

PARALYSIS AND IYENGAR YOGA

- MATHEW SANFORD

A catastrophic injury brought me to Iyengar yoga...but not right away. I was thirteen. Our family car skidded off an icy bridge and my father and sister were killed. I broke my neck, my back, both my wrists, filled a lung with fluid, and suffered an internal injury to my pancreas. Of all these injuries, however, only my severed spinal cord could not adequately heal. I was left permanently paralyzed from the chest down and dependent upon a wheelchair. I found Iyengar yoga twelve years after this accident. Now sixteen years later, I am a yoga teacher. I teach both abled and disabled people,



and I have a non-profit corporation that operates a yoga studio in Minnetonka, MN in the United States. I have also written a literary book about my experience *Waking: A memoir of trauma and transcendence* (Rodale, 2006). But none of this could have happened without the revolutionary work of Sri B.K.S. Iyengar.

It took me so long to find Iyengar yoga because the doctors, nurses, and other therapists taught me to overcome my paralysis, to overcome my disability. They never told me that something else was possible, that there were subtle connections between mind and body, ones that would never make me walk again but were essential to a full recovery. Instead,

they told me to make my upper body really strong and drag my paralyzed body through life. But finally I reached a boiling point. I needed to feel my whole body again - both what I could move voluntarily and what I could not. It was then that I came across yoga - what better way to start than an ancient discipline expressly dedicated to the union of mind, body, and whatever we call spirit. I had no idea how lucky I was that the very first teacher I encountered was an Iyengar teacher.



Jo teaching me the underlying principles behind Iyengar Yoga

Jo Zukovich from San Diego, California was that teacher. She was able to pass on the alignment, clarity and precision of Gururji's groundbreaking work through both my paralyzed and unparalyzed body. Rather than worrying about maximizing the number of *asana*-s I could do, she relied upon the depth of Gururji's teachings. She focused on some of its underlying principles. For example, in some sense,

everything in an *asana* begins from the base; or an *asana* is always traveling in at least two directions, usually opposite ones. By having such a focus, we were able to be patient and trust that my progress would organically emerge from a solid foundation.

Iyengar Yoga and Disability

Iyengar yoga is a perfect match for disability. Gururji opens the infinite depth of each individual *asana* through heightened attention to alignment and precision. This reveals the heart of yoga while leaving a physically repeatable trail. This is essential for me as a student living with a disability because I will only gain full access to a limited number of *asana*-s, let alone an entire sequence. In other words, I have to learn more

from the experience of less. I also have to learn *asana-s* from both the “inside-out” and from the “outside-in.” Iyengar yoga is the only yoga I have encountered that makes this possible.

Another obvious advantage of Iyengar yoga is its innovative use of props. By helping my body in simple ways, I gain glimpses into the experience of physical actions that I cannot perform. For example, by simply sitting on a folded blanket while in *Dandasana*, gravity can become my teacher - gravity begins to move the inner head of the femur bone in and down. Then if I listen inwardly, I can feel - on some subtle level - the energetic experience of the physical action that I cannot perform. I can then follow that feeling out through the inner heels and even sense how the same feeling helps lift and open my side ribs and chest - an action I can perform. Thus, my experience of yoga can travel not just from the unparalyzed part of my body to my paralyzed part, but also in the other direction - from my paralysis and back into normal function. This opens a much larger world for me.



I learnt from Guruji's teachings that distribution of gravity, alignment and precision integrates mind and body without muscular action.

One of the breakthroughs in Guruji's teaching is so obvious that we often forget to think about it as revolutionary: Through the more efficient distribution of gravity, alignment and precision integrates mind and body without muscular action. Jo and I discovered that this is true even through my paralysis. In other words, the inward energetic experience of increasing alignment and precision crosses the mind-body rupture created by my severed spinal cord. This simple Iyengar truth is the cornerstone of adapting yoga for people living with disabilities. When I teach my adaptive yoga class, I simply bring Guruji's heightened attention on alignment and precision to a demographic of people who desperately need it.



When I teach, I bring Guruji's heightened attention on alignment and precision.

My Current Practice As Example

For obvious reasons, I cannot do *Uttanasana* - I cannot stand, not without an amazingly complicated prop set-up, let alone stand and bend forward at the waist. Recently, Jo and I have been trying to help me approach *Uttanasana* from other directions. Clearly, there is similarity between how the legs work in *Tadasana* and how they work in *Uttanasana*. I can gain insight into the former by working on *Supta-Tadasana* (usually with some help) but even more so when I work in *Dandasana*. Then I can build on that. *Paschimottanasana* also holds some similarities to how the legs work in *Tadasana*. Although the gravity is obviously different because the legs are resting on the floor, *Paschimottanasana* does add the change of gravity that comes with a forward bend. Thus, it takes a step closer to *Uttanasana*.

Lately, Jo and I have been working with props to increase my experience of gravity. I sit on a sticky mat, on the edge of a folding chair, legs straight ahead with my heels on the ground on another sticky mat, and a quarter round under my feet. I am careful not to aggravate the attachment on my hamstrings or the back of my knees by coming recklessly into the forward bend. Instead, I put my hands on the seats of two other folding chairs for more control and come forward slowly to study the experience of the increasing gravity.

This work has taught me a number of things. The increased encounter with gravity has somehow shown me more directly the feeling of drawing the inner thighs up (thus deepening the sense of the groins) and its connection to a corresponding extension across my sacrum. This, in turn, teaches me how to better extend my torso out of my pelvis - an insight that brings greater relief to my back and applies to other forward bends. This insight helps more than my own practice, however. It helps my teaching because now I understand better why *Prasarita Padottanasana* is one of the standing *asana*-s featured within the Iyengar system.

I live in a different mind-body relationship than an ordinary yoga student. The more I practice, the more I explore, the more I encounter the profound genius of Sri B.K.S Iyengar. He has left a trail even for someone like me. When I hear people criticize Iyengar yoga for being a strictly physical practice, I smile and shake my head because I am living proof that they are mistaken. I also know to whom I am grateful.



When I hear people criticize Iyengar Yoga for being a physical practice, I smile because I am living proof that they are mistaken.