

Backbends

Interview with B.K.S. Iyengar on Backbends

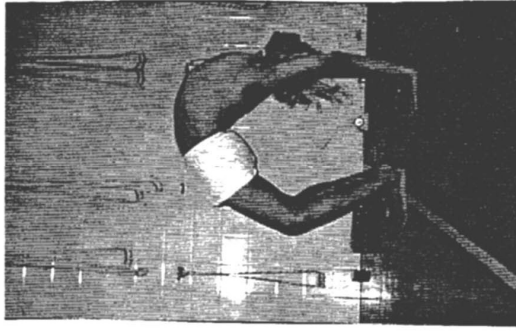
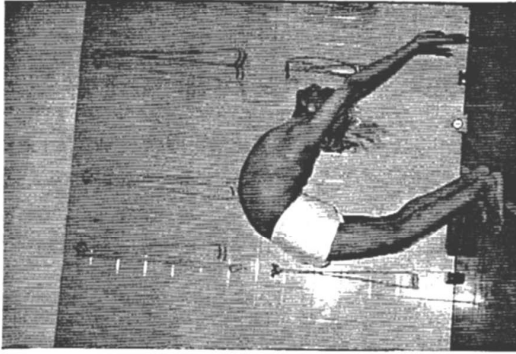
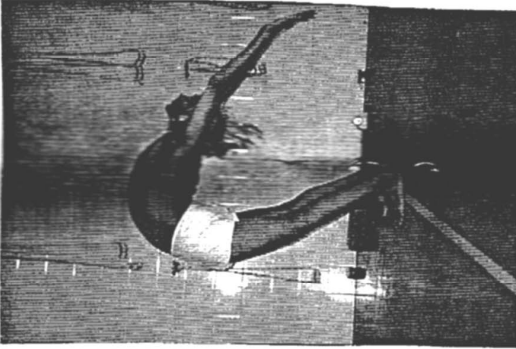
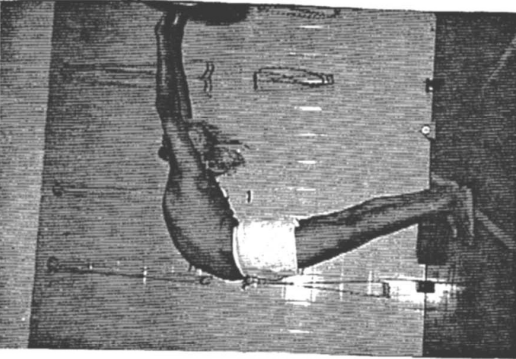
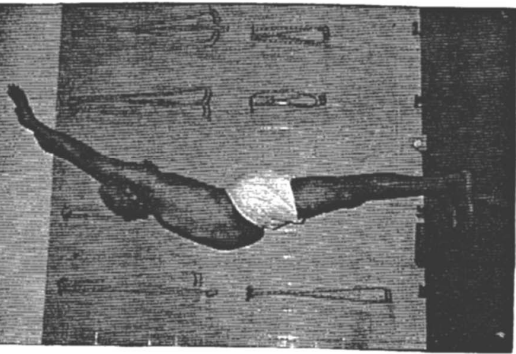
12th May, 1991

with Victor Oppenheimer and Patricia Walden from USA

These questions were asked during the Teachers' Backbend Intensive Mr. Iyengar taught in November-December, 1991. This intensive was videotaped, and some of the questions refer to the videotapes. The interview was transcribed and edited by Francis Ricks.

Victor: *Why backbends?*

B.K.S. Iyengar: In the asana systems' the most advanced postures are the backbends. The human structure is such that the idea does not strike anyone that the spinal vertebrae can be moved backwards as well as forward and sideways, without causing injury. In the field of yoga, backbends are not taught at the early stages in the practice of this art, but only when the body is trained and when it is tuned and toned to such an extent that it can accept these poses. Backbends are to be felt more than expressed. The other postures can be expressed and then felt. But in backbends, like meditations, each person has to feel. And that's why I thought that after fifty years of teaching, at least



Guruji Backbending - Pune, January, 1997



Photographs by Kay Parry

some of my students should get the background of the right means to perform the backbends. Backbends are not poses meant for exhibitionism. Backbends are means to understand the back parts of our bodies. The front body can be seen with the eye. The back body cannot be seen; it can only be felt. That's why I say these are the most advanced postures, where the mind begins to look at the back, first on the peripheral level, then inwards, towards the core.

For a yogi, backbends are meant to invert the mind, to observe and to feel - first the back, then the consciousness and the very seer. Through the practice of backbends, by using the senses of perception to look back, and drawing the mind to the back portion of the body, one day meditation comes naturally. In other poses, the attention on the back is not given to such an extent and the mind moves outside. Backbends have principles of their own and learning the workings of the mind and intelligence in backbends naturally leads one towards the real aspects of life and the higher aspects of yoga. Because I feel that one who knows, and who looks into the back can look into God. And that's the reason I gave these backbends.

Victor: *At what level should people start working with this material?*

B.K.S. Iyengar: Only a dedicated student should take this degree of practices, and as in the class I jocularly said, to do backbends seriously you need to be like a trained racehorse. All horses cannot be made into racehorses. So a human being should have a special character, special qualities of tenacity, perseverance, and forbearance, to take these poses. The effect of backbends is that our nerves which originate from the spine are very greatly activated by our will power, logic, and our reasoning in adjustments. The strength of the nerves created is so enormous that when, by the grace of God, the light of Spirit dawns, the backbend practitioners will have absolutely no fear to face that Divine light.

You should know, when I use the word racehorse, that it means a special human category, that's why I did not give this backbend course before, this depth of action which I am only giving you now after fifty-five years. Previously only 'touch and go' backbends were given. The depths were not given.

The second reason for the focus on backbends is that backbends attract people. Teachers want to do backbends to impress and win more students. Until now, even the teachers had no base in backbends; they taught only according to the possible mobilities and capabilities of their bodies.

To a great extent, all of us know the standard of standing poses, the standard of forward bends, the standard of inverted poses, the standard of sideways movements, even to some extent the standard of balances. One can easily find out whether a person is doing these poses correctly or not. But regarding backbends, I don't think that anybody could

judge so easily because there was no disciplined method of practice. Discipline means that backbends have to be done using the discriminative quality of the practitioner, without disturbing the anatomical structure.

When I've seen people giving performances or doing videos on backbends, my impression was that there was no concord, harmony or balance in their presentations of the spinal movement (I don't say about the postures, that's not the important thing.)

There was no healthy use of the gross as well as the subtle parts of the body, including the spine. Without the spine, bodily movements cannot take place. The spine, the foundation of the human being, was not trained by the practitioners; they just did as they liked. So I thought that some balance and harmony should be given to them, so that when they are doing they cannot injure themselves, and when they go to teach others, they may not injure them. That's the reason for this backbend intensive. I saw people at the conventions in 1984, 1987, 1990 - when they performed the poses - a catch in the back might come because they did wrongly. There was no rhythm - or rather, no communication in the various joints of their bodies, various muscles. The intelligence was not in contact with their actions. When I saw this, I thought I would be doing an unfair thing as a yoga master if I did not teach some of my pupils the right method; I thought I would be following an unethical method within myself, and so I made up my mind to conduct at least one intensive backbend class to give the right footing in this style of asanas.

So, first I wanted to give a certain standard for backbends. Second, in doing backbends, as I said, you will be prepared philosophically and spiritually by the grace of the Lord, or the grace of yoga, for the illuminative light to open on you. You may not become nervous to face it because your spine will be a tower of strength. As Lord Krishna gave a special eye to Arjuna, to his Lord, so the backbends are like a third eye. The third eye means such a strength within to face the unseen light when it falls on you.

Patricia Walden: *Would you like to talk about any cautions for people who practice the backbends?*

B.K.S. Iyengar: The caution is implied in the sentence 'it's like training racehorses'. The trainer takes great care to keep the horse in a good condition. So much or even more than that is required to take your body in a true shape, in a perfect shape to perform these asanas. So it's not just a matter of hit and miss, or trial and error. You can take trials and errors in other poses but in backbends you must be very, very sharp. Sharpness means discriminative power. Backbends demand sharpness of the intelligence. And if that sharpness is not there, then I think you have to wait to do the backbends. It's certainly not meant for all. It's meant for those who can bear it. Then it is right. All around training is also essential, that is, the body, mind and soul have to be understood. Inversions work on certain parts of the body; standing poses work on

certain parts of the body, also twistings and balances work on certain parts. But the interpenetration of the spinal nerves and spinal muscles are not touched in any other poses as they are in backbends. When we speak of the extension of the spine in backbends, it is the anterior layer of the spine which elongates, not the posterior. When you do forward bends, you are creating space on the posterior vertebral column of the spine. When you twist, you are creating room or space on the lateral parts of the spine, but so far, there are no movements to extend or expand the interior portion of the spinal vertebrae except backbends. Hence the importance of backbends cannot be measured at all. Because the anterior extension of the spine is unknown. The moment you start the backbends you are in the unknown world. Your body may be known, but your inner spine is unknown. You are entering the unknown world. So you can understand that it cannot be done by everyone.

Victor: *You waited fifty years before teaching this. Do you have any advice for people who are looking at the videos of the intensive or who want to do backbends, as to what poses they should have reasonably well perfected, what groups of poses, before they start working?*

B.K.S. Iyengar: All the participants in this intensive have been practicing for nearly two decades. A minimum of two years is needed to begin backbends, though the simple backbends may be taught after six months. Backbends can be divided into various stages, simple ones, those of medium difficulty, and complicated ones. Complicated ones need lots of training and so one should only begin the harder poses after maturity.

Victor: *So people should wait until they've matured their practice to try these poses.*

B.K.S. Iyengar: they should try only after they've mastered the standing poses - particularly the standing poses, twistings and inversions should come very, very well. Balancings are unimportant for backbends, but these others have to come.

And when you ask for the base - I have taught you now for two weeks after ten years of practice. Have I gone, like any others might jumping around? Or have I been consolidating? What did I say the other day, that Urdhva Dhanurasana is the first pose. I said that in standing poses Tadasana is the base. When you spread your legs Trikonasana is the base. In forward bends Janu Sirsasana is the base. In inverted poses Sarvangasana is the base. In balancings I said Bakasana is the base. In backbends I said Urdhva Dhanurasana is the base.

Practitioners must understand the positioning of the muscles, most importantly, the positioning of the muscles and positioning of the joints when they are doing backbends, or injuries are bound to come. So I decided to conduct this intensive backbends class. Otherwise, until now I have only taught 'touch and go' type of backbends.

Patricia: *Would you like to say what the effect of backbends is on the emotions and the spirit?*

Iyengar: First of all, backbends demand a lot of discriminative power and the emotional centre is the torso, the trunk. You can keep your brain quiet, but have you ever experienced that you can keep your brain quiet but the mental thoughts move in the trunk? Can you keep from here to here (clavicle to belly) the silence which you keep here (brain), or which you keep in your limbs?

Victor: *It's very hard.*

B.K.S. Iyengar: Very hard. And now to speak of the emotions - when you do backbends, what happens to the emotional centre? Does it not open more? Does it not go to vastness? So as we say that the empty cup alone is useless, you are creating tremendous vastness so that it can accumulate (absorb and withstand) all types of pressures and strains. So emotionally there is no chance for a person who does backbends to be depressed or distressed. The beauty of backbends is that the person not only remains intellectually - no strong, remember the word - stable. 'Strong' means like a scorpion sting. So I don't want that intellectual 'strong' - the words, when you say is intellectually strong, they're not correct. Backbends give stability, or maturity, where there's ripeness in the brain, ripeness in the emotion. So we cannot become victims easily, those who very accurately do backbends. You can take catastrophes with a calm mind, which other cannot do. Others have to build up, for us it becomes a natural process. We need not build up. That's the beauty of backbends.

Victor: *The next question we have has to do with people's practices at home. Are there guidelines you would like to give about what to do before backbends, and also afterwards, to avoid any problems in the back.*

B.K.S. Iyengar: See, practically, in two weeks, you have the experience of what to do. I have been educating your spine; I have been educating your muscles, step by step, or you can say, progressively, preparing for backbends. The first day, it took one hour for me before you tried a backbend, and now, if you observe, you can see the video later, but the time that you took in preparation today was much less than in the beginning. That means you started very fast. So I build up. In backbends the receptivity in the cells and fibres and joints should be cultivated because the actions are very intense as you go on doing them. So as a learner or an athlete, start slowly, to build up power, to take a chance at the end to reach the zenith. And then afterwards, you should not be like your Olympic players who reach the final stage and do not know how to bring back that used energy. In many cases they depend on drugs. They go to the doctor immediately or they take pills. Backbends are demanding like that. They are athletic poses to a great extent.

So what I did for you or what we naturally should do first is to build up that energy, knowing very well that you have to do backbends. Then when you do a lot of backbends the blood is circulated with such speed, you know, with such force in the system that a practitioner will feel the hotness of the body. So as the body is warmer than normal, we give soothing or cooling poses afterwards. Soothing and cooling poses like dog pose, a little Virasana, which I taught today, bending forward and lateral Uttanasana, are given so that the temperature of the body which increased in the backbends is brought back to normal. And that is the natural 'pill' to come back to life.

So every session they should learn how to start and how to end. Not just doing backbends and their job is over. Or as I overheard someone say 'I have done backbends, now let me do Savasana'. No.

To be continued:

Questions answered by Guruji included:

- You don't think that the seated twists are a good way to end a session of backbends?
- And what about passive Paschimottanasana, which a lot a people like to do after backbends?
- (*About Bakasana*) I never thought of it as a forward bend?
- In "Light on Yoga" you say that balances require more perseverance than all other poses.
- What happens to the mind in backbends that is different from other poses?

