

Taking the “Buzz” Out of Words By Theresa Elliott

“Ohmygod, is that what I’m supposed to do? Is this what people expect me to teach?” “I am SO mundane!” This is a reaction I had just last week after reading a workshop description that went something like this: “Learn to raise the prana of the hara to awaken and open the heart chakra to it’s fullest potential!”. Yikes! After 18 years of yoga, I still wonder, am I deep and esoteric enough to teach?

My goal as a teacher is to communicate, whether it pertains to a pose well-executed or a philosophical idea that conveys meaning and insight, perhaps allowing an opening or a new possibility for my students.

I catch myself trying to placate the “yoga police” who live in my head, insisting that I be “spiritual”. When I teach, I find it tempting to use words and phrases in class because they sound deep. And my using them implies I know what I am talking about. But I wonder, do I really know what these words mean? And then a more troubling question arises: does my use of buzz words like “karma”, “heart”, and “prana” really communicate meaning, or does it get in the way?

I have a rule around asana that is shared by many teachers. I do not teach poses I am not intimately acquainted with. I have extended this rule to philosophical or esoteric concepts. I do not talk about the human condition, life or mystical experiences that I have not personally been through.

I have gotten into the habit of asking myself, do I have an experience-based understanding of this word? If someone asked me to explain what I meant by the word “heart” for instance, could I explain it in a way that gives my students an insight, instead of a mind deadening cliché? And, more fundamentally, how do I see the word operating in my life?

Buzzwords stand in for complex subjects, they reduce and generalize. I like to think of buzzwords as needing “unpacking”. A way I do this is to take a common spiritual or mystical word and write a definition of it and how I have experienced it. The process of writing forces me to be very clear: the paper will not prompt me like a friend might, and I can literally see what I am thinking. The challenge is to be clear and create a definition that reflects me - not a reiteration of a definition from a teacher or from a book I have read, and not some easy cliché.

For example, my current definition of an open heart, and how it looks when I have one, goes something like this: an open heart comes from a psychological state that allows a suspension of judgment, leading to empathy or compassion and the ability to let people and events “in”. Joy often arises from such a state, but so does grief. Joy and grief are polar opposites, and to

be open to one, is to be open to the other. Much like light and dark, you cannot have just one. I experience a profound opening of the heart when I pick up my daughter from school. The joy that comes from seeing her is accompanied by an aching realization that she is growing, and that one day I will not be picking her up from school anymore.

By defining our words, we create clarity. And through clarity the possibility of understanding and growth. Consider this: what are the chances that we all have the same idea of what spirituality is? If I use a word that is subject to a million interpretations, does the word even have meaning, or is it now so vague as to mean everything and therefore nothing when used?

Here is another valuable exercise. Write out as many definitions of the word in question you can think of. You do not have to agree with the definitions, and it can be very helpful to read books or talk with friends as to what they think. This helps to get a perspective of what students may hear if you use the word when teaching.

For this purpose I went to the dictionary to see what Merriam had to say about the heart. Although “he” did not illuminate me on the meaning of an open heart, there was quite a listing of phrases containing the word heart and the quality that the phrase exemplified: <a cold heart>, pertaining to personality or disposition; <a leader with heart>, pertaining to compassion; <never lost heart>, pertaining to courage. You may be thinking chakra and your student may be thinking compassion!

I think the expectation we have of ourselves as teachers to be spiritual and use words we have not explored, examined and matured into actually undermines us and limits the depth and potential impact of our teaching. I believe the greatest gift we can give as teachers is to “just” be who we are. I realize this is not a simple task: it requires self-inquiry and work as we all have layers of rubbish that need to be cleared away. It also requires courage.

One of my goals for years has been that I be the same person when I teach as I am at home. Today, I’m pretty much the same in both places, except when I’m home I swear more and I am less diplomatic. My next goal is to get to the place where what goes on in my head is no different than what I say. I am not sure this will be good for business, but I hope this change will result in less static in my brain and an ability to see more clearly.

I believe if I am “being me”, I will be genuine when I teach - and though the “yoga police” in my head are still getting used to this idea, I’d much rather be a teacher true to her nature than someone who is “being deep”.

Theresa Elliott is Director of Taj Yoga and co-director of Pacific Yoga Teacher Training Program in Seattle. Core work, unique movement patterns and humor form the heart of

her teaching. She is featured in the book *30 Essential Poses: For Beginning Students and Their Teachers* by Judith Lasater and can be seen on YouTube (key in “Theresa Elliott”). She can be contacted at www.tajyoga.com.

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