

# Learning and Teaching Yoga

Kirsten Agar Ward

*This article in two parts was inspired by classes attended during a trip to Pune in December 2010 and on talking further with Prashantji.*

## **Learning and Teaching Yoga**

*This article explores some issues around learning and teaching yoga. There is a danger that we become stuck at a basic level and never properly get to grips with what it really means to “learn” yoga. We might “know” a lot of biomechanical points (ie generally have picked them up second- or third-hand), how to adjust etc. but we need to understand that learning and teaching yoga involves much more than this, that it is a culturing process at all levels of our being, not only body. So we should not get stuck there in our learning and our teaching. We have to keep moving forward, not become impressed with what we “know”, congratulating ourselves on how far we have come – that way lies arrogance and stagnation.*

## **Part 2 – Teaching**

### **What Makes a Good Teacher?**

A good teacher must be a good learner. If we put our efforts into being a good learner then necessarily we will become a good teacher (even if we are only teaching

ourselves). On a higher level of practice you have to be a teacher to yourself even if you teach no one else.

### **Instilling Yoga Culture**

Yoga is a culturing process so as teachers we need to be clear from the outset that our role is to move beyond the basic training resulting from regurgitating instructions and

*Yoga is a culturing process therefore as teachers we have to take care what culture we instil into our students.*

instil yoga culture. Since the real learning comes from inside, pupils have to be cultured in order for that to occur in a proper way. Just as when we have taught a child how to read we cannot control everything they read, but we can instil a culture in them so they make good choices.

So we have to take care not to instil a dependency habit in students relying on outside inputs from us. As a spiritual subject yoga depends on potentials; the teacher’s role is to make pupils aware of the potentials within themselves, to help them access them, then to guide them in exploring, using, evolving and realising those potentials.

### **A Learning/Teaching Continuum**

Of course we must adapt to the situation – teaching beginners is totally different from teaching seniors. You can’t teach a beginner to identify potential nor to use it. So initially the process will be heavily weighted towards direction, biomechanical instruction-giving and adjustment. They

have to be doing at least a basically correct pose in order to progress. But it is not appropriate to go on in this vein forever. We don’t go on teaching children basic phonics once they have learned to read, so we shouldn’t go on and on with the basic points in teaching yoga. Higher education and learning is not merely a case of inputting more material into a student, even if it is more complex/subtle; that is merely training as distinct from education. Traditionally in education not only does content get harder but more importantly the teaching /learning process evolves into one in which the learner takes a more active role, has to think for themselves and work things out, learns to apply process as

well as content, becomes original and creative and takes on the culture of the subject not only retains some facts about it

Therefore the teacher needs to have in mind moving the pupils along this continuum and gradually teaching should be shifting to bring them closer to yoga. This has to be gradual since if we suddenly remove the supports of instructions then the pupils will of course feel support-less, but somewhere we have to incorporate a plan to do this. So we have to gradually reduce the spoon-feeding to break the habit of you as teacher telling and them doing. As Prashantji says: "Make them think and feel so you don't need to do the spoon-feeding but they see what is in the spoon."

This is not to disparage content knowledge. Clearly a good teacher has to "know their stuff". But the best teachers are not those who are merely a few pages ahead of the pupils in a text-book of content, but those who have a well-rounded and deep history of study of their subject and who not only impart content but guide the pupils towards independent learning. They are not merely regurgitating some sort of script but respond to those they have to teach, are creative etc. We mustn't get stuck in the biomechanical nor encourage this in our students; yes it is essential to develop this understanding but don't

get stuck there, it's not the whole story.

### **What Should we be Trying to do as Teachers?**

At first pupils will need lots of pointers and ideas, so that they can make a start and begin to build up some confidence, develop sensitivity, and develop a process for their own discoveries. But gradually we have to reduce the point-giving. We may think we are being helpful giving points, but we have to consider what leads us to do this. Perhaps we don't know anything else except biomechanical points? Perhaps it makes us feel good to be able to impress the pupils with our extensive knowledge and "deep" understanding? But in this spiritual sphere the teacher's role is to induct a person to the potentials within themselves rather than our achievements and knowledge as teachers! We also need to understand the damage spoon-feeding can do. When I worked with adults working with children with special needs, the adults would sometimes do everything for the child, (often with the best intentions of being "kind" or simply to "justify" their employment) but in so doing they undermined the child's self-belief (implicit message – you can't do this for yourself) and created an atmosphere in which the child wasn't given space to find out for themselves, making the mistakes which inevitably accompany learning. We must

not disempower and disable our pupils, even if we mean well.

So in practical terms we should gradually make students aware not only of their body, to observe and be sensitive to its symmetry, alignment etc. but also, importantly, of their mind and breath. For example, helping them become breath aware – e.g. whether they hold the breath, how is the breath in different types of poses (eg forward compared with backward bending). Later, helping them start understanding how to use the breath; seeing how exhaling completely in a pose affects the body, such as helping overcome stiffness, bringing power. Then they realise breath is an important tool through which body can be accessed. We must also make them aware of their state of mind.

All three of these aspects of our embodiment have to be set right. We have to learn to understand our nature and the interactions between these three, and in so doing modify our nature and find out how far we can evolve within it. This is the culturing process. In this way gradually pupils will become aware of the potentials within themselves.

It is our duty to prepare students for going to Pune, familiarising them with the teaching approaches of all the Iyengars in our teaching and encouraging them to read the

*If you remain a good student then you will become a good teacher.*

books and listen to the CDs, then they will be better able to access the teaching; after all they are not going there to show off how many points they have acquired from us! They are going to learn, so we have to prepare them to be able to do that.

### **Essential Qualities of a Good Teacher**

Having profound knowledge isn't sufficient to be a good teacher. Qualities such as tolerance and patience are essential. Prashantji stresses that yoga is a natural rather than an artificial process, so we have to allow that organic process, not be in haste, always implanting. Slow learning is better, because it enables consolidation.

Teachers can give clues but everyone has different abilities and potentials which we have to allow for, for example some are very emotional, others intellectual, others sensitive, others do first, think later. We have to be patient – our students might learn it the tenth time!

Pupils will make mistakes and we must let some of them go as long as they are not dangerous. Whilst adjusting raw beginners is all right, adjusting the more experienced gets in the way of their learning; the student doesn't understand the process of correction, just the stroke of correction. Moreover,

adjusting is a jerk and jolt to them, especially in pranayama where it can be alarming and explosive. So instead we need to encourage them to feel or watch certain things then they evolve the process to get into that aligned condition. This requires much patience.

### **Teaching the Subject Rather than Teaching Students**

At some point we should be teaching the subject rather than teaching students. With the former you are not concerned with the individual; not all will grasp it, some will learn today, some in a week or a year. It may be an unfashionable and unpopular view, but we can't adapt the subject to fit the students. In this case we should teach for the deserving, who might only be one or two percent, then the legacy will continue. When teaching the subject it's unhelpful to look too much at the students who will be experimenting and trying, as not only is this not good to look at(!), it's inhibiting if they feel they will be criticised. Having said this we should make students inwardly so then they are not bothered even if there is someone hyper-critical around.

We should try to bring pupils to a point where we are no longer required. In Prashantji's words: "To remain a good

teacher see that you remain a good student, develop your understanding of these things. If you have understood yourself in your *asanic* endeavour then you will become a good teacher, rather than learning other people's points by heart regurgitating others' points. If you remain a good student then you will become a good teacher."

### **Some Pitfalls for Teachers:**

#### **Teachers Making Attractive Consumer Packages so that Pupils Come Again**

This might mean trying to make everyone feel "nice" in the class or organising things in other ways to suit consumer preference rather than the requirements of the subject. But yoga is not concerned with appearance or transient or illusory states; it is about well-being as distinct from sense of well-being. Therefore as teachers we should be concerned with cultivating well-being rather than sense of well-being in our students. Consequently the pupils might finish a class feeling less than happy in some way: that does not mean they were badly taught. We must not run things to keep people happy and maximise rebookings!

#### **Ego**

We might get ideas that "I taught them this" etc. But either our points are second-hand regurgitation or else our

learning comes from the higher teacher within. Either way one is a medium and it is not "I" who can take any credit.

### **Teaching Becomes a Higher Priority than Learning**

We should understand that this tends to happen; then we can say to ourselves "Let me keep a priority for learning although I am teaching."

### **Only Teaching Techniques**

Prashantji points out that teachers go on teaching techniques because they have nothing else to teach. Techniques are dogmatic but the teacher's instructions have to be pragmatic and customised to the conditions. For example in pranayama, after the initial stages of learning, we should try to avoid referring to the skeleto-muscular as to an experienced person it's an irritant as they are trying to do something finer and you are drawing them to something gross. Prashantji's challenge "Can you teach a class without reference to biomechanics?"

### **Hypercriticism**

It is easy to fall into the hypercritical pitfall, to show how clever we are in being able to spot so many faults in others. It also helps us justify our existence as teachers! Clearly we must not allow people to do

dangerous things, but we should have a tolerance of pupils' imperfections and slowness, after all we are like that too! Being hypercritical is not a philosophical or spiritual way of life, it brings irritability and diverts both teacher and pupils away from equanimity. Moreover creativity of pupils cannot come in a hypercritical environment. We have to create an atmosphere in which people feel they are not there to "perform" for our or anyone else's benefit and in which mistakes can be made.

### **Talking/Doing Too Much**

As teachers we should only say what is necessary, not go on and on with the constant "AK47" of instructions. Nor should we cultivate a habit in pupils of incessantly doing and never learning. We should allow people time to reflect, to feel what they have done and what has happened, why they have done it. If they have to listen all the time then they can't be independent and also meticulous instructions are an irritant. This all stifles the pupil's creativity.

### **Talking Imprecisely**

We should develop our ability to enunciate Sanskrit words properly, in order to convey the essence of meaning properly, e.g. trikonasan not trikonasanAH and Yog not

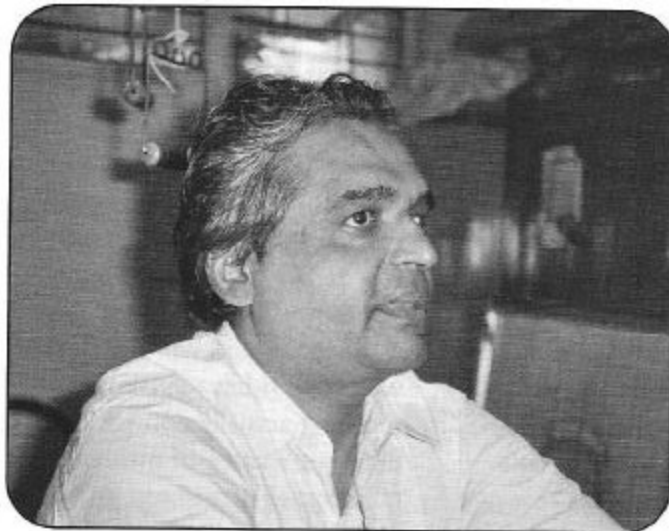
YogAH (the latter being a physical fitness programme & sense of well-being as distinct from well-being).

Also it is tempting to use words as if any one of several words will do to convey the same meaning. But English is a rich language in which different words with broadly similar meaning actually convey different shades of meaning and nuances, eg straighten, stretch, elongate. We should be aware of that and incorporate it in our teaching. We should know why we have used that word and not another. This will reflect our own inner precision, awareness and understanding and will help cultivate precision and care in those we teach. If we are casual then we encourage that in them. What we mean and what we say should coincide (*satya*).

### **Identity Problems**

There is a danger that we may allow wrong ideas into our minds such "I am a teacher as distinct from a student". It is nonsensical to separate yoga practitioners into mutually exclusive categories of teachers and students. Actually the teacher identity is really for others. There is nothing wrong in someone calling us a teacher or advertising as such but that is for others, in our minds we should basically be students of yoga. Of course when we teach we have to take on that persona in order to be able to do it, but we should not live in

*Prashantji's challenge: Can you teach a class without reference to biomechanics?*



clear about what the yogic endeavour is and look for teachers who can guide us in that, not merely make us feel good, add to our point list, adjust (serve) us, build up

*There is nothing wrong in someone calling us a teacher... But that is for others, in our minds we should basically be students of*

that teacher identity. The identity should be: "I am a student of yoga"; this avoids stagnation in practice and teaching.

### **Copying Our Teachers**

We have to learn organically and find our own words, not simply learn by heart and parrot what our teachers say. We can't straight away teach what we have been taught in Pune, we have to go on practising, then it will come in our own words and mould.

As Prashantji says: "Yoga is a very natural process, don't have a regimen to follow. See what the conditions are at a given time and accordingly devise your process, devise it rather than prescribe it."

### **Conclusion**

It is up to us as learners to be

our sense of achievement etc., like some sort of personal trainer. And it is up to the teachers to be clear about we are trying to do in teaching yoga, that this is something much more being than a trainer or instructor. It is our duty to live up to that label of "teacher" rather than seeing it as our entitlement. To do that we need to retain our primary identity as learners and like Gururji never give up learning.

With thanks to Prashantji for your patient teaching and explanation.

## APPLYING FOR CLASSES AT THE RIMYI, PUNE

If you would like to attend classes at the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute in Pune, India, you have to apply through the IYA (UK). For more details about the application process and to download an application form, please visit our website. The website also contains lots of information about travelling to and staying in Pune, and about attending yoga classes at the RIMYI.

## CALL FOR PHOTOS AND VIDEO FOOTAGE

You may have noticed that we have added some videos to our website recently. Do you have any good quality footage of the Iyengars that you would be happy for us to share on the site?

We would also be pleased to receive any interesting Iyengar yoga related photos you have that we could consider for inclusion in our online photo gallery, at [www.iyengaryoga.org.uk/photos](http://www.iyengaryoga.org.uk/photos) and on our Flickr pages.

If you have anything of interest we'd love to hear from you. Please get in touch with us at [admin@iyengar.org.uk](mailto:admin@iyengar.org.uk) or phone 07510 326997.