Pune, India, December 2015

The history of yoga is that it has been passed from teacher to student (guru to sisya) over millennia. Each teacher grapples with and establishes a way of working to resolve the questions posed within the Yoga Sutras by Patanjali. What has to be recognised is that Patanjali does not describe the specifics of what to do in one’s daily practice but rather generates a map of the human condition, outlining why we suffer, along with types of suffering, the behaviour of the mind, as well as types of people, and ways to practice to resolve the inner turmoil we all experience. It is up to each individual to form a methodology of practice that applies Patanjali’s principles. This is the work that a practitioner does to confirm or refute the propositions of Patanjali’s Yoga.

In the Yoga Sutras Patanjali defines 2 sets of Yoga practices that are applied to address the sufferings and still the consciousness:

* Action & dispassion (Abhyasa & vairagya)
* Practice, self study and surrender (called Kriyayoga)

By applying the Yoga practices, we seek to achieve a level of integration to counter the alienation and fragmentation that we experience in our lives. Patanjali does not tell us what to do when we wake up each day.

When working with a teacher the student is exposed to the methodology generated by the teacher based on their own experience. It involves 2 aspects

* A set of practices that the teacher developed to study themselves. This self study is referred to as Svadhyaya. It is knowledge based on their own experience gained through practice.
* A culture of practice. This involves more than learning what to practice but ‘***how to practice***’. How to practice includes how to respond to obstacles, to injuries, as well as how to uncover one’s own tendencies and inclinations.

What a teacher does when working with a student is to induct them into the practice. This involves teaching the techniques required to do the practice which could be likened to learning a musical instrument. A musician begins with instruction on how to hold the instrument, to generate the notes, to perform specific pieces and evolves gradually and sequentially to achieve a level of fluency and intimacy with the object. Externally we see a method to build up from individual notes, to scales, to specific pieces and so on. There is another process being undertaken also. Something which is less visible to the observer, something which cannot be seen from outside. What a teacher brings to the student and his/her process is the acuity of their observation- their practice sensitivity. This is the thing they have developed through their own practice disciplines and is the quality that the student cannot have at the outset regardless of how gifted or how enthusiastic they are to learn.

This can be seen clearly when we look at the lineage of T Krishnamacharya one of the most influential teachers of Yoga last century. T Krishnamacharya was taught in the Himalaya by Yogeshwara Ramamohana Brahmachari. In turn he taught a number of students and notable of these were 3 teachers BKS Iyengar, TKV Desikachar, and Pattabhi Jois. If we look at these 3 what we see is that they bear little resemblance to each other in the specifics of their practice. Apart from involving the practice of asana they each appear quite different. But when each of these 3 teachers had the same teacher why is this the case. From this one teacher each individual refines their own practice understanding and over a lifetime of practice. Through ongoing and uninterrupted practice (Abhyasa) each individual traces themselves to come to a place of understanding through practice. There is no other way.

BKS Iyengar for example did not go on copying his teacher. He used his teachers guidance and followed these pathways of practice until he was able to examine himself. He, in turn, then communicates the examples that he finds from within his practice. Even within the Iyengar tradition his Daughter Geeta and son Prashant have developed their own distinctive voices as teachers.

BKS Iyengar makes the following statement

‘The yoga I teach is purely astanga yoga, known as the eight-limbed yoga, expounded by Patanjali in his 196 terse sutra, each of which reflects profound experiential knowledge. These are supplemented with hatha yoga texts, the Bhagavad Gita and others. Patanjali's Yoga Sutra have attracted considerable attention and there are many commentaries on them. Most commentators have seen the subject of yoga objectively or from an academic angle. On the other hand, I have responded to it subjectively. Through my uninterrupted practice and its refinement I have compared my experiences and feelings with the original text’[[1]](#footnote-1)

Iyengar accepts and applies Patanjali’s Yoga practices within the practice of Asana and Pranayama. Asana and Pranayama are 2 of the 8 disciplines but each have specific daily routines. Iyengar asserts that Patanjali's Astanga Yoga need not be a sequential set of 8 steps each practiced individually but can be applied concurrently. In the passage below he states

'In each posture, in each action, you should be able to find yoga in its integrity according to Patanjali’s explanations ...... 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 (violence): 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.'

This focus on a practice in which each asana contains all the 8 steps holds a recognition that asanas be practiced with deliberate intention and ethics, details in performance and will generate specific outcomes in the body and mind. That the asanas deliver an experience of integration. This integrated practice of asana is referred to as Yogasana. The methodology of how to practice is more significant that the specifics of the techniques. It provides an entry point for the student. It's a way to enter the world of practice, to orientate themselves in that world and to move about in that landscape within themselves. It is not an outcome!

Traditionally Yoga, music, art were all taught under the Guru-Sisya system. It is a system based on Svadhyaya (self study) and the role that the teacher plays is to uncover the individual nature of the student knowing that each student will exhibit habits and aspects of their character that may hinder their progress. The teachers role will involve instructing the student but their vital function is to bring to the student’s attention to those elements that they may not be able to see. In essence, at teacher may instruct but they do far more as the student teacher relationship evolves.

The word Parampara denotes the transmission from teacher to student down a line. It is lineage. Parampara involves a relationship conducted over time in which the teacher observes the student and teaches the individual. The student learns about them self through the practice. Parampara is effectively an apprenticeship formed in craft which evolves into skilfulness by working with the instrument. Whilst studying at the Iyengar Institute in Pune, India recently I attended a concert by Zakir Hussain the Internationally renowned tabla player. Zakir is a classical tabla player performing time honoured pieces of music from across the centuries called Ragas. I purchased tickets late and was able to buy low priced tickets at the back of the auditorium. We queued and entered the crowded space and found seats. What unfolded was mesmerising as the audience who were intimately acquainted with each Raga were able to discern moments of supreme subtlety and nuance in a way that my untrained ear could never hope to achieve. The audience were completely absorbed and expressed joy based on their capacity to look into what unfolded throughout the performance. Zakir Hussain was expressing something he had learned through his teacher but had made his own through practice and here he was communicating this knowledge from his own experience to an audience who were appreciating his own individual interpretation.

There is an ongoing evolution when teaching through lineage where the specifics of practice will vary between teachers as each teacher conveys to the student their own experience examples of their knowledge gained through experience. This first hand account of the practice transfers from generation to generation so that the practice is always relevant. Additionally, it is vested in the trust between the teacher and student. This trust is established over time and becomes the basis in which a teacher is able to communicate the subtle understanding of their art and the student becomes able to comprehend what is being transferred.

Based on the ongoing relationship the teacher comes to know the student beyond the social self that is presented to the world. Seeing through their choices and behaviours a visible expression of the underlying thoughts and values. This non social exchange which is neither forged in a contract of social behaviour or expectation is at the core of the learning potential and has little to do with instructing asanas. What the teacher offers and the student needs is to have an experienced eye who knows them well to guide, to verify or to challenge and redirect their efforts over time in a way that an instructor can never do.

Today however, yoga is often taught in a class environment. It has become an exercise modality that bears little resemblance to its true purpose, its history, and its profound subject matter. We attend classes that are often devoid of Svadhyaya (self-study) or any methodology that will produce a meaningful engagement or outcome.

True learning is not the acquisition of points of detail, nor is it the ability to perform complex asanas. A practice that takes us beyond our social selves with the potential to change how we behave and who we ultimately become involves more than bland statements and encouraging words.

Let us not loose the potently gained through committed practice within an enduring student-teacher relationship which ultimately provides a respectful and meaningful exchange and maintains Parampara. Without this the heart of Yoga is lost….

Alan Goode

**Notes**

Wikipedia

The guru-shishya tradition, lineage, or parampara, denotes a succession of teachers and disciples in traditional Indian culture and religions such as Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism(Tibetan and Zen tradition). It is the tradition of spiritual relationship and mentoring where teachings are transmitted from a guru "teacher" (Sanskrit: गुरु) to a śiṣya "disciple" (Sanskrit: शिष्य) or chela. Such knowledge, whether it be Vedic, agamic, architectural, musical or spiritual, is imparted through the developing relationship between the guru and the disciple. It is considered that this relationship, based on the genuineness of the guru, and the respect, commitment, devotion and obedience of the student, is the best way for subtle or advanced knowledge to be conveyed. The student eventually masters the knowledge that the guru embodies.

From the website [www.yogamandir.com.au](http://www.yogamandir.com.au)

BKS Iyengar was born in India in 1918 and died in 2014. Throughout his life he practiced and taught Yoga opening his Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute in Pune in 1975. His daughter Geeta and son Prashant continue to teach.

Iyengar founds his work on that of Patanjali. Patanjali is the author of the Yoga Sutras, which is widely viewed as the central text in Yoga. A practice based on Patanjali's Yoga Sutras is referred to as traditional Yoga from its classical period.

In the Yoga Sutras Patanjali defined 2 sets of Yoga practices:

* Abhyasa & vairagya - Action & dispassion
* Kriyayoga - made up of practice, self study and surrender

By applying the Yoga practices we can achieve a level of integration to counter the alienation and fragmentation that we experience in our lives.

Patanjali goes on to define the 8 disciplines (astanga Yoga) made up of:

* Yama. Yama comprises - truth, non violence,continence, freedom from avarice, non-covetousnes
* Niyama. Niyama comprises- cleanliness, contentment, practice, self study and surrender
* Asana. Study of postures
* Pranayama. Study of breath
* Pratyahara. Internalizing the senses
* Dharana. Concentration
* Dhyana. Meditation
* Samadhi. Merging

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This focus on a practice in which each asana contains all the 8 steps holds a recognition that asanas be practiced with deliberate intention and ethics, details in performance and will generate specific outcomes in the body and mind. That the asanas deliver an experience of integration. This integrated practice of asana is referred to as Yogasana.

YOGASANA

The term Yogasana refers to the internal state contained within an Asana. In his book Alpha and Omega of trikonasana Prashant Iyengar writes

‘Once the body is positioned in the Asana… create a ‘condition’ in the embodiment which is the next step and the most vital, as it is in this internal conditioning which makes an asana a ‘Yogasana’. Here the sadhaka learns to unite one part of the body with another part of the body, the body with the mind, the body with the breath and senses, also the breath with the mind and senses and this takes one into the inward journey which makes the practice of Yoga a Svadhyaya (self-study). It is this unification which justifies the definition of the word Yog which means, ‘to unite’. Merely doing an asana by the body, through the body and for the body is not Yog. Yogasanas are to be done by the body but for the mind, for the psyche, for the consciousness and for the culturing and refinement of a human being.’

That an asana might be done by the body but for the mind, for the psyche and for the consciousness and refinement of a human attests to the ability of a practice based system to deliver us to a state of integrated awareness.

BKS Iyengar notes

‘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’

**Lineage and an assessing culture**

When candidates present at assessment it may be considered that we are assessing them on whether they know how to perform the asanas correctly. In effect checking what they know. This however presents us with a significant problem when the techniques taught have changed and evolved over time at both at the RIMYI and as students develop. Prashant has highlighted that you practice Trikonasana on your first day in Yoga and throughout your practice life but they are not the same Trikonasana. Just as Guruji’s Trikonasana and your Trikonasana are not the same. Whilst light on Yoga is clearly our reference there are many examples where we have evolved from those times. For example- Sarvangasana is now practiced with supports as do many of the asanas.

An asana changes according to the intelligence of the practitioner. Equally if we are to assess candidates across a number of levels we should not be merely assessing them on the complexity of the Asanas presented or their ability to perform the Asanas as this unduly favours youth and flexibility over intelligence and understanding. As a subject, Yoga is directed towards a level of integration and our assessment values and assessing practice should reflect this.

Qualities that should be considered in an assessment framework include

* Maturity- does the candidate demonstrate a commitment to an Abhyasa (sustained and ongoing enquiry)
* Practice based learning- to gain Knowledge from experience
* What can be seen of the candidate’s understanding based on their choice of sequence, the way they apply pace and timing, use repetition along with the techniques they use.

Historically lineage is passed from Guru to Sisya through practice. Whilst copying the Guru is essential in the beginning the aim is not merely to copy but to develop the skills for one’s own ongoing practice and self study (Svadhyaya). Assessing candidates on specific fixed criteria based on correct performance undermines the values inherent to Yoga. Implicitly it says that these details are important because we are assessing them. More important in fact than what we understand and our level of integration through practice.

Extending this to who assesses is equally important. We ensure that lineage and assessing is entrusted to those most committed to the practice and teaching of our system over time. This involves 2 distinct parts

1. Those entrusted to assess candidates and grant certificates in our system.
2. What is being assessed in candidates and effectively carry on the teaching to the next generation.

Moderators and assessors should be made up of the most experienced and committed individuals who have demonstrated a longstanding commitment to the method and are actively involved is training students to become teachers. An assessing culture that involves assessors who are not themselves trainers provides opportunities for those individuals to judge the work of others without any direct experience of what is involved themselves. This runs counter to a practice based understanding (knowledge from experience)

Guruji was an outstanding practitioner and one who is unlikely to be repeated. Assuming we are to attempt to recreate his efforts externalises our efforts to copy what he did rather than what he came to understand. Lineage involves the passing on of a set of practice values over a specific set of actions.

In his article *The distinguishing features of Iyengar Yoga* Prashant Iyengar makes the case that there are a number of key principles that define Iyengar Yoga. He defines these as technicalities, the use of timing, sequence along with props. These are the tools to achieve Yogasana and Guruji was focused on teaching yogasana. These were the methods he applied to bring his students to feel the asanas. The following quote is taken from the article Yoga Drsti (with Yogic eyes)

‘The only thing I am doing is to bring out the in-depth, hidden qualities of yoga to the awareness of you all. This has made you to call my way of practice and teaching, "Iyengar Yoga". This label has caught on and become widely known, but what I do is nevertheless purely authentic traditional yoga It is wrong to differentiate traditional yoga from Iyengar Yoga’[[2]](#footnote-2)

in essence what we should be assessing whether candidates uphold lineage and are teaching Yogasana and this is most effectively done by looking at the effectiveness of all his methods- not merely technique.

Following Prashant’s guidance I would suggest that we assess the candidates on their application of these methods- namely Technique, Timing, Sequence and Repetition. Thus, candidates teach a range of Asanas using the 4 methods and they are assessed on the effectiveness in applying the methods. In this way they are effectively critiqued on their understanding of our system

Alan Goode

1. Iyengar BKS, Astadala Yogamala Volume 2. Yoga Drsti [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Iyengar, BKS, Astadala Yogamala Volume 2, Yoga Drsti (with Yogic eyes) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)