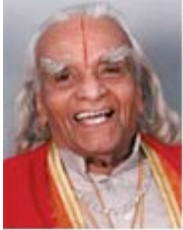



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## Yoga: A Path to Wholeness

**Master yogi B.K.S. Iyengar talks about how yoga can enhance our physical, emotional, and spiritual development.**

Interview by Corinne Schuman



Many consider B.K.S. Iyengar, now 87, the world's greatest living yoga master. Named one of the "100 Most Influential People in the World" by Time magazine in 2004, he is the author of the bestselling yoga book of all time, "Light on Yoga," first published in 1966. Iyengar lives in India, and although he retired from formal teaching in 1984, he still serves as an advisor and an inspiration to students around the world.

What yogic practice allows us to do, he writes in his most recent book, "Light on Life," is to "rediscover a sense of wholeness in your life, where you do not feel like you are constantly trying to fit the broken pieces together." He describes yoga as an inward journey that can lead to happiness and inner peace. Corinne Schuman recently interviewed Mr. Iyengar via email for Beliefnet.

**In "Light on Life" you write of the yogic system as a vehicle to enlightenment. Do you think yoga has something to offer people of any faith, even those who don't believe in and aren't trying to attain enlightenment?**

Yoga has a lot to offer to people, whatever [their faith]. It has no geographical boundary, gender, caste, or religion. As each of us is susceptible to physical problems as well as mental, emotional, and intellectual problems, yoga can help us recover from these wants. It is an art to practice, a science to ponder over, and a philosophy that shows us the ways of right living.

Whether one believes or not, it enlightens one in giving physical health and lightness in mind, emotional stability, and clearness in thinking.

**For many Hindus, yoga is a way of life. For many Westerners, it's often just a great way to stretch, strengthen, and relax. What is lost when yoga is stripped of its spirituality and treated like just another exercise class?**

Life has two facets. One is the physical; the other is spiritual. The physical facet of life is a concrete visible part of the life force recognizable through the organs of action, senses of perception, and the mind. The other facet of life is the self or the soul, which is mercurial and abstract.

Naturally whether one is [Eastern or Western], he or she believes in what they see, and after grasping the visible sheath of the body he or she naturally tries to evolve to reach the source of all movements. [Then they can advance] by refining the intelligence to experience the second part of the facet of life. That is the core of the being, or the self.

I do not think that the essence of yoga which is meant to touch the self is lost in leading one's life towards the core. For me the body is the concrete visible self, mind is the subtler self, and 'self' is the subtlest of the subtle.

This is the gradation or hierarchy in the field of yoga. Not all practitioners can jump to that highest level. They have to climb, step by step from the physical sphere to reach the spiritual sphere. If it is treated as exercise it is not the fault of yoga but of the practitioners.

**Are there benefits people will get no matter where their minds are?**

Those who activate their muscles as they should be activated do feel a sense of benefit in yogic movements. It is possible to derive the benefit of lightness in the limbs of the body or freshness in mind, even if their mind is not in yoga.

In yoga the attention of bringing the mind to focus and correct the wrong movements of the body is very important. Hence without the attention of mind and religiosity in the practice, the benefit of integration of body, mind, and self is not possible. A casual attention brings a casual result, and intense, attentive practice gives intense benefits.

**What are your thoughts on the widespread trend of yoga across America? Is this a good or a bad thing?**

My friend, I am happy that yoga—whether it is in physical form, mental form, or spiritual form—is spreading.

**What do you make of modern iterations and trends like "hot yoga" or "power yoga"? Do you think these are creative innovations or poor substitutes for more a traditional practice?**

I am not here to comment on other yogic names, as yoga students should learn not to criticise but to trace their own weaknesses and correct them.

**For those who are not familiar with your style of yoga teaching, in what ways is it different than other types of practice?**

Yogic principles of any style are the same. As the trunk is one but the branches are many, yoga is one but adaptations may vary. One who takes any style of yoga experiences the same transformation. My style of practice is not different than others except in alignment of the motor nerves with the sensory nerves. [This requires] intellectual reflection and skillful actions without distorting even the minutest part of the anatomical structure of the body, so that the bones, joints, muscles fibres, the energy, the mind, and the intelligence [are in] harmony and the life force touches all the concerned layers of the body.

**How can yoga help with specific physical ailments, such as lower back pain?**

Human anatomy is God-made at birth and becomes man-made as he grows. Yogic practice helps one to understand the divine anatomy and not the habituated anatomy formed by one's habits and manners. Each asana [posture] has to be performed correctly in order to [rectify bad habits]. While performing asana one has to judiciously adjust the anatomy without distorting the muscles or joints. If there is anatomical distortion then it is not an asana. That is why my emphasis is on alignment, which is a guide for enlightenment.

**The use of props—pillows, blankets, belts, or blocks—is central to your teachings. Can you describe their function?**

The use of props, pillows, blankets, blocks, or belts is not central to my teachings. As true teachers are rare I developed these props to guide practitioners to get a sense of right direction so that they do not commit mistakes. [They also help] those who are stiff, confused, physically shaky, or who have disabilities and cannot perform independently. These props do two things at the same time: [they help with] the extension of body and relaxation of the mind—together these are the key to meditation.

As they guide the body in the right direction the feeling of well-being is felt in the body and elation of freshness in mind is experienced. This naturally leads one to experience equipoise and oneness in body, mind and self.

**Could you choose a pose that you feel you've learned from and explain the physical, emotional, and spiritual effects you've experienced from it?**

It requires pages and pages to write on it. If you read the whole book you can get the answer to your question. This much I say here: the physical strength, mental strength, nervous strength, and intellectual strength should balance evenly by working in concord with all parts of the body, so that the core of the being, the intelligence, and consciousness concurrently and uniformly move with all parts of the body. If the body is the field then the intelligence of the self is the gardener who ploughs the field using asana as instruments.

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