

SKILLFUL SEQUENCING

BY GERRY VISCO

Ask any Iyengar devotee, and he or she will explain that intelligent sequencing pampers both your body and spirit. So it's not surprising that one of the most distinctive qualities of Iyengar yoga is the variation of asana sequences. Throughout his 70 years of practice, B.K.S. Iyengar systematized over 200 classical yoga *asanas* and 14 types of *pranayama*, all designed to guide beginners toward more advanced poses as they gain flexibility, strength, and deeper meditative practices.

An Iyengar practice can vary as much as the weather—depending upon the week of the month, the time of the day, the practitioners in a class, their levels of experience, the instructor's theme, and what poses had been taught during the previous few classes. All these variables enhance the fun and challenge of a class, making each practice fresh and vibrant as it nurtures and balances your body.

In Pune, India, the Iyengar family has set up a monthly series that focuses on a specific category of poses each week. This allows students who may only be able to attend one class a week to learn many poses and challenging variations. One pattern daughter Geeta Iyengar outlines in her book, *Yoga: A Gem for Women*, is to dedicate the first week of the month to standing poses, the second week to forward bends, the third to back bends, and the last week to restorative, which includes seated *pranayama*. (Since it can have a detrimental effect on the nervous system if practiced with incorrect alignment, seated *pranayama* is not usually introduced for the first six months to a year.)

Renowned for its therapeutic aspects, Iyengar yoga includes sequences to help such ailments as depression, fertility, heart conditions, scoliosis, and blood pressure with remarkable results. Practitioners often use props such as belts, blocks, ropes, chairs, bolsters, blankets, and specially constructed benches and wooden "horses" to aid in the healing process.

Although class sequencing can and does change, there are general rules and guidelines designed to provide optimum results and avoid injury. For example, Iyengar yogis always follow *Sirsasana* (Headstand) with *Sarvangasana* (Shoulder Stand) or other neck-lengthening postures such as *Halasana* (Plow Pose), *Setu Bandha Sarvangasana* (Bridge Pose), or *Viparita Karani* (Legs Up the Wall).

A regular Iyengar practice will certainly ensure proper alignment, but bet you never thought you could actually learn to smile too!

OTHER GUIDELINES INCLUDE:

- *Adho Mukha Svanasana* (Downward Facing Dog) is a good preparation for all poses and counterbalances both forward bends and back bends.
- Standing poses prepare the body for forward bends or back bends.
- Forward bends are calming and have a cooling effect.
- Twists are neutralizing and are done after forward bends and back bends.
- Forward bends can alleviate anxiety, and back bends help with depression.
- Back bends create heat and are invigorating.
- Always cool down after a back-bending session with neutralizing poses.
- Heating poses are generally followed by cooling poses before *Savasana* (Corpse Pose).
- Inversions increase blood flow and circulation, calm the nervous system, and help relieve stress.

The sequences on the following pages show three levels of Iyengar yoga. All three levels emphasize balance, an important component of Iyengar yoga.

LEVEL ONE concentrates on standing poses, twists, and Shoulder Stand. Students learn how to shape the poses as they improve their strength, flexibility, and balance.

LEVEL TWO builds upon the standing poses and adds more revolved poses and twists, forward bends, inversions, and the beginnings of back bends. Students also begin learning seated *pranayama*.

LEVEL THREE intensifies the standing poses, twists, forward bends, and back bends, and students hold inversions for longer periods. Not just about doing difficult poses or physical tricks, this stage incorporates a profound intelligence and transformative method integrating the body with the mind, senses, and breath to create equanimity.

For more information on Iyengar sequences, read *Light on Yoga* by B.K.S. Iyengar, *Yoga: A Gem For Women* by Geeta Iyengar, and *Yoga: The Iyengar Way* by Silva Mehta, Mira Mehta, and Shyam Mehta.



Urdhva Baddhangulyasana (Mountain Pose with Arms Overhead): Standing in Tadasana, the foundation for all standing poses, intertwine your fingers and reach arms overhead to create a dynamic extension throughout the body.

LEVEL 1 SEQUENCE

Tadasana

Urdhva Hastasana

*Urdhva Baddhangulyasana

Vrksasana

Utthita Trikonasana

Virabhadrasana II

*Utthita Parsvakonasana

*Virabhadrasana I

Parsvottanasana
(arms down)

Prasarita Padottanasana

Adho Mukha Svanasana

*Urdhva Mukha Svanasana

*Chatush Padasana

*Salamba Sarvangasana

*Halasana

*Bharadvajasana
(chair or floor)

Swastikasana
(bend forward and rest head on chair)

Savasana

**poses shown*

Utthita Parsvakonasana (Extended Side Angle Pose): According to BKS Iyengar, you can keep your chest, hips, and legs in a line by moving your chest up and back. Stretch every part of your body, concentrating on the entire back, especially your spine.



Urdhva Mukha Svansana (Upward Facing Dog): Rest the weight of your body on your palms; the insteps of your feet, pelvis, thighs, and knees lift off the floor. Push your chest forward between your arms. Keeping your legs active makes it less likely you'll have any lower back pain.

Virabhadrasana I (Warrior I Pose): Practice this pose, named after the brave Virabhadra, with the energy and focus of a warrior. Keep your bent knee in line with your heel, not extended past your ankle. Your back leg stays firm, your chest lifts, and your arms extend toward the ceiling.

Robin Janis (left) began studying Iyengar Yoga in 1986 and is a founding faculty member of the Iyengar Yoga Institute of New York. She is the owner of the Space For Grace yoga studio on Manhattan's Upper West Side. Her website is robinjanisyoga.com



Chatush Padasana (Four-Limbed Pose): You can do Chatush Padasana, which is a good preparation for back bends, and also to learn the correct actions of Shoulder Stand. If you can't reach your hands around your ankles, use a strap; or place the backs of your hands on the floor and rest the soles of your feet on your palms.

Halasana (Plow Pose): Halasana is a continuation of Salamba Sarvangasana with the same blanket set-up. Keep your back long and straight, lift your legs toward the ceiling. Open your chest and the back of your knees. You can also do Halasana with your legs supported on a chair.

Bharadvajasana on chair (Bharadvaja's Pose): Practiced on a chair, this is excellent for beginners and pregnant women and is recommended after back bends. As you twist into the pose, lead with your chest, not your head. After your chest is open and parallel with the back of the chair, then turn your head.

Salamba Sarvangasana (Supported Shoulder Stand): Says BKS Iyengar: "Sarvangasana... is one of the greatest boons conferred on humanity by our ancient sages..." To protect your neck and cervical vertebrae, place three (or more) folded blankets under your shoulders so the back of your head rests on the floor. Beginners can use a chair or practice against the wall.

