

THE LIGHT'S MISSION

The Light, the magazine of the Iyengar Yoga community in the U.S., is published twice a year by the Iyengar Yoga National Association of the U.S. (IYNAUS). *The Light* is designed to provide interesting, educational, and useful information to IYNAUS members to:

- Promote the dissemination of the art, science, and philosophy of yoga as taught by B.K.S. Iyengar, Dr. Geeta S. Iyengar, and Prashant S. Iyengar.
- Communicate information regarding the standards and training of certified teachers.
- Report on studies regarding the practice of Iyengar Yoga.
- Provide information on products and services related to Iyengar Yoga.
- Review and present articles and books written by the Iyengars.
- Be a platform for the expression of experiences and thoughts from all members, students, and teachers about how the practice of yoga affects their lives.
- Present ideas to stimulate every aspect of the reader's practice.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Letter from the President	2
Letter from the Editor	3
Tributes to Guruji, Part I, Prashant S. Iyengar	5
Yoga—Our system Part II, Prashant S. Iyengar	11
Yoga—Our system Part III, Prashant S. Iyengar	16
On <i>Pranayama</i> : Laying the Foundation, John Schumacher	21
On Asana: <i>Vatayanasana</i> , Lucienne Vidah	25
On Healing: Healing Seated Poses, Downward Facing and L-Shapes, Lois Steinberg	31
On Philosophy: <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> Chapter Summaries, Prakash Parameswaran	39
On Teaching: Collegiality and the Spirit of Community, Aretha McKinney Blevins	43
Classifieds	45
Back Page: <i>Ujjayi</i> , by John W. Steele	50

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Laying the Foundation

BY JOHN SCHUMACHER



When I was asked to write a series of articles on *pranayama*, my first thought was: What can I say about *pranayama* that hasn't already been said? Or can't be learned by reading *Light on Pranayama* (the best book available on the subject), Geeta's and Prashant's masterful and unique teachings, or the myriad of other books and articles on *pranayama*? Probably not much. What I intend to do then, is tell you about my own experience with *pranayama* in the hope it will persuade you to take up this practice in a serious way. The articles will include some how-to's, but mostly they are about my journey with *pranayama*, which over the years has become the heart of my yoga practice.

By the way, as I discuss *pranayama* in these articles, please understand I am presenting my understanding of the Iyengar approach to *pranayama*. Each of us takes the teachings we receive and processes them in our own way.

WHY ME?

I don't claim to be THE expert on *pranayama*. There are certainly those who know more than I do. What I bring to the discussion are nearly 50 years of practicing *pranayama*, almost 40 of them every day, six days a week; many years of direct study of *pranayama* with B.K.S. Iyengar, including what may be the best workshop I ever took—the one-week *pranayama* intensive he taught in 1995; over 30 years of teaching a weekly *pranayama* class at Unity Woods as part of a year-long *pranayama* course I developed based on my study and practice and from observing and guiding hundreds of students as they explored the mystery and beauty of the breath; and a deep love, respect, and passion for the practice.

WHY NOW?

Anytime is a good time for starting *pranayama*. This may be a particularly auspicious time because the coronavirus pandemic, which can seriously affect our breathing and lungs, has elevated awareness of the importance of respiratory health; because stress envelopes us these days in a cloud of worry and fear beyond the usual demands of hectic modern life, and

the breath is a key to reducing stress and calming and clarifying the mind; and because many of us have been doing yoga long enough to be truly ready for the practice.

WHAT MAKES ONE "READY" FOR PRANAYAMA?

For most, a confluence of factors come into play in beginning and *maintaining* a daily practice. I emphasize *maintaining* because it's relatively easy to start *pranayama*. I know. I did it many times. It took me several years to begin and *maintain* my practice. Among the factors are an already established regular *asana* practice, a conducive lifestyle, and an inspiring teacher.

WHY ALREADY HAVE A REGULAR ASANA PRACTICE?

'Cause Patanjali says so. As many of you know, *Pranayama* is the fourth limb of the eight-limbed (*Ashtanga*) path of yoga; *Asana* is the third. As part of the description of *Ashtanga* yoga, the first words in the first *sutra* about *pranayama* *Yoga Sutra* II.49 are: *Tasmin sati*—"This having been accomplished." In *Light on Pranayama*, B.K.S. Iyengar translates this as, "[*Pranayama*] is to be practiced after perfection in *asana* is attained." *Asana*, therefore, is a prerequisite for practicing *pranayama* (the only one of the eight limbs with a clearly stated prerequisite).

Asana practice prepares the *sadhaka* (practitioner) for *pranayama* in several ways. With a regular *asana* practice, the body becomes familiar, mobile, and stable. Familiarity may seem an odd requirement, but to learn the subtleties of breathing, a finely tuned knowledge of the body on the physical, physiological, and practical levels is essential. The *sadhaka* should know (be familiar with) the anatomical structures of the body and know how to bring intelligence to the various parts of the body. This is a key, and unique, element of *asana* in the Iyengar method. We learn to become aware of the parts of the body, their movements, and their actions in exquisite detail and with great precision. As granular as that approach is, it becomes much more refined in *pranayama*.

Asana practice increases mobility in the rib cage, shoulders, and spine. Without that freedom of movement in the body, movement of the breath is

restricted. *Asanas* also increase mobility in the hips, legs, and feet which allows us to sit properly.

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Yoga Sutra II.46 tells us stability (*sthira*) is an important aspect of *asana* practice. *Asanas* tone the spinal muscles so the *sadhaka* can sit straight and keep the chest open. Guruji tells of his early days attempting to practice *pranayama*. Because he loved and practiced back bends extensively and excessively, when he attempted to practice *pranayama*, his spine was so unstable that he found it impossible to sit properly for any amount of time. *Asanas* also tone the diaphragm muscle so the movements of the breath can be controlled, soft, and steady.

Toning the nervous system is another way in which *asana* prepares the *sadhaka* for *pranayama*.

Pranayama is a combination of two words: *prana* and *ayama*. In *Light on Pranayama*, Guruji says, “*Prana* is the energy permeating the universe at all levels. It is physical, mental, intellectual, sexual, spiritual, and cosmic energy. All vibrating energies are *prana*... It is the prime mover of all activity... ‘*Ayama*’ means stretch, extension, expansion, length, breadth, regulation, prolongation, restraint, or control. ‘*Pranayama*,’ thus, means the prolongation of breath and its restraint.”

That having been said, *pranayama* is much more than breathing deeply and holding the breath. *Pranayama* is the art of tuning in to, and adjusting the flow of the life force. We live and function in a sea of *prana*, surrounded and permeated by it in the same way a fish is immersed in the ocean. *Pranayama* is the study and refinement of our interaction with *prana*.

In *pranayama*, we are accessing and regulating as powerful a force as exists in the universe. Our nervous system is the primary conduit for this energy. *Asana* helps us strengthen our nervous system which enables us to handle the powerful energy that *pranayama* amplifies. The *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* 2:16 says, “Just as

lions, elephants, and tigers are gradually controlled, so the *prana* is controlled through practice. Otherwise the practitioner is destroyed.”

Over the years I have seen people have bad experiences with *pranayama*. Only a few. But it can happen. I bring up this point when I speak to students starting the year-long Unity Woods *pranayama* course, but I always question myself as to the wisdom of doing so (just as I am doing now). Lord knows, as difficult as it is for folks to take up the practice, I don’t want to drive them away by scaring them to death. I do want them to take the practice seriously, however, and to know how powerful it can be. In a later article, I’ll explain how brilliant the Iyengar method is in addressing this issue.

Asana in the Iyengar tradition is often described as “meditation in action.” When we practice *asanas*, we concentrate on what we are doing (*dharana*). As we develop more focused attention, we deepen our awareness of what we are doing, what is happening, and our ability to observe the interplay between the two. This refined awareness is a gateway to practicing *pranayama* as distinct from deep breathing. We must be able to catch the most subtle actions and sensations for our practice to be effective and safe. By doing so, we create and strengthen new pathways in our brain (neuroplasticity). Our brain is a major part of our nervous system, so this aspect of *asana* practice also prepares our nervous system for *pranayama*.

WHAT IS A CONDUCTIVE LIFESTYLE?

For many, establishing a practice is the biggest challenge. Everybody is crazy busy and adding another thing to the schedule is not particularly attractive. By already having a regular *asana* practice, you have the experience of managing time to create a measure of discipline and consistency in your life.

You also have become aware of the ways in which food and sleep affect and are affected by your practice. You probably have made changes in how you eat and sleep based on your *asana* practice. Of course, lifestyle adjustments revolve around a lot of factors—family, livelihood, social life—but for many, as your practice becomes an important part of your life, you learn to make adjustments necessary to keep your practice and the rest of your life in a balance that facilitates both.

Among the factors I mentioned earlier that make one

ready for *pranayama* is an inspiring teacher. Every skillful endeavor presents tremendous challenges. A teacher, mentor, guru helps us meet and address these challenges. Of course, people struggle and succeed on their own without teachers, but a teacher can help us avoid pitfalls and guide us to find and follow the most efficacious path.

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Guruji's guru, T. Krishnamacharya, refused to teach him *pranayama*. Even so, Krishnamacharya's own practice provided the inspiration for Guruji to undertake the practice. By surreptitiously watching his guru practice, the seeds were planted. What an amazing tree grew from those seeds.

In the next article, I want to speak more about the importance of the teacher in *pranayama* and lay the groundwork for beginning the practice of *pranayama*.

As we continue to grow and nourish our community, I hope these articles can offer an avenue for education (yours and mine), dialogue, and support. I welcome your comments, questions and suggestions. [Email me here](#)

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John's clear, precise style and his engaging sense of humor have made him one of America's leading yoga teachers. In 2015, Yoga Journal awarded him its prestigious Good Karma Award for spending "40-plus years sharing [his] practice to help authenticate yoga in America today." John has written for a variety of publications. He has also appeared in numerous local and national media outlets, speaking about the practice and benefits of yoga across the country. He conducts classes and workshops for students and teachers around the world.