

OPINION: WE DO NOT KNOW HOW TO TEACH

BY LOIS STEINBERG

Dr. Geeta S. Iyengar first taught on American soil at the 1996 IYNAUS convention for certified teachers in Estes Park, Colorado. At the convention, titled “A Teacher’s Exchange,” Geetaji made a bold statement to the teachers in attendance: We do not know how to teach! At the time, Geetaji thought the problem was that U.S. teachers had only taken intensive courses at the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute (RIMYI) in Pune, India, and that they did not know how the instructors at RIMYI taught classes to the general public.



Geetaji made several more visits to the U.S. for IYNAUS teachers’ and general membership conventions (Pasadena, California, 2001; Las Vegas, Nevada, 2007; Portland, Oregon, 2010). Geetaji here observed the teaching of American CIYTs in more detail, and she broadened her critique of our teaching. She ridiculed and mimicked the way we teach, citing our slowness in instruction as our most egregious error: “Turn... the... right... leg... out. Turn... the... left... foot... in.”

In my view, she speaks the truth. Somehow the rigors of our assessment system caused many of us to lose sight of what makes Iyengar Yoga unique and exciting and what also enables our students to be present. The first and second generations of Iyengar Yoga practitioners loved the challenging, dynamic classes in which heaps of exciting poses connecting to the next were taught: *Tadasana* to *Urdhva Dhanurasana* and back up to *Tadasana*; *Salamba Sirsasana I* to *Dwi Pada Viparita Dandasana* and back up to *Salamba Sirsasana I*; *Mandalasana* from *Salamba Sirsasana I*; *Sirsasana II* to *Bakasana* and back up to *Sirsasana II* then dropping back to *Urdhva Dhanurasana* and up to *Tadasana*. We also did *Hanumanasana* jumping to change sides. The classes were lively, fast-moving, and fun.

Of course, we also learned the foundation of a good practice. We attempted many of these challenging poses after “going inward,” practicing our “scales” so-to-speak, via standing poses to build the intelligence of our bodies. Even so, the standing poses were held for a long time with rapid-fire instructions and no demonstrations between poses. We came back to *Tadasana* between sides and held *Tadasana* before jumping to the next pose. We had no time to let our minds wander. These days, when I am teaching to practitioners who are not my regular students, I notice that when I instruct the class to jump back to *Tadasana* and to be in *Tadasana* after a standing pose, they step out of it immediately because they habitually are trained to watch the next demo. I have to ask them where they are going!

Now, this is not to say that in Pune they never give demos in the general classes or that I never do. They do. I do. But these

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are rare. With the beginner students, I stay in the front of the classroom to better observe the students and do the poses with them. They can see me and more readily follow my instructions. I improve their poses simply by repeating the same pose without a demo. After quite a few weeks, I may give one demo to correct them. At that point, they are able to pay more attention because they have already practiced the pose for some time and their minds are becoming more present. I have demonstrated *Salamba Sarvangasana* and its cycle when I teach it for the first time at week three of the beginner course. But I am even reconsidering how I teach this pose in order to do so without a demonstration.

Many of my colleagues from the first and second generation of practitioners reluctantly began teaching after being told by their teacher we had to. Back then, being a CIYT was not a profession. We knew it was not an easy path and discovered, after being “forced” to teach, how much we did not know. A lot of us started teaching in our early 20s and attracted many of our young peers. Many went to Pune and took the three-week intensives conducted by Guruji, and later Geetaji. Those intensives were designed to demonstrate to us young upstarts how to practice deeply and, given the limited timeframe of these intensives, they were not conducted like the regular classes at RIMYI. Multiple demonstrations were followed by doing. We were mentally prepared for the demonstrations and were absorbed while watching; we learned not only to look but also to actually comprehend what was being taught. These intensives were not designed to demonstrate how to teach, and they were certainly not meant to show us how to teach beginners.

I took one of those intensives in early 1983 and stayed for the year. I took general classes and began assisting. Guruji

corrected my teaching when I was assigned to teach standing poses to students in the medical classes. I did not give demos to those students. I verbally instructed and manually corrected. I returned many times for long periods of four months to a year and my instruction embodied the “Pune style” of teaching. At the 1990 San Diego IYNAUS convention, we had to teach our peers in front of Guruji. I was used to him correcting my teaching from my time in Pune, so I was not too afraid when he stood right next to me as I led the group in *Parsvakonasana*. It was a learning experience and great fun. Years later, my colleague, Glenn Kawana, told me that my peers did not like my teaching at that convention. I was surprised to learn that. It turns out, I was teaching as I had learned in Pune and not as my peers had learned from the intensive courses. Their teaching morphed into demonstration/teach, demonstration/teach, demonstration/teach. I was the odd one out, and most were not yet used to it.

The assessment model of evaluating teacher performance sealed the deal for the demonstration/teach regime. I agree with that way of assessing. I think it is remarkable. But only for assessment. Many teachers who come to study with me are shocked when I declare this is not how to teach in a real class. It is for assessment, and I repeat, I think it is a terrific way to evaluate our teachers. However, when I mentor and educate my student teachers, I want them to really teach, to keep the pace of the class dynamic. This is especially true for beginners, who need to move and become absorbed and present in their movement. The beginner student does not know how to or even that they ought to correct their poses through observation. Only when they become practitioners and can remain present during a demonstration can they do this well. Even so, that demonstration should be dynamic, clear, and to the point. For the beginner student, the challenge is to stay present and focused more than it is to perform the pose correctly. The demonstration/teach regime most teachers have succumbed to is boring. We lose the students, especially the younger generation.

This past June at RIMYI, Abhijata stated that we have become OCD (obsessive-compulsive disorder) with our teaching. When a child first learns to walk, if you start telling them, “No! Turn your left foot just so and your right foot this way, and position your arm that way!” the child will simply sit down and never learn to walk. Teach your students to fall in love with yoga.

While at RIMYI, I again observed several beginner classes a week and have come away with further revisions to my own beginner classes. After the fourth week, I realized that if I were to compare my beginners at week four to those at RIMYI, mine would be “better.” But the RIMYI beginners have definitely fallen in love with yoga. They are not stressed over the perfection of *asana*. In my opinion, this is the direction to go.

According to a study done by *Yoga Journal*, in 2004 Iyengar Yoga had 69 percent of the market share. By 2015, it had

plummeted to 2 percent. Of course, there is more competition as everyone and their dog becomes a “certified” yoga teacher, but have we not shot ourselves in the foot? The reasons we have failed to attract the next generation of practitioners—especially the 20-year-old students—are multifaceted. I believe the main reason is our failure to teach as they do at RIMYI.

My student teachers do not conduct assessment-style teaching until they are well-versed in threading the poses together with minimal breaks. When they are ready to apply for and later take the IYNAUS certification exam, they should be able to teach in the exam framework because they have become skillful, dynamic teachers. I avoid educating them to teach assessment-style. However, I do permit them to practice one to three “mock” assessments to become familiar with that framework prior to taking the exam. But they know this is not the way to teach a real class. It is like taking a cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) course. First, you practice chest compressions and resuscitation on a doll. After mastering the basics, further specialization, such as bandaging and applying tourniquets, is taught. This can be compared to mastering the basics of *asana* instruction, followed by learning to modify *asanas*. But in real life, it is not a doll you encounter. It is a human being, which is completely different, and hopefully your basic skills are useful, and you can help save a life (or get a student to become present).

I encourage teachers of Iyengar Yoga to go to Pune and take the general classes to discover how yoga is taught there. Observe or participate in the upstairs classes where the beginners learn. The students are not instructed to stop and get a belt if they cannot catch their hands in *Gomukhasana*. Why break the consciousness to get a belt? Is it really necessary? The first time I would not let my students use belts, one of them reported they had caught their hands for the first time! I also ensure that the students have the props they will need for the first pose to maintain the quietness they obtain from the



Caption

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invocation and to enable them to transition to *asana* without getting up to get a prop.

In order to stay the same, we have to change. Each time I observe the classes in Pune, I come home and further refine my style of teaching to match Pune's beginner classes. Even with *Halasana*, I have my students roll back from *Dandasana* to *Halasana* and try to touch the toes to the floor with no demonstration or blankets in the first four weeks. Those who cannot do this can reach their feet to the wall. It is fun and doable. I talk the new students through *Ardha Chandrasana*, and they do not fall out most of the time!

Since I abandoned assessment-style teaching in my introductory classes, the enrollment has shot up, and I have mostly 20 year olds. (I do also have "50 plus" and slower-paced classes.) Students crave dynamic teaching and find assessment-style teaching slow and boring.

Make Iyengar Yoga dynamic again!

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NOTE from the editor: Please visit the IYNAUS Facebook page at www.facebook.com/IYNAUS to join the discussion around this important topic.