

In Iyengar yoga we shape our bodies with the outward form of each asana but the practice of asana also requires that we observe our relationship to what we are doing – the quality of our actions. Once the form of each asana is learnt and becomes familiar, what becomes more apparent to the practitioner is the changing nature of concentration, moods and energy levels. How many times, for example, have you gone to practice only to find yourself mentally resistant or unable to concentrate - unwilling in fact. A student will often postpone their practice until their interest levels are higher but in terms of the relationship to the practice, this unwillingness needs to be questioned. Coming to understand this question is really about coming to understand yourself. Practice should involve the deeper question of who am I, and what drives me, if it is not to become a physical exercise used only to make you feel good. This could be likened to merely looking for pleasant sensation or comfort.

Just as erratic practice can become an avoidance of the difficult issues within one's practice, changing teachers can entail the same. By the nature of their own practice, the teacher is intimately involved with their own process and development and yet a student may only wish to hear the instructions of how to do each asana- its points. The knowledge the student seeks is assumed to be contained in the verbal instructions (points) used to describe each asana and so the student tries to gather these points. Psychologically, however, they are training themselves to gather information as though "truth" were a static thing. Discovery is seeing the interconnectedness of things - the linking or relationship. For example - the way focus and attention affect the experience of the asana, or the way the breath interacts with sensation. Without learning to be in your own process, points in asana practice are of no use. You cannot look outward to understand the internal environment and so the use of points should reflect the linking of attention to experience. A teacher uses points as a way of expressing, in words, their own experience of this interconnectedness.

Because the asanas are so elegant and practice is a graceful art, students often try hard to do well. They apply effort and willpower in an attempt to learn. These qualities will take the body so far, but as the practice continues it becomes apparent that these two qualities have a residue in the muscles - they tighten and contract. Thus more effort is needed with diminishing results.

Below I would like to outline some central concepts in relation to learning with a teacher.

Learning

There are three stages in the learning process. To be fed, to discriminate, to think.

To be fed

Initially the teacher informs the student, showing them the shape and form of each pose, while the student watches the teacher closely to adapt their senses to the task of learning. Home practice is commenced. At this stage the student is totally reliant on the teacher.

Discrimination

As the student progresses the teacher should not continue to provide all the impetus for the student, because the student has to learn to discriminate using the tools and experience passed on from the teacher. This second stage is crucial in the development of a yogi and requires the student to deepen their commitment to home practice; it is a personalising of the art.

Various challenges come to the student whether it be finding time to practice, interest levels or an injury. These can be seen as problems or challenges which require careful observation. An injury or physical difficulty often throws the student into fear and uncertainty. They must fall back on their experience and skills of inquiry to realign themselves - it is sensitivity not just information that is needed. Too often an injury overwhelms the

student who is using information as the way forward, and they end up saying yoga is no good for them, or hurt them, when in reality they lack the resources and methodology to respond.

Fear can present itself as a lack of confidence, doubt or uncertainty. The student is paralysed by the unknown and will look to others for answers to remove the tension. And yet, at this time, they must look at themselves and their weaknesses to come to an understanding of who they are more fully. Fear needs to be experienced and carefully evaluated and experienced it cannot be conquered.

Thinking

The third level of development comes when the student is a skilled exponent in the art and is able to weigh up their own responses to challenges and difficulties, and is not overcome by fear or power. To be adept in any field is not just to know a system, but implies a way of thinking or being in the world. The teacher has to imbue the student with a profound respect for the art. Having respect is the equivalent to having assessed one's insignificant resources when facing the unknown. It is humility.

This full process could be likened to the growth into maturity from childhood.

The Teacher

In most areas of learning a good teacher helps to deepen the student's understanding of the subject by the depth of their own experience and their enthusiasm. In this way the teacher hopes to spark the thirst for knowledge in the student so that they will follow the example set by the teacher to explore the subject more fully. The subject is brought to life by the teacher who elaborates the subtleties of the subject and their relationship to the student's world. If Yoga were merely an academic subject these factors alone would apply, but the meaning of yoga is to provide a mirror to the soul. In the Yoga Sutras the opening verses state that "yoga is the stilling of the fluctuations of the mind". Yoga is the cessation of mind waves, or a resolution of our inner tensions, and in this realm a teacher is essential.

The role of a teacher is to observe the character of the student and to present the subject in such a way that the student comes to see their own personality and to work with their own character. The student's greatest weakness will be the area they are unable to see clearly and for many without a teacher, they will skirt the difficult questions. The student is taught the form but must also be taught measure and substance so as to know when effort or stillness is the correct response. Discipline is required, not force. A clarity of mind and breath. For the yogi to come to understanding they must be clear and constant in their inquiry.

The Student

In Hatha yoga students who go from teacher to teacher often do so in an attempt to learn more quickly. They pick up a lot of technical detail about asanas, which in the short term helps their rate of progress and level of commitment to practice, but I have found over years of observing this style that in the long term it often develops problems for the student.

Students who work in this way are often stuck on detail not relationship. Practice becomes the linking and presentation of points. Continually varying approaches does not develop depth, but entertains the mind. True discovery is a personal process requiring persistent inquiry to uncover new or hidden meaning. If the student is stuck on changes they can never discover deeper levels of practice. When the mind becomes dull or sluggish it looks outside for stimulation. The student may become bored with the teacher and so they look for another teacher not because of the teacher, but because the student is unable to maintain their own level of inquiry. As yoga is a journey into the heart of each individual, looking outward for answers creates a distraction. The student must learn to discipline the tendency to avoid those difficult areas within themselves in search of comfort and pleasant sensation.

It is also valid to say that a student needs to find a teacher who speaks to them. It may be necessary to go to different classes – from teacher to teacher initially – but in the knowledge that this is not a method. Once the right teacher has been found then settle down to the task of learning.

The Relationship

The student's role is to suspend disbelief in order to explore the teacher's concepts and to gain some insight into the teacher's experience and knowledge. At times this is difficult for the student as they may have strong opinions formed by past impressions and experience. If yoga is to be a vehicle for self transformation, the student needs to discipline themselves to the task of learning and must be willing to question all their assumptions and beliefs. Nor is it a question of blind faith in the teacher, but the slow development of trust in that person's skills, experience and integrity. Commitment to a teacher comes, it is not given - just as learning is the development of trust in one's own judgment, a teacher should embody those principles.

It has been argued that this is a power relationship where the student is disadvantaged and is open to abuse. Both student and teacher should be aware and constantly question their own motives within the relationship. Ultimately the student has the choice as to whether to continue if there is any doubt as to the teacher's motives. Good teaching is not a form of co-dependence. The student teacher relationship has the potential to be "powerful" not just a power play and is challenging and enriching to both parties. The best teachers teach to learn, not to exercise power (influence).

In Conclusion

Learning doesn't simply happen in yoga. It is the development of trust in one's own practice from results. A student involved with a teacher must observe them closely in order to be able to trust their judgment. In this way a teacher is in a unique position. As the relationship develops the teacher will open their experience up to the student and enrich the student's practice. Through this interaction the student can then experience the richness of the teacher's inner life. Albert Einstein once said "the greatness of an artist is in their ability to create an inner world and in their ability to reconcile this inner world with the outer".

The student should not be looking for information alone from the teacher but at the way they experience the world. To fully understand the yogic process you should work with one teacher at a time and look beyond their technical ability to the way they resolve their inner tensions. If you work with more than one teacher you will always be caught in technique - physical yoga. This type of practice is quickly depleted of energy and needs continual feeding. It doesn't sustain itself, it consumes. If practice is lived in effort and willpower it will be exhausted. It should be approached with honesty and commitment but done with compassion and love. Too often I see students totally reliant on teachers, and fearful of being left to fend for themselves because they lack the necessary skills and confidence. They are attracted to the teacher for the qualities they exhibit and yet it so often happens that this supports them in not having to develop these same qualities; the teacher does the work for them.