

Iyengar Yoga and the Power of Intention

Iyengar Yoga National Association of the United States

Regional New England Conference

Keynote Address

October 17, 2009

My thanks to our conference co-coordinators and my dear friends, Patricia Walden and Linda DiCarlo, for their tireless efforts and their deep devotion that made this conference possible. Thanks also to all you workers and volunteers, in front of and behind the scenes for your invaluable and essential assistance. And, of course, thanks to all of you attendees for being here. Without you there wouldn't be any conference.

I felt very honored when I was asked to give the keynote address to this conference. This is the largest group of senior-level Iyengar yoga teachers ever gathered for a weekend conference. And it is the first regional conference ever put on by the IYNAUS. Because of that it is a wonderful opportunity for all of us to experience Iyengar Yoga in a deeper and broader way. So in light of that I've thought long and hard about what to say on such an occasion.

I chose the topic, Iyengar Yoga and The Power of Intention for several reasons.

The first is that it is relevant to all of us. Each of us here has an interest in yoga – obviously, or we wouldn't be here. But each of us has our own particular reason for pursuing the path of yoga. Back in the old days, when my classes were smaller, I used to ask my beginning students why they had come to class. As many students as there were, that's how many reasons there were for their being there.

For some it may have been to try to heal a back problem; for others a chance to get a little more flexible, or stronger. Some wanted to learn to relax and relieve some of the stress in their lives; others wanted to get high on movement or meditation. Some wanted to explore their spirituality in a system that had been doing so for thousands and thousands of years.

The reason those students were in that beginning class – and the reason you are here is your Sankalpa. That's the Sanskrit word for intention.

So everybody starts on the path of yoga with some purpose, some goal in mind, some intention.

Another reason I picked this topic is that it illustrates the importance in yoga of the movement of our consciousness from the gross to the subtle, from the temporal to the timeless, from individual consciousness to cosmic consciousness. On this amazing journey, we travel from the external to the internal.... **AND THEN BACK OUT AGAIN!**

I want to come back to the “then back out again” later on, but for right now, let’s see how this evolution of involution, or curling inward of consciousness - which is what yoga is really all about - works in relation to intention.

Those of you who have been doing yoga for a while, think back to what your intention was when you first began. Now think about why you’re doing yoga at this point in your practice. I’m pretty sure that very few of you have the same reason for practicing now as you did at the outset. And I would guess that for many, maybe most of you, your reason for practicing, your intention, is more sophisticated, more refined, subtler than it was in the past.

As we go on practicing, moving nearer to our goals, we continue to refine and redefine our intention. For me, that’s one of the amazing things about yoga: the practice itself invites the continual refinement of intention. Just by doing what you do in your practice, you are changed, and because of that your motivations and expectations are changed as well.

Now with respect this involution of consciousness, in Iyengar Yoga, we are very explicit about this intention of taking our consciousness inward to the core of our being.

In his superb book, *Light On Life*, our Gururji, B.K.S. Iyengar, titles the first chapter, *The Inward Journey*. In the second paragraph he says, “The yogic journey guides us from our periphery, the body, to the center of our being, the soul. The aim is to integrate the various layers so that the inner divinity shines out as through clear glass.”

No matter what your Sankalpa at this stage in your practice, though, I think that one of the beauties of the Iyengar tradition is that the path to fulfilling your intention is within the scope of this method.

You can come at it for purely physical reasons. That’s how I began. Lord knows, with our emphasis on asana and pranayama and the use of props and therapeutic techniques, you’ll find what you’re looking for on that level. With the focus on alignment, balance, and breath, you can learn to harmonize yourself with the powerful energies within yourself and discover emotional equilibrium and personal empowerment.. The subtleties and precision of this practice draw you into a deeper and deeper experience of ekagra – a one pointed, sharper, clearer state of mind.

In Iyengar Yoga, we work to develop and enhance our powers of discrimination. With respect to that, I think of Iyengar Yoga as the yoga of “What if?” “If I have this sensation in my hip when I press my inner heel, what happens if I press my outer heel?” “What is my state of mind after 8 cycles of Viloma I? What if I make the pauses longer? Then what? What does that do to my awareness?” This is the process of developing discriminating wisdom. In this way, we refine our intuitive understanding of our bodies, our world, ourselves. And as we go deeper and deeper inward in our practice, we may begin to taste those moments of joy and freedom that open our hearts and make our lives sing.

So as we go on practicing, our reasons for practicing change. In light of this, I think it is really important to ask yourself – often, really – “Why in the heck am I doing this?”

Because it is important to understand that unless we are clear in our intention, our chances of fulfilling our purposes are greatly diminished. We need to ask ourselves “Why am I doing this?” because the clarity of our intention gives us much greater power to move toward our goal.

B.K.S. Iyengar is fond of quoting the 22nd sutra of the Ist Pada of Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras: *mrdu madhya adhimatratvat tatah api visesa*, which he translates as “There are those who are mild, medium, or keen in their practice.” Patanjali tells us in the preceding sutra: *tivra samveganam asannah*, which Guruji translates as “The goal is near for those who are supremely vigorous and intense in practice.”

If the goal is near for those who are supremely vigorous and intense in practice, the question arises, “How do we become keen, intense in our practice so that we can move more readily toward our goal?”

Certainly one way to intensify your practice is to become clear in your intention. I think it is interesting to note that the words intense and intention have the same root, from the Latin *intendere*, to stretch or intend. By understanding clearly what you intend to do, the intensity with which you can act is greatly enhanced. By consciously establishing your intention, you can stretch out and reach for your goal much more effectively.

John Locke has an interesting definition of intention. He says, “Intention is manifest when the mind, with great earnestness, and of choice, fixes its view on any idea, considers it on every side, and will not be called off by the ordinary solicitation of other ideas.”

It is my experience that when we set our intention, when we choose to fix our view on something and consider it on every side, when we’re not called off by all the distractions and impediments that surround us, something mysterious happens. What the sutras imply, and what I think you’ll find, is that many of the obstacles that loom in your way fall aside when confronted with the clarity of your intention and the power of your intensity. Problems become manageable and interestingly, help, expected and unexpected, seems to arrive from every quarter.

Locke’s definition sounds a lot like the definition of *dharana* and *dhyana*, of meditation.

[Go back and read it again]

Now when you move nearer the core of your being through meditation, something mysterious happens. Yogis are, after all, mystics. A certain clarity that is beyond thought arises that calls forth powerful forces within us. These forces, this *shakti*, is not only within us but all around. We swim (or sink) in an ocean of energy. The essence of our practice is, as I see it, the process of aligning ourselves with the currents of energy our vessel moves in.

Alignment is not just getting your bones all pointed in the right direction and balancing the forces in your joints. It is becoming sensitive to the currents in which you move and learning to align yourself with that flow so that you are carried toward your destination, your goal, so that those powerful currents are not in your face, not against you, but are, instead, behind you, with you, urging you on with greater intensity than you could muster on your own. When your intention is clear and strong and you move forward with great intensity and integrity, the Universe is on your side.

So our journey inward is guided by our intention and is energized by our intention.

When I said earlier that our practice and its encouraging effect on our intention leads us ever more deeply into ourselves, I also said **AND THEN BACK OUT AGAIN!**

It seems to me that whatever awakening, whatever opening up to the mystery and grandeur of it all we might touch in our practice, we have an obligation to manifest that awakening, to share it with our fellow beings. I mean, that's the real reason for teaching, isn't it? Because what arises from this awakening is a deep realization that we're all in the pool together and that what I do affects you and what you do affects me.

And that brings me to the final reason I chose Iyengar Yoga and the Power of Intention as the topic of this address. When the concept of this conference was first being developed, there were several reasons for doing it. Gathering the local tribe together, which is always a rush; giving the more junior teachers an opportunity for greater exposure, and giving the broader, non-Iyengar community a chance to experience the energy and joy that Iyengar Yoga gives to those of us who practice it.

It is this last intention, the intention of reaching out to the larger yoga community, that I want to address here in my final words.

As yoga has grown larger and larger and more mainstream in the last couple of decades, I have noticed what might be called the Balkanization of yoga, its fracturing into various sects and groups, and, more important, the tendency for those different tribes to view one another with less than benevolent eyes.

Actually this has been around since the beginning of yoga, but I think with the recent exponential growth of yoga, these tendencies have proliferated. Ever since my early years of practice and teaching, I have been puzzled and disturbed by this tendency. As we all know, Yoga means Union, which implies a basic understanding that everything and everyone are interconnected.

As Swami Satchidananda used to say, Paths are Many, Truth is One. This means that there is more than one way to do yoga, more than one way to see what is real and true.

Obviously, those of us who have a devoted practice of Iyengar Yoga have found the path we prefer, the one that works for us...or we'd be doing something else. Just as obviously other devoted practitioners have found a way that works for them. And, of course, many haven't found the way that speaks clearly to them, that helps them with their problems,

that carries them past their limited vision of themselves more deeply into the challenging and exciting quest for Self-realization.

It is especially to these seekers that we want to reach out and say, “Hey, check out this stuff I’ve been doing. Look what it has done for me.”

But before we go strutting our stuff around the barnyard, we need to look to see just what that stuff is.

Here’s what I see. Nearly every tradition borrows our techniques, our methods of practicing and especially of teaching. Why? Because they are so clearly effective and powerful. For example, I started my practice in the Sivananda tradition.

If you look at the practice instructions in Swami Vishnu’s Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga and then compare that with the instructions in The Sivananda Companion to Yoga which came out in 1983, 23 years later, you will notice a significant change in the use of anatomical instruction, benefits, cautions and contraindications, and terminology. I think that’s a direct result of the success of the Iyengar method in refining the practice and teaching of asana. Beryl Bender, Baron Baptiste, Richard Freeman, various teachers in the vinyasa and flow approaches all acknowledge the influence Iyengar methods have had on their practice and teaching.

I also see that our teachers undergo the most rigorous certification process in the country. No one’s teachers are better trained than Iyengar Yoga teachers.

As I said earlier, and as most of you know, Guruji’s practice and teaching are steeped in traditional yoga, in the Raja Yoga system as described by Patanjali. In fact, in a recent interview with Guruji in YJ (DEC.2008), when asked, “What is Iyengar Yoga?” he said with a laugh, “I myself do not know. I just try to get the physical body in line with the mental body, the mental body in line with the intellectual body, and the intellectual body with the spiritual body so they are balanced.

It’s just pure traditional yoga, from our ancestors, from our gurus, from Patanjali.” Iyengar Yoga, then, whatever it is, is a profoundly spiritual practice directed toward our very reasons for being and the nature of existence.

So we are part of an ancient spiritual tradition - whose methods are recognized far and wide as extremely effective - and our teachers are top notch. Why, then, isn’t everybody doing Iyengar Yoga?

This is a huge question, more than enough of a topic for another talk or panel or article or book, but if our intention is to reach out to the broader community, we need to ask how is it that our message is so persuasive, lauded and imitated, but in terms of numbers of practitioners, Iyengar Yoga is being caught up to and surpassed by adherents of other approaches.

I can think of lots of reasons frankly. We are uncompromising, demanding, challenging. Not everybody wants that. I do. I wouldn't sacrifice that for popularity. Better to go down the tubes with integrity than sell out our principles for passing gain.

We use Sanskrit. We are critical. We work on learning not just doing, which means we ask for a commitment, not just a one-night stand. We aren't satisfied with half-hearted or casual behavior, we insist on your best shot.

These are perfectly understandable reasons why Iyengar Yoga is not everybody's cup of tea. And certainly, there is the fact that no teacher or system can be all things to all people.

But if our intention is to reach out to folks, to present the benefits of our method, to entice them to take a look, we need to examine the things we can do better without sacrificing our hearts and souls.

So what's the knock on Iyengar Yoga and yogi's? We are rigid. We are harsh. We are boring. We are arrogant. We are unfriendly and unwelcoming.

I doubt any of this is a surprise to you, most of you anyway. And to those of you who are worried about hanging out the dirty laundry, I think it makes for good relations to hang around in the back yard chatting with the next door neighbor for awhile while you put your stuff on the line and take it off.

So while we're chatting, I'm reminded of my momma's words (my mom always had words for every occasion): You catch a lot more flies with honey than you do with vinegar.

I'm not saying we should sugar coat what we do and come up with watered down tricks that suck the real juice out of our yoga. It wouldn't be Iyengar Yoga anymore, anyway. What I am saying is that we should look at how we manifest our yoga, especially we teachers. What do people see when we step in front of a class? Are we healthy, vibrant, enthusiastic? Do we radiate joy, friendliness, compassion? Do the students see someone that they want to be like, a presence they aspire to?

And if we want folks in other traditions to be accepting, respectful, and friendly toward us, do we offer them the same?

I won't speak for people from other tribes, but I too often hear comments from my fellow Iyengari's that are disrespectful, pompous, full of pride. Those of you who know me well, know that I am not without fault in this respect myself. Guruji in Light On Life says, QUOTE "This pride lies in difference, not equality. I am fierce, but you are weak. I am right, but you are wrong. Pride blinds us to the quality of others. We judge by external and by worthless comparisons. We lose the joy in the existence of others. We expect others to perform according to our desires. We are consistently dissatisfied."

Of course most of you practice and teach with joy and it shows. I have only to think of our dear friend, wonderful colleague, and shining example, Mary Dunn. Talk about exhibiting qualities that one would find admirable, desirable, and eminently worth emulating. As far as I am concerned, she was the ideal poster person for the Light on Iyengar Yoga in this country.

As always, Mr. Iyengar provides us with excellent guidance on this whole issue. In Light On Yoga he says, “Maitri is not mere friendliness, but also a feeling of oneness with the object of friendliness (atmiyata). The yogi cultivates maitri and atmiyata for the good and turns enemies into friends, bearing malice to none....

Mudita is a feeling of delight at the good work done by another, even though he may be a rival....Of upeksha he says, “The yogi understands the faults of others by seeing and studying them first in himself. This self-study teaches him to be charitable to all.”

We Iyengar Yogis are fortunate to have been graced, either directly or indirectly, with a teacher, B.K.S. Iyengar, who has shown us a practice that is powerful, effective, and time-tested. If our intention is to share with others the great joy we have experienced in this practice of Iyengar Yoga, we will fulfill that intention by following his advice and we will cultivate an attitude of friendliness, delight, and charity towards those with whom we come into contact. For only to the extent that we feel atmiyata, oneness with our brothers and sisters, only by opening our eyes and hearts to see in everyone the same spark of divinity that unites us all, only then will our power of our intention to share the joy of Iyengar Yoga be realized.