



HOW TO DELIVER A GREAT DHARMA TALK

by Hari-kirtana das

Inspiration and Empowerment
*for yoga teachers who want to connect
the ancient wisdom of yoga to the modern practice of yoga*



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One of the most challenging aspects of teaching yoga is integrating yoga philosophy directly into an asana class or workshop. The ability to introduce a theme at the top of a class and then connect that theme to what's happening on the mat while simultaneously cueing poses and observing students is one of the skills that separates a good yoga teacher from a *great* yoga teacher. Over the many years that I've been training yoga teachers, this skill is the one that I'm most often asked to help teachers develop.

Of course, plenty of practitioners who come to yoga classes aren't interested in yoga philosophy; they just come for the physical practice. So, I'm often asked, "How do I find the right balance? How do I offer just enough yoga philosophy to satisfy those who want to hear it without turning off those who don't?"

Got a Stopwatch? Start it.

The first thing I do when I start a workshop is try to learn something about my audience. So, I ask everyone to tell me why the topic of the workshop is important to them and to share a seemingly insignificant detail about their lives outside of yoga.

At least half the stories I hear about life outside of yoga involve pets, now known as 'animal companions'. You can probably relate to this: if you don't have an animal companion in your life now, odds are you've had one in the past. We had a lot cats when I was growing up so I spent many a summer afternoon being entertained by kittens playing with one another in my backyard. Now, of course, we all watch them on YouTube.

One of the far out things about seeing cats or dogs or camels or chameleons through the lens of yoga philosophy is that we start to think of them less as animals and more like people in animal bodies. The first lesson of yoga philosophy is that we are not these temporary material bodies; we're eternal sparks of spiritual consciousness having a temporary material experience.

In yoga wisdom texts, the Sanskrit word *purusa* is used to indicate a conscious being or 'person' and it applies to all conscious beings, not just human beings. In the *Bhagavad-gita*, the essential text of yoga wisdom, we find a verse that says:

"Endowed with humility and knowledge, the wise see a learned and gentle sage, a cow, an elephant, a dog, and one who eats dogs, with equal vision". (Bg 5.18)

When we look at animals with this kind of ‘equal vision’ we don’t see a dog or a cat; we see a person in a dog body or a cat body. We don’t see a stinkbug or a skunk – however stinky or skunky they may be – we see people who, somehow or other, have taken birth in stinkbug or skunk bodies.

This kind of vision dramatically changes our relationship with our non-human companions, both in our homes and on our planet. So, if you haven’t previously considered this way of looking at other living beings, I encourage you to try to think of the animals in your life as people in animal bodies. And during your yoga practice, try to experience the feeling of being a person in an animal body when you enter into a pose that’s associated with an animal, such as Cat-Cow, Eagle Pose, or Hanumanasana.

I know for myself that when I use my asana practice to connect to this idea it becomes more than just an idea; it becomes a visceral experience. If we all take this idea for a test drive – in our practice on the mat and when we engage with our non-human companions at home – then it will transform our experience of interacting with animals.

And if we all have this kind of transformative experience then it can radically change the way that human beings relate to every other living being in the world.

Stop your Stopwatch.

Now, did you see what I just did? I eased into a ‘Dharma Talk’ in a casual and conversational way. Most of the time the students in my class don’t know I’m giving a dharma talk until I’m halfway through it. You may not have picked up on it until then, too. I offered you a micro-drop of yoga philosophy nested in a simple 5-part structure that began with a story anyone can relate to and ended with a grand vision for a better future for everyone... through yoga.

How long did it take you to read it? I’m betting 4 minutes or less: enough time to deliver the news, not enough time for people to get antsy. Try it again: go back and read my dharma talk out loud as if you were speaking to your class and see how long it takes you.

I came to the contemporary practice of yoga from a bhakti-yoga tradition where daily talks on yoga philosophy can last for an hour or more. So one of the first things I had to learn about teaching in a modern yoga environment was how to give a talk that conveyed an essential teaching from yoga philosophy in a very short amount of time.

This wasn’t as easy as I thought it would be. When I first started teaching asana classes my opening talks were only about 8 minutes long – a fraction of what I was used to. But I quickly came to the realization that this was still too long.

I knew because my first opportunity to teach regular evening class came at a studio that had a big clock on the wall right above the seat of the teacher. After speaking for what felt like just a few minutes, I noticed a student sneaking a peak at the clock above my head – a clear indication that they were wondering if I would ever stop talking.

I decided that I had just 5 minutes to complete my talk before people would want to start moving. Since teaching yoga philosophy was my real reason for becoming a yoga teacher in the first place, I worked extra hard to tighten up my talk to get it under 5 minutes and make it seem more like a conversation than a lecture.

You may also find it challenging to keep a Dharma Talk short, sweet, and on point. Some teachers tell me that they feel their yoga very deeply but have trouble organizing their thoughts into a tight, coherent message.

After a lot of thinking and a little research, I found a simple, five-part structure that helped me to make a personal connection with my students while sharing my personal realizations about the ancient teachings of yoga in a practical and meaningful way.

Using this structure will allow you to seamlessly pivot from having a casual conversation with your class to delivering a relatable tidbit of authentic yoga philosophy in less than five minutes.

Here's the structure:

Me / You / Transcendental Knowledge / Me / We

Let's take a closer look at each part of the structure:

Me: "This happened to me / I was doing this."

"This" can be something totally ordinary like walking your dog, doing the laundry, visiting a relative, etc., or it can be something totally amazing like climbing Mount Kilimanjaro, skydiving, or seeing the Aurora Borealis.

You: "you may have had a similar experience."

The people in your class do garden-variety life-asana every day or are likely to have had comparably amazing experiences at some point in their lives so, either way, they should be able to empathize with your experience.

Transcendental Knowledge: "There's a sutra / verse that speaks to this kind of experience / shows us a new way to look at this sort of thing."

This is the one essential element of the structure that everything else revolves around: deference to a traditional yoga wisdom text such as the *Yoga-sutras* or the *Bhagavad-gita*. You can reference traditional commentaries or contemporary insights but the straw that stirs this drink is bringing yoga's ancient sources of transcendental knowledge into your class.

Me: “When I looked at this experience through the lens of yoga philosophy / what this book of transcendental knowledge showed me / my personal realization from acting on the basis of this teaching was . . .”

Your personal realizations and transformations are the most credible testimony to the power of transcendental knowledge that you have to offer.

We: “When we see this through the eyes of yoga wisdom, we can all . . .”

- Experience an individual transformation (be the change)
- Contribute to a collective transformation (we want to see in world)

Let’s take an even closer look at each part of the structure to really see how they work:

1. Tell a story from your life. Yoga means ‘union’. It’s about relationships, making connections. Your students want to connect with you, get to know you a bit. So share a little piece of your life with them by telling a quick story about something you did or something that happened to you. It doesn’t have to be extraordinary or deeply personal. In fact, it’s better to share something that could happen to anyone: a common challenge, a simple joy, or one of life’s familiar annoyances. Take just a couple of minutes to share the experience and tell your students how it made you feel, what you thought about it, and how you responded to it or, perhaps more significantly, how you wanted to respond to it.

2. Invite empathy. Odds are that your experience is not entirely unique. So take a minute to ask your students if your story sounds familiar. You’ll probably see nods of recognition, of ‘been there, done that, know how you feel’. We share the same kinds of triumphs and tragedies, big and small. How we respond to life’s roller coaster is what matters. And one definition of ‘dharma’ is ‘the best way to respond to one’s destiny’. That brings us to the question of ‘how do we know the best way to respond to any given event in our lives?’

3. Ask the experts. We speak from a position of authority when we defer to the authority of a traditional yoga wisdom text. Deference to a traditional teaching will confer more authority on you as a teacher than making up your own philosophy or even referencing contemporary teachers. So share a passage from a book of ancient yoga wisdom that speaks to your story. What advice do the sages of antiquity have for us? How do self-realized yogis respond to such situations? The amazing thing about traditional yoga wisdom texts is that, if we spend a little time with them and try to live their teachings, they have a way of telling us just what we need to hear when we need to hear it. Remember that yoga philosophy is the systematic illumination of basic concepts and principles that underlie the practice of yoga. Traditional texts are treasure-troves of timeless wisdom that present those concepts and principles while offering valuable insights into the human condition.

Take a minute to read or recite the text and add some relevant comments based on your own realization that illuminates the significance of the text.

4. Share the effect. Tell your students how seeing the key elements in your story through the eyes of yoga's wisdom tradition transformed your experience. You can bolster your student's faith in the transformative power of yoga by telling them how you have been transformed! Realization is simply applied knowledge so you don't have to be a philosophy scholar to teach yoga philosophy; all you have to do is try to live whatever little bit of yoga philosophy you're studying and share your realizations along the way.

5. See the future. Ask a rhetorical question about what the world would be like if we all took our cues from the masters of yogic wisdom. After all, we don't just do yoga to change ourselves; we do yoga to change the world by changing ourselves. So encourage your students to join you on the journey, starting right now: link the experience of yoga wisdom in the world to your experience of doing yoga on your mat. The key to helping students take their practice off the mat and into their lives is to share your experience of living a life of yoga with them.

Why delivering your Dharma Talk as a story is so important

The yoga tradition relies far more on stories as vehicles for philosophical ideas and wisdom teachings than on codified instructions like sutras. And for good reason: human beings are hard-wired to be receptive to storytelling, which may explain why studies show that people are 22 times more likely to remember facts and ideas when those facts and ideas are a part of a story. Storytelling also encourages constructive engagement with the story's message and builds an emotional connection between the audience and the storyteller. And when you establish an emotional connection with your students, it will be easier for you to re-create your vision of how the teachings of yoga illuminate a path to a better world in the minds of your students.

Keys to using this structure

The first key to successfully using this system is knowing that your opening story is the hook that makes it work. Most students will happily give you a few minutes to tell your story if it's casual and conversational. As long as it doesn't feel like a lecture, you're golden.

The second key is timing. Your story is the ice-breaker that pulls people in so you should give more time to the lead-in story – about 2 minutes – than to the other four parts. The next part, getting everyone to empathize with your story, only takes a few seconds. That still leaves 30-45 seconds or so to introduce a relevant sutra or verse

and then 2 minutes to describe your transformation and how the world can be a better place if everyone had a similarly transformative experience.

The third key is practice. Your goal is to complete your talk in 5 minutes from the moment you casually start telling your story to the moment your signal that it's time to begin the practice. So take your talk for a test drive and see if you can deliver each part of the structure in its allotted time. The Vaudevillian comic Jimmy Durante once said, 'you wouldn't believe how much work it takes to make this look unrehearsed.' If you take 20 minutes to go through it three times before your class you'll know that it will flow smoothly for 5 minutes in front of your class.

The fourth key is to open your class with your Dharma Talk, *before* you chant 'Om' or do whatever you do to get your class centered. Give your talk first, bring everyone to a place where they can set an intention based on the theme of your talk, *then* chant or do whatever you do to get everyone centered, and then take your class into the physical practice. You don't want to get everyone centered, then channel your inner 'Peanuts Teacher', and then have to re-center everyone. Make it flow by putting your talk before your centering ritual.

Here's one more example of a Dharma Talk:

1. Me: *"This happened to me / I was doing this."*

One time, about twenty years ago, I walked into a burning building. I couldn't see anything. But I could smell the smoke and I could feel intense heat pressing against the front of my body.

I slowly and mindfully walked *toward* where the heat was coming from.

At which point my mind started to send me a message that said: "You're going the wrong way! You need to go the other way!"

But I ignored my mind and moved forward through the pitch-black room toward a fire that I knew was hiding behind a wall somewhere out in front of me.

As I stepped forward, I saw a few thin threads of fire flicker and vanish up above my head so I stopped . . . and a second later a huge burst of flame billowed across the entire ceiling like an upside down ocean rolling in at high tide. I was standing beneath a blazing canopy of rippling fire.

But not by myself: there were a dozen Probationary Firefighters on the line with me. I let go of the hose and adjusted the aperture on my video camera while the men in front of me shot quick hits of water in a straight stream up at the ceiling.

I used to work for the New York City Fire Department. My job was to produce training videos. The simulated fire was part of a training exercise taking place in a building at the FDNY Training Center on Randall's Island. My role was to record the performance of the Probationary Firefighters for evaluation purposes.

The big take-away from this experience was that one of the first skills a firefighter has to develop is the ability to control the mind.

2. You: *“you may have had a similar experience.”*

You may never have walked into a burning building but I’ll bet there have been times in your life when you had to put out a fire of one kind or another. And to do it, you had to stand up to the heat even if your mind told you to get out of the kitchen.

3. Transcendental Knowledge: *“There’s a sutra / verse that speaks to this kind of experience / shows us a new way to look at this sort of thing.”*

The effort to control the mind in the face of the mind’s opposition to being controlled produces friction. And friction produces heat. Developing the ability to tolerate that heat is essential for gaining mastery over the mind. In the Yoga-sutras, this kind of self-discipline is called *tapasya*; the voluntary acceptance of discomfort, and specifically heat, for the sake of personal growth.

Tapasya is the part of our yoga practice that prepares us to deal with whatever kinds of fire life sends our way. We learn how to tolerate constructive discomfort by using our practice to build up a fire in our minds and bodies, and then we lean into the heat as an exercise in gaining mastery over the mind.

As we gain control of the mind, we can begin to still the fluctuations of the mind. Stillness of the mind is how the Yoga-sutras define yoga as a state of being that allows us to experience ourselves in our true, pure, and joyful nature.

4. Me: *“When I looked at this experience through the lens of yoga philosophy / what this book of transcendental knowledge showed me / my personal realization from acting on the basis of this teaching was . . .”*

In my own practice, I try to invoke my inner firefighter by using my intelligence and determination to control my mind and tolerate whatever heat my practice is generating, with faith that a higher, stronger, better, and truer version of myself will come out from the other side of the fire.

5. We: *“When we see this through the eyes of yoga wisdom, we can all . . .”*

So, as we start moving on our mats today, I encourage you to use your intelligence to both listen to your body so you can respond to its needs and control when your mind so you can lean into the heat your practice is generating because making *tapasya* a part of our practice will help bring about an experience of the positive transformation our practice is ultimately meant for.

Now try it yourself: Use this worksheet to compose your own Dharma Talk.

Pro Tip: Our writing voice is usually different from our speaking voice so be sure to read what you write out loud after you write your first draft. In addition to making sure that you can say it in under five minutes, you'll probably edit what you wrote as you hear yourself speak so that your Dharma Talk sounds less like the way you write and more like the way you really speak.

1. Me: *"This happened to me / I was doing this."*

2. You: *"you may have had a similar experience."*

3. Transcendental Knowledge: *“There’s a sutra / verse that speaks to this kind of experience / shows us a new way to look at this sort of thing.”*

4. Me: *“When I looked at this experience through the lens of yoga philosophy / what this book of transcendental knowledge showed me / my personal realization from acting on the basis of this teaching was . . .”*

5. We: *“When we see this through the eyes of yoga wisdom, we can all . . .”*

The Take-away: Offering a few reflective thoughts at the beginning of a class about how yoga philosophy makes an impact on your life is a great way to make a personal connection with students and inspire your students to integrate the principles and values of yoga into their own lives. You’ll feel a genuine connection to your students by sharing a little part of yourself with them and your students will feel inspired by your personal example of how to integrate yoga philosophy into our lives. The trick is to keep it personal, focused, and short. Using this system for structuring your Dharma Talks will ensure that you do just that.

Want to learn more about yoga philosophy, see other examples of how to use story-telling for teaching philosophy, and get some great jumping off points for discussions, journaling, and doing inner work? My book, *Journey Into the Bhagavad Gita*, is especially written to meet the needs of yoga teachers who want to integrate yoga philosophy into classes, workshops, and teacher training programs. [CLICK HERE](#) to learn more about it and get a free sample chapter.