

Understanding the principles behind Iyengar Yoga

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In the year 1998, Prashantji paid a tribute to Guruji on the occasion of Guru Purnima through a talk titled as Yoga: Our System. (Yoga Vaani No. 69 June 2002) In this talk, he very clearly and precisely articulated as to "What is Iyengar Yoga?" and the unique features of the system (of Iyengar Yoga) being precision and alignment, sequencing, timing and use of props. Today, he observes that many of the practitioners are being so obsessed with these features that they are forgetting the principle behind them. In this article, we clarify the common mis-understanding of these features and an explanation behind the principles of Iyengar Yoga practice.

Yoga is symmetry - BKS Iyengar

Before Prashantji gave these talks on our system, we as Iyengar Yoga students, would often fumble when asked "what is Iyengar Yoga?" It is yoga as practiced by Guruji Yogacharya BKS Iyengar. If we were asked to specify in what way it was different from "other" types of yoga then we would be unclear in our responses. Many of us had never done "other" forms and knew yoga as Iyengar Yoga. Many of us had never bothered to study the yoga texts to be able to articulate what was so unique about Iyengar yoga and in what way it authenticated what was stated in the ancient texts. So, Prashantji felt it necessary that we clearly know what we are practicing or supposed to practice and so clearly articulated the unique features of "Iyengar Yoga".

Today, five years later, if any Iyengar Yoga teacher is asked to express what is so unique about Iyengar Yoga then he would have no difficulties in expressing that "Iyengar Yoga is characterised by precision and alignment, sequencing, timing and the use of props". Unfortunately, as Prashantji again clarifies, that we have become so obsessed with these "4 unique features" that we have forgotten the principles behind them. By doing this we are only looking at Iyengar Yoga superficially and not at the real teachings of Guruji. The situation is analogous to many of the rituals, which are common in many civilizations. There was logic, a rationale, a reason behind each of these rituals. The principle behind these ceremonies was lost over the years.

For example, it was very common to have elaborate rituals signifying important milestones in human life such as birth, puberty, marriage and death in most civilizations. These "rituals" are now often ridiculed, considered unscientific or superstitious and often looked down upon by so-called intellectuals. These elaborate rituals were basically a preparation for a major change. It would give individuals time to absorb and prepare themselves with the new phase entering their life so that the transition would be smoother. Imagine a death in the family. The interactions with friends and family during the rituals that follow give the near and dear ones time to accept and absorb the loss. Otherwise, the psychological trauma of death in the absence of any support systems could lead to the collapse of the surviving individual.

Today, Prashantji notices that many of the "uniquenesses" of Iyengar Yoga are turning into rituals and we are forgetting the principles behind these. If we do not go to the roots of these unique features of Iyengar Yoga then what is today considered the "strength" of Iyengar Yoga would lead to our own down fall and also ridicule of our system. And, this would only happen because we are interpreting Iyengar Yoga from our superficial understanding and not the depth to which Iyengar Yoga really is!

Precision and alignment: Precision and alignment in the practice of the various asanas forms the hallmark of Iyengar Yoga. If legs are to be straight then they have to be absolutely straight. If the legs are to be bent at the knees then they should be right angle between the thigh and the calf. There has to be an alignment between the

inner and outer wrist when the hands are lifted up in Urdhva Hastasana, between the left and right leg in Tadasana and Sirsasana; how the weight has to be equally distributed on the front and back of the foot in Tadasana.

Even the junior-most Iyengar Yoga teacher would start emphasising precision and alignment in his/her very first Iyengar Yoga class. However, some of the teachers are getting obsessed by "precision and alignment" of the body to a point of ridicule and are forgetting the reason why Guruji insists on precision. The precision is not just for the geometrical presentation of the structure of the body!

The precision in an asana is not merely meant for the alignment of the part but for the proper functioning of the human being. If the body is aligned with precision then the breath is aligned with that same precision, if the breath is balanced then the mind, emotions and senses get balanced. We have to study the connections of how these precise adjustments work on the entire human being.

If we are asked to spread and create space between the metatarsals in Tadasana it is not just to align the inner and outer foot for the sake of the foot. Even a first time practitioner would realise that extending the foot leads to a firm grip on the quadriceps (the thigh muscles) which move closer to the thigh bone. A firmness in the thighs leads to a sharpness and lift in the gastric and lower abdominal region (which is the samanic and apanic region). This lift in turn elates the thoracic and pranic region; the breathing automatically becomes deeper and rhythmic with corresponding changes to the senses, mind and emotions. So the precision and alignment should be accompanied by a study on the effects on the breath and the mind. As a practitioner progresses, he/she needs to learn how the senses, the mind and the breath have to and should be utilised to align the body.

Timing: Iyengar Yoga practitioners are known for their "ability" to stay for prolonged duration of time in different asanas. For a beginner, it does mean developing a will-power and is essential in early stages of practice. However one has to evolve beyond the realms of external force i.e. will. As Guruji has explained in his talk on citishakti (YR 10.4; 2003), one should evolve in one's practices whereby one performs an asana not merely by external force of power of the mind but the practice should be such that one intrinsically wants to stay in the asana. It is that atma (citti) which gets you to perform the asana. Then, naturally sthirata (stability) and sukhata (gladness) come in an asana. One should not be staying in the asanas just because one's neighbour is doing so or stay in the pose because the clock demands.

One should stay in the asana as long as one is contemplative, reflective in that asana so that one becomes meditative in whatever asana one is performing. We may extend our chronological duration of staying in the asana but at the cost of quality. Such a practice has no meaning but is in fact detrimental.

Sage Patanjali also mentions that asanas are mastered when prayatna becomes saithilya. So we need to stay in an asana such that the effort required to perform it minimises. So we may stay for the same amount of chronological time but the effort required to maintain it should be diminishing. As Prashantji has often mentioned in class "Do not inspire till you expire".

The performance of an asana includes going into, staying and coming out of the asana. We tend not to give enough emphasis to coming out of the asana. For us, the asana ends with the staying phase. We extend the chronological time of our stay to such an extent that we have no energies left to thoughtfully come out of the asana. It is like utilising all one's energies and resources while going up the mountain and having nothing left to come down.

Sequencing: As Iyengar Yoga practitioners, we are aware that it is not just the asanas but how you perform them, how long you perform them and also the sequence in which they are performed which determine the effect of these asanas. The sequence in which the asanas are performed is determined by various factors. These

include the purpose of practice, the weather, time of the day, the health status of the practitioner and the level of practice. With over 200 asanas, there can be any number of permutations and combinations. However, there are certain thumb rules. For example, Sarvangasana is never practiced before Sirsasana. Practice generally ends with Savasana or any other such relaxing asanas.

Unfortunately, some students and teachers are tending to go "overboard" with the concept of sequences. They think that sequences are like mantras. One sequence for one disease. One sequence for one individual. It was quite amusing when a foreign student at the Institute felt that she was not taught at RIMYI as she had not been given HER sequence. Although she was attending classes by Geetaji and Prashantji for over a month! It is important to reiterate here that one needs to understand the principles behind sequencing rather than memorising the sequences alone! Repeating a sequence taught at the Institute will not essentially lead to the same effect.

Props: Props have been a fruit of Guruji's innovative genius. It is because of the prop that people of all ages and health status can perform asanas with ease and attain benefits of the practice of yoga. As Guruji explained during his presentations during the 85th birthday celebrations one should not be using a prop only as a crutch or a support but learn from the prop. This aspect is not being dealt with here as it has already been covered in "Why Do We Use Props" YR 11.1; 2004.

Hierarchy in practice: One of the most important aspects of Iyengar Yoga is hierarchy in practice. A beginner may be taught Trikonasana in his very first class while Guruji also practices Trikonasana after 70 years. Both these asanas are Trikonasana but the quality of the asana is totally different. For a beginner, the asana is totally on the skeletal plane whilst Guruji's Trikonasana would be in a state of rpediation in Trikonasana. A beginner's Trikonasana would be controlled and guided by his/her teacher whilst Guruji's Trikonasana would be guided by his citti.

Thus, as students of Iyengar yoga, we have to practice asana and progress in the hierarchy of our practice. We should align our sharira. It is imperative to mention here that sharira which is loosely translated as body in English, in reality encompasses our breath, mind, senses, intellect and emotions. So although we start with physical alignment, we have to progress to include the complete meaning of the sharira.

We should evolve so as to time our practices not only by the clock but to perform them to attain sthirata and sukhata with the practice being progressively being governed by the will, mind, breath, intelligence and finally the citti.

If and only if we understand the principles behind the unique features of Iyengar yoga will we be able to progress in the hierarchy in our practice: which is the fifth and most important aspect of Iyengar Yoga.

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