

Alignment is enlightenment

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Philippine Daily Inquirer

05/11/2010

Iyengar yoga practitioners strive to do a pose correctly—and do it for a long time.

IT'S THE ONE QUESTION WE get almost every time the newcomer learns about the kind of yoga we have been practicing for some 13 years now: "So what makes Iyengar yoga different?"

The Oxford English dictionary defines "Iyengar" as "a form of yoga focusing on correct alignment of the body, making use of straps, wooden blocks..." The man who started it all, BKS Iyengar himself, was quite amused upon seeing this definition enter the dictionary in 2003, for he has categorically stated that "Yoga is one, like God is one."

Still, for many, especially in the west, Iyengar has become synonymous with yoga in the 20th and 21st century.

What is unique about his method of teaching? Conventionally, students learn about a subject and then proceed to practice it to attain the experiences or results described in the text. Iyengar, or Guruji ("my teacher"), as his followers call him, does the reverse.

He started practicing the asana or yogic postures from the age of 14, and consistently refines and redefines his practices even today, at the age of 91. He then corroborates his experiences with what ancient texts say, thus turning yoga into a practical philosophy, through which words from ancient wisdom are brought to life through personal practice and experimentation.

It is mainly through the practice of the most familiar of yoga's eight limbs or aspects, asana and pranayama (the art of channeling and regulating the life force or prana through breathwork), that Iyengar yoga gets the practitioner to experience the other aspects, such as pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses); dharana (concentration); and dhyana (meditation).

It was Patanjali, the sage who codified yoga 2,500 years ago, who defined asana as sthiram sukham asanam—literally, "stability" (sthira); "pleasure" or "bliss" (sukham); and "state" or "position" or "seat" (asanam). This has often been mistakenly interpreted as "being in any stable, comfortable or pleasurable position," when, as Guruji says, the correct definition would mean "being stable, comfortable, pleasurable in any position."

Just reshuffle the words, and the meaning drastically changes. It is no great achievement for a person to be calm, composed, and relaxed on the beach or on vacation. But to experience that same composure in daily life means being "comfortable" in any situation or circumstance we may face. That is the true gift of yoga.

Guruji rightly says, "The body is the only instrument we are born with which remains unutilized in most of us." Iyengar yoga teaches us how this body can

be adapted into different asanas to maximize the generation and channeling of energy, such that even the remotest parts of the body are well nourished.

This not only ensures that the body remains healthy, but also that the mind remains alert, the thinking process clear and the emotions balanced.

Detailed techniques

Iyengar yoga uses detailed techniques and methodology to perform even the most difficult asana with precision, based on the core principle of alignment, and enabling one to stay for a prolonged period of time in the pose. In short, we want to do a pose correctly—and do it for a long time.

Every individual naturally favors his or her right or left side, making it the dominant side of the body. This preference is not so evident in toddlers, but becomes more obvious with age. A toddler will eat or scribble easily with both hands. As we grow, however, a one-sided dexterity becomes more pronounced.

As adults, we find it difficult to eat or write with equal efficiency with both hands. It is not only dexterity, but also strength and flexibility that vary between the two sides of the body. A beginner to the practice of asana will notice this difference immediately—how one leg is stronger than the other, how it is easier to twist in one direction than the other. How soon this lack of alignment is discovered depends upon the extent of involvement of the mind and intelligence in the practice of the asana.

In class, trained Iyengar teachers can spot, when a student bends forward or stretches his or her limbs, where there could be weakness, tension or even possible hidden injury.

Iyengar yoga is bent on intelligently spreading the consciousness and energy to the "weaker" side. A conscientious practitioner is able to bring as much alignment as possible between the muscles and joints, gradually proceeding to "align" the mind and sensations.

In Guruji's own words, "From alignment only will you be able to develop gradually... Alignment is a movement toward enlightenment."

That being said, it's really not possible for everyone to reach a completely symmetrical level of precision and alignment in all the poses. But that doesn't mean anyone who is stiff or has anatomical problems cannot practice yoga. One of the greatest contributions of BKS Iyengar to this end is the development of props.

These props are nothing but simple things which can be used as support—walls, blankets, belts, ropes, chairs, blocks, bolsters, and tables and stools of different dimensions. It is these props that make it possible for one and all to practice yoga regardless of age, gender or state of health. The use of props has revolutionized the practice of yoga. It's what allows us, today, to see a 10-year-old practice in the same class as a 90-year-old. Props build confidence, help to bring correct alignment, and allow an individual to stay in the asana with comfort for a while, thus experiencing a pose's full benefits.

Alignment and enlightenment may be lofty ideals, in yoga as in life, but that doesn't mean they should not be available for all to aspire for.