



What is Iyengar Yoga?



Image courtesy of Julia Pederson

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How does Iyengar yoga differ from other types of yoga? If you'd like to share your thoughts on what Iyengar yoga is or how it differs from other types of yoga, send us an email at info@marrickvilleyoga.com.au with 'What Is Iyengar Yoga?' in the subject.

In a general sense, Iyengar yoga is based on the Hatha tradition, which was developed in accordance with the Yoga Sutras as set out by Patanjali over 2000 years ago. Developed by B.K.S. Iyengar, the Iyengar approach to yoga is part art, part philosophy, part science and aims to keep people healthy, inhibit the development of disease, and help people to recover from sickness. Iyengar yoga is essentially interested in the true nature of health – in attaining mental, physical and emotional freedom through the rigorous practice of asanas working towards pranayama.

Since there are a wide range of principles and philosophies behind the Iyengar approach to yoga, we thought we might approach these questions from the inside out. Rather than try to nail down the concept of Iyengar yoga we'll take as our beginning one of Mr Iyengar's seminal texts – Light on Life – and start to explore some of our ideas about key Iyengar yoga concepts.



In this way we'll work towards understanding what Iyengar yoga is, and how it might differ from other types of yoga.

To begin our 'What is Iyengar Yoga?' study, let's look at the idea of precision. Once again, we'd love to hear your thoughts. Please send an email to info@marrickville.com.au with some of your thoughts about what Iyengar yoga is and how it differs from other forms of yoga.

Iyengar yoga is interested in Precision

Iyengar yoga is interested in precision, timing, and sequence: in Iyengar yoga, nothing is done casually. Poses are practiced with intention and require a certain discipline around listening to and following instructions.

In the Iyengar method the teaching is extremely particular and detailed. Some of us find this confronting at first – feeling that it is 'slow' work and feeling that we should be 'doing' more. Perhaps this is because we are not accustomed to thinking about such fine motions and it is interesting that it actually becomes apparent over time that the way we practice in Iyengar, while highly methodical, has an acute intensity. The thing with Iyengar is that it is all about structure and process – not racing ahead to the final result, outcome. The Iyengar approach to yoga is based on a deep and resounding respect of the mechanics, function and needs of the body, and that is why we prepare the body for each asana, building on the most basic foundations such as standing on our two feet.

Practicing yoga with attention to detail is good for the brain. In listening to and following instructions, we are also gifted an opportunity to practice developing essential life skills such as concentration and focus. Through the teaching of asanas specifically and consciously, the Iyengar method offers students the opportunity to not only develop physically by practicing certain skills, but to develop mentally and emotionally as well as we begin to acquire certain tools that will help us in our practice and in our lives outside yoga. This is also an important part of progressing in yoga – not simply getting to a certain level and staying there.

Progressing in yoga, over many years, requires the capacity to begin to turn our attention inwards. This idea of continual progress relying on method explains in some part the qualities Iyengar yoga teachers possess. Rather than taking on the role of the 'expert' or the 'accomplishment' the Iyengar yoga approach encourages humility as one progresses, and a constant and ongoing engagement with the philosophies and principles which are the foundation of yoga: meaning at each stage, no matter how advanced, all yoga practitioners are essentially students of this ancient art.



Image courtesy of Julia Pederson

Iyengar yoga is interested in Integration.

Although we work with certain parts of the body in certain asanas, the Iyengar method teaches us that all asanas originate in the core of one's being.

Mr Iyengar says "Practice asanas by creating space in the muscles and even the bones of your body. Practice asanas by creating space in the muscles and skin, so that the body fits into the asana. To do this, the whole body has to act. To extend the part, you must extend the whole".

When a pose is integrated, there should be no strain on the body. While discomfort may be felt it is exertion that energises and exhilarates, rather than deforms or depletes. Mr Iyengar talks about how when there is strain in yoga – when an approach to yoga is based on the end result, on the final pose, rather than the process involved in getting to the pose – the practitioner might afterwards feel weary, irritated and disturbed. The whole idea of Iyengar yoga is that it aims at developing the capacity in the student to stop straining: the idea of the asana, in the Iyengar approach, is about bringing competing interests or opposing forces together, rather than using a particular force or energy alone and extending that to its full limit.

Because of its focus on integration, Iyengar yoga encourages us towards a state of balance. Balancing poses are an ideal example of where we can see the Iyengar interest in integration, in action. Balancing poses in a sense force honesty and integrity on the practitioner, who simply cannot, no matter what, get into the pose through sheer force, strain, desire, or will. To be able to balance on our hands or on our heads in the middle of the room, we must have some capacity to



draw together competing energies or interests in order to, as our recent Guest Teacher Darrin McNally said, “distribute the effort evenly.” To be able to balance in a pose – even if that pose is Tadasana, just standing on our feet – we must engage in a certain process of integration.



Image courtesy of Julia Pederson

Iyengar yoga is interested in Perseverance

In yoga asanas, we find ourselves in a state of discomfort and the question is put to us: what are we going to do about it? Pain is an inescapable aspect of life and yoga teaches us to develop skills to bear pain and go through it, rather than run away from it. Mr Iyengar says, “Learn to find comfort even in discomfort. We must not try to run from pain but to move through and beyond it. This is the cultivation of tenacity and perseverance, which is a spiritual attitude toward yoga. This is also the spiritual attitude toward life.”

Bearing pain is not easy, nor is persevering through a time of hardship: whether in an asana on the mat or in daily life off the mat. Yoga does not promise any quick fixes: it is instead about building up patterns of behaviour and habits of responding to things that, in time, begin to also affect our responses and behaviours in other areas of life.

Mr Iyengar talks about how in the beginning, the pain in yoga practice can be very strong. It is true that sometimes pain seizes us in class when we’re not even doing anything much – such as a cramp in the foot when sitting in Dandasana. Even so, Mr Iyengar talks about surrendering to this pain – in



other words, accepting it is there, watching it, and waiting for it to pass. Jumping up and down about the pain, avoiding yoga on account of the pain, or being annoyed with yourself for being in pain when it seems others are not doesn't get you very far. In this sense, Iyengar yoga works very well for some people in teaching them how to tolerate pain more effectively and peacefully. In this way, there are often some very intimate dynamics which are at play for us as students when we are on the mat, and much of this has a lot to do with the pain that yoga presents to us.

This brings us to one very interesting point Mr Iyengar makes about pain which in a sense can be applied to any difficulty, and it is this: "It is not just that yoga is causing all this pain; the pain is already there. It is hidden. We just live with it or have learned not to be aware of it. When you begin yoga, the unrecognised pains comes to the surface."

This is very interesting in terms of the notion of perseverance; it suggests that even by choosing to run away or avoid pain (or being resentful of difficulty or becoming bitter) one does not really achieve even a disturbed respite from the pain. In other words, any response to pain that is intolerant or avoidant, while perhaps making us feel better in the short term, is actually an illusion, doing nothing to shift the source of the pain whatsoever. Better then, to face pain and move through and beyond it.

Yoga can teach us these skills when we persevere with yoga, and return to it.