

The Asana of Conversation

Leave the mat but take the awareness

By Annette O'Neil

You may not think people are really listening to you, but here's a little secret: they are. They're paying rapt attention, actually, to everything your voice and body are communicating—and that can sometimes be a problem. Due to a lifetime of bad habits, there can be an obvious conflict between what we're trying to say and what others perceive. The good news? Yoga gives us the tools to change those bad habits and allow ourselves to be truly understood and to understand others.

Practicing awareness of the body is as vital in our daily interactions as it is on the mat. Most of us allow our bodies to constantly misrepresent our meanings when we communicate, and that misrepresentation leads to an abundance of misunderstandings. In the yoga studio we have a teacher to help us with adjustments and corrections; in the charged space of face-to-face conversation, we're on our own.

The rules of body language are complicated, but the basics are very rooted in yoga. First, open your heart—don't cave in when you're trying to communicate, rounding your shoulders and shielding your body with your arms. Allow yourself to lean into the moment, however slightly. Mind your eyes; as in the studio, your body will follow them. If your gaze floats helplessly around the space you're in, so will the conversation. Finally, mind your breath. Breathe into the connection you're making. It makes a world of difference.

The Fifth Chakra

In traditional Indian medicine our powers of communication spring from the fifth chakra, located in the throat. When this energy center is balanced, we're empowered to express ourselves and our ideas clearly and lovingly. The chakra falls out of balance when it is under- or overstimulated, muddying our capacity to connect. Symptoms of overstimulation include aggressiveness in speech, egoistic displays and a compulsion to control conversations. Insufficient stimulation manifests in withdrawal, insecurity and vagueness.

Mindful listening will help to balance an overstimulated chakra. For most people with this

issue, breathing into the conversation and deeply listening to the other party—not just waiting for your turn to talk—is incredibly challenging. The best approach is to start solo. Really listen to the individual instruments of a piece of music, words of a guided meditation, or sounds of nature when outdoors. Draw the sound in with your breath, allowing the fullness of your body to receive and absorb it. With daily practice, you'll become more at ease with the process.

Communicators with the opposite issue—under-stimulation—must become comfortable with their own voices. As with the previous group, it helps to start solo. Memorize and recite passages and poems, read aloud to your dog or sing in the shower. Over time you'll begin to dissolve the protective shell you've developed. Then go deeper—start small conversations with strangers who pass through your daily life, trusting yourself to make new connections. Eventually that trust will build balance.

Both conditions will be infinitely helped with a bit of studio work. Let your mind rest in your fifth chakra while you get silly with a lion pose, for instance. Open your heart and throat by going deep into camel.

In traditional Indian medicine the throat chakra is associated with the color blue, so if you're preparing for an important conversation or will be addressing a group, wearing or carrying something in the color blue will support your efforts.

Remember Namaste

Every yogi is familiar with the term *namaste*, which means

that we recognize our common divine spark, that “The God within me bows to the God within you.” It has resounding implications in the act of human communication, beautifully describing the inherent equivalence between all people, making it clear that we are all linked. Remembering this can make it much easier to express yourself, almost as if you are talking to . . . yourself.

The next time you're in a conversation with someone, particularly if it is feeling awkward, practice experiencing *namaste* in that moment. See the divine in yourself, in that person, and in the space between you. Our sacred connection must be acknowledged, honored and respected in order for true communication to take place.

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