

## CULTIVATING DEPTH PERCEPTION

*by: Max Strom*

It was an intense class; a sweat-drenched, prana filled flow-yoga class. Golden light from the sunset streamed through the room of gleaming students. The mist of thirty human beings sweating together stung my eyes. A new assistant, just out of the teacher's training course, was helping me with the adjustments. She was doing good work. She was kind and caring and growing in her confidence.

About mid-way through class, the standing sequence was completed and I instructed the students to come down onto their mats and move into a static hip-opening asana commonly called, "pigeon." The class moved into place and the energy of the class rooted into the earth. I scanned the room, observing what I could of the emotional state of the students while also checking on the people with extra-tight hips, giving them variations to protect their knees. My assistant, who was doing the same on the other side of the room, came over to me and quietly pointed to a woman that I had just passed by without adjusting. My assistant commented on a subtle point regarding the student's position and was wondering if she should go over and adjust her. I respected the fact that my assistant saw this, had a question, and came to me first, but what she missed in her assessment was important; she had not used her "depth perception." I whispered to her to look at the student again, more carefully, and tell me what she saw. My assistant looked at the woman again, and then turned back with a quizzical face, not understanding. I whispered, "You see how her face is buried in her towel? She's crying. She's not mopping sweat off her face, she's in tears. She's having an emotional release. My suggestion is we leave her be."

The point of this story is this, we need to see students as human beings who are going through a transformational and healing process first, the corrections of the asanas come second.

Internal body first.

External body second.

Hatha yoga appears at first glance to be 100% physical, but we know that the mind and body and spirit are not separate. The asanas are tools to help us go through this transformational process, and to help in opening the energy meridians, or "nadis," and to do it as safely as possible.

When you walk in your yoga room look, feel. Stand at the back of the room and watch, feel, and listen for a few moments before each class to read what kind of energy the general group is emitting. Some days you will walk in and everybody is chatting like they are at a party. Other days, half the class is lying on the floor in a gloomy silence. Still other days, they are all lying on the floor looking exhausted. Sometimes you'll come in and discover everyone in meditation. You may have a plan of what you are going to do in class – but look in front of you, it may not match. It's up to the teacher to change course, to be flexible with a lesson plan. Adapt your plan to them.

As class gets underway, don't adjust anyone, hands-on, for the first five minutes or so. The students need time to surrender to being where they are and opening their bodies and minds. So, use those first few minutes scanning the different people to see what is before you. Read the collective energy first, the individual energy second.

Examples for reading individual energy:

- What is the general health of a person?
- What is their essential emotional state?
- Stress level?
- What is the quality of their breathing practice?
- Is their intention to change and grow, or are they in a state of resistance?
- Can you see any particular energy blockage?
- Is he/she tight in the joints or hyper flexible?
- Are there any scars on the knees or anywhere else?
- Are their eyes focused or wandering?

There are some amazing signals that can be observed if you look for them.

Watch their fingers. When a person's arms are raised in standing postures, look at their hands from behind the student. If the fingers are fidgeting, their inner state is agitated and their breathing is shallow. Move to them and ask them to breathe deeply, you will see the fingers cease to move as they inhale. When in floor postures, see if they grip their hands, knuckles turning white. This usually indicates they're in a state of negative thoughts and, of course, not in the present moment and not breathing. Instruct them to relax their hands and jaw and breathe deeply.

Watch their eyes. If their eyes are wandering, so is their mind.

Watch their feet. If the toes aren't spread or if they're rolling out onto the outside of the foot they are not conscious of their legs and therefore not grounded. Touch their feet with your finger then verbally teach from the feet up.

Watch their abdomen and chest. If someone's belly is always soft, you must teach drawing it in on the exhales, (uddiyana bandha). The slack belly of course indicates a lack of central strength (core strength) and awareness in the torso and probably there are some lower back issues. If the breath is occurring in the belly region rather than in the chest, they may not understand how to breathe yet, or they may be unable to breathe deeply enough in the upper lungs.

Look at their jaw. Many people, particularly driven/stressed people, clench their jaws. Most of them know it and many of them do it in their sleep and even grind their teeth at night. Tight jaws and tight hips are often occurring simultaneously. I have observed that many people with habitually tight jaws have other illnesses, or may have a submerged illness in the making. Also, tight-jawed people have an extremely difficult time learning to breathe deeply. (I heard a renowned psychologist

state that in her experience in therapy, people with tight jaws are people dealing with submerged rage without exception.)

Look at their shoulders. Tight, muscular shoulders on men usually mean they lift weights and don't stretch. Open shoulders on men usually indicate a dance or gymnastics background, or they were born with hyper-mobile joints. Tight shoulders on women seem to indicate some sheltering/shielding instinct; maybe from sexual issues from puberty, maybe not. Very tall women and also large breasted women commonly have forward-slumping shoulders. The habit usually begins manifesting during puberty as a way of trying not to be noticed. Often women with very flexible spines will still manage to have locked-up shoulders due to emotional holding. Men are usually locked-up and holding everywhere, this is why yoga terrifies men: because the degree which we need to journey through a land of unfelt and even undiscovered emotions can be very daunting to say the least.

Do they habitually arrive to class late? It could be that they run late because they're addicted to stress. Yet, for some, they believe the center of the universe begins in their world and they really don't mind disrupting a class.

Do they habitually leave early without a good reason? Then they are probably avoiding the feelings that will inevitably come up in the final relaxation. Most likely, they also have tight jaws and/or hips, and a shallow breathing practice.

You will see after a while that the people with physical ailments are often the people with emotional ailments. I'm not referring to car accident or sports accident problems; I'm more referring to problems stemming from the internal organs and nervous system. These disorders are commonly played out in odd or disruptive behaviors. You will be able to predict which student will be disruptive by the way they enter through the door and close it behind them. The people with the most disturbed hearts are most likely to disturb your heart and the heart of the class. These people will challenge your depth of compassion and forgiveness. Accept that challenge.

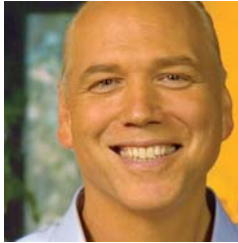
Things for you, the teacher, to do -

1) Your body language needs to be consistently calm, kind, and non-threatening. Stay out of a student's personal space (three feet) unless you are going to move in to put your hands on them. Try to learn to study a student from eight feet or more away and out of their line of sight so they don't feel stared at.

2) Constantly take an over-view of the entire class. Someone right behind you may need your help more than anyone, but if you don't look you won't see him or her.

3) If a student has a negative attitude, avoid them. You don't need to convert them and you certainly don't need the negativity aimed at you. They'll come around in their own time.

So, study your students. Watch and listen. You will begin to witness how every class is different, how every student's practice fluctuates day by day. You will learn to see people differently and like every other part of your yoga practice, this new way of seeing will transcend the yoga room into your daily life.



Max Strom is known for inspiring and impacting the lives of his students, teaching with the aim of personal transformation and has become one of the most revered teachers of yoga in the US. He now travels worldwide teaching and lecturing on yoga and spirituality, and leading teacher trainings. He is a member of the International Association of Yoga Therapists, and registered with the Yoga Alliance at their advanced teacher level.

[www.maxstrom.com](http://www.maxstrom.com). *Max will be in Beijing, China - Yoga Yard in July & Oct 2008 to conduct his teacher training program. For more information, please visit [www.yogayard.com](http://www.yogayard.com).*