

Why Mentoring Matters for Yoga Teachers

This word ‘mentoring’ has numerous aspects. One is a process that helps us to wake up to who we really are. Another is a journey where we are facing fears, observing personal limits and making difficult decisions. A third possibility is a path that helps us to keep things in perspective. Yet another could be a dialogue between people with differing levels of experience.

Mentoring is not just relating and repeating old stories. It is more of an updating of ourselves — an updating based around offerings of guidance, learning and support. The mentor (a person who has more experience/perspective) helps the mentee (a person who has less experience/perspective) to act for themselves. Holding space for the mentee to think things through, a supportive mentor is not prescriptive but cultivates conditions for self-analysis and self-thought. The mentor consciously encourages a container that is safe. A container that allows ideas and practices that might have been avoided to be examined.

Foundations for mentoring include listening, mutual respect and compassion. Listening is essential for both mentor and mentee. Mutual respect enables receptivity to learning. Compassion encourages care and generosity. The mentor’s attention to the mentee influences this relationship. As responsibility for learning is with the mentee, this is not about the mentor ‘managing’ the mentee. It is not leader idolisation, suspending critical judgment or a neediness for compliments. This is about empowerment. Not obtaining CPD hours. Not Facebook likes. Not forcing individuals down particular paths that the mentor may think is better for them. Rather than directive advice, more skilful can be an offering of ideas or suggestions, grounded by the boundaries of timekeeping and confidentiality. Practising openness and honesty in face-to-face discussion, we can explore what challenges, what uplifts, what frustrates.

Mentoring session material most fruitfully comes from turning towards what we bring to the sessions. Lessening the presentation approach and instead cultivating an honesty that allows us to work with what actually *is*. Through tools such as listening, trust and relationships built on effective focus, there can be a process of growing. As the philosopher Jean Vanier wrote: “I am struck by how sharing our weakness and difficulties is more nourishing to others than sharing our qualities and successes.”

In terms of teaching yoga, mentoring can be a way of letting go of delusions and the falsity of perfectionism. A releasing of masks and an acknowledging of imperfections. It can also be one way of dealing with the inevitable difficulties of teaching yoga. Surviving the certain challenges.

Mentoring aims to increase the awareness, the knowledge and the wisdom of the mentee. The mentee can become better equipped and better balanced because they have more information and broader perspectives about teaching yoga. It is easy to get stuck. Whether we have been teaching for six months or ten years, there are the patterns of habit and the ruts of familiarity.

Many of these scenarios may be familiar to you. Such as the student with the doe eyes (who looks at us as if we know everything) to the teacher who tries to take over our classes. From the private who suddenly cancels their class to feelings of fed-upness and flatness. Handling difficult characters and while staying positively motivated. Studios that are more like a supermarket. These circumstances all occur. And much more. How are we handling the inevitable troughs, the obstacles and bruises of teaching yoga? How are we handling the beauties, the joys and the significant responsibilities of teaching yoga?

We all need helping hands. Other people-centred fields, such as psychotherapy and acupuncture, have some form of support as a non-negotiable requirement. This might be the difference between sinking and swimming. The difference between collapsing and being grounded. The difference between unethical actions and maintaining integrity. Mentoring can be a way of finding these helping hands.

A suggestion is that all who teach yoga seek mentoring. Receiving advice and skilful guidance from more experienced teachers is a precious gift. A participant in a recent mentor group wrote: “I’ve found mentoring to be way more useful than most of the workshops I’ve attended in terms of developing trust and confidence in the way I do things. For me it’s a big act of self-care and I value the time and space to pause for reflection.”

A further suggestion is that senior teachers might give back through mentoring. Mentoring can be incredibly rewarding. It is a good test of flexibility to changing conditions. It is a good test of humility. It can be an enjoyable and insightful experience for both the mentee and the mentor. The mentor can realise the wealth of their experience and the mentee can – because of the practical assistance, learning and growth that can arise through mentoring – realise their value.

A suggestion is that mentoring can make us better yoga teachers.

Norman Blair
July 2019

This article has been inspired and informed by ongoing discussions with many teachers and by Julie Starr’s *The Mentoring Manual: your step by step guide to being a better mentor*.

I run mentoring groups (limited to five people; six two-hour sessions about once a month; cost £180 (so £15 per hour). I also do 1:1 mentoring (cost £60). For more details, please email yogawithnorman@gmail.com or visit my website, and click on Mentoring. There is also an article that I wrote about mentoring – *Helping Hands* – in Writings and Readings/Articles (scroll down to August 2018).

www.yogawithnorman.co.uk