

Chapter One

Why You Started Demonstrating

"You learned to teach by watching someone teach. The problem is what you were watching."

The first yoga class you ever attended had a teacher at the front of the room. They moved. You followed. When you didn't know what came next, you looked up.

That is how you learned yoga. That is — almost certainly — how you learned to teach it. And it's the reason your students aren't improving.

Not because anyone told you demonstration was the right method. Because it was the only model you had ever seen.

The Inheritance

Yoga in the West arrived in the shape of exercise. The studios that first brought it to mainstream culture were staffed by teachers trained in aerobics, dance, fitness. The format followed: instructor at the front, class behind, everyone moving together.

You show. They copy. It is efficient. It is legible. It has worked for decades.

And when yoga teacher trainings began producing teachers at scale, they trained teachers the same way they had been trained — by watching. Your first teacher demonstrated. Your training teacher demonstrated. The DVDs you studied demonstrated. Every reference you had reinforced the same conclusion: *this is what teaching looks like*.

So you rolled out your mat at the front of the room. And you taught the way you had been shown.

Why It Feels Right

There is a reason demonstration feels intuitive. It is not a mistake or a weakness. It is a logical response to a real problem.

Students are new. They don't know the pose. You show them. They see it. They attempt it. The visual reference closes the gap between confusion and action.

This is true — as far as it goes.

The mirror neuron research supports it. Observation activates the same neural pathways as movement. When you watch someone do something, your brain begins to rehearse it.

So demonstration is not wrong. But it is incomplete — and often overused.

What You Are Actually Teaching When You Demonstrate

When you demonstrate a pose, you are showing students what the pose looks like on your body. Your proportions. Your flexibility. Your range. Your relationship to this particular shape today.

That is almost never what your student needs.

What they need is the felt sense of the pose — the internal experience of what it asks of the body, where the weight is, what the breath does, what it means to find the edge and stay there.

You cannot show them that. It has no visible surface. It lives below the skin, in the nervous system, in the places where sensation becomes information.

Every moment a student spends watching you is a moment they spend outside their own body. They are doing research, not practice. They are studying your pose instead of finding theirs.

The moment your students are watching you, they have stopped practicing.

The Dependency It Creates

There is a longer cost that takes time to see.

Students who learn to watch you learn to need you. Not consciously — but structurally. The external reference becomes the practice. *I look at the teacher. I see the pose. I copy it.*

Take the reference away and something falters. A home practice that never quite holds. A student who attends your class for years but cannot practice independently. A room that works when you are in it and loses its shape when you are not.

You have been at the centre of their practice when the practice was supposed to happen inside them.

The Teacher It Makes You

There is a cost on your side as well.

The teacher who demonstrates is always managing two things: the pose in their own body and the class in the room. Attention divided is attention halved.

You are half a teacher. Not because of lack of skill — because of structural impossibility. You cannot fully inhabit the room when you are also inhabiting the pose.

And over time, something else happens. The class becomes a performance. Not deliberately — by default. Because you are on display. Because they are watching. Because the unspoken contract has become: *I show, you follow*.

That is not teaching. That is a mirror with instructions.

The Question This Chapter Is Asking

This chapter is not asking you to abandon demonstration. It is asking you to look at it honestly.

To notice how often you demonstrate because it genuinely serves the student — and how often you demonstrate because you are not yet sure your words are enough.

That uncertainty is where the work begins.

Because your words *are* enough. More than enough. They are, as you will see, the only thing that can deliver what demonstration never could: the internal experience of the pose, landed directly in the nervous system of the person who needs it.

Not a copy of a copy. The real thing.

Practice: Count the Eyes

In your next class, add one task to your teaching: notice every time a student looks at you.

Don't change anything. Don't adjust your teaching. Just notice. How often does it happen? In which poses? At which moments?

That number — the frequency of eyes on you — is the measure of how much of the class is happening outside the students' bodies and inside yours.

Write it down after class. Keep it. It is your baseline. Everything in this book is aimed at lowering it.

Chapter Summary

- Demonstration was inherited from the exercise-class model, reinforced by every teacher training and reference you encountered
- It feels intuitive because it is — but intuitive is not the same as effective
- Demonstration shows what a pose looks like on your body; it cannot deliver the felt sense the student actually needs
- Every moment a student watches you is a moment they spend outside their own body
- Dependency is the long-term cost: students who need to see you to practice cannot practice without you
- The teacher who demonstrates is always managing two things at once — and the room gets half their attention

Reflection

1. Think about your own learning as a student. Which teachers changed how you felt in a pose — and did they do it by showing you, or by saying something?
2. When you demonstrate, is it for the student's benefit or for your own certainty? Can you tell the difference in the moment?
3. If your students could not see you at all — eyes closed, no reference point but your voice — what would change about how you teach?

From Why Demonstrating Is Making You a Worse Teacher — Gabe Yoga