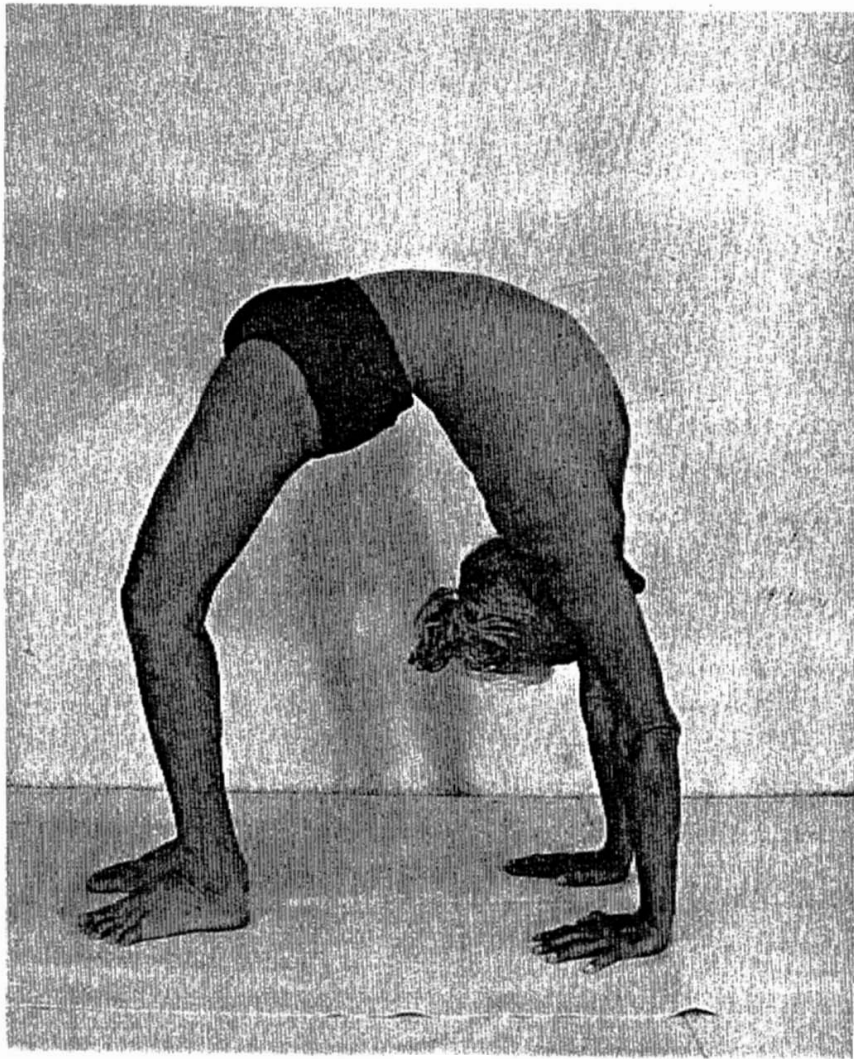


# Backbending



# Interview with B.K.S. Iyengar

## on Backbends

*12th May, 1991*

*with Victor Oppenheimer & 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.*

*Continued from Yoga Vaani, March, 1997*

**Patricia (Walden):** *You don't think that seated twists are a good way to end a session of backbends?*

**B.K.S. Iyengar:** No. Because you have already overstrained the spine, so even lateral movements of the spine mean you are exerting further. I have explained to you that in backbends the anterior spine is extended to such an extent that afterwards, you need to do a little Prasarita Padottanasana, Uttanasana, Adho Mukha Svanasana - poses where the posterior spine works and gives automatic rest to the anterior spine. So the heat in the system is diffused. Then you can do anything in the world afterwards.

**Patricia:** *And what about passive Paschimottanasana, which a lot of people like to do after backbends?*

**B.K.S. Iyengar:** No. See, unless and until your spine can respond to a backward and forward movement at the same time, you should not do it. If you can, it's all right. But a beginner, if he does Chakra Bandasan and then passive Paschimottanasana, he will get such a catch in the spine he might end up in bed for six weeks.

You cannot reach the counterpose, whether it is passive or active, at once. So you have to give some time for the used muscles to set in their positions. After that, if you try, it's all right. That's what I said, we do these poses like Adho Mukha Svanasana - that is a half backbend, half forward bend. It's not a full forward bend. Uttanasana as it is practised after backbends also is a half forward bend because there is no pull on the spine: the weight is on the leg, the spine is passive. But when you do Paschimottanasana, the spine is active. So you have not allowed the spine to become cool by stretching.

So we have to educate pupils that they should not do the counterpose at once. I can do it, because my body can move both ways. But for beginners, it's impossible. If they strive to do it because a teacher says they should and then the muscles snap, yoga gets a bad name. Why take unnecessary risks and bring a bad name to the art when the art is so superb?

Remember, when you use the gears of a car you have to come to neutral to change. Backbends are like high gear, and from high gear you can't jump to low gear, you have to come to neutral and you have to wait for some time. You have to observe - the car may come to neutral soon, but your spine does not come to the neutral position very soon; it takes a little longer. And you should observe, when you are in Tadasana, when you start your practice with Tadasana, what sensation you get in your back. There is no tension, right? There is no tension; the only tension is in your legs because the spine is very healthy, it adjusts itself. So, after backbends, when you do Tadasana, you should feel whether the muscles of the spine are as passive as they were when you started Tadasana. That means your body has become cool. Then you can do anything. You can do forward bends, you can jump, you can do anything. And this also should be known to the advanced students, who do backbends, that Bakasana is a far better forward bend than any other forward bend. Don't say 'It's only balancing.'

**Patricia:** *I never thought of it as a forward bend.*

**B.K.S. Iyengar:** When there is a backache, if you do Paschimottanasana, it does not relieve you. Do Bakasana, it relieves you. Because the hardness of the sacroiliac muscle, the hardness of the lumbar in Paschimottanasana means you are extending. In Bakasana you are curving the spine, resting, and in the resting, you are responding. So my pupils should know that Bakasana is a superior forward balancing pose - not like Urdhva Kukkutasana. In Urdhva Kukkutasana you have to curve the spine, but in Bakasana you have to spread the posterior muscles of the spine. That's the beauty of Bakasana.

**Victor:** *But you're not teaching balances in the intensive.*

**B.K.S. Iyengar:** No. I can make even stiff bodies or beginners stay in Urdhva Dhanurasana for half a minute. But I can't make them stay even ten seconds in Bakasana, so how can I teach it? If you know how to do balances, there are points we give which you can catch. If I teach you balancing one day; then you will know that it's only 'do this, do this, do this.' That's all. And then if you catch those points, you have touched the zenith of the balancing poses. But it cannot be given in the pose 'do this way, do that way'. A lot of donkey work is involved in balancing, that means like a donkey which does not feel the load but carries on. Balancings are like that; you should go on doing, doing, doing. Whereas discriminative power has to be used in all the other poses. Even in Tadasana you have to do the discriminative pose.

**Patricia:** *In "Light on Yoga" you say that balances require more perseverance than all the other poses.*

**B.K.S. Iyengar:** Because you cannot stay more than ten seconds. That's why they cannot be taught but you can be shown at that moment, 'do this, do this, do this.' Because the time in the pose is short, the points must be given quickly. So one day I'll give two points, and say, 'learn that', then after eight days, I will add two more. But in backbends I can go on giving a daily course, like a philosophical course. In balancing I cannot do that.

**Patricia:** *How should menstruation or pregnancy affect a woman's practice of backbends?*

**B.K.S. Iyengar:** When she is not pregnant or menstruating, it does not affect her at all. But if a woman practices backbends during pregnancy, I can't say what will happen. Because it is like a natural abortion, if you force it.

If a pregnant woman does yoga it's going to affect her. Because the child has to be held by the spine. So how can you do backbends where you are trying to expand the inner, anterior spine? They can't go together. People must not go ahead and say 'what does it matter?' They are playing with their lives. They play not only with their lives, they play with the life of the child which is in the uterus.

During the first two months of pregnancy, backbends should not affect you. But afterwards, no chance, anything might happen. If you hold your breath, you could even

injure the limbs of the child, how do I know? Anything might happen.

Other times, it's not a problem for women, it's okay. During menstruation, women should not do backbends. After the menstrual period, the fourth and fifth day, the body will be very tired, but from the sixth day onwards one can do.

Women especially must be careful not to do backbends from the abdominal organs. Those organs should not become hard. Periods may stop altogether if the abdominal area is taking the load in backbends. The breath should move freely. If there is hardness in the abdomen during backbends the nerves become like strings pulled tight.

To do backbends, the extremities must be built up, creating strength in the arms, legs and back. Stability must be created in the shoulders, the feet and the upper arm and upper leg.

Sometimes periods may stop if backbends are done very fast. If too many backbends are done, the cycle between periods may be disturbed. If periods stop or come closer together the backbend practice should be modified or lessened. It might be necessary to do only

more passive backbends for a time. Supta Baddha Konasana is a good pose to practice if there are menstrual difficulties.

**Patricia:** *Are there any conditions where you shouldn't undertake a backward bending session or practice, other than menstruation?*

**B.K.S. Iyengar:** When you are running a fever, or when you are really tired, or physically exhausted. A mature person can sometimes do even then, but a beginner should not. If there is a disturbance that shakes the nerves, due to family affairs or something, backbends cannot be done on that day.

**Patricia:** *When you're growing anxious or your're under a lot of stress...*

**B.K.S. Iyengar:** Then I advise you to do inverted poses. Sirsasana, then with the support of the chair. Viparita Dandasana and Sarvangasana. So you have to keep Urdhva Dhanurasana only supported on the chair, Viparita Dandasana on the chair, Kapotaasana on the chair. Then you should come back to normal. That can be done. But backbends independently, I say no. Don't try independently in certain circumstances.

**Victor:** *The converse of that questions is: are there any conditions that you think indicate the need for more backbending to go into the practice?*

**B.K.S. Iyengar:** There are no fixed rules for that. If you can do other poses very well, if you can face them, you can try it.

**Victor:** *...but are there medical conditions for which it's particularly indicated?*

**B.K.S. Iyengar:** I have already told you that backbending is meant for healthy people. When I say that to learn to do backbends, it's like breeding race-horses, that covers many things. I don't just say it humorously. How much attention, how much care you have to give to maintain the body in a healthy state to perform backbends! It's a necessity. It's an essential factor. An unhealthy person cannot try.

**Victor:** *Do you have any other thoughts you'd like to share with the people that may watch the videos of the Backbend Intensive, people who are interested in deepening their backbend practice?*

**B.K.S. Iyengar:** What more can I tell you? On the very first day I said that in backbends the accent is on the nerves and you have to take care.

But I also say that with backbends, you have to be cautiously bold. Not carelessly bold. You have to descend to the dictates of the spine. You cannot command from the brain to



do the poses. As you play with a child you play in such a way that you guard the child from injuries. Similarly, you have to play in backbends, guarding your spine.

One should never try to do backbends carelessly. You know that if you do Sirsasana carelessly, you drop. So inverted poses and backbends have to be done carefully. If you do something a little wrong in standing poses you may feel a little pain - you know you hurt this tendon or that fibre or something. But in backbends, the injury will be weeks healing. Some advice is to be bold with the postures, but also to guard the body. You have to keep your mind, your intelligence and your will power in such a state that these do not trespass and disturb the body.

When you do backbends, you have to rethink; you have to start from the beginning. So never allow people to look at the video and to jump immediately to do anything - it is like keeping your money in a safe hold for several months and then you go to the bank and take what you need and again leave the rest safe in the bank. So these videos have to be kept unless and until someone is ready to start. The videos are a guide. But all pupils who want to try should get the basic instructions from the teachers. After that, the video will be a very great help. Because I don't instruct like others, you know, 'do this, do that, do this way.' I'm giving the accuracy of the presentation. All cannot touch the accuracy immediately, so the videotapes are for later use. First, with the help of the teachers, get the basic ground to practice. Then I think the video will be helpful. Not before.

But students of various levels can watch the videotapes of backbends to get the format of how to practice, and to observe some of the intricacies. If they observe properly, they will have a thorough picture of the poses to help them start well when they are ready.

**Patricia:** *A lot of poses that we're working on, like Kapotasana and Eka Pada Viparita Dandasana, really haven't been taught. I've watched people do them but I haven't had formal instruction.*

**B.K.S.Ivengar:** Instruction should be given on the positioning of the parts of the body. You should not disturb at all, even in Urdhva Dhanurasana. Today, in Viparita Dandasana, I made you all to do like Tadasana. So healthy adjustments are very important, the positioning of the cells, positioning of the spinal vertebrae, and positioning of the joints. I showed you how to squeeze, how to stretch. You can easily see these points on the video. So youngsters who want to learn can catch the important major points. They speak of 'budding artists' so why not 'budding yogis'?

**Patricia:** *What happens to the mind in backbends that is different from other poses?*

**B.K.S.Ivengar:** The spine is the root of the human system. Standing poses are the beginning. In standing poses, you move forward and backward as a peripheral action, you can take deeper later with twists and all those things. In twists, the side muscles of

the spine are activated. In forward bends the posterior muscles and vertebrae are activated. But in these poses we never use the anterior spine to such an extent that it also is bathed in blood, as it is in backbends.

When you do these asanas, you are educating the entire human system without forgetting even the invisible parts of the bodies. Even the toes are activated in certain poses, particularly in backbends. That area nobody knows. Only in backbends can you touch that part. Otherwise, for many people, it's hollow.

Backbends, when they are done correctly, allow you to touch the human system as a whole. In other poses you touch from the outside. In backbends you touch from inside. So we know how to educate the mind in both ways. In Sirsasana, or forward bends or balancings, your mind is an extrovert. Of all the poses, it's only in backbendings that your mind is going in. You hit your mind toward the internal body.

Even forward bends, you have to use the mind which is on the outer body, but in backbends the outer mind doesn't work at all, the inner mind works. And you see that the inner mind is in command over the outer mind. And that's the beauty of it - then you are touching everywhere.

People may not understand when I speak of the mind. It's the subconscious mind which is awakened in backbends and that's why when you do a lot of backbends you will never become emotionally disturbed because the subconscious mind is made conscious throughout in backbends. It's not a question of the physical body's stamina. The subconscious mind is made to be more than conscious in backbends. In other poses your subconscious mind will be sleeping. Or unoccupied. The conscious brain alone works. Only in backbends the unconscious or the subconscious mind works. That is the beauty of it.

And that's why I say it takes a long time. Sub means below, below the level. So in backbends we bring the mind to all the levels. That's the beauty of backbends. Emotionally we can never be disturbed, for the emotional centre has become an extrovert. When you do Viparita Dandasana, your head looks backwards. But your conscious mind stretches everywhere. So you must study the subject this way. You go on studying. They you know that not only is there a freedom to the spine, there is a freedom to the spirit.

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