

Modifications and the Ego

I teach quite a few classes where the students' abilities vary widely and so for this reason I always offer posture modifications both up and down.

Some advanced modifications are easy enough that they can be offered to the class as a whole. For example I might say "If you want more twist in this pose then...." Other modifications have a caveat attached such as "If you can easily do X then try Y". Still other modifications are clearly only for the one or two people in the room who have a dance or other athletic background and are very flexible and strong. In this case I generally address special modifications to those people directly.

One of the challenges students face with modifications is the ego. I frequently see students trying to perform advanced modifications that they are clearly not ready for. I also see advanced students, who are obviously very tired or sore, unwilling to do the easier modification because they "always" do the harder pose. What would people think?!

It is important to understand that advanced modifications are not a "reward". Advanced students, those who are very athletic or very flexible, and those who have been practicing yoga for a long time frequently need a more challenging pose in order to ensure that they get the strengthening and stretching they need. Being in a pose and feeling nothing because it is too easy for you can be just as frustrating as not being able to do a pose at all.

On the other end of the spectrum, choosing the easier version of a pose should not be viewed as a failure or as meaning that your practice is somehow less than anyone else's. Newer students, those who are tired, injured, less strong or less flexible need easier modifications so that they can attain the poses without frustration or strain. Remember that you are not a machine and that your body is a little bit different every day. How you slept, your activity and energy level and your overall health will all affect your practice. Choosing an easier pose is simply bowing to the body and its needs and it shows great wisdom in the student. As for what other students might think, try to remember that you as well as everyone else in the room should be focusing on their own practice. Your focus should be on your practice alone.

Of course, doing a modification in one part of a class does not mean that you have to do all the modifications that day. Listen to your body and modify your practice accordingly. If you need to, flag the teacher down and ask for a modification or even an alternate pose if the current one is not working for you. If the teacher's offered modification is one of the "caveat" type I mentioned earlier and you cannot meet that caveat, then stay in the current pose rather than doing a modification that you are not ready for.

Remember that as yogis we are working not only on the strength and flexibility of the body but also on the wisdom of the mind and the taming of the ego. Learning to do the pose you need without making it mean that you are either a failure or a hero is a great way to work on the subtler aspects of yoga.

Enjoy your practice!