

Iyengar and the Yoga Tradition

Karl Baier*

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Part I

Basic Questions

1 Introduction: Controversy about Iyengar's method of Yoga

Both in India and in the Western World the way of Yoga developed by B.K.S. Iyengar has caused considerable controversy over the past two or three decades. One cannot say that the debate so far has been on a particularly high level. It rather can be characterized by repetition of a handful of clichés.

The critics of Iyengar's method reproach it as reducing Yoga to mere physical exercises. They condescendingly look down upon the "knee-cap-yogis" who allow themselves to be tortured by their sadistic master. The euphoric supporters of Iyengar counter by asserting that the critics have no idea at all what Iyengar Yoga is about. It's much more than mere gymnastics, they say. The master is not aggressive either, but through his provocative behaviour he teaches the students to become humble and to do their utmost. Filled with contempt Iyengar's students look down upon the "armchair-yogis:" "They want to meditate and cannot even stretch their knees yet!"

One might wonder what psychological dynamic exists behind the fact that two groups by virtue of their prejudices constantly dismiss one another with the same arguments. It turns out very often in such cases that each side hits the other where it hurts. However, instead of admitting to being hit each replies immediately with a counter-attack.

I do not want to take part in the controversy between the "knee-cap-yogis" and the "armchair-yogis", but instead try to contribute towards transforming this often fruitless quarrel into a more interesting discussion. In order to go beyond the usual prejudices and to enter into an objective investigation it is necessary to study carefully the relationship between Iyengar's way and the traditional Yoga. To take a few beginning steps down this path, I use Iyengar's remarks on this issue as a starting-point.

As Iyengar Yoga is very complex, and the tradition of Yoga as a whole is an extensive and difficult subject, I can tackle only a few aspects of it without claim to completeness.

2 Iyengar's main source of reference from the Yoga-tradition

First it must be asked what Iyengar means when referring to traditional Yoga. Which traditions of the manifold history of Yoga are essential to him? Next the way in which he himself determines his relation to the traditions must be examined. Where does he see conformity and where differences? Also the relationship of Iyengar's Asana and Pranayama practise with the traditional forms should be looked into. Finally it would be particularly interesting to know the reasons he gives for the peculiarities of his method.

In his "message for the 70th birthday" Iyengar says, "What I do is pure, authentic, traditional Yoga."¹ What he means by pure, authentic, traditional Yoga he explains in the same speech, as follows: "The Yoga I teach is purely Astanga Yoga, known as the eight limbs of Yoga, expounded by Patanjali in his 196 terse sutras, each of which reflects profound experimental knowledge, supplemented with Hatha Yoga texts, the Gita and others."²

Here an answer is given to our first question of what Iyengar refers to when he speaks about the tradition of Yoga. His primary source of reference, he says, are the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali,

¹Light on Yoga Research Trust (Ed.), *70 Glorious Years of Yogacharya B.K.S. Iyengar*, Bombay, Light on Yoga Research Trust, 1990, p. XXVII.

²Ibid. p. XXVIII.

particularly the Astanga Yoga as described in the second and third chapters of the Sutras. A glance at the introductory chapters of “Light on Yoga” and “Light on Pranayama” confirms this, for when answering the question “What is Yoga?” he mainly builds upon Patanjali there.

3 His principle of interpretation: the original text versus his own Yoga-experience

Of course, Iyengar’s assertion of practising “pure Astanga Yoga” sounds overstated and often combative in tone. This exaggeration can be understood only when read in the context of the criticism he had to put up with all his life, which reproached him for being imperfectly rooted in the Yoga tradition. Aside from that, as part of the social role of the Guru which he usually plays when making speeches, Iyengar never says “perhaps” and “probably”, but rather tends to speak in terms of absolute certainty. This kind of behaviour is not necessarily pure vanity, since in Indian society a Guru is more or less expected to act like this.

But who can claim to know what pure Astanga Yoga is? The Yoga Sutras are multifaceted and opaque, and like every historical document they are only with us having passed through a history of interpretations and reinterpretations. Doesn’t Iyengar himself say, that his view of Astanga Yoga is influenced by the Gita, Hatha-Yoga texts, Upanisads etc., which are hardly compatible with Patanjali’s Yoga?

The basic question here is: What does purity mean? It is a very superficial understanding of purity if one thinks something only remains pure as long as it is repeated in the same way. A thing is pure insofar as it remains in unity with its primary source and essence and therefore is not alienated to itself. In the flow of time such an identity is only possible if the thing changes, always showing itself in a fresh and new way. And for that reason if we want to preserve the purity of something we have to keep it alive by transforming it according to new ways of understanding, which fit to our time and experience.

And that is what Iyengar tries to do in his interpretation of Patanjali. He says: “The Sutras of Patanjali have attracted considerable attention and there are many commentaries on it. Most of the commentators have seen the subject of Yoga objectively or from the academic angle. On the other hand, I have responded to it subjectively, comparing my feelings and experiences with the original text through uninterrupted practise and refinements.”³

According to this statement he wants to disclose the essence of Patanjali in a new way by using two principles of interpretation. Firstly he stays close to the original text, not to the more academic commentaries, which are not personally involved in their subject. Secondly he compares the message of the text with his own experience in practising and refining Yoga. By studying the tradition he tries to improve the understanding of his own way, giving clear priority to experience in practising and teaching: “Though I am rational, I am tradition-bound and sentimental. I trust the statements of others and follow their line of explanations and repeat the experiments to gain experience. If the experience tallies with their expressions, I accept their statements. Otherwise I discard theirs, live on my own experiments and experiences, and make my pupils feel the same as I felt in my experiments. If many agree, then I take it as a proven fact and impart it to others.”⁴

Iyengar considers his way as traditional Yoga in that he regards the Yoga Sutras, particularly the eight-limbed path, as a suitable categorical framework of Yoga in general and of his special method,

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid. p. XXVII

too. In this he takes the liberty of unconventionally reinterpreting the Sutras from his experiences, taking Yoga practise and teaching into a testing ground for the thoughts written down in the old texts.

4 Prominence of Asana and Pranayama

Comparing Iyengar's Yoga with Astanga Yoga one can notice immediately the special role that Asana and Pranayama play in the former. This fact is openly admitted: "Guruji's system is a unique interpretation of Patanjala Yoga", it says in the guide to the RIMY-Institute, "both in theory and practise. [...] The emphasis is on Asana and Pranayama and intensive instruction is given in both."⁵

As there are only very few, although important references to Asana and Pranayama in the eight-limbed path of Patanjali the following questions arise:

1. What is the relation of traditional Yoga to Iyengars Asana and Pranayama practise and teaching?
2. How does he substantiate the emphasis on both?
3. What role do the other six of the eight limbs play and how does Iyengar regard the interrelationship of the various limbs towards one another?

4.1 How traditional is Iyengars practise of Asana and Pranayama?

4.1.1 The renewal of Asana

As for Asana and Pranayama, Iyengar places himself above all within the tradition of his teachers: "You should know that many people were and are under the impression that my method of Yoga has nothing to do with the traditional form. This is imagination and not fact, as my Guru had a Guru, who had a Guru also. [...] I consider my Guru and my Guru's Guru as the fathers of Yoga, who sowed the seed for thinking about analysing and developing the practical side of this art. The seed of Yoga may be the same, but the trees grow in different directions, bearing fruits of different tastes."⁶

However, among what has been written about Iyengar's life so far, only a few hints can be found as to what exactly was conveyed to him by his Guru. Iyengar says that in 1934 his brother-in-law Shri T. Krishnamachar, a great Sanskrit scholar and director of a Yoga school in Mysore, had offered to teach him how to do some Asanas in order to improve his health. Krishnamachar had learned Yoga from Ramamohan Brahmachari, a Yogi who lived in Tibet near the lake Manasarovar. I was not able to find any more detailed information about the yogic, religious background of this man. It is known that Brahmachari was a very strict authoritarian teacher, who taught not only Asana and Pranayama but also emphasised the study of Patanjali, a combination which later became very important for Iyengar's approach.

Krishnamachar instructed Iyengar for several days and then dismissed him, saying that he had to digest now what had been imparted to him. Only then could further instruction follow. Because of Iyengar's stiffness, however, Krishnamachar lost interest in giving further lessons. Therefore, it was not until a year later, when Krishnamachar needed somebody to replace another pupil at a public performance, that Iyengar received further training. Again he was given lessons for a few days only, after which he had to prepare on his own for the performance. "I struggled very hard with tears in the eyes and tremor in the body. He never asked me to rehearse before him, merely telling me to be

⁵Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute, *Know your Institute*, Pune 1985 (Internal document), p.4.

⁶Light on Yoga Research Trust (Ed.), op. cit., pp. 4-5.

ready. Being weak, I was nervous about appearing in public. But his words were orders. Believe me or not, I did as asked and got a coveted prize of fifty rupees from the hand of the Maharaja as a token of appreciation. Though I was in ecstasy at that moment, I was in agony, with pains and tremors for months at a stretch.”⁷

Apart from these two short periods of training, Iyengar never mentions any Yoga instruction received from his Guru Krishnamachar. Moreover there is never a word about philosophy, meditation or religious teachings, only Asanas.

It seems that Krishnamachar, being unpredictable, hard and excessively strict, struck Iyengar with fear. He intimidated him on the one hand, but on the other awakened in him the ability to practise with firmness and intensity. Within a very short time Iyengar was able to develop the Asana practise on his own. A born teacher, instructing others became an essential source of enlightenment: “This inner penetration, this way of looking into the bodies of others, developed awareness. This keen awareness brought me to focus my attention on looking into the Asanas while doing them myself. Thus, I developed awareness to penetrate the secrets of this mysterious human body.”⁸

When asked how he assessed his way of teaching compared with that of his Guru, Iyengar says that in the past 30 years he has constantly changed his methods and that his way of doing the Asanas is certainly an improvement on that of his Guru. Most Asanas he innovatively developed further. The methodical use of “props” was his invention.⁹

When Geeta S. Iyengar, who also knows Krishnamachar’s way of teaching Asanas by her own experience, compares it with the approach of her father she finds the most striking difference in the lack of a logical sequence of the Asanas in Krishnamachar’s practise. According to her it was Iyengar’s work to introduce the proper linking of the movements and poses according to the anatomical structure, physiological functioning and psychological effect.¹⁰

A last point that should be mentioned here is the discovery of alignment as a basic principle, which differentiates Iyengar’s Asana and the old way of performing it. He says: “I began to look at photographs of people, drawing lines between their way and my way of doing it, chest to chest, hand to hand, elbow to elbow. The poses were there, but not aligned.”¹¹ Later I will show that this alignment is a necessary precondition for Dhyana in Asana.

As for the Asanas, one can say in short that Iyengar, starting from traditional forms of Hatha Yoga and working almost completely on his own, succeeded in making a revolutionary breakthrough regarding both the way of practising and teaching them. His approach leaves far behind all which has so far been called Asana.

4.1.2 The renewal of Pranayama

In Pranayama, Iyengar had to rely even more on his own intuition than in the Asanas, because his Guru categorically refused to teach him breathing exercises, considering him unfit due to his poor state of health. “When my Guru visited me in Pune in 1940,” he tells, “I asked him about Pranayama; he just gave an outline. You know, what we call deep breathing. [...] Then he said to do deep inhalation, hold the breath and do deep exhalation. These are the only techniques my Guruji gave me to follow. [...] Though I did it, I did not succeed at all. [...] So I questioned him. [...] He said: ‘Continue. It will

⁷Ibid. pp. 2-3.

⁸Ibid. p. 7.

⁹Ibid. pp. 58-59.

¹⁰Ibid. pp. 378-379.

¹¹B.K.S. Iyengar’s 60th Birthday Celebration Committee (Ed.), *Iyengar. His Life and Work*, Porthill, Timeless Books, 1987, p. 197.

come.' And it never came."¹²

Iyengar says that he had only once the opportunity of watching Krishnamachar for some minutes in Nadi Sodana Pranayama, and that, in secret. Thereby he learnt the erect sitting posture, the practise of which was very difficult for him for years because, due to his excessive practise of backbends, he had lost the ability to hold himself erect.

As the Guru refused to help him, he tried with books on Yoga. But the very long breath retention that was recommended in these books to awaken the Kundalini Sakti resulted only in the feeling that his head was like a wooden block.¹³

His listless and uninspired Pranayama lasted about 20 years until 1960. "In 1960, while I was in Gstaad, Switzerland, the weather was congenial. [...] While I was practising daily, one day I felt the delight and tasted the fragrance of incoming breath. The weather was neither cold nor warm, but exhilarating. That sensation which I felt, gave me the clue to play my digital fingers and thumb on the gates of the nasal passage to create that feeling. From then on I practised Pranayama daily with interest."¹⁴

It's typical for Iyengar's undogmatic and autodidactic access to Pranayama that he didn't copy his Guru's placement of the fingers in Nadi Sodana, but tried to play with the fingers on his nostrils like his disciple Yehudin Menuhin played on the violin.¹⁵

Just as in Asana, the challenge of teaching motivated him to carry on with his experiments and innovate the methods of Pranayama. In connection with the problem of Iyengar's relation to the Yoga Tradition it is important to note that this innovation was at the same time a return to the roots of Pranayama. For example today Iyengar refuses to use the mechanical methods of counting while breathing which he himself, having been influenced by Yoga books, taught in former times. In this he can regard himself in agreement with the Yoga Sutras. "It is a fact, that all textbooks speak of ratio of inhalation, exhalation, and retention, whereas Patanjali does not speak of ratios but of depth, subtlety and precision. If one concentrates on counting the numbers [...] then the practioner is only interested in attending to the numerical numbers and not to the breath, the movement of breath within the body. [...] It is better [...] to witness and observe the smooth flow of inhalation and exhalation."¹⁶

As mentioned above the extreme Pranayamas, which Iyengar had taken from manuals, including the counting of breath, did not lead him to success. So in the course of time a more gentle, simplified and yet refined method of breathing emerged. This new method is closer to the original Pranayama as described in the Upanisads, the Gita and Patanjali than to many of the techniques written down in the later Hatha Yoga texts and commentaries on the Yoga Sutras.

One can summarize the relation to tradition of Iyengar's Asana and Pranayama by saying that it was indeed his Guru who has sown the seed of yoga in him. What he received from tradition was not more than a small, albeit powerful germ. The detailed analysis of the Asanas and Pranayamas and the many innovations in practising and teaching them must be ascribed to Iyengar's genius.

Now let us turn to the second question mentioned above.

4.2 How does he substantiate the prominence of Asana and Pranayama?

In Iyengar's publications various arguments are brought forward in favour of this prominence. I want to summarize them under three headings.

¹²Light on Yoga Research Trust (Ed.), op. cit., p. 74.

¹³Ibid. p. 79.

¹⁴Ibid. p. 76.

¹⁵Ibid. p. 77.

¹⁶Ibid. p. 78.

4.2.1 Asana and Pranayama as a prerequisite to the higher limbs of Yoga

The contention can be found very often in Yoga literature that the so called physical exercises are a mere preparation for meditation. Such references are also found in the writings of the Iyengar family. So for instance the guide to the institute reads: “Guruji believes that the higher forms of Yoga — Dharana, Dhyana and Samadhi — can be taught only to those who have gained a measure of proficiency in Asana and Pranayama. Any attempt at bypassing these vital steps, which render the body fit and pure for higher practise, would result in damage to the body and the mind.”¹⁷

Patanjali doesn't insist on a special sequence of the eight limbs of Yoga, with the exception that Pranayama should only be practised after Asana (which in the Yoga Sutras means correct sitting posture) is mastered. Nevertheless many of the old and also some of the contemporary commentators proceed from the assumption that the practise of one limb has to follow the other. “Becoming steady in each preceding one, he is able to master the next” one can read in the commentary which is ascribed to Sankara.¹⁸

Iyengar refers to his own experience in supporting this thesis. In the introductory chapter to “Light on Yoga” he describes the remedies that Patanjali recommends to overcome the distractions and obstacles hindering the student of Yoga from reaching unalloyed happiness. They are Maitri (love), Karuna (active compassion), Mudita (delight at the good) and Upeksha (usually translated as equanimity, interpreted by Iyengar as understanding one's own weakness and that of others). Iyengar concludes the review of these four as follows: “The deeper signifiacnce of the fourfold remedy [...] cannot be felt by an unquiet mind. My experience has led me to conclude that for an ordinary man or woman in any community of the world, the way to achieve a quiet mind is to work with determination on two of the eight stages of Yoga mentioned by Patanjali, namely, asana and pranayama.”¹⁹

According to the concept that every limb is the groundwork of the following ones, Iyengar consequently treats Yama and Niyama in “Light on Yoga” as a necessary basis of Asana and Pranayama: “Without firm foundation a house cannot stand. Without the practise of the principles of yama and niyama, which lay down the foundation for building character, there cannot be an integrated personality. Practise of asanas without the backing of yama and niyama is mere acrobatics.”²⁰

In her book Geeta S. Iyengar varies the same thought when she reads the Astanga Marga as a threefold quest where the external quest (pursuit of external purity) is followed by an inner or mental quest (pursuit of inner purity) which culminates in the spiritual quest, the pursuit of the soul.²¹

So it's obvious that the Iyengars know and sometimes also advocate the common pattern describing the eight-limbed path as a step-ladder in which the lower step serves as a presupposition for the next one. Later it will become clear that this is not the ultimate and innovating view that B.K.S. Iyengar finally developed.

When we assess Asana-Pranayama as nothing but preliminary to the higher stages of Yoga it remains unexplained why Iyengar doesn't teach these stages, too. Though Dhyana is always mentioned in his books (and also in Geeta S. Iyengar's “Yoga — A Gem for Women”²²) it is hardly explained in contrast with the other exercises. The teachings which are given by the Iyengar family at the RIMYI-

¹⁷Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Institute (internal document), p. 4.

¹⁸Trevor Leggett, *The Complete Commentary by Sankara on the Yoga Sutras: a full translation of the newly discovered text*, London, Kegan Paul International, 1990, p. 261.

¹⁹B.K.S. Iyengar, *Light on Yoga. Yoga Dipika*, London Sydney Wellington, Unwin Hyman, 1989, p. 27.

²⁰Ibid. p. 57.

²¹See Geeta S. Iyengar, *Yoga — A Gem for Women*, New Delhi, Allied Publishers Private Limited, 1983, pp. 16-18. A very similar scheme underlies the book of Silva, Mira and Shyam Mehta, *Yoga: the Iyengar way*, London, Dorling Kindersley Limited, 1990.

²²See Geeta S. Iyengar, op. cit., pp. 295-301.

Institute in Pune coincide in this connection with their writings. Let us see if the arguments Iyengar delivers to legitimize this are convincing.

4.2.2 Samyama can neither be explained nor taught

In his speech for his 70th birthday Iyengar comments on the final three of the eight limbs of Yoga, which are called Samyama (integration, perfect constraint) as follows: “These three stages of Yoga are experiencing stages. They cannot be presented with explanations. Asanas and Pranayamas can be explained, taught, shown and corrected, while Yama and Niyama are explained by stories of great men as ideal examples to build up character.”²³

Iyengar here understands Samyama as the fruit of practise which comes as its perfection. It is to be experienced directly only and cannot be demonstrated or corrected by others. So a reason for the fact that the Iyengars don't teach Samyama at their institute is indicated: It is not possible for a teacher to teach these areas.

But this reason is not quite plausible, since not only the Yoga tradition but also many other schools like Zen, Sufism etc. do give instruction in meditation. Moreover, through intuition and verbal exchange teachers of these schools do have the opportunity to distinguish right from wrong and correct the students' mistakes. The argument holds true only if it is presupposed that Samyama is a state of mind only and not a practise to gain this state. It fails to prove the impossibility of exercise and teachings in the field of Samyama, but it is true in the sense that nobody is able to fabricate the integration of the mind just by following certain operating instructions. This also holds good for the third argument:

4.2.3 Samyama as Divine Grace

Craving for “instant enlightenment”, demonstrated above all by a special sort of Western travellers to India, often results in circumventing the “lower” limbs of Yoga. Those who seek “mystical experiences” or “altered states of consciousness” often practise exclusively so called “meditation techniques”. Not only does Iyengar consider this to be dangerous, he also sees in it an abuse of Yoga, a kind of sacrilege. “Even a man like Arjuna had to beg Lord Krishna”, he says, “to bless with divine eyes for him to see the infinite light of the Lord, when the Lord graced him to look at his form. This instance is sufficient for seekers like us. To know that, we have to build up that strength and vigour to face the light of the Divine when divinity graces its light on us.”²⁴ From this point of view Asana and Pranayama are a humble preparation for receiving the grace of God, a request that He might bestow on us the eyes that enable us to see His light. Unless we can realize this dimension of Asana-Pranayama, that they -like a prayer- are a manifestation of our longing for the presence of God, we cannot touch the deepness of Iyengar Yoga.

However, neither the graciousness of deep meditation, which always comes as a gift of the deity, nor the greedy attitude of some spiritual greenhorns preclude the regular practise of Dhyana as such.

Summing up, one can say that the arguments brought forward so far do not suffice to substantiate the almost exclusive practise of Asana and Pranayama in Iyengar Yoga. Ultimately, Iyengar's personal dedication to the practise of Asanas, which has been absolutely central for decades, is probably at the root of it. But does that mean that all of his life he spent only on the preparation for higher Yoga?

In order to see why, according to Iyengar himself, this was not the case, we now have to get through to the core of his interpretation of the eight-limbed path.

²³Light on Yoga Research Trust (Ed.), op. cit., p. XXXII.

²⁴Ibid.

4.2.4 Iyengar's new interpretation: All of Yoga is attainable in each limb

Quite a different and new view appears already in the teachings of Iyengar written down by Noelle Perez-Christiaens. In a note dating back to 1959 Iyengar says: "In each posture, in each action, you should be able to find yoga in its integrity according to Patanjali's explanations" Then he undertakes a first attempt to rediscover the whole eightfold path in Asana.²⁵

The same basic idea can be found in Iyengar's instructions collected by Donna Holleman between 1970 and 1974 where it says:

"Patanjali has not said: 'Eight steps;' all these put together are Yoga. But unfortunately people who have not practised at all say: 'This is physical.' Yama and Niyama: when you are doing the posture, the ethics of the right foot, the ethics of the left foot, are they even or not? If you let loose, that is untruth. If the palms are not joining (Parsvottanasana), that is Himsa: you are showing violence on that palm which is not working at all. Because your intelligence has not touched there, so the truth is unknown. [...] So please learn that these poses have been given to know whether in any posture whatever we do, whether you can follow the eight steps or not. [...] All the postures contain all the eight steps."²⁶

In the texts just quoted, Iyengar speaks his very own language, taken directly from a training situation. It is not scholastically alienated as seems to be the case with some of his more theoretical commentaries on the Yoga Sutras.

From the standpoint of the practitioner he calls into question the premise that the eight-limbed path is a sequence of steps, one following the other. He rather suggests that only "put together" i.e. taken as a unity they form Yoga. Because the eight-limbed path is an indivisible whole in every partial field of it, at least potentially, the entire way of Yoga is present.

From this thought it follows that those who are serious about one of the limbs of Yoga are able to attain what Yoga as a whole is about through intelligent practise of that limb alone. This is Iyengar's unique interpretation of the eightfold path, which has no precedent as far as I know.

What is hinted at by the early remarks quoted above, he treated in detail in his collection of speeches and lectures entitled "The Tree of Yoga", published in 1989 (especially pp. 41-81). Therein he says: "Mahatma Gandhi did not practise all the aspects of Yoga. He only followed two of its principles — non-violence and truth, yet through these two aspects of Yoga, he mastered his own nature and gained independence for India. If a part of Yama could make Mahatma Gandhi so great, so pure, so honest and so divine, should it not be possible to take another limb of Yoga — Asana — and through it reach the highest goal of spiritual development?"²⁷

Formulated with reference to Patanjala Yoga, Iyengar suggests that the various areas mentioned in the third chapter of the Sutras as a field for the application of Samyama are replaced by the refined practise of Asana and Pranayama, which includes the development of the other parts of the eight-limbed path.

How this can happen, I want to work out in greater detail in the second part of this essay, paying particular attention to the last three limbs of the Astanga Marga.

²⁵Noelle Perez-Christiaens, *Sparks of Divinity*, Paris, Institute de yoga B.K.S.Iyengar, 1976, pp. 79-80.

²⁶Dona Holleman (Ed.), *Yoga Darsana of B.K.S. Iyengar*, London, 1970-1974, Vol. II: *Savasana, Pranayama, Sutra*, Firenze, Donna Holleman, 1987, p. 134.

²⁷B.K.S. Iyengar, *The Tree of Yoga. Yoga Vrksa*, Boston, Shambala Publications, 1989, p. 46.

Part II

Detailed Analysis: The Hidden Presence of Astanga Yoga in Asana

5 The integration of the other limbs of the eight-limbed path into Asana

The problem from which my thoughts about Iyengar's reference to the Yoga tradition proceed can be expressed in the following manner: Every mindful reader of "Light on Yoga" will ask what the relation is between the comparatively brief introductory part dealing with traditional Yoga philosophy and the very voluminous description of the various Asanas which follows. The book itself does not give a satisfactory answer. There is a gap between the two parts and this gap is the yet unbridged difference between the tradition and Iyengar's own approach to Yoga.

Iyengar is aware of the limitations of his first major work in this respect (Analogous problems reappear in "Light on Pranayama"). In a conversation with Neela Karnik he gave as the main reason for writing "Light on Yoga" his wish to convince the public of his authenticity and earnestness by completely documenting his Asanas. He remarks that in those days, he had not been able to present the essence of his art, that is the process of personal growth and self-realisation initiated by the struggle for precision in the poses, in a sufficiently clear manner. However, it has always been implicit in his practise and in his teaching: "The Asanas came because I followed the principles of Yama and Niyama. I involved my entire self — physical, emotional and intellectual. The entire body becomes a basis for meditation. Each pose is meditation. The body is a temple. The 'atma' needs a clean place to live. That is why the book shows a detailed technique. But Yama-Niyama has to be understood. The book has limitations. But my pupils have to realise this. When I am teaching you, you realise your involvement and your own 'culturing'. You are evolving emotionally, intellectually, spiritually. Now this could not be put in the book - it is implicit in my technique."²⁸

In "The Tree of Yoga" Iyengar takes an important step in the direction of an original "Iyengar Yoga philosophy", which integrates the old Yoga by trying to illustrate and explain the implications of his practise of Asana using Patanjali's eightlimbed path as a conceptual framework. The following interpretation is based mainly on the second part of this book.

5.1 Yama in Asana²⁹

In "The Tree of Yoga" Iyengar sticks to the view taken in the passages already quoted concerning Yama and Niyama.³⁰ As earlier in "Light on Yoga" he describes Yama as the root from which all Yoga grows. But now he shows which place Yama takes in the practise of Asana itself, how it is present when we work on the pose. More deeply and in more detail than ever before he develops the connection of Yama with the basic principle of Asana: the proper extension of the entire body.

This extension means Ahimsa, because it avoids the violent forms of over- and under-extension which lead to injurious strain on the one hand and on the other hand to slackness, which is just as destructive because functions not being used waste away and finally die.

Satya, truth in the exercise of the body, according to Iyengar, is gained insofar as the single stretch which moves the whole body, reveals the reality of our embodied being. The weak points are not

²⁸Light on Yoga Research Trust (Ed.), op. cit., p. 42.

²⁹See B.K.S. Iyengar, *The Tree of Yoga. Yoga Vrksa*, op. cit., pp. 50-51.

³⁰See above p. 13

avoided but integrated into the exercise. Slumbering points are awakened and the openness of our bodily existence increases.

Practise of this kind leads to Brahmacharya, continence in the sense of development of inner energy.³¹ The mind stops wandering around; stops being driven by different wants and desires. The energy is not wasted but on the contrary circulating inside the body without loss.

The opening of a complete stretch also liberates from greed and the attitude of grasping and holding on to things. In this way Asteya and Aparigraha (non-stealing and freedom from greed) are integrated into Asana to some degree.

5.2 Niyama in Asana³²

Practising Asana means a purification (Sauca) of our embodied being: Our capacity for mobility is regained, as is upright posture and unrestrained movement. This leads to satisfacton and feeling comfortable with oneself (Samtosa).

The following principles of Niyama are more demanding and presuppose more experience and understanding.

Tapas: a burning desire to give the maximum by performing a pose, carrying the aspirant beyond self-imposed limitations, which are all too often determined by inertia. In the fire of Tapas the longing for the divine is already stirring.

Svadyaya: Through devotion to practise the practitioner learns to know the various dimensions of her's/his own being. The way we do the poses reflects our mode of living in the world, including our attitude towards the divine source of the universe.

This leads us to Isvarapranidhana which only very few are able to realize in Asana. To master it means to be able to transform the pose into an act of surrender to God. This does not mean that while holding the poses prayers should be spoken in a loud or low voice. Rather, the Asana itself becomes a prayer, taken as a gift from God. In thankfulness the giver and his gift as such are present for the recipient. In case of the Asanas gratitude is realized through complete involvement in the pose, doing it with the utmost attention and precision. "Doing Asana is a grace from God. Take it or He will walk away."³³

5.3 Pranayama in Asana

In "The Tree of Yoga" and in his other books, too, Iyengar doesn't say very much about Pranayama in Asana.³⁴ He stresses that in doing a posture we can extend the body fully only if we synchronize the breathing with the movement. He considers holding the breath in the Asana bad because it stiffens the body. Those comparatively unpractised are especially advised to go into the poses with an exhalation.³⁵

In general, it may be added that a pose can only be felt fully if it is pervaded with relaxed breathing. Paying attention to the tension, relaxation and expansion connected with breathing plays an essential role in deepening the Asanas towards meditation. Moreover, the so-called postural-prana mentioned below is a phenomenon which is supposed to occur only in connection with sensitive breath flowing through the entire body.

³¹ Ibid.

³² See B.K.S. Iyengar, *The Tree of Yoga. Yoga Vrksa*, op. cit., pp. 52-53.

³³ B.K.S. Iyengar's 60th Birthday Celebration Commitee (Ed.), op. cit., p. 503.

³⁴ See B.K.S. Iyengar, *The Tree of Yoga. Yoga Vrksa*, op. cit., pp. 52-53.

³⁵ Ibid. 57-58. The problem of breathing in the Asanas is also treated by Geeta S. Iyengar, loc. cit., pp. 75-76.

5.4 Pratyahara in Asana

Pratyahara is mostly translated as “withdrawal of the senses from the world”, which is an easily misleading phrase. It doesn’t mean an elimination, a deafening or any other kind of reduction of the senses. Rather it is their soothing. It is a calmness that manifests itself not by restraining the senses but rather by removing restraints, in the sense of William Blake’s aphorism: “If the doors of perception were cleansed, everything would appear to man as it is, infinite.”

The cleansing of the doors of perception called Pratyahara entails a change of attitude towards that which is given through the senses. It is not our senses that need to be held back but we ourselves, since we block the senses with our self-centred possessive armour. The more we free ourselves from this armour the more our senses are free not only to turn towards the outer world but also to turn inwards towards their source, which is hidden in darkness and silence.

In this sense Iyengar describes Pratyahara as release from the unsatisfactory cycle of compulsively seeking pleasures, which always is connected with fearful avoidance of uncomfortable situations. “Detachment from the affairs of the world and attachment towards the soul is Pratyahara.”³⁶

In the exercise of Asana, Pratyahara happens when muscles and joints get into their correct positions: “[...], when the muscles and joints are rested in their positions, the body, senses and mind lose their identities and consciousness shines in its purity. This is the meaning of pratyahara.”³⁷

Further aspects of Pratyahara in Asana are a receptive, quiet condition of the head while in the posture; the integration of the eyes into the sensation of the whole body; and the awareness of the back of the body.³⁸ If these characteristics are present, in spite of the effort of maintaining the pose, a calm, listening and open attitude is achieved, which Iyengar calls humility.³⁹

5.5 Dharana in Asana

“What are you focusing on? You are trying to perfect the pose, but from where to where? That is where things become difficult.”⁴⁰

Dharana is generally translated as concentration. It is derived from the root dhri: to carry, to bear, to hold (cf. dhara: the one who bears = the earth; dharanam: prop, support, pillar, stay, hold).⁴¹ The word has been used in the Yoga tradition from ancient times. For example Katha Upanisad 6.11 speaks of indriyadharana, the holding (together) of the senses. In Yoga Sutra III, 1 Patanjali defines it as “binding the mind to a place”⁴²

Dharana is more than simple concentration in the sense of stupidly staring at a certain point. It is an accurate care which heeds that neither the thing which is held by one’s attention nor the self of the one who holds it is lost. A story told by Somadeva in his Katha-Sarit-Sagara illustrates very well how Dharana implies dedication of the whole person:

“Vitastadatta was a merchant who had converted from Hinduism to Buddhism. His son, in utter disdain, persisted in calling him immoral and irreligious. Failing to correct his son’s obnoxious behaviour, Vitastadatta brought the matter before the king. The king promptly ordered the boy’s execution at the end of a period of two months, entrusting him to his father’s custody until then. Brooding

³⁶B.K.S. Iyengar, *The Tree of Yoga. Yoga Vrksa*, op.cit., p. 63.

³⁷Ibid. p. 61.

³⁸See Donna Holleman (Ed.), op. cit., p. 114 and p. 120.

³⁹Ibid., p. 110.

⁴⁰B.K.S. Iyengar, *The Tree of Yoga. Yoga Vrksa*, op. cit., p. 41.

⁴¹Concerning the etymology of Dharana, Dhyana and Samadhi I follow J.W. Hauer, *Der Yoga. Ein indischer Weg zum Selbst*, Stuttgart, 1958, Kohlhammer Verlag, pp. 319, 322 and 340-341.

⁴²According to the translation of Trevor Leggett, op. cit., p. 282.

on his fate, the lad could neither eat nor sleep. At the appointed time he was again brought to the royal palace. Seeing his terror, the king pointed out to him that all beings are afraid of death as he was; therefore, what higher aspiration could there be than practising the Buddhist virtue of nonharming at all times, including showing respect to one's elders.

The boy, by now deeply repentant, desired to be put on the path to right knowledge. Recognizing his sincerity, the king decided to initiate him by means of a test. He had a vessel brought to him, filled with oil to the brim, and ordered the lad to carry it around the city without spilling a drop, or else he would be executed on the spot. Glad of his chance to win his life, the boy was determined to succeed. Undaunted, he looked neither left nor right, thinking only of the vessel in his hands. He returned at last to the king without having spilled a drop. Knowing that a festival was going on in the city, the king inquired whether the boy had seen anyone at all in the streets. The boy replied that he had neither heard nor seen anyone. The king seemed pleased and admonished him to pursue the supreme goal of liberation with the same single mindedness and passion.⁴³

The story shows what Dharana in Yoga should be: Being glad of the chance to win one's life and liberation, taking this chance with total attention on what is necessary to gain them.

In practising Asana according to Iyengar's method, the specific posture becomes the place of meditation. What is Dharana directed toward in the pose? Iyengar says: "Dharana is concentration on a point. Dhyana is concentration from that point without losing the source: 'Can I attend the rest of the body?'"⁴⁴ Here it is said that Dharana is directed to certain points of the body which Iyengar calls sources. What kind of points are they and why are they called sources? "If you know the source of each and every asana," he says, "then you are very nearer the truth. Otherwise it is just a branch moving."⁴⁵ From this it follows that the sources of the Asana are those places of the body from which the truth of the pose, i.e. that which it truly is, its nature, can be understood and brought into appearance. Therefore Iyengar sometimes also calls the source the "brain" of the Asana, the brain being the organ of orientation, insight and reflected action.

Through the "brain" or "source" the position can be built up with intelligence and held according to its nature. Every source gives birth not to a part but to the whole of whatever emanates from it. So does the source of the Asana. It opens the posture as a whole. If the Asana doesn't spring from the sources, it doesn't become fully revealed in its unity. Instead, only parts are moved, in an isolated way: "It is just a branch moving".

Where are these sources? "Whatever pose you do, that which is in contact with the ground or nearest the ground is the brain."⁴⁶ Just as a building can only be erected on a solid foundation, being rooted in the ground is decisive for the various poses. The entire Asana springs from those points through which by breathing and with the weight of our body we unite ourselves with the supporting ground that gives us stability and the firm base to bring ourselves upright or to relax like in Savasana.

Other important sources of the postures are — and this may be surprising at first — the weak points, where nothing happens. Only by turning to those areas and waking them up the Asana can be experienced fundamentally, and that means in its entirety. "Once you know the portions that do not work, that becomes the brain for the pose, the source for action."⁴⁷

The hint at portions that don't work is important, because by the very attention given to certain points, the inevitable danger of forgetting the others exists. This may have painful consequences: "You can lose the benefits of what you are doing because of focusing too much partial attention on

⁴³G. Feuerstein, *Yoga. The Technology of Ecstasy*, Los Angeles, 1989, Crucible, p. 192.

⁴⁴Dona Holleman (Ed.), *op. cit.*, p. 125.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 131.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*, p. 108.

trying to perfect the pose. [...] In concentration, you are likely to forget some parts of the body as you focus your attention on other parts. That is why you get pain in certain parts of the body. It is because the unattended muscles lose their power and are dropped. But you will not know that you are dropping them, because they are precisely the muscles in which you have momentarily lost your awareness.”

In order to avoid the dilemma that Iyengar speaks of here it is necessary to develop an attitude of concentration on those parts that were neglected and therefore are on the edges of our field of awareness.⁴⁸

One has to expand the attention from the area that has been particularly extended over the whole body without losing the openness and stretch in the extended part.

In doing this, Dharana already merges into Dhyana.

5.6 Analysis of the transition from Dharana to Dhyana in Asana: The role of extension, postural prana, body-scheme and structural analogies

According to the German Indologist J-W. Hauer Dhyana is a compound of dhi: to put, to place and -a: near, up, on. If this is correct then Dhyana originally is a verbal noun meaning “the placing near”, which can be understood as the gradual narrowing of the distance between the one who is dedicating himself to something in Dharana and that to which he is devoting himself. The closeness of both becomes manifest when the onepointedness (ekagrata) of Dharana transforms itself into a steadily flowing stream of attention (ekatanata) connecting the two.⁴⁹

Whereas in Dharana the attention still shifts between different aspects of the place which is contemplated, in Dhyana the place is perceived in its wholeness, by itself and in relation to itself. This is well illustrated by the commentary on the Yoga-Sutras which is ascribed to Sankara. It is said there, that someone who practises Dharana whilst contemplating the sun still notices various attributes of the sun, e.g. its being disc-shaped or its brilliance. In Dhyana, however, the continuous stream of attention is not directed to the sun as being disc-shaped, brilliant, etc. but to the sun as sun and nothing but that. All the different aspects of the sun are integrated in one single perception of the sun in its wholeness.⁵⁰

As far as the practise of Asana is concerned, the transition from Dharana to Dhyana means the development of awareness of the whole pose which transcends the concentration on different points and details. At the end of the last section I already pointed out that this transition is of great practical importance and therefore I want to dwell a little longer on the question of how this change is possible.

The wholeness of our bodily existence in a certain pose is always already there before we start to look at the manifold details. We don't have to compose completely separated parts of our body and body-awareness. They originally exist in unity. But this unity and wholeness is more or less disturbed, dull and uprooted. So we have to work on the details to restore it from the sources.

As I already mentioned above a source is something which gives birth to something else that in its entirety springs from it. If you look at a mighty river it is almost incredible that it owes its existence to some little springs up there in the mountains. Although sources usually are small and inconspicuous, they are the real centers of energy, more powerful than whatever is originated by them.

If source is the correct designation for the parts of the body upon which Dharana is to be practised in Asana, then these points must have the hidden power to emanate the correct pose in its entirety. How does this springing of the whole pose from the sources happen?

⁴⁸B.K.S. Iyengar, *The Tree of Yoga. Yoga Vrksa*, op. cit., pp. 41-42.

⁴⁹See G. Feuerstein, op. cit., pp. 192-193.

⁵⁰Cf. Trevor Leggett, op. cit., p. 283.

It doesn't happen just by itself without the practitioner's endeavour. Dharana, fixing the attention upon the sources of the pose, means more than just to feel specific points. In order to let the source be a source one must allow the position to spring from it. This happens if we extend ourselves from the sources into the various directions inherent in the pose. Extension is the key to Dhyana in Asana. It is a movement that is impossible without a continuous flow of attention.⁵¹ The moment we lose our attention the extended part is dropped and becomes dull. But the attention needed for extension is not in points. It is spreading throughout the whole extended area. The more the pose is unified in one single but multidimensional stretch the more the practitioner is aware of her's/his bodily being as a whole, opening itself in every direction in which the pose is pointing.

In the stretch the multiplicity of sensitive points is increasingly united by a phenomenon aptly called postural prana by the Iyengar Yoga teacher Arthur Kilmurry: "In a healthy, undistorted body, the muscular action follows certain patterns. In some areas, the muscles naturally tend to lift; in other areas, they tend to pull downward. When this natural action of the muscles is not inhibited, one can experience it as a circuit of energy flowing through along the inner lining of the skin. For lack of a better term, I refer to this wave of muscular energy as 'postural prana'."⁵²

With the concept of postural prana Kilmurry indicates a very important dimension of Asana. But I don't think that he is right in explaining it materialistically as a mere result of muscular movement, or as subjective experience of muscular energy, because I would argue that the experience of prana is ontologically and epistemologically prior to the observation of the action of muscles and their physical energy.⁵³

Anyway it's true that the extension of the body in a correctly performed Asana is essentially not achieved by arbitrary muscular contractions but rather by placing the joints and bones into their correct positions and then following the directions of extension which inhere in the structure of the pose interacting with gravity.

When this is done, the contraction and release corresponding to the posture come by themselves and a flow is felt under the skin going in circles and running through the body, enlivening and invigorating the practitioner. The more correct the position, the clearer and simpler are the resulting circuits of prana along the arcs of extension and the easier an integral awareness of our bodily existence comes. The main traits of the pose are carved out and through this we as performers gain a well centered body-profile vibrant with life.

This experience is supported by the development of the so-called body-scheme which unfolds through practise. In psychology the body-scheme is defined as the sense of location and direction regarding one's own position and movement. This sense is absolutely necessary for orientation. Without the perception of where our arms and feet are, how long they are, in which direction they move and how far they can reach, our behaviour would be totally confused. The knowledge of these things is primarily not imparted by seeing but by the inner feeling of the body. Usually it's limited within the narrow scope of daily life demands, but through Yoga we are able to widen it.

Being still unfamiliar with the poses in the beginning of training, one doesn't know, for instance, which joint is stretched, or how far backward one's leg can reach, etc.. Just as with learning to play the piano, because of our mistakes we initially have to turn our attention again and again to the detail movements and away from the sound of the whole. But the more the body-scheme develops, the more natural the pose becomes and the less it needs to be watched and corrected from outside. Then Asana becomes a way of being ourselves: No more "I am turning my knee to the right" but "I am entirely in

⁵¹"Extension is attention" Iyengar says in D. Holleman, op. cit., p. 111.

⁵²Arthur Kilmurry, *Sarvangasana*, in: Yoga Journal, Sept./Oct. 1990, p. 33.

⁵³To say it in terms of Indian philosophy: The pranamaya-kosa is pervading and enlivening the annamaya-kosa. This relation is not reversible.

the pose”.

The widening of the body scheme is promoted by what might be called structural analogies and symmetries. The analogous structure of the limbs and the different symmetries in the entire body are conducive to a personal presence in the pose as a whole and therefore it is helpful to pay attention to it in the practise of Asana. The experience of symmetry always implies an experience of the centre, the middle line. Centering ourselves in Asana leads our dismembered Ego to the remembrance of the Self, which is the aim of Dhyana.

5.7 Samadhi in Asana

“In some postures, we lose the sense of duality and we live in peace, in a joy we cannot express in words. And even if we have to fight all our life to feed this joy once more, it is worth doing it.”⁵⁴

Samadhi is a synonym of samadhana: sam = together; a = on; dha= abbreviated; dhi = to put, to place. It means both putting near and thereby putting together, joining together. That which by nature belongs to a unity is brought into this unity and becomes a whole. Patanjali defines samadhi as such: “The same (dhyana), when it comes to shine forth as the place alone, apparently empty of its own nature as knowledge, is called samadhi.”⁵⁵

In Samadhi the meditator is not concerned with her/himself any more. The knowledge of the meditated place loses the structure of “I know this”. It becomes pure openness in which the place alone is present and the presence of the place is at the same time the awareness of the meditator. Both are in unity. What does this mean when an Asana is the place of meditation?

As soon as the resistance dissolves and nothing stands between the pose and the one doing it, the possibility of Samadhi is given. By divine grace the pose may become the presence of the self. “The mind should fade into the Vastness; the mind has to dissolve, and the self has to approach the subject”.⁵⁶ The body recedes from consciousness because the extension the practitioner has opened to goes beyond to the vastness of the universe and into the depth of its hidden origin. Staying firmly and quietly in this openness the depth of being shines forth and the joyful nearness of the divine can be felt in the cave of the heart.

As Geeta S. Iyengar says: “Asana means holding the body in a particular posture with the bhavana or thought that God is within. The Asana has to be held firm or ‘sthira’ so as not to shake that divinity. Asana Jaya or conquest of Asana comes when effort ceases and stability sets in. The stability brings about a state of ‘sukhata’ or bliss.”⁵⁷ This, however, is nothing else but Samadhi in Asana, for Geeta later describes Samadhi in the following way: “The meditator, the act of meditation, and the object meditated upon all three merge into one single vision of the entire cosmos. Supreme happiness, free from pleasure, pain and misery, is experienced.”⁵⁸

6 Conclusion

Coming back finally to the conflict between “knee-cap-yogis” and “arm-chair yogis”, it should have become sufficiently clear by the above reflections that the arm-chair yogis have no reason to slight Mr.

⁵⁴Noelle Perez-Christiaens, op. cit., p. 70.

⁵⁵Yoga Sutra III, 3 translated by Trevor Leggett, op. cit., p. 283.

⁵⁶Donna Holleman, op. cit., p. 118.

⁵⁷Geeta S. Iyengar, op. cit., p. 25.

⁵⁸Ibid. p. 29

Iyengar's way of Yoga. On the other hand, it is to be hoped that my considerations managed to show that it is not superfluous for the Iyengar Yoga student to study the Yoga literature very accurately. It is of great importance for understanding one's own practise and deepening it. A Yoga without philosophical dimension is not spiritual, but stupid.

In order that Yoga theory doesn't turn into empty talk, though, it must always be reconnected with practise. As Iyengar says: "You need to rub yourself with words and works. Put the words to the test of your experience. Do not be carried away by my words or anyone else's words. Rub yourself with each word through work and practise. Rubbing means to experience. Go with it! Find out! You develop original intelligence by rubbing the thought with experience and that originality is meditation."⁵⁹

⁵⁹B.K.S. Iyengar, *The Tree of Yoga. Yoga Vrksa*, op. cit., p. 72.