

The Path to Perfection through Iyengar Yoga

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Yoga practice helps us to accept the beauty of our cycles and our changes and that there is beauty in ageing. Taking care of yourself is one of the greatest sources of beauty. Calm, peaceful equanimity reflect in our physical experience.

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The benefits of yoga reach beyond the leisure lifestyle with which it has become associated, says Marla Apt, in conversation with YogaLife's **Kish** and **Catharine Nicol**. Based in Los Angeles, Marla is a Senior Intermediate level Certified Iyengar Yoga teacher

I am sitting on my mat at the side of the room waiting for Marla Apt's Iyengar Yoga class Opening the Hips to start. Around me fellow yoginis and yogis are lying flat, allowing their bodies to relax while they breathe, others are going through some stretches and poses. And then Marla, our refreshingly no-nonsense instructor, calls us to order and begins.

Not being a perfectionist I can't quite figure out why I like Iyengar Yoga so much. I suspect it's the investigative element that appeals to me. I think studying Iyengar Yoga is the way to get yoga. It's truly Yoga 101. And if you're really into yoga how could you not want to dive right in?

"It was one of the first yoga asana methods that people were able to latch on to as a good fit for the west," says Marla. "BKS Iyengar took it out of the Indian context. His whole premise was that what is unified is our bodies and our breath. If we can relate to the language of the body we can all reach the same state of understanding. He taught from a universal experience that everyone could relate to and he kept it separate from religious trappings."

Marla came to Iyengar Yoga from the opposite direction, however. She learnt the spiritual before the physical, and as a result was looking for something a little different to most. "I was studying Buddhist philosophy," she says. "I took yoga classes here and there but it always seemed like exercise, which I appreciated, but never took seriously as a path. When I took my first Iyengar Yoga class I saw for the first time the connection between practice and philosophy, that yoga practice was a gateway to deeper philosophical dimensions. It tapped into my consciousness. I saw the unknown aspects of the self could be mined and understood through paying attention in the body. I also sensed my teachers knew so much more than they were teaching in the context of a two-hour class. I was intrigued and wanted to learn these mysteries."

Marla has now been learning and teaching the mysteries of Iyengar Yoga for over 20 years. She's studied under BKS Iyengar as well as his children Geeta and Prashant. She has been involved in medical studies at UCLA looking at how yoga can help those with depression, anxiety and IBS, leads teacher training classes regularly and has created a yoga therapy course. "I find great satisfaction in utilising and witnessing the therapeutic benefits of yoga. It is an honour to be able to participate in and support someone's healing through yoga."

She's also been the President of the Iyengar Yoga National Association of the United States and is dedicated to making sure yoga is available to those in need through non-profit, Iyengar Yoga Therapeutics. When she's not travelling the world you'll find her in her teaching in LA or online at Yogaglo.

YOGA AS SURRENDER

The act of surrender is an important part of yoga for Marla. "I trust in the path of yoga. I do believe there's divinity in it. There is so much wisdom in this path, so much more than what I know. If I focus on my ideas, I'm limited. It's a challenge, but if I have an agenda I may miss the potential of what can come. When I open myself I reach greater possibilities. I'm so blessed to have had a teacher who was an example to me. BKS Iyengar provided an ocean of wisdom that still guides me."



Gentle twists
relieve tension
throughout
the spine

pose

Relinquishing the demands of the ego is an intrinsic part of the practice of yoga and one that Marla welcomes. "It's about surrendering my ego, the idea that I know best and I'm the one in control – because as soon as I think that, life shows me I'm not. And actually it's good to know I'm not always in the driver's seat. I'm open to the winds of change and I thank my yoga practice for that. Yoga has helped me be sensitive to the changing nature of my life."

Each morning Marla starts the day with prayers and chants, pranayama and asana. She describes it as offering her body, mind and energy to a higher purpose and it brings a lightness and perspective to her day. "I check in on how I feel, whether I've had a lack of sleep, the season has changed or I am dealing with things that have arisen via my students. Sometimes things come up for them and I don't understand how their bodies are responding, so I explore that in my practice. It's a challenge every day on that mat to figure out what is the right thing. That's why the surrender; I need to be guided."

Marla believes this higher purpose, this spirituality, can be present from your very first class. "Even though the instructions focus on how to align the legs, for example, if taught well the mind and intelligence are infused in the movement, which helps students become more conscious while at the same time their senses of perception withdraw. This can be a bridge to spirituality."

This was certainly the case for her. "In my first class while I worked hard and felt so many sensations, I noticed that they had an effect elsewhere. Even if I was focussed on my right foot, it impacted my mind and helped make connections that resulted in me feeling calmer in the present moment. As I've learned more and more about the yogic philosophy I see it is all about being present in the moment, which is where kindness, compassion and spirituality exist. That present moment slows you down. One minute can be an eternity."

IYENGAR YOGA FOR BEGINNERS

As Marla's class progressed for me, as a relative newcomer to yoga and someone certainly challenged when it comes to flexibility, it was hard not to be distracted by the occasional physical discomfort, hard to imagine feeling physically free enough to fully access the spirituality of the practice. Marla acknowledges that this can be the case and suggests, "Associate physical intensity as sensation rather than labelling it as pain. Gradually drop into deeper levels of practice, then incorporate the philosophical, spiritual dimension."

Injuries can crop up, when you are beginning yoga, especially when you are already fit, have done other sports and overestimate your ability. "Go to beginner level classes and learn the foundation," she advises. "A good teacher will give you the proper preparation and sequencing. Don't start with a strong backbend or strong forward bend. Good alignment pays attention to biomechanics and anatomy and keeps us safe. In a classroom situation one can become ego-driven and competitive, leading us to push ourselves."

She points out that it's important not to be in a rush. "It can take a few years to work through the external practice, the joints and muscles, and to dis-identify with the body. We think my body is Me. If the teacher points out an error, flaw or asymmetry we think it's Me she's correcting. But after a while you realise this body is not who I am; it is a tool, a gift I've been given. Just like my possessions aren't me. Yoga is a great tool for learning detachment."

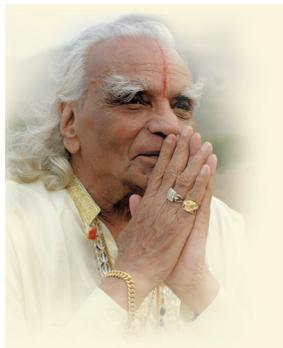
ASANAS AS MEDITATION IN ACTION

Although Iyengar Yoga classes don't specifically teach meditation to beginners, the tradition considers asanas as meditation in action. "The idea is that you try to bring this meditative quality to every single action and movement. You don't need to be advanced to meditate, but there are clear signposts. When you're ready for the next step, you have to be able to quieten the mind."





When I ask her, finally, what she would say to BKS Iyengar, her ocean of wisdom and her constant guide, if he were still here on Earth, Marla says, “I’m not sure that there are words, but I would be on my knees with gratitude”



Yoga asanas help prepare us to quieten the nervous system and watch our wild minds. We start with Savasana – can our students be still? Time sitting at the beginning and end of class is meditation, even though it isn’t announced as such. In that sitting we can see if people are ready.”

YOGA'S RIPPLE EFFECT

I particularly love that Marla’s work includes offering yoga to the less fortunate. “Since the benefits of yoga are universal, I think it is important that access is available to anyone who wants it,” she says. “Yoga leads to better health and thus benefits us financially as individuals and as a society. This should not be denied to those who do not have the same resources or privileges as those who can join a yoga studio or yoga retreat. The benefits of yoga reach beyond the leisure lifestyle with which yoga has become associated. Since yoga developed as a discipline for consciousness and the removal of suffering, it is my hope that it can reach those who experience suffering, which is everyone!”

She points out the natural progression from the physical to the mental, emotional and spiritual. And it’s a path I believe we should all walk down if we can. “Yoga can help us on multiple levels, beginning with physical health and vitality. When we are healthy, we can begin to attend to observing our mind and develop understanding of our own mental processes. Self-knowledge leads to understanding of and compassion for others, which changes our interactions in the world. Through yoga practice, time slows down and we can have the experience of the present moment, where we can see that all is interconnected. Once we feel connected rather than separate from the world around us, we cannot help but behave differently. It only takes the changing of human perception and mental reactivity to change the entire trajectory of world events. Yoga being accessible to all will benefit all.” ❁

“Patanjali [author of the *Yoga Sutras*] says we should cultivate joy,” says Marla. “We must remember our practice is meant to bring joy, even if at times it feels unpleasant. We should approach our lives with joy. And I hope our practices make us better partners, collaborators and collective forces for good”

