

Art of Teaching Yoga in the Iyengar Tradition: Observation, Adjustments and Use of Props

Tens of thousands of adulating yogis – students, teachers, and devotees of B.K.S. Iyengar were packed in the San Francisco auditorium during his recent October, 2005 U.S. tour - exemplifying the huge popularity of Iyengar Yoga in the West. I am one small being sitting in a distant upper balcony seat remembering the pivoting first moment I personally met this man 30 years ago in India. The twinkle in his eyes is still glistening; the husky voice exactly the same. When asked by the emcee to what he attributes all his fame, respect, and recognition, Mr. Iyengar simply and humbly says, “to my mother and father for giving me the name of Iyengar; the rest is a gift from the Divine...I feel your love and affection; but it is really about the practice.”

It is always about the practice to Mr. Iyengar - the consciousness with which we enter the practice, the awareness of all the myriad layers of our being in the practice. His innovations are standard features today in the practice and presentation of asanas. He inspired the way we think about alignment and developed anatomically precise details for instructions. He pioneered the use of props as learning tools when he first introduced his style of yoga to the U.S. nearly 50 years ago. And it is still just about the practice.

I believe Mr. Iyengar’s philosophy centers around

bringing full self-awareness to the practice of asana. He says that students should be self-aware, not self-conscious. In an excerpt from his new book, *Light On Life, The Yoga Journey to Inner Peace, and Ultimate Freedom* (2005 Rodale Press), he expounds on this subject. “Self-consciousness is when the mind constantly worries and wonders about itself, doubting constantly and being self-absorbed. When you are self-conscious, you are going to exhaust yourself. You are also going to strain the muscles unnecessarily because you are thinking about the asana and how far you want to stretch. You are not experiencing the asana and stretching according to your capacity. Self-awareness is the opposite of self-consciousness. When you are self-aware, you are fully within yourself, not outside yourself looking in. You are aware of what you are doing without ego or pride.”

The art of teaching others stems from the art of practicing on one’s self. In order to approach my daily asana practice with fresh enthusiasm rather than habit, I must recharge and re-ignite my intellectual awareness. I must be at every minute conscious, aware, and alive in every cell of my being, and wake up parts of the body that are sleeping.

When teaching the asanas to others, I must help to bring that full awareness to each student in each posture. Suppose I

observe in my student a lack of awareness, a lack of intelligence, moving out the extension of the arms. Perhaps I see that the intelligence stops at the wrist, rather than moving completely out the tips of the fingers. Where there is laziness, there is a loss of intelligence, a collapse. As a teacher, I must coach my student to be aware of that lazy part; not in a judgmental way from the outside, or to reach an outer form, but by bringing their awareness to their full capacity when now they are only engaging 80% of their intelligence.

Mr. Iyengar teaches us as teachers to observe the action in our students’ postures. True knowledge, he says, is when action and analysis are one. To reflect and analyze in each pose opens the way for true understanding. In demonstrating the asanas to us, he would bring our attention to the outer edge of his back foot, for instance, and have us observe how he is conscious of the weight placed in the back foot at the same time performing a deep lunge with the forward leg and vertical lift of the Spine. His inner eyes are everywhere simultaneously observing, analyzing, adjusting - “See and learn” he would often say.

I will always remember the class in India when he was teaching us to how to see – to observe. We were all practicing Urdhva Dhanurasana – Upward Bow, a strong backbend. He kept

referring to the “equal intelligence of the spine” in back bending postures. We observed his back bending pose as he described the awareness throughout his body. We then attempted the pose ourselves. Many of us struggled with the arm strength and effort to fully extend the arms. Some were more flexible than others; but he only encouraged us to go as far as we could maintain that equal intelligence in the spine. Then suddenly he stopped the entire class. “Come here!” he roared – “See and learn”. He then asked two students to perform the backbend. One was a very flexible student, and the other a beginning student. The more flexible student was pushing her chest too aggressively over the hands, her lower back was severely compressed and there was very little weight in her feet. Her spine was in the shape of a pyramid, there was no action in the lumbar spine to lengthen, and there was no awareness in the legs. The beginning student could not yet fully extend his arms, and yet his spine was working with equal

intelligence, and his weight was placed evenly in his hands and feet. It was a dramatic example of how to see and observe.

The Art of Adjustment is the next layer of understanding as a teacher. If my student could fully extend their arms in backbend if only there was a block placed under their wrists at an angle to slightly decrease the shoulder rotation, then I, as the teacher must attend to that modification. If the theme of a class is the equal intelligence of the spine in standing poses, and I see and observe that my student could in fact lengthen the spine more fully if their hand was not struggling to touch the floor, then I must bring a block for that hand, and guide them to the understanding of why.

The use of props such as a block, belt, chair, bolster, and the solid wall is integral to the Iyengar tradition of teaching yoga asanas. The props are learning tools, not crutches, to help us realize our full capacity in the pose. Often both in

our home practice, class or when guiding others, we can go so much more fully into a spinal extension, or a deep backbend, or a still and balanced inverted pose with the aid of the appropriate prop.

One of the greatest gifts of studying the benefits of Iyengar yoga is the understanding of the Therapeutic practice. Which supported poses stimulate organs so that their function is increased, as “prescription poses” for female organ cramping, digestive problems, organic sluggishness. Which poses are quieting to the brain, and how can I, or my student benefit from the use of a prop to go much more deeply into that quieting forward bend. These are the gifts, the understanding, the gems, passed on to us as Iyengar teachers, students, devotees. Mr. B.K.S. Iyengar, Gururji, - he is our guiding Light.

**-by Ann Barros, Certified
Iyengar Yoga Instructor**

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