

Self-Practice

Cecilia Harrison

This edition of Iyengar Yoga News explores the theme 'self-practice'. IYN is honoured to have two exceptional international Iyengar yoga teachers contribute to this theme. Dr Rajvi Mehta¹ gives a wonderful, illuminating personal insight into self-practice from her earliest days as a student of Mr. Iyengar in Mumbai to her work now as practitioner, teacher and researcher in yoga therapy in an interview. Mr Faeq Biria² shares with us an article on self-practice and the codification he has made of yoga postures that prepare the body for asana practice, discussing method and means through ancient texts and a life spent learning from Guruji. Both the interview and the article bring to life something of the extraordinary texture of the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute, Pune, India.

Iyengar Yoga Texts

A totally transformative yoga practice sequence is given at the end of Yogacharya B.K.S. Iyengar's book *Light on Life*.

Mr. Iyengar calls the sequence "Asanas for Emotional Stability". He outlines *asanas* to calm the mind and cool the brain, *asanas* to balance the intelligence of the head (the intellectual centre) and the intelligence of the heart (the emotional centre), *asanas* to stimulate the brain for positive thinking, an *asana* to bring quietness in the body, and an *asana* that allows the practitioner to experience inner silence.

In *Light on Yoga* Mr Iyengar gives a short three day course "which whenever followed will benefit the body and bring harmony to the mind" (p.466).

Geeta Iyengar's *Basic Guidelines for Teachers of Yoga* gives ten sequences that can go in rotation after students learn the *asanas* from "Preliminary Course" – this variety of sequences of *asanas* she describes: "asanas work effectively on the body,

mind and breath in order to bring about the required change" (p.57)

Yoga changes us and transforms our energies. The texts of B.K.S. Iyengar and Geeta Iyengar are the cornerstone of Iyengar yoga practitioners self-practice. Geeta Iyengar's superlative new book *Yoga in Action – Intermediate Course I* provides a method for practice that, she writes, gives "a clue to the student on how to approach one's practice and how one has to form practice sequences" (p. 111). The chapter on *pranayama* – the importance of *pranayama* – is for people who seek "calmness, quietness, silence and peace of mind" (p.101).

Daily Practice – Why is it important?

The Dalai Lama writes the forward to B.K.S. Iyengar's *Core of the Yoga Sutra's*. The Dalai Lama acknowledges the diversity of different traditions: "The most important thing is practice in daily life that is how we can gradually get to know the true value of whatever teaching we follow".

B.K.S. Iyengar writes "make your yoga sessions a daily practice" (p. 386 in *Yoga: The Path to Holistic Health*)

In *How to Practice* the Dalai Lama writes: "the central method for achieving a happier life is to train your mind in a daily practice that weakens negative attitudes and strengthens positive ones" (p.5)

Through Iyengar yoga practice we seek to transform ourselves. This is a spiritual practice – our aim is to increase awareness in order to bring freedom through the exchange between body and mind learnt in *asana* and *pranayama*.

1. Rajvi Mehta, senior teacher at Iyengar Yogashraya in Mumbai, India. Rajvi taught at the annual IY(UK) conference 2013.

2. Faeq Biria co-directs the Iyengar Yoga Centre in Paris. He teaches annual Iyengar Yoga intensives at Blacon, France.

Yoga-Kritya (Self-Practice)

Faeq Biria

Self-practice is the very foundation of yoga and all other paths of inner quest. I borrowed this term *yoga-kritya* from the great epic of India, *The Mahabharata* (XII. 294.6). It means *the yoga practice*.

The terms that we often use for practice are *abhyasa* and *sadhana* (which includes *tapas*). *Sadhana* conveys generally the idea of “means” and “aids” and especially the means and aids for emancipation. In the second chapter of yoga sutras, Patanjali gives the three fold *Kriya-yoga* as the method of *sadhana* and the *astanga yoga* as the means to do *sadhana*.

He talks about *abhyasa* in the first chapter. This chapter is meant especially for the most vehement yogis. The precise description of Nagoji Bhatta of *abhyasa* as “the attempts made by yogi again and again, to bring back the *citta* to the state of stability within the stream of unmoving one-pointedness, whenever it wanders outside of the object of meditation” shows the important position of *abhyasa* in the hierarchy of yoga practice. For this reason, some of the traditional commentators of yoga sutras like Nagoji Bhatta himself and Ramananda Yati believe that *abhyasa* and its following component *vairagya* cannot be practiced by someone who hasn’t yet attained the state of *Citta-suddhi* (purification of the mind). *Vacasprti Misra* goes even further and demands the

“purification of the entire personality” to become eligible for *abhyasa*.

It must be based on this view that the yogis like Hariharananda Aranya, having most probably in mind the three works of Lord Patanjali (that we repeat in our daily invocation) consider the *kriya-yoga* as the method to reach to a three-fold *samyama*:

- *Tapas* as the control of the body
- *Svadyaya* as the control of the speech
- *Isvara-pranidhana* as the control of the mind

The order of transformation

Though I am asked to write about *asana* practice, yet I have to clear a first erroneous conception which consists of considering *sadhana* as only the practice of *asanas* and the practice of *asanas* only on a physical plane.

In our Guruji’s assessment of yoga sutras, *sadhana* means the practice of all petals of yoga on physical, physiological, energetical, mental, intellectual and spiritual planes, with zeal, awareness and devotion. The oral tradition of yoga has set an evolutive diagram for the natural transformation of a disciplined adept, and his evolution from mild (*mrdu*) state to a supremely intense (*tivra-samvegin*) level.

Nature of Practitioner	Nature of Practice					
	physical	physiological	energetical	mental	intellectual	spiritual
Level of Practitioner mrdu (mild) ↓ Tivra-Samvegin (Guruji Iyengar)	100	80	60	40	20	10
	100	100	80	60	40	20
	100	100	100	80	60	40
	100	100	100	100	80	60
	100	100	100	100	100	80
	100	100	100	100	100	100

This means that a yogi of our Gururji's attainment can engage fully his entire physical, mental and spiritual being in an *asana* and can get any *asana* from any layer, from the skin to the innermost core of his being. This idea may look strange, even shocking to the philosophers and they may even object against it: How can the *atman* or *purusa*, the immutable self, which cannot be grasped (the famous quotation in *Bṛhad-Araṇyaka-Upaniṣad*), which reveals itself only to itself, do an *asana*? The answer is by reaching to Gururji Iyengar's standard.

Three major principles in the practice of asanas

1. The aim and goal of practice:

We must define why we are practicing a sequence or an *asana* and we must not forget it throughout our practice. "Never lose the sight of the self", says a famous yogic adage.

We must also clearly define whether the aim of practice is:

- to learn?
- to consolidate?
- to study?
- to reach maturity in the *asana*?²

2. The personal mood:

The approach to practice is very important. According to *Bhagavad-Gita*, the fruits of practice depend upon the spirit with which we undertake the practice. Some 40 years ago, I read an advice in *Linga Maha-purana*, that even after four decades remains fresh in my mind and guides me in my daily practice: "The aspirant must undertake the practice always with a good mood".

3. Vinyasa or the proper sequencing:

It is indispensable to respect a proper sequencing to reach the desired *asana* and to choose a right method to realise through that desired *asana* the desired effects or states inherent to it.

Etymologically *vinyasa* means "arrangement", "order", "putting in", "placing down" or "position (of the limbs)". Most probably the term was used in the ancient art of jewelry as the art of

arranging and positioning the gems, and reached *yogasastra* through *Mimamsa-darsana*.

Gururji Iyengar defines *Vinyasa* as "a sequence to reach the ultimate or final state of *asana*, where the mind and intelligence, along with energy (*prana*) and conscious awareness (*prajna*) are built up within the system in different aspects of human beings sequentially and gradually"¹. There is a great adage attributed to a yogi of old times, Vamana Rishi: "O yogi, never attend the practice without proper sequencing".

Three stages in the practice of an asana

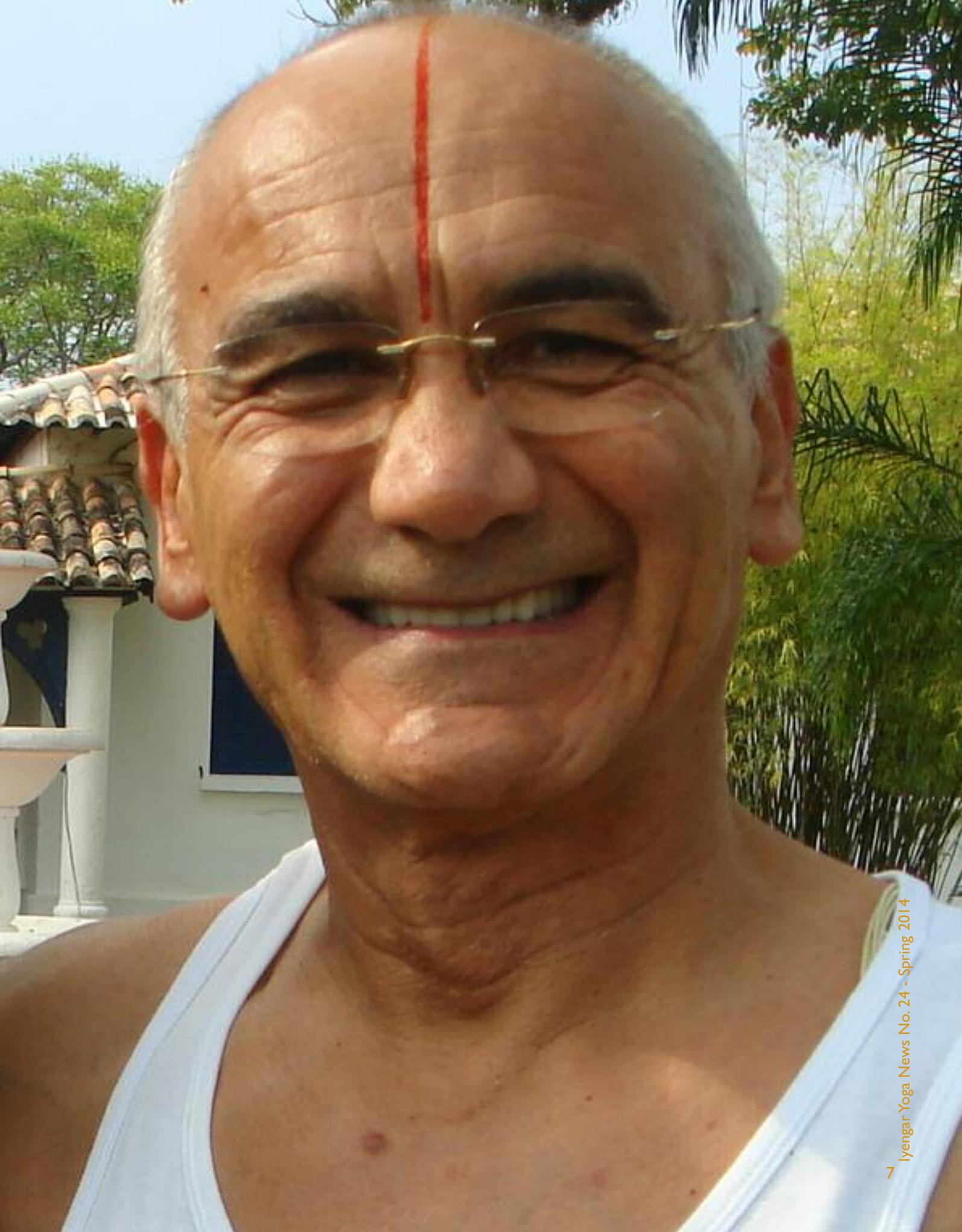
The *yogasanas* must be performed with respect to the three stages of practice of an *asana*. Indeed the yogis have divided the practice of an *asana* into three stages², borrowing two terms from *Sad-Linga*³ for the first and the third stages:

1. Upakrama³, the beginning, the introduction or: how to enter into the pose.

Vacaspati Misra, Vijnana Bhikṣu and Bhoja Raja, all believe that the word *asana* has as root "as" (to sit) and define it as *asyate 'nena*, that is "the procedure and way through which one enters in the pose". Unfortunately most of Iyengar yoga practitioners feel only concerned by this stage and only on a purely physical level. Prashantji often insists on the fact that *upakrama* must condition the body, the mind, the intelligence and the awareness to go into the pose, and to reach the purpose of it.²

2. Sthiti, maintaining or: how to stay in the pose. This is the stage where the very effects of the *asana* are created. The students of yoga who visit Pune and observe our Gururji's practice, are amazed to see the stability and the deep introspective state with which the master stays in each pose. We can almost consider this stage as *asana-jaya* or the conquest of the pose.

3. Upasamhara³, the end, the conclusion, the recapitulation or, how to conclude the pose.



How to prepare the body and its components for the practice of *asanas*

Once I have read in one of the Puranas (most probably in *Visnu Maha-Purana*) that in old times the guru, before initiating a disciple into a new *asana*, used to give him proper *mantras* which prepared the specific parts of his body to get the pose without effort.

Prashantji has studied deeply the effects of vibrations of Sanskrit alphabet on the body and mind and I am sure that readers who have had the good luck of participating in his classes have been amazed realising the powerful effect of these vibrations on their body, breath and mind.⁴

In the early 1970s when I was travelling as a student of yoga, I saw in a yoga community how they fed the aspirants, from childhood, with a special diet (with a completely secret recipe) for about twelve years. This, along with three sessions of practice a day, created a full disposition in their bodies to get the most complicated *asanas* with a

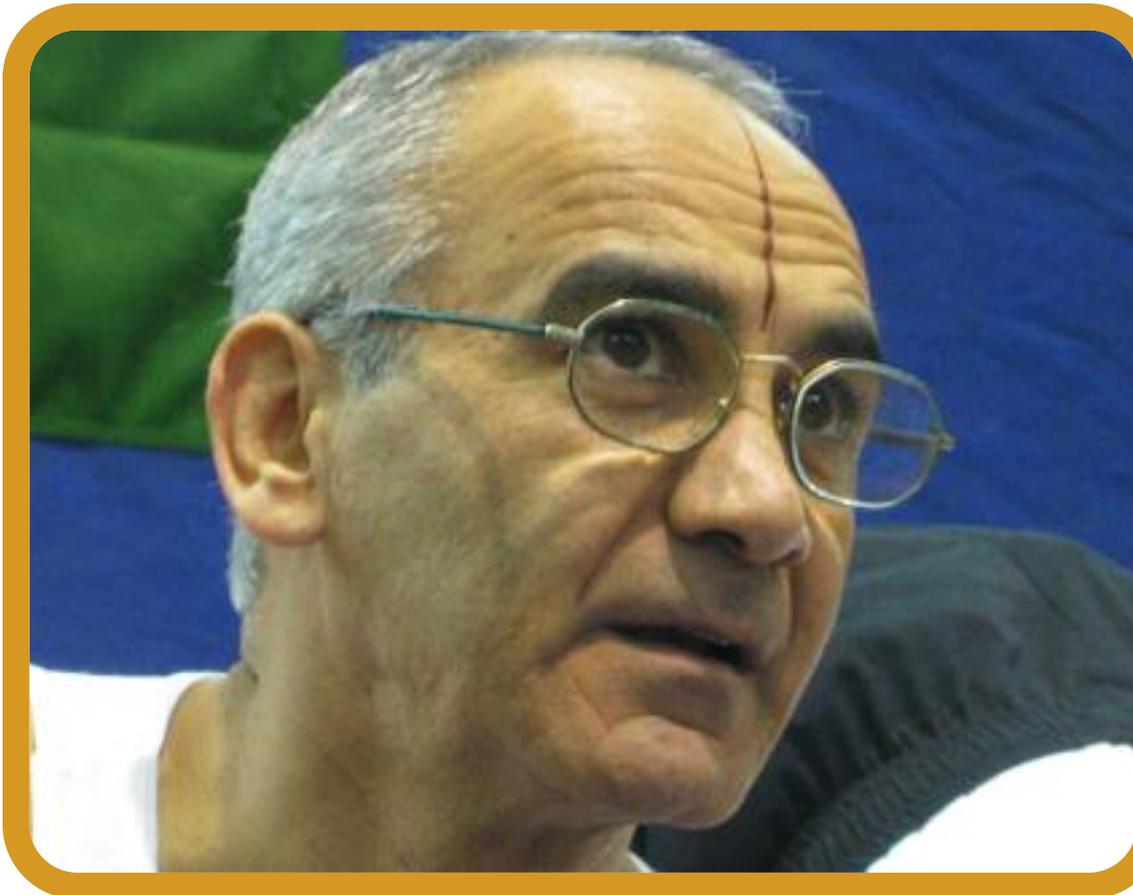
great ease (I saw the children in the backyard of the monastery having fun, balancing in *Kandasana* with the heels under the throat!). I witnessed also a Kalaripayattu⁵ master of Nair clan who through diet, full rest in a dark room and long sessions of oil massage, created such a softness in the body tissues of his disciples that he could adjust even the scoliotic spines, before re-muscling the body again, curing deformity.

How Guruji's words ignited in me the reflection over the preparation of the body for *asanas*

Two incidents particularly made me think of finding the way to prepare the body for entering in a specific *asana*: During the years when Iyengar yoga was beginning to be spread in the world, many people used to practice with *Light on Yoga*. Sometimes they used to write to Guruji about their injuries caused by practice or their failures in getting some advanced *asanas*. It was amazing to see how quickly Guruji used to answer them: if the injury came while practicing a pose, it was

because another pose, which was on a lower hierarchy in *Light on Yoga*, has not been well practiced. If one did fail in getting a new pose, it was because the preparatory poses in preceding weeks of the programme have not been well mastered.

The second incident happened



when a senior student of Guruji asked him about the apparent incoherency of some of the advanced sequences of *Light on Yoga*. Guruji answered that he could himself go from any pose into any other pose through linking the inner technical points of the poses, whereas we should search the 'linking *asanas*' according to the structure of the poses and needs of our body, to complete the programmes.

Guruji's method of preparing the body for *asanas*

This became the beginning of a new era of reflection for me. Having participated for so many years in the classes taught by Guruji,

Geeta and Prashant I began to think about the preparations they used to give in their classes and their methods of linking. In October 1989, during a walk one very cold evening in Moscow, Guruji granted me with a few precious guidelines to think about the hierarchy of *asanas* and about the preparations of the body. However, it took me almost eight years of practice, teaching and observation to reach to a satisfactory classification, approved by Master.

I had always understood and admitted with humility that none of us could be Guruji!

He could open the body and mind of all of us within a few minutes with a few very well chosen points and then have us doing the most difficult *asanas* with ease, comfort and pleasure. I will never forget that hot evening of April 1980 when he walked in and asked us to go directly in an intense variation of Viparita Dandasana. That day he showed us that he could also prepare the body for an *asana*, through the *asana* itself.⁶ Indeed, as told me once by the late Vanda Scaravelli, "he did himself the poses for us, within us, making us believing that we were doing

...alertness of activity and passivity in the body are increased or decreased, which helps to open the horizon of the mind

them by ourselves", breaking this way our psychological and mental barriers. I learned to ponder over the pose that I was going to do or to teach and, inspired by Guruji's sequencings, I started to prepare the body gradually through the other simple (and sometimes more difficult)⁷ poses to get that required pose.

Guruji calls this method the *pratiloma vinyasa* of *samputana kriya* (ascending sequence of encasement action) and calls the returning method as *anuloma vinyasa*. He explains very beautifully: "This way of

changing the body, vital energy, mind, senses of perception, and lightening the intelligence and "I"-consciousness (ego) is called *pratiloma vinyasa*, whereas returning from complicated to simple *asana* and pacifying the complete system of the body and consciousness is called *anuloma vinyasa*. This way, the alertness of activity and passivity in the body are increased or decreased, which helps to open the horizon of the mind."¹

Aum Sri Gurubhyo Namah ||

- 1 Sri B.K.S Iyengar, *Astadala Yogamala*, Vol.2.
- 2 Sri Prashant Iyengar's article: 'Our System' in *Yoga for a New Millennium*.
- 3 Sad-Linga: Six marks to be noticed in understanding of the Vedas.
- 4 See, also, the outstanding research works of Sir John Woodroffe in his *Garland of letters*.
- 5 The South Indian martial art, most probably a synthesis of Dhanur-Veda and Ayur-Veda.
- 6 Sri Prashant Iyengar, *ABC of Trikonasana*.
- 7 According to Prashantji, the aim of advanced poses is to prepare body to get better main poses.

Interview with Rajvi Mehta: Self-Practice and Experiences in Iyengar Yoga

Interview by Cecilia Harrison

What led you to Iyengar yoga and what has been the course of your studies in Iyengar yoga?

My entry into the field of yoga (which to me is only Iyengar yoga) and my studies in yoga just happened. I did not start doing yoga with any motive or purpose. I had no idea what yoga was all about or what it was supposed to lead to or the benefits it would give. I would say that it is chance, grace, destiny and blessings that got me and my other siblings into yoga.

My father has a lot of interest in yoga and such sciences. He incidentally met a German student of Gururji. Out of curiosity, he went to see Gururji's class and he was immediately given permission to attend his Sunday morning classes in Mumbai. This was way back in 1971.

He felt that this was something "good" which his children should also get exposed to and learn. He first asked Gururji's permission for my elder sister Neeta and brother Birjoo. A few years later I started and then my youngest sister Arti. None of us had any idea about yoga. The first ever yoga class that I attended was with Gururji.

I went because I was asked to go and I have no idea or any explanation as to what made me continue. It just became very much a part of life.

Can you describe your earliest experiences of "self-practice"?

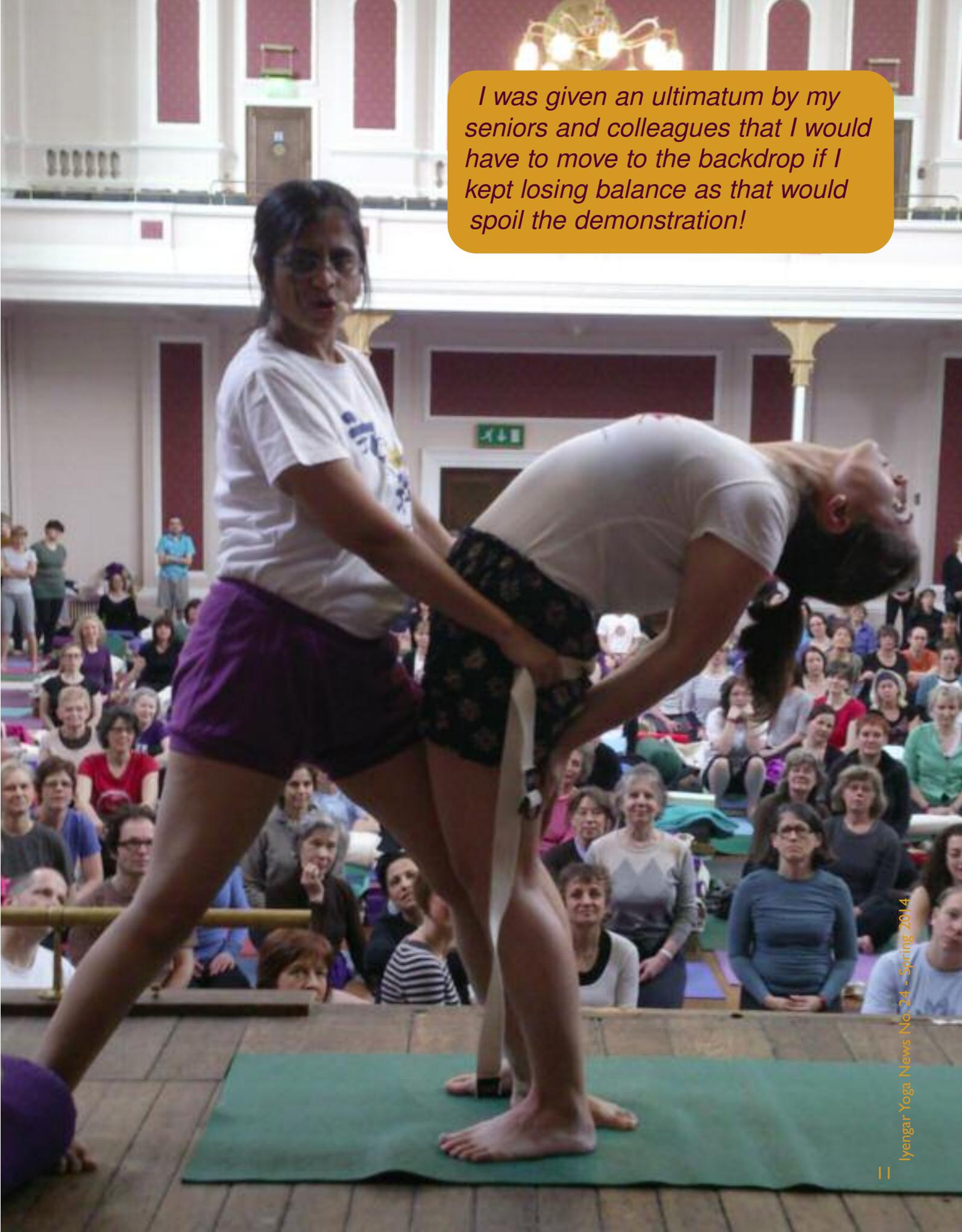
For several years, my "practice" would be from Sunday to Sunday in the class. Of course, the "effect" of the class with Gururji would last until

Thursday of the next week! Once in a while, I would open up the *Light on Yoga* to "try out some different poses." But that was not very often.

I recollect that the first time that I must have tried to seriously practice on my own was when we were to give a group demonstration to music on the occasion of Gururji's 70th birthday. It was a very big event with 16 or 17 of us. We practiced for nearly six months. A few of us were to do challenging *asanas* in the centre and the others would form the backdrop. The "backdrop" was expected to stay for long duration in an *asana* to make it a stable *sthira* backdrop.

In one of the "sequences" a small group was doing the balancing *asanas* and the "backdrop" were to stay for long duration in *Urdhva Prasarita Padasana* and other abdominal *asanas*. I found it very difficult and painful to be stable in these poses for so long so I opted for the "arm balancing *asanas*". I was not too good in these too... and kept losing balance. A few weeks before the final demonstration, I was given an ultimatum by my seniors and colleagues that I would have to move to the backdrop if I kept losing balance as that would spoil the demonstration! I remember that I spent the whole of next day trying the arm balancing... I tried and tried. I attempted many things and adjustments to retain balance. I started realising how subtle adjustments had to be made to get the balance. Balance was my sole motive then. It was like trial and error and I started learning the role of subtle adjustments. With hindsight I would say that this must

I was given an ultimatum by my seniors and colleagues that I would have to move to the backdrop if I kept losing balance as that would spoil the demonstration!



have been my very first serious attempt at “self practice.”

Later, for many years, I used to spend several weeks in Bangalore. Then, I missed my regular Sunday classes which were so much a part of my life till then. It was then that I became more serious about practicing on my own.

How did the work in your “self-practice” relate to your experiences in classes with your teacher(s)?

I would say it is a two way process. When I am attending a class with any of my teachers then sometimes what they tell or make me do or the experiences I get gives me some idea of practice which I attempt later on. Sometimes, there are certain ideas or feelings that one gets in one’s own practice and you find that your teacher has explained or articulated that very clearly for you. So, it is a two way process.

Sometimes, what has been taught in the class inadvertently surfaces when you practice on your own. Sometimes what you practice or have experienced is corroborated and explained by the teachers.

How do you structure experiments on yourself in your self-practice? Can you please give an example? When did you first have courage to do this experimenting?

I think most of my intentional

experiments are with reference to therapy. I observe a patient and “imitate” him/her and then start sensing/feeling their problems/complaints. Then, I would think about what changes should I do to myself to get ‘relief’. Then, I think on what are the asanas that need to be done; recollect what I have seen at the Institute. If I don’t feel anything or cannot sense anything then I will not try it on anybody.

For example, one day we were approached by the Parkinson Disease and Movement Disorder Society of India to

conduct yoga classes for individuals with Parkinson Disease. Since we were to get an entire group of 30 individuals with the same problem we decided on doing “research” and assessing the benefits if any on these patients with the practice of yoga. I was very excited with the prospect of research and we took Guruji’s blessings and advice and embarked on a two week programme. By the end of the first four days, I got very nervous. We could see some minor change in these people but would it be significant when assessed objectively? My worry was not as much about not



being able to help the patients but about the “label” that this study could lead to... “Iyengar yoga does not benefit individuals with Parkinson’s Disease.” It would be not Iyengar yoga but my inability that would be “reflected” as Iyengar yoga. I then started critically studying the structure of these patients and at the same time reading about the disease. Logically, it appeared to me that something was not right in the back brain and we had to access that area, but how? It had to be Sarvangasana and its variations. I experimented on myself on how to get these 30 odd patients with their typical “structure” to get into Sarvangasana... and then with the help of my fellow teachers – we did manage to make most of them do Sarvangasana. To our utter surprise, the tremors just stopped and the patients were so comfortable. That was a big booster for us. This is how I would say that I experiment.

Can you describe the method that you now follow in your self-practice?

I must admit that I have no specific structure or method. I practice sometimes on the ideas and links given in the classes that I attend. Sometimes, it is for a condition that I maybe in and sometimes some “idea” that comes in and I try it. Sometimes, I may read Guruji’s work, his philosophy and try to see whether I can get a glimpse – some experience – of what he describes in my practice. He may have said something long ago but I am able to understand it or implement it only now.

Deepening Self-Practice

Can you please describe the move from working “muscle to bone” towards internal work and changing awareness in skin sensitivity in your practice? How many years of practice?

We always have to start with muscle and bone and then move towards working with sensitivity with the skin which is the envelope of the body. All are interlinked. We have to start with muscle and bone. Working with muscles and getting the internal sense of balance is working with sensitivity through the muscles.

I find working with and through the skin very fascinating. It seems to be opening out areas which for me were unexplored.

Again practice varies by the day. In some poses on some days I am a raw beginner and in some I am able to get more awareness. It is a continuous process where one moves forward and backwards.

At the moment, I find working with and through the skin very fascinating. It seems to be opening out areas which for me were unexplored. It is not anything new. Guruji has been teaching and talking about it several decades ago. But now I seem to understand, experience and appreciate the element of space in the skin. It opens out new avenues and a different level of absorption.

How does the face effect practice? Can you describe something of the changing awareness in this attuning to facial muscles in your posture work?

I don’t think that the face affects the practice but it is how you practice that reflects on your face.

If an *asana* is done with force then that reflects as tension in the face, hardness in the temples, clinching of the lips and teeth and holding of the breath. All this may happen unknowingly. When we start working with greater sensitivity, with feeling, with increased awareness then there is no change in the facial expressions. As Prashantji often says, “We do one *asana* with many faces but if you look at Guruji then he does all *asanas* with the same face.”

Body, mind and breath – how has the experience of training the mind to become attentive and aware evolved in your self practice over years? Is it possible to describe this learning curve?

I don’t recollect intentionally changing the way I practice. To be honest, in the early days I did not

always understand or even if I theoretically understood what Guruji was saying – I was not able to implement what he would say. I remember decades ago when I started, Guruji would show us how to move the skin. I was so naïve and raw that I only understood how to move the arms and legs. I could not really ‘see’ the movement of the skin and had no clue on how to work through the skin.

Over the years from moving the limbs, I could move my attention and develop awareness and sensitivity. The learning curve was definitely not very sharp otherwise I could be in a position to pinpoint and say when and how it happened. It is very, very gradual.

I must say that I am very lucky and blessed to have the good fortune and opportunity to frequently and regularly learn from Guruji, Geetaji and Prashantji and to imbibe the subtleties in their teachings. I often feel very blessed. Things just seem to happen in the class with their instructions and their presence. But it does not

always happen when I am on my own. However, gradually I find that some of the teachings seep in and become part of my practice and teaching. I would say that it just happens and it is not about training the mind.

When did *pranayama* become a key focus for your practice? Can you describe your approach to this training of your self?

Pranayama was not a part of my practice for many years. Even during the regular Sunday classes that I attended with Guruji, Geetaji and Prashantji – the last week of the month when the rest of the class did *pranayama* – I, along with some other ‘youngsters’, were not allowed to do it.

I remember Prashantji making us do rope works in multiples of 50 or Urdhva Dharnurasana or umpteen Urdhva Prasarita Padasana.

If I recollect correctly then I must have got introduced to *pranayama* in one of the camps with Guruji in Khandala. For a couple of years, we



would have a two to three days residential camp of the Mumbai students with Guruji. We would have asana and *pranayama* classes, questions and answer sessions with Guruji and walks. I distinctly remember one of the classes in the open air where he taught the art of sitting and *nadi shodhan* in one of those camps... and then I started getting into it and appreciating it.

Can you please say how you utilise breath in your asana practice? Can you say more about how this came to be perceived in your self-practice?

Breath is a very important integral component of our embodiment. None of our activities are possible without its involvement. Sometimes it is the master and sometimes we make it the slave. The body does not exist without the breath. A person has a name, an identity as long as he/she is breathing but the moment the breath goes – the individual becomes a body!

There is no way we can abuse the breath which is the core of our existence. The more we respect the breath, it is going to facilitate our practice. The asanas become easier, more sustainable and we get more involved when we consciously work with the breath. We move from the realms of the *annamaya* to the *pranamaya* is what I feel.

In the *Light on Yoga*, Guruji is very explicit about how to use the breath while doing the asanas. If we consciously follow these instructions with greater emphasis and breath awareness then the asanas start happening rather than doing. This is how *prayatna* can become *saithilya*.

Can you describe how you use the support of sound props in your practice?

I have used it once in a while but not much in my own practice so I cannot describe much on this.

How do you relate the concepts "love" and "truth" to your practice of Iyengar yoga?

Love is a combination of *maitri* and *karuna* to me. Friendliness and compassion. With these two qualities one can resolve many impediments in life. The sutra *matiri, karuna, mudita upeksanam* is a very helpful and a guiding light. I have seen how Guruji has often referred to this when people come with problems.

Practice can evolve these traits in us is what I feel.

I feel that the practice of yoga brings with it clarity of thought. It makes certain things transparent and

obvious without the need for analysis and justification. When anything does not require explanation or justification or support then that to me is the truth. This is IT.

I feel that practice brings these qualities in the practitioner. There are no facades, masks, dualities or hypocrisy in a true practitioner. They are what they are under all situations and circumstances! They are embodiments of honesty and simplicity. Of course, the level of these qualities would depend upon the intensity (and here I mean qualitative and quantitative intensity) of the practitioner.

This is what I really learn observing Guruji in his teaching, practice and also in his day to day life. He is the embodiment of Truth.

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