

mission impossible?

The quest for the perfect yoga teacher

You've found a yoga tradition you enjoy, but what if your teacher's style and personality just don't work for you?

As she searches for the perfect yoga teacher, Erin O'Loughlin learns to let go of expectations and see the reality about teachers – and herself.

Yoga has taken me on a journey. Not just a spiritual one, but a literal one as well. For five years now I've been looking for the right yoga teacher.

My first teacher, in 2001, was Kate. Kate was in her mid-forties, super skinny, and always wore black. She was also very smiley and liked to quietly giggle her way through classes. Her sweet nature and words of encouragement were what got me through an eight-week beginners yoga course and on to regular classes. She was, quite simply, lovely.

She remained lovely week after week as I went to her classes, but of course there were also moments when her loveliness came undone. What started to bother me was the tendency Kate had to comment on her students' body shapes. The comments were always meant in the spirit of kindness, but sometimes they fell a little short of complimentary. I could withstand

the occasional discussion about someone looking a little slimmer, stronger or more toned, but when Kate brought Weight Watchers into the room, I was done. Wasn't yoga about finding value in things beyond the size of your waist? It was time to try out yoga teacher number two.

Caroline was the teacher I turned to. Almost the antithesis of Kate, Caroline was curvy instead of thin, blonde instead of brunette, and liked to wear colourful clothes. She didn't giggle or smile all that much, but she also didn't comment on anyone's weight. After a few weeks of Caroline's classes, I labelled my new teacher one who enjoyed slow, meditative practice.

It took me a while to realise that Caroline had a rather detached attitude towards some students. I was one of them. After a couple of weeks of attending her classes, she hadn't asked me

my name or anything else about myself, bar whether I had any injuries. One night I decided it was time to volunteer some information, so I officially introduced myself. Caroline responded by saying, "It's nice to meet you, but I don't remember names. When I start calling people by their names I find they don't come back to my classes." So every Wednesday, I did one-and-a-half hours of yoga as a nameless body.

It was fine at first, and I could understand Caroline's rationale. Many people like to give yoga a try without having to commit to long-term practice or to a personal relationship with their teacher. The problem was that Caroline didn't apply the same teaching style to everyone. Some students she *did* call by name, and she generally invested more effort in their development. For example, Caroline would often comment on my weak abdominal

muscles as I wobbled in Salamba Sarvangasana (Shoulder stand), whereas other students received high praise for their upside-down perfection. Initially I thought I just had to prove my commitment; I had to show my teacher I wasn't just a passing face and that I wanted real help and guidance. But after a year of Wednesday night sessions, I was still being treated like the new kid on the yoga mat. I felt ignored, neglected and disliked. It was time to leave Caroline and move on.

Next came Maureen. Although older than both Kate and Caroline, Maureen's teaching style was far more vigorous than anything else I'd tried. Her sessions made my skin glisten with sweat and my muscles shake with fatigue. It was like starting yoga from scratch all over again.

After a year or so with Maureen I felt I'd found the right teacher. Maureen seemed to know about balance. Although she would offer very challenging classes, she would also make the last week of every month a 'slow down' week, where the emphasis was on cultivating a quiet mind and a quiet practice. Maureen knew my name, she didn't comment on anyone's weight, and she handed out constructive criticism along with smiles and praise. Her classes felt perfect.

But then came a moment that shattered my illusions of Maureen.

There we all were, a class of 15 or so, pulling on our socks and picking up our bags at the end of a normal yoga class. As we rifled through our wallets for money and began to think about the day ahead, a conversation started up between Maureen and one of the other students. They were discussing a mutual acquaintance whose husband was gravely ill when the student said of her friend, sadly, "Her whole life seems to be one dark period after another." Maureen replied, "Sometimes I feel like my life's like that too."

Maureen's words startled me. I'd had no idea my yoga teacher was unhappy.

Maureen then continued, mentioning that her story was "just too sad" to share. She finished off the conversation by stating that she "didn't have much time left"—her life, she declared, was nearly up. Then she stopped talking and started collecting everyone's fees.

I felt winded, as though the air had been sucked out of me. My yoga teacher wasn't just unhappy, she sounded downright depressed. Until that moment, I'd always considered yoga teachers to be people who were positive and calm, people who lived beyond our material world and were happy to do so. Yoga teachers, I'd thought, were

an admirable breed of human beings who were in constant possession of a 'can-do' mindset and masterful self-discipline. Hearing that I was wrong was an unwelcome reality check. If even my fit, healthy yoga teacher failed to get through life with a feeling of contentment, things suddenly seemed rather unbearable for me. That day, Maureen and I both went home feeling a little more than blue.

I still went to Maureen's classes for a long time after that incident, but for me the atmosphere had changed. I often just looked at Maureen and wondered what on earth had happened to her to make life



so sad. Had yoga helped her manage at all? Why was I doing yoga if it had failed my teacher so completely?

Gradually, the classes I went to began to feel like a chore rather than a release. After more than four years and three teachers, I was stuck in a routine of practice that wasn't bringing me much pleasure. So not long ago I decided it was time to stop and take a break, both from yoga classes and yoga teachers.

The time off has given me space to think about my experiences. Time to reflect on why my search for 'my best yoga teacher' has not come to an end.

I've realised that although there is certainly some value in 'trying out' different yoga teachers, my approach to finding the 'right' teacher was a little flawed. When I go back to formal yoga classes in the near future, I will keep in mind some of the lessons I've learned.

The first is that yoga teachers are human. It sounds obvious, but it's so easy to forget that those who guide us through

Shavasana (Corpse pose) have to go home and defrost their freezers, just as we do. They also have to lodge taxes, scrub their showers and see doctors about lumps in their breasts. Because they are human and have their way of doing and saying things, there will be those with whom I just won't get along. Sometimes people just don't mesh. It's not a problem, just a reality.

I will also bear in mind that it's okay to approach my teacher with any problems I'm having. It's part of their job. When I recall my time with Caroline, I realise so many of the issues I had with her classes could probably have been sorted out if I'd just gone to her and explained how I was feeling. Yoga teachers may meditate, but they can't mind-read.

I will keep in mind that teachers do what they think is best as a result of their experience. Teachers learn over time what works well for them and their classes. For some, that means not learning people's names. For others, it means knowing their regulars' names by heart. Styles differ in every single yoga room.

I will also be conscious of the fact that teachers bring their personal baggage to their teaching. Remember my first teacher, Kate? Some time after I abandoned her classes I learned that before she was a yoga teacher, she was an overweight school teacher who was unhappy with her life. Kate found her release in weight loss and yoga practice, so it's really no wonder she encourages others to lose the kilos. Other instructors will bring their personal histories to their teaching as well.

Finally, I will remember that the perfect yoga teacher probably does not exist. My journey will only come to an end when I decide what it is that I want out of my practice, and when I let the teacher who comes closest to helping me fulfil those needs be the teacher for me.

**Names of teachers have been changed.*

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