

SPECIAL

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EDITION

# YOGA

life





Ganga White leads a yoga teacher training course in Los Angeles, California, 1968. In a 2016 Yoga Alliance survey, 99 percent of studio owners said yoga teachers should continue learning.

Tracey Rich and Ganga White, co-founders of the White Lotus Yoga Foundation, demonstrate proper form for warrior pose. In addition to teacher training courses, White Lotus also offers Weekend Yoga Retreats.



# head of the class

**TRACEY RICH, DIRECTOR OF THE WHITE LOTUS YOGA FOUNDATION, DESCRIBES THE QUALITIES REQUIRED TO GO FROM STUDENT TO TEACHER.**

**A**S A PRACTICE viewed as a continuous learning process, yoga, to some, can seem daunting to teach. Even the most physically and spiritually aligned students feel a looming uncertainty about when they will be ready to start taking the steps toward instructing others. But according to Tracey Rich, director of the White Lotus Yoga Foundation in Santa Barbara, California, the realization that one is ready to teach comes precisely from accepting that there is always more to learn.

"For many, it just starts to overflow because it has inspired their life; it has transformed their life," says Rich. Rather than reaching a point in their practice where they're resting on a plateau, these inspired students begin to see a new mountain to climb. "They think, 'How do I learn more about this?'" Rich says.

In many cases, it is the teacher who first recognizes the capacity to teach within a student. "There are those who are chosen by their teacher," says Rich. "It's one of the wonderful aspects of mentorship that can happen." Now a teacher with close to 40 years of experience, Rich herself was one such student who was pushed toward teaching by a mentor. In her case, it was more

of an abrupt thrust into the role. "I was pretty much thrown out of a nest," she says. "Which is a positive experience if you can actually fly."

But being able to "fly" requires far more than physical ability—an important distinction that some teachers forget. "Many teachers, depending on who they are and where they come from, choose people just for their acrobatic skills and their contortion skills," Rich states. Inevitably, as she explains, innate flexibility is frequently praised in yoga, but those skills often do not translate into quality instruction. And sometimes, those who advance strictly based on their flexibility are actually the students who need to develop a better skillset for taking care of their body. "Not that there isn't the naturally flexible person who also has good overall balance in their life," says Rich. "But you do see a lot of teachers who, when they see a very flexible person, say, 'Oh, you should teach.' But we definitely do not hold that as a prerequisite. It's important for teachers to recognize the difference between 'performance' or contortion poses and poses that are therapeutic."

As for prerequisites that are necessary for the Yoga Teacher Training program, Rich and fellow instructor and White Lotus co-founder



Ganga White look for students with two years of personal practice, meaning solitary posing and exploration beyond studio classes. “There’s something special that happens in the time spent on the mat with yourself because the practice of yoga really is going within,” she explains. Generally, Rich tends to recognize the internal teaching qualities in someone far more than the external. “You see someone who has a spark,” she says. “For me, it’s a spark of humanity, someone with a real sense of empathy who’s on fire with excitement about what this gift, yoga, is.”

Beyond pure passion and understanding, other personality aspects can point toward a strong teaching style. “I think a good sense of humor never hurts,” says Rich. While she does see a fair share of people who use the studio as their own personal stand-up comedy venue, Rich feels the ability to blend humor with guidance can be quite effective. “That wit gives the sense that someone is awake and self-reflective,” she says. “They can use humor as a teaching tool, as part of a growth and learning process.”

In addition to the natural teaching tools prodigies of yoga may come equipped with, the White Lotus Yoga Teacher Training program provides many more through its versatile course structure. Throughout the 16-day course, students are provided a deep well of information to apply to their eventual training, from studying yoga history and philosophy to learning about diet and nutrition to engaging in meditation and inquiry. “There’s information being shared



From left: A class at White Lotus; the Yurt Village at White Lotus Yoga Foundation in Santa Barbara, California.

through conversation; there’s partner work. People are enjoying each other’s company and they’re learning in beautiful nature—one of the greatest teachers,” says Rich. “The way we pace the days are really meant to foster balance, well-being and fun.”

The element of fun is something White Lotus recognizes as pivotal in a training course that involves intensive undertakings. Music nights are periodically held throughout the program as not only an opportunity to unwind, but also as a means of encouraging creative expression. “I use a lot of poetry when I teach,” Rich says. “I love language, so I infuse my classes with that to hopefully create a way for people to find how the yoga moves within them.”

Still, despite the numerous measures to keep spirits high, self-doubt can sometimes creep

in. “You start with excitement and inspiration, and that is what we want to foster in people and continue to support,” Rich explains. “But then you get people invariably in the course of the program who become overwhelmed with the enormity of information, whether that’s the philosophical, the practical, the kinesiology or just understanding the responsibility being put in their hands.” Sometimes, students can get temporarily derailed by the level of introspection the program requires. “I think people often don’t understand that this is a deep process of personal transformation,” says Rich. There are inevitably those, she says, who enter merely expecting to gain physical strength, teaching tools and general guidelines. “They don’t expect the emotional aspect of the training where the personal growth starts to take hold,” she says.

But while self-judgment may be unavoidable at times, White Lotus strives to establish the most nurturing, judgment-free space they can. “One of the main things we really try to provide for people is a very safe environment for that exploration and to give them information supported by inspiration,” says Rich. The testimonials she finds most meaningful come from those who feel they were always encouraged and not judged.

As for any hesitation about endeavoring to teach a discipline founded on perpetual learning, Rich encourages embracing the ongoing dialogue of yoga. “This is a living process,” she says. “As a teacher, you don’t always have to have an answer. You want to realize that teaching is seeing, and that you’re working with a living system and that the medium is the human spirit.”