

Addressing Scent and Sensitivity in Class

With allergies on the rise, many studios and teachers are trending toward scent-free alternatives to incense, essential oils, and scented candles. Find out when to avoid scents—and what to use instead.

By Angela Pirisi



No doubt, scent can be a powerful means of inducing both physical and neurological changes that can redirect bodily health and emotional states, such as the scent of lavender to induce calm. In yoga, incense or essential oils have traditionally been used to set the mood of a class.

"Scent denotes certain things, so we use scent to set a mood, energy, and space," explains Terri Kennedy, PhD, founder of Ta Yoga in New York City and Chair of the Board of Directors of Yoga Alliance.

"Incense was and is still used in classes because scent often has a relaxing effect," says Dr. Jeff Migdow, MD, who directs Prana Yoga teacher training programs through the Open Center in New York and is a holistic physician at the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health in Lenox, Massachusetts. "People relax more, thus stretch more fully and move more deeply; many scents also have a meditative effect."

Nevertheless, recent years have witnessed a growing trend of scent-free classes in response to individual preferences and health issues, such as environmental sensitivities and respiratory illnesses. Migdow says, as he can recall from his own practice, incense use was quite popular in the 1970s, but the increasing rate of allergies curbed its use by the '80s.

From Religion to Health

There are ritualistic reasons for burning incense, historically part of religious worship in Buddhist, Christian, Hindi, Islamic, and Jewish traditions. Today, however, health concerns have trumped tradition and spiritual connotations. For example, New York City Asthma Initiative and Tobacco Control Program classifies incense smoke as a form of harmful second-hand smoke. And a growing number of yoga teachers agree that having students inhale incense smoke during their practice, especially during pranayama when their breathing deepens, isn't a healthy proposition.

That's what Linda Karcher Howard, a yoga teacher in Annapolis, Maryland, believes, which is why she has been leading scent-free classes for more than 15 years. She says, "I have had numerous students who live with allergies, asthma, and other respiratory concerns. Scent-free classes provide the opportunity for these yoga students to take class without the irritant that scents often bring about."

The Powers of Distraction

It's also an extension of a yoga etiquette 101 rule: please do not wear fragrance or scents to class. "We are all individuals, and scents that appeal to me may not appeal to another person, and then they become a distraction to our yoga practice," says Howard.

That's true according to science, too, which has found that certain scents can be calming or arousing; but if you don't like them, they can have the opposite effect, inducing stress and aggression, says Alan Hirsch, a neurologist and founder of the Smell & Taste Treatment and Research Foundation in Chicago.

Scents, pleasant or unpleasant, catch our attention. "In the practice of yoga, we work toward moving away from distractions and turning our attention inward," says Howard. So whether pleasant or unpleasant, she explains, scent creates "distractions from the intent of the practice."

Richard Rosen is director of Piedmont Yoga Studio in Oakland, California, which is a "scent-free studio" that asks students not to wear fragrances to class. He agrees with Howard, explaining, "It seems to me that in a class, the teacher will want to minimize outside distractions so the students can more easily focus on themselves."

Being Sensible about Scent

Others who continue to use scent in some form have modified how they use it. "I tend to shy away from using any kind of incense or scented candles, because I actually find that it interferes with the quality of my voice when I lead chants. As far as using scented lotions, though, I'm all for it," says Alanna Kaivalya, a Jivamukti yoga teacher in New York City.

Because the Jivamukti tradition involves physical adjustments, Kaivalya says she enhances the experience by using an organic, vegan lotion infused with essential oils (such as lavender, rosemary, or mint), to rub on her students' necks and shoulders during [Savasana](#) (Corpse Pose). "This is aromatherapeutic goodness that gives students one more chance to let go and sink into the yogic-buzz," she explains.

Migdown, a pranayama expert who co-authored the book *Breathe In, Breathe Out*, says he now burns incense for 10 to 15 minutes before classes in the studio and waiting area. "That way, when students arrive, there's just a subtle feeling or vibration from the incense in the studio and lobby, but it's not so strong."

For Kennedy, her use of scented candles and incense evolved to a citrus spray. "Just a handful of students said scent bothered them, but it was enough for me to say it might affect their practice. And having fresh air as much as possible is people's preference, so we open windows, weather permitting."

Besides Using Scent

So what are some unscented ways to set the mood? "I use soft instrumental music, a mix of real and flameless candles, as well as my own voice," says Kennedy.

Sometimes, lightening the mood of the class is enough to get everyone positive and focused. For example, Rosen says, "I like to tell a joke. I'm trying to put the *ha* back in *hatha*". Others like to gently guide their students into a quiet, peaceful state, so that they can be more receptive to the teachings of yoga. "When we get to class start-time, I talk students through a bit of relaxation, just for a few minutes—it puts a margin of space between the rest of their day and their practice," says Howard.

Other yogic traditions can help to hit the right note and initiate novices into the spirit of yoga. For example, says Rosen, some teachers begin class with a Sanskrit chant. Or you can direct the class's attention "to one of the two propitious compass points, east or north."

Adjusting lighting and temperature can also help; Kennedy suggests getting rid of the stark overheads. "The ability to dim the lights is ideal," she says. For daytime classes, the most natural lighting is the best, such as sunlight. "In terms of temperature, we certainly don't want to freeze students out or overheat them," says Kennedy.

Whatever the path, the end is the same. "Most of all, setting a yogic mood is simply creating a safe space where a student feels she can be herself and be present with her own body and practice," says Kennedy.

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