaivalya

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About the Author

Alanna Kaivalya



Alanna believes Yoga is for everyone and each student can develop the self-empowerment needed to embark on a personal journey to meaningful transformation. On this principle she founded The Kaivalya Yoga Method, a fresh take on yoga emphasizing the individual path while honoring tradition. Teaching students since 2001, teachers since 2003, Alanna has written and developed teacher trainings worldwide for top studios and independently. In January she debuted a [comprehensive 200hr-online teacher training with YogaDownload.com](#). She holds a Ph.D. in Mythological Studies with an Emphasis in Depth Psychology from Pacifica Graduate Institute, has authored numerous articles and two books: *Myths of the Asanas*, an accessible practitioner’s guide to stories behind beloved poses; *Sacred Sound*, a yoga “hymnal,” illustrating the role of chant and mantra in modern

practice. Look for her third book, *Yoga Beyond the Mat*, a guide to making yoga your complete spiritual practice in Autumn 2016. She lives in New York City with Roxy the Wonderdog. Find out more about her at alannak.com