

A Helping Hand

Partnering up in yoga class can deepen your practice and connect you to yourself and your fellow yogis.

By Charity Ferreira



We were only a few minutes into the yoga class when the teacher uttered the five words I dread hearing: "OK, everybody, find a partner!" As we students sized up one another with varying degrees of wariness, the teacher demonstrated what she wanted us to do by leaping lightly onto the thighs of a supine volunteer and balancing there, as gracefully as a cat, her feet grounding and rotating her partner's thighs inward.

Full disclosure: My approach to partnering exercises in yoga class has generally been of the "Lie back and think of England" variety, though I usually participate as gamely as I can. But this particular caper was just too much for my inner Woody Allen.

Photo by Chris Andre

What if my partner or I slipped and fell? What if I had bone density issues I didn't know about? What if my partner outweighed me, or I her? What about my bad knee? Where were the feet supposed to go? Concerned about my safety, and uncomfortable turning to the person next to me and saying, "It's nice to meet you. I'm now going to place my bare feet on your thighs," I declined to participate.

Unlike "partner yoga," in which two people come together to create a single pose, often practiced with a friend or significant other, "partnering" takes place when your teacher asks you to consider the student next to you as a human prop to help you get into a pose more fully, isolate a particular action, or help you balance. A teaching tool in many styles of yoga classes, partnering tends to inspire strong feelings among practitioners: Mention the subject to a group of yoga students, and the room is likely to erupt in exclamations as people tell their stories of awkward moments, contact with another person's sweat or stinky feet, and even injuries.

Here at the Yoga Journal office, where we practice yoga together every day, we ask that our teachers not do partnering exercises in class—not all of us are comfortable with the degree of physical intimacy involved in sharing sweat with a supervisor, or gripping a co-worker from behind. But the frequency of partnering exercises in the other classes I attended made me wonder whether my resistance to them could be holding me back. What was I missing by participating reluctantly, or opting out entirely? When I started asking around, I discovered that there's no simple answer to that question, since partnering exercises themselves, and people's attitudes toward them, vary greatly. A few teachers told me that they never teach partnering exercises in class, because of the risk of injury. For other teachers and practitioners, asking, "How do you feel about partnering?" was like asking, "How do you feel about yoga?"—so central does the one practice seem to be to the other. Still others described partnering, when done safely

and skillfully, as a useful tool for deepening your practice.

So What's Not to Like?

But let's face it: Depending on the exercise, partnering in class can be embarrassing. I think of my yoga teachers the way I think of my doctor or physical therapist, and I've never felt uncomfortable with a teacher's adjustments. But I can't say the same when a fellow student is fumbling for my hip points or squeezing my inner thighs. "If someone's in a supported Paschimottanasana, and the other person's hands are on their back, just giving feedback, that's fine," says Cyndi Lee, Yoga Journal's Basics columnist and the founder of OM Yoga in New York, who says she doesn't teach much partnering, especially in beginners' classes—in part, because of the embarrassment factor. "But your yoga classmate is not your doctor. There's not that same natural boundary." In addition to the discomfort of sharing my personal space, it's embarrassing to put my hands or feet on a stranger's body, to wonder where their feet have been, or when my own last pedicure was. Most of all, it's embarrassing to admit how embarrassing these inconsequential corporeal details can be. I practice yoga so that I can further my development as a fully realized human being...so why am I thinking about toenails? But perhaps the biggest reason students and teachers avoid partnering exercises in class, particularly with beginning students, is a concern for safety. "I have a friend who was injured doing partner exercises. I've had that fear: This is a student, not a trained teacher—do they know how to support me?" says Sarah Saffian, a writer and yoga student in Brooklyn. Another downside to partnering, for some, is that it interrupts the flow of the class. "Sometimes, in the context of an hour-and-a-half class, partner work doesn't seem to provide enough benefit compared with the amount of time it takes to explain and to take turns helping one another," says Michele King, a yoga student in San Francisco. Not only does partnering interrupt the physical practice, it can also interrupt the deep concentration you drop into during class. "I go to yoga for an internal experience, and partnering exercises are disruptive of that," Saffian says. "They take me out of my little world on that mat."

A Little Help From My Friends

In the right context—that is, when partnering is done skillfully and safely—working with a fellow student can have myriad benefits, including changing the tempo of the class. While some students might object to having their attention redirected from their own practice to another student's, some teachers say that's one of the benefits of partner exercises. When the energy in the room is low, one way that Stacey Rosenberg, a certified Anusara Yoga teacher in San Francisco, likes to raise the energy level is to do a partner pose. Leslie Howard, a yoga teacher in the San Francisco Bay Area, puts it another way: "You can zone out when you're doing your own practice, but when you know you're going to have to do something with another student, you really pay attention," she says. "You have more responsibility."

Howard, who teaches an alignment-based style inspired by her years of studying the Iyengar method, describes the partnering exercises she teaches most frequently as straightforward exercises designed to isolate an action, discover a greater range of mobility, or just gain a better awareness of where the body is in space. The safest poses for partnering, she says, involve bringing awareness to a subtle action rather than adjusting the other person's alignment or supporting their weight. "A partnering exercise done well can give a sense of how far you can go and how good a pose can feel, and

give you a more kinesthetic understanding of a pose," she says.

In the simplest of partnering exercises, the partner is a feedback device, like a prop or a wall. "But students are better than props, because they're sensitive props," Howard says. "A block can't tell you, 'You're more forward on the left.' But if you hold blocks to the back of someone's legs in Downward Dog, you can feel that, and let them know."

At whatever level you practice, a skillful adjustment or touch cue can bring more awareness to a part of the body, often deepening a pose. I can't count the times a teacher has reminded me to externally rotate my thigh, lift my chest, or draw my hips back, and thought, "Chest lifted, check!" only to receive a subtle adjustment that made me realize how much more I could lift. This has to do with the elusiveness of kinesthetic awareness, the sensory input that your body uses to know where it is in space. In other words, what you think your body is doing and what it's actually doing can be two different things. "Working with a partner can give you a deeper, more three-dimensional understanding of a pose. It's not just your brain understanding it; it's your body understanding it," Howard says. Having another student help lift your chest in Ustrasana (Camel Pose) or externally rotate your upper arms in Virabhadrasana I (Warrior Pose I) can help your body learn the action more effectively than it could with verbal instruction alone.

"I've definitely had that aha! moment, doing Triangle with a partner, using a belt to rotate the thigh outward," Saffian says. "You can do it yourself, but having another person do it really helps you get the physical information to that muscle. It's not just a verbal instruction—it's physical information that you can get in a much more concrete way."

Taking turns

It might feel frustrating to spend precious practice time waiting for your turn, but the benefits of partnering go both ways. When you're the person assisting, you have a chance to observe the action on another body, which is a step toward deepening your own practice, says Howard. "You can't see yourself draw the buttock down in a backbend. But if you're helping someone else do it, you can see what that looks like." With this new awareness, I gradually started noticing what it looked like on my fellow students to tuck the tailbone, lengthen the spine, or draw the shoulder blades down the back. I was surprised by how much this helped me to visualize those actions on my own body.

Observing my classmates in partner exercises also had the effect of softening my self-criticism: Seeing other bodies have trouble with some of the same poses that I do made me feel kinder and more accepting of my own body, and less like I was the only one to struggle with intractable shoulders and balky hamstrings.

Partnering exercises can also let you glimpse a place you haven't been able to go to before, whether it's taking a familiar pose a little further, or experiencing a pose you can't do on your own. "There are times when just a little bit of support from a partner allows me to push a little more, maybe find space I didn't know was there or didn't have the strength to make myself," says Pao Chiu, a San Francisco graphic designer and yoga student.

Where Everybody Knows Your Name

In classes where people practice together regularly, and where the development of community is an integral part of the practice, partnering exercises can have benefits that go beyond physical alignment.

"To me, doing Handstand with a partner is not just about being able to do Handstand, but also about what qualities you cultivate in the process," says Stacey Rosenberg. "Being able to do Handstand is great. But how much do you have to open your heart, how much do you have to learn to trust the other person to do it?"

I'd never thought about partnering in that light and was curious how it would affect my experience, so I dropped in on some of Rosenberg's classes, where her students regularly introduce themselves to newcomers. Throughout class, I hear students advising each other, applauding each other, and congratulating each other.

"We're all students, and we're all teachers," Rosenberg says. "My students learn so much more by being in class together than they would if we weren't interacting. And that's the idea behind community in our practice: When one person has an opening, we all benefit from that; we all feel it." Helping a partner, or being helped, teaches communication and awareness, Rosenberg says: "It's an opportunity to learn how to ask for what you need and learn to be sensitive to what the other person needs." In Handstand, Rosenberg says, you don't want to give your partner too much or too little support; you have to be perceptive about just how much support your partner needs. At the same time, you have to be sensitive to what's going on around you, so that you don't get kicked, or kick someone else. I thought about this as I concentrated on my partner's weight shifting back and forth in Handstand. I also thought about it when I accidentally jostled another student while putting away props after class, not because I was in a hurry to put mine away, but just because I hadn't realized she was at my elbow when I turned around.

One evening in Rosenberg's class, we got into groups of three to drop each other back, with the option of coming back up to standing. Dropping back felt safe enough with two people gripping each other's forearms to cradle the back of the third person, so I offered to go first, dropping back with ease. But when it was time to come up, I knew I couldn't do it on my own, and I wasn't sure I could depend on my partners to help me. "I don't think I can come up," I said. "Sure you can!" said one of my partners, and I had just enough time to ground my feet and firm my legs before I was standing again. "Beautiful!" beamed one of my partners. "You're strong!" said the other. I couldn't help grinning.

Full circle

Another day in class, Rosenberg demonstrates using straps in groups of three to deepen each other's Urdhva Dhanurasana (Wheel Pose). I'm a little out of sorts— it's hot and humid, and it feels as though every bit of dust in the room has gotten itself stuck to either my skin or my mat. Pretty much the last thing I feel like doing is hovering over someone's armpits. My lower back twinges a little, and I briefly wonder if this is a good reason to opt out. But instead I flop down on my mat and let my two partners gently help me into a deeper Wheel. I have to admit it felt pretty good. When it's my turn to assist, I forget about the dust. My focus shifts completely to the person on the floor in front of

me. I concentrate on getting the strap around his shoulder blades, on watching his face and his breath for cues that I'm giving the right amount of pressure in the right place, and on gently lowering him to the floor when it looks as though he's had enough. Afterward he thanks us, confiding that he'd always muscled his way through that pose, but that our doing some of the work for him had allowed him to experience the pose in a way he never had before. I thank him, too, not for deepening my Wheel, but for sharing his practice and for helping me realize that there's nothing at all awkward or embarrassing about partnering.

These days, I am no longer averse to partnering exercises. I don't avoid them by taking a bathroom break when a teacher announces one, or by shuffling extra slowly to the prop closet, hoping everyone will be paired up by the time I get back to my mat. I'm eager to see what a partnering exercise can teach me, and I even practice some of my tried-and-true favorites with friends when I want to deepen or finesse a pose.

I found that the kind of partnering exercises I appreciate the most are those that bring subtle refinements to poses I already feel strong in. I'm not comfortable assisting someone when there's a chance I'll have to bear their weight, and I'm wary of being helped into a pose I'm not confident in. But when it's a pose I know I can hold comfortably, a little touch or adjustment from a partner can make a huge difference, bringing my chest more open in Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose), for example, or lifting me out of my standing leg in Ardha Chandrasana (Half Moon Pose). I'll still occasionally opt out of an exercise if it feels risky to me, or if I know that injury or fatigue preclude me from being a good partner that day, but I'm comfortable with that. I've found that it can take as much openness and honesty to ask questions and communicate my reservations about a partnering exercise as it does to participate in one. But more often than not, I participate. And more often than not, I'm glad I did.

The Power of Two

Working with a partner is a fun way to realize some basic actions more deeply and to experience the poses in a new way. These instructions refer to the person doing the pose as the "receiving partner" and the person assisting as the "helping partner."

VIRABHADRASANA II (Warrior Pose II)

A common tendency in this pose is to lean one's weight too far forward, toward the front leg. Working with a partner whose size is similar to yours can help you feel where the torso should be placed, how much weight should be in the back leg, and what the action of the arms should feel like.

As partners, come into the pose left shoulder to left shoulder—next to each other, but facing opposite directions—so that each partner's left foot is the back foot in the pose. Place the outer edges (little-toe sides)



of your back feet against each other. Push your back foot against your partner's to help lift your inner arch and keep your back leg active and straight. Grasp each other's forearms and pull gently, helping each other lengthen the back arm. Hold the pose for 30 seconds to a minute. To come out, push into your back foot a little more as you straighten your front leg. Repeat on the other side.

ADHO MUKHA SVANASANA(Downward-Facing Dog Pose)

Working with a partner in this pose can enhance the action of the legs and reinforce the drawing-back action of the hips. This partner exercise also puts the spine into traction and takes the weight of the pose out of the shoulders.

The receiving partner comes into Downward-Facing Dog. The helping partner stands a few inches behind, then places a strap around the front of the tops of the receiving partner's thighs, close to the hip crease, grasping the strap as close as possible to the receiving partner's legs. (If it feels more secure, wrap the strap around your hands.)

As the helping partner, bend your knees slightly, keeping your torso upright with a natural curve in your lower back, and start to pull strongly on the strap, drawing your partner's hips back. The receiver should feel an increased stretch in the hamstrings and calves, and space in the lower back, and might find that the heels get closer to the floor. Check in about the amount of pressure, and adjust accordingly. Hold for a minute. Slowly let go and see if the receiver can maintain some of the drawing-back action in the hips and legs.



ARDHA CHANDRASANA (Half Moon Pose)

The most difficult part of Ardha Chandrasana is balancing, and unless you can balance, it can be difficult to feel the other actions of the pose. Working with a partner to help you balance allows you to focus on opening the front of the body. Choose a partner who is of similar height.

The receiving partner takes Trikonasana (Triangle Pose) on the right side. The helping partner stands behind the receiving partner's upper torso and takes hold of the left wrist or upper arm. The receiving partner



steps off the back leg and comes into the pose, placing the right hand on a block. The helping partner gently supports the underside of the partner's calf, ankle, or heel, without pulling up. The receiving partner should engage the legs and open the front chest. Once the balance is taken care of, the receiving partner can work on lifting and externally rotating the quadriceps of the standing leg and reaching through the left heel. Hold for 30 seconds to a minute. To come out, the helping partner releases the leg but holds the upper arm until the receiving partner's back foot has touched down and the weight is supported on both feet. Repeat on the other side, and then switch positions.



SETU BANDHA SARVANGASANA (Bridge Pose)

When you work with a partner in Setu Bandha Sarvangasana, you might find you can lift your chest a little bit more. The receiving partner places a strap across the width of the mat and lies down so that the strap touches the upper back. The helping partner sits a few inches from the top of the receiving partner's head, takes hold of the ends of the strap, and places the feet against the tops of the receiving partner's shoulders.

The receiving partner comes into the pose. The strap should now be in the crease of the armpits, and the ends should be parallel to the floor. If you are the helping partner, press gently down through your feet to keep your partner's upper arm bones down. Lift your own chest (be careful not to round your back) and pull the ends of the strap toward you, not up toward the ceiling.



If you are the receiving partner, make sure you are drawing the buttock flesh away from the lower back as the chest is opening, being -mindful of any sensation of compression in the lower back. Keep your weight on the ball of your big toe and keep your knees aligned with your hip sockets.

The helping partner pulls for 20 to 30 seconds and then slowly releases the strap. Notice if the receiving partner can maintain the new height of the chest. After a few breaths, the receiving partner slowly releases to the floor, lengthening the lower back. Switch positions.

USTRASANA (Camel Pose)

A partner's support in Ustrasana can help you keep

your chest lifted and keep compression out of your lower back, two actions that can be challenging in this pose. Choose a partner of similar weight.

The receiving partner kneels on a mat facing a wall. If you are the helping partner, sit on the mat directly behind the receiving partner, close enough that you can place your feet on your partner's back body without straightening your legs. Lean back slightly and support your weight on your hands or forearms. Place the ball of one foot on the top of the receiver's buttock flesh, at the top of the sacrum, and gently draw the flesh of the buttock down to help the receiver keep the lower back long in the pose. Check in about the placement of your foot, making sure it is at the top of the buttock, not in the lumbar region (lower spine).

This pose is traditionally done with the top of the feet on the floor, but it can also be done with the toes tucked under to make the feet more accessible. The receiving partner lifts the chest and comes into the pose, bringing hands to feet without collapsing the chest, and minimizing how much the pelvis falls back, away from the wall. Once the receiving partner has placed the hands, the helping partner can place the ball of their second foot between the receiver's shoulder blades and gently push up to help the chest lift. You should think of your two feet drawing away from each other, up toward the ceiling and down toward the floor, not toward the wall. Hold for 30 seconds.

To come out, the helper can remove the foot from the receiving partner's buttock, but leave the foot between the shoulder blades in place until the receiver is upright. Support and encourage your partner to keep the chest lifted coming out of the pose.

SUPTA PADANGUSTHASANA (Reclining Hand-to-Big-Toe Pose), variation

In Supta Padangusthasana, the outer thigh of the top leg tends to lift, causing the lumbar spine on the side of the lifted leg to shorten. This simple exercise, done with a partner and a block, can help you understand the connection between the legs and the lower back, and reinforce the idea that the thighbone should move toward the back of the leg.

The receiving partner uses a strap to bring the right leg up to 90 degrees. If you are the helping partner, sit or kneel on the outside of your partner's right leg, so that



you can easily place a block on the back of your partner's thigh, touching the sitting bone. Hold the block in place, but don't push.



The receiving partner should push into the block with both the sitting bone and the thigh, noticing that, as the right side of the waist gets longer, the hamstring gets a deeper stretch. The helping partner should be able to feel the pushing. Repeat on the left side, and then switch positions. Notice if your partner pushes more strongly on one side or the other, and offer feedback.

How To Be A Great Partner

Practice safely and respectfully to get the most out of partner exercises.

Know Yourself The most important requirement for partnering is that you feel safe and comfortable. "I have had students who say, 'I don't do partnering,' and they sit it out. And that's completely valid," says Cyndi Lee of OM Yoga. "If a student's not comfortable, they should ask the teacher if there's an option for people who don't feel comfortable partnering." If you're uncomfortable for any reason at all, it is always OK not to participate.

Use Common Sense Remember that waiver you signed? Ultimately, you are the one responsible for your own safety and for the way you touch a fellow student. So use your own judgment about what's right for you. If you're doing dropbacks in pairs, don't partner up with someone twice your size whom you can't support. If you or your partner is not proficient in the pose you're doing, alert the teacher.

Pay Attention Don't chat or people watch. Make sure that you can see and hear the teacher and that you understand what you're going to do.

Speak Up If you're not sure about what you've been asked to do or what you're supposed to be feeling in the pose, ask the teacher. If the teacher hasn't specified whether partners should be of similar size, ask if that's important. Check in with your partner about how they're feeling in the pose, and tell them if something they're doing doesn't feel right to you.

Keep an Open Mind If you feel safe and comfortable, consider giving the exercise a chance. "When I'm able to get over my initial crankiness at having to touch a sweaty stranger, or having to talk when I feel like looking inward, I usually leave the partner exercise feeling good about it," says Sarah Saffian, a yoga student in New York. "I feel like I learn something spiritual by opening up to the experience of partnering with someone."

Don't Sweat It If you're not comfortable participating, that's OK. "The whole point of our practice is how much we can open to each other, and be balanced and strong and clear and stable—all of the things we work on in our practice—with other people," says Lee. "But there are other ways to do that, even in yoga class, that don't involve partnering. Make room for someone's mat if they come in late. Hand them a block. There are a lot

of ways you can interact with people in class that everybody feels safe about, that relate to the rest of our lives."

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