



# Establishing and Structuring Self-Practice - Part I

Eyal Shifroni

The articles by Faeq Biria and Rajvi Mehta addressing the theme of self-practice in the Spring 2014 issue of Iyengar Yoga News expressed ideas that many readers found both illuminating and encouraging.

The theoretical insights given by Faeq Biria and the experiential responses to questions by Rajvi Mehta prompted a request from readers – can we have a practical guide to self-practice? We are responding to this by publishing a guide to self-practice by Eyal Shifroni. His article is divided into two parts: how to start self-practice at home and advice for students who already practice at home and wish to deepen their practice. Part 2 will appear in the next issue of IYN.

## How to Start your Self-Practice at Home

Self-practice is an indispensable component of our *Sadhana*. Receiving instructions from teachers and attending classes regularly builds the foundation, but self-practice is where one can truly develop and incorporate yoga into one's life. As a teacher, I often notice how the progress of students is accelerated when they begin to practice on their own. However, for most students starting self-practice presents a major difficulty: even though they recognize the importance of self-practice, and attend classes regularly, only a minority succeeds in making it part of their daily routine. Some of the obstacles on the road to self-practice were noted thousands of years ago by Patanjali in one of his famous yoga sutras (I.30), while other obstacles are more pertinent to our modern era.

Over the years I was asked by many students for advice on how to cross the barrier to self-practice. This article collects the ideas which have been the most helpful for them. It is arranged in two parts. Part I is catered to students who wish to start practicing at home, part 2 provides advice for students who already practice at home and wish to expand and deepen their practice

## Note:

Not all of the ideas presented in this guide may be relevant to all students. Please choose those that are relevant and beneficial for your capabilities, experience and limitations. If in doubt, consult your teacher or write to me at: [eyal@theyyengaryoga.com](mailto:eyal@theyyengaryoga.com).

May these ideas and tips encourage you to create and enrich your self-practice!

## Starting Self-Practice at Home

Some of us (...typically at the beginning of a new year) tend to make dramatic resolutions about improving our lives. Oftentimes, newcomers to yoga are eager to practice and decide they will devote an hour a day or even more for practice. The problem with these decisions, however, is that they are often not feasible in the context of their current lifestyle and obligations. The pressures of life make persistence in practice difficult to maintain. In such circumstances, people find it impossible to live up to their resolution, which – in turn – leads to frustration and eventually may lead to dropping yoga from their life altogether. This is probably what Patanjali refers to as *Anavasthitatva*, the inability to persist in gradual progress.





So, my first piece of advice is:

### **Set Realistic Goals And Build Your Practice Gradually**

Progress in yoga is not created by revolutions, but rather by a slow and gradual evolution. I always tell my students: ‘practice even 15 minutes a day, the duration is not important, but the regularity!’. Set a timeframe that you can repeat daily, without making dramatic changes in your life, and stick to it. If you missed the practice slot planned for the morning, make sure you make up for it in the evening.

If you are not used to self-practice, scheduling a full hour of it each day may be just too demanding for you. A shorter interval is much easier to allocate by simply reducing the time of watching TV, surfing the Internet and/or chatting on the phone.

### **Fix a Place in Your Home for Yoga Practice**

Find a suitable place in your home for practice and keep your mat always open on the floor in that place, ready for practice. This will lower the barrier to starting your practice and will remind you to do it in case you fail to remember.

Ideally, the place should have a window for natural light and air. It’s nice to have some area of exposed wall and sufficient room for storing your props, such as blankets, blocks, bolster, etc.

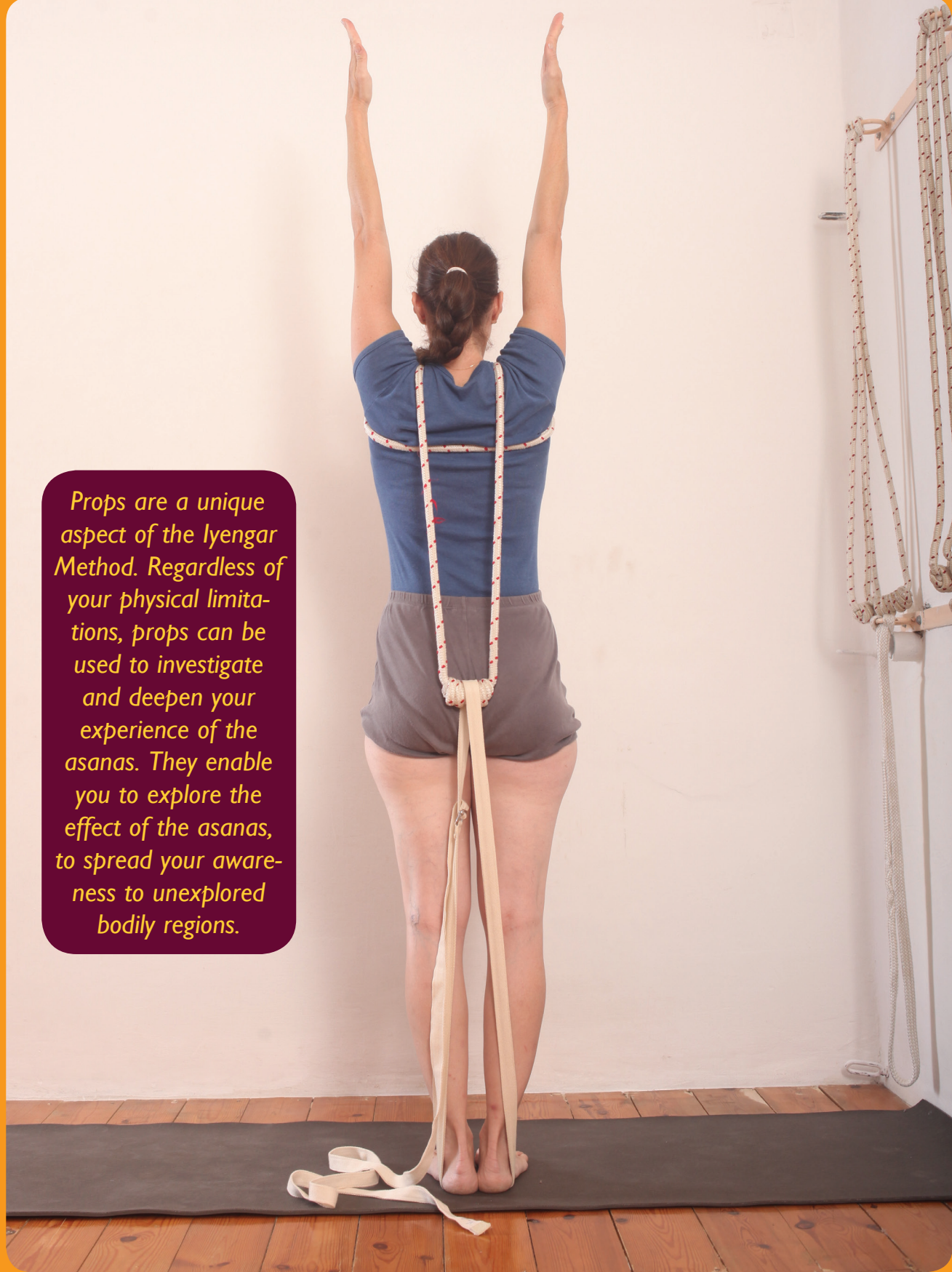
### **Hang a Practice Sequence on the Wall**

A common request I get from my students goes like this: “I want to practice at home but I don’t know what asanas to do. Can you give me a good sequence for self-practice?”

My best advice: Get a recommended list of *asanas* from your teacher and stick it on the wall in front of your mat!

### **Overcome Laziness**

The hardest part is to begin practicing. Iyengar is known to say that the most difficult asana is unfolding the mat, and it’s true! Once you start though, practice usually flows smoothly and it is



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often difficult to stop that flow.

Patanjali mentions two related obstacles: *Styana*, which Iyengar translates as lack of perseverance, lack of interest, sluggishness, mental laziness; and *Alasya* – idleness, physical laziness. Laziness is not a very strong hindrance in my own case, but I still face it every now and then. I have developed two strategies to tackle it:

One is to imagine the joy at the end of the practice. Good yoga practice will always make you feel fresh, relaxed and content. Simply imagining the peaceful state of mind to be experienced in one hour is an excellent motivation to start it!

The other method, which I often offer as advice to my beginning students, is to say: “Okay, let’s give it 10 minutes and see how I feel!” Regardless of the mood in which you start the practice - you will often find yourself practicing well past those initial 10 minutes, or at least wishing to have planned more time for it.

### **Prioritise Yoga According to its True Value for Your Life**

You may have many tasks or projects to complete today, but the time you invest in your practice has the potential of improving the quality of your entire day. After the practice your mind will be clearer, your intelligence sharper and your emotions more balanced.

So the time you invest in the practice will more than pay off as you’ll be more effective in performing your tasks. You will become more relaxed and quiet and will waste less time and energy. You’ll make better decisions and prioritize your tasks better. In addition, the joy, peace and harmony that you’ll experience will shine outwards; you’ll be happier and this will improve your interactions with people and possibly transmit some of your joy and serenity on to them as well.

During my own practice, I often realize that some of the things that I considered to be so important and urgent are actually not that important, and I can drop them or postpone them for some other time.

One of my students used to say that yoga is the best investment one can make because it saves on bills for the doctor, the psychiatrist and other kinds of therapists. Investing a little bit in yoga is still much cheaper than having to pay for therapy. I tend to agree with this student.

There is a well known saying: “You should sit in meditation for 20 minutes every day, unless you’re too busy; then you should sit for an hour...” And indeed, if you are so busy that you can’t devote 20 minutes a day for practice, maybe you should rethink the way you manage your life. Why are you so busy? Do you spare

some time for yourself or devote all your time and energy to other people and projects? Maybe an hour of practice will give you more time to contemplate on these questions and to change your priorities.

Often, even before getting out of bed in the morning, my mind is already busy making the daily ‘to-do’ list. In very busy times I may hear an inner voice saying: “hey, maybe you should just skip practice for the day!!” I learned to recognize this voice and label it - “Oh, this is my ‘do-disease’ speaking”. I hear the voice but answer: “My dear ‘do-disease’, although you are speaking to me, I can’t listen to you right now because I need to practice yoga – I’ll attend to all the tasks you mention when I finish; now I am busy doing something more important, please excuse yourself from my brain”.

### **Practice According to Proven Sequences**

The task of remembering the asanas and deciding in which order to practice them is difficult for beginners. Pre-defined sequences, arranged by qualified teachers, structure the practice and guide us into gradual and safe progress.

Based on the example of Faeq Biria, one of Guruji’s senior teachers, the first year of my teachers training courses is devoted to establishing self-practice. I give the students a set of five sequences – one





for each day of the week (they also have to go to a formal class or two during the week). When they start to follow these sequences, I often see a dramatic progress in their practice. The students report that the sequences are essential for building up their discipline and consistency.

When I started my own yogic journey in 1978, there was much less information available about yoga than we have today, and not many ready-made sequences. Sometimes I followed the sequences given in Light on Yoga. These sequences are inspiring – but they may be too challenging for the average practitioner.

Luckily, today we have excellent sequences that can be used by beginners, leading them gradually to more advanced *asanas*. For example:

- Start by following the 28 week course given by Geeta Iyengar in Chapter X of Yoga in Action – Preliminary Course
- Follow the 10 sequences given in chapter V of Basic Guidelines for Teachers of Yoga by BKS and Geeta Iyengar.

The cited sequences were carefully designed for us by our Gurus, the Iyengars, and we must follow them until we get mature enough to tailor our own sequences. They consist of *asanas* from all the basic groups, including standing, sitting, forward and backward extensions, inversions and lateral twists.

One characteristic of these sequences is that all of them contain standing *asanas* and inverted *asanas*. In Yoga in Action Intermediate Course-I, Geeta says:

“The standing *asanas* are the base or foundation; therefore one has to start there, in order to strengthen the spine.”

In Woman’s Yoga Practice, Geeta Iyengar and Lois Steinberg write: “The benefits of *Sirsasana*

and *Sarvangasana* cannot be over- emphasized. Practitioners of inverted postures experience the effects daily. If circumstances shorten practice time, they know to do *Sirsasana* and *Sarvangasana* as their benefits would be missed.”

Standing poses and inversions are so very important that they should be a part of your daily routine (except of course, when otherwise indicated, like during menstruation). In building your practice sequence, follow the guidance given by Geeta in the Yoga in Action booklets, especially read the Introduction, page 80 and pages 119-121 of the Preliminary Course and the section “Method of Practice” on pages 111-113 of the Intermediate Course-I.

*“An auspicious and good beginning leads one towards the Ultimate end. Slow and steady wins the race. Our duty as a beginner is to keep on practicing with a steady and firm mind.” - Geeta Iyengar*

Advanced practitioners who have gained practice maturity don’t need external sequences. I don’t use any fixed sequences in my practice any more, instead I listen to what my

body tells me. I usually have some idea of what is going to be the focus of the session, but this may change in the course of the practice. Indeed, each pose leads naturally to the following one, and the practice flows without any fixed plan. (But I do practice *asanas* from all the major groups over the course of the week).

This requires intimate knowledge of the *asanas* and their effects, so in the beginning (and this can last several years) it’s best to follow sequences given by teachers with great knowledge and experience.

### **Make Sure Your Practice is Interesting and Enjoyable**

In Yoga in Action – Preliminary Course, Geeta Iyengar gives the following advice:

“Do not burden your mind with the idea of doing too many *asanas*. Do not feel the pressure on the mind that it is a time consuming practice. Start the practice with the freedom of the mind.”

Your practice should be interesting and enjoyable. Yes, in order to make progress you need to be focused and determined. But if you feel that your practice is a burden, stop and ask yourself honestly what the cause of that feeling may be.

In *The Tree of Yoga* B.K.S. Iyengar writes: “You are a beginner in yoga. I too am a beginner from where I left my practice yesterday. I don’t bring yesterday’s poses to today’s practice. I know yesterday’s poses, but when I practice today I become a beginner. I don’t want yesterday’s experience. I want to see what new understanding may come in addition to what I had felt up to now” (see *The Fruit* chapter).

If your practice is shallow and mechanical it will become boring; you will not feel engaged with it. Each session should bring with it a fresh sensation; some new learning; access to a new internal territory in which you have never visited. This way, the practice will never be boring and you won’t ever consider it a burden.

A good teacher encourages us to explore deeper layers in ourselves through careful instruction and insightful questioning; but how can we do it when we practice on our own at home?

The key is to adopt an inquisitive, curious mind. For example: look for actions that repeat themselves in different poses; or explore how different poses affect your breathing; or try performing the same pose with different props.

Props are a unique aspect of the Iyengar Method. Regardless of your physical limitations, props can be used to investigate and deepen your experience of the asanas. They enable you to explore the effect of the asanas, to spread your awareness to unexplored bodily regions. In 70 Glorious years of Yogacharya B.K.S. Iyengar says:

“The student understands and learns *asana* faster on props as the brain remains passive. Through passive brain one learns to be alert in body and





mind. Props are guides to self-learning. They help accurately without mistakes” (Page 391). As an example, here are some variations in which props are used to direct awareness to a bodily region (image one), to help moving tight muscles (image two), to check the alignment of the body (images 3 and 4), to activate the legs (image 5) and to allow for a restful stay in a challenging asana (image 6).

### Use a Timer to Develop Your Endurance

Asanas are psycho-physical states that have to be maintained for a certain length of time. Staying in the pose is at the heart of the practice. I remember that in the early days while doing headstand, I found myself coming out of the pose unintentionally, in a lapse of concentration. This prompted me to start using a timer; when working on prolonging my stay, I used to set the timer to 10 minutes and was determined to stay until the beep. This helped me to build stamina and determination.

Today it's easy to install sophisticated timers, adapted to yoga practice, on any computer or cellphone. Staying for one minute in a balancing pose (like *Virabhadra III*), or 10 minutes in a forward extension (like *Paschimottanasana*) or 15 minutes in an inverted pose (like *Sirsasana*) requires will-power and determination. Using a timer frees your mind

to concentrate on precision and reducing the effort in the pose rather than on worrying about the time. In addition, when you perform a cycle of asanas, you can add intermediate beeps to signal you to move to the next variation in the cycle.

Be careful however not to develop dependency on external gadgets. Ultimately you should develop an internal 'feel' for how long it is beneficial for you to stay in a given asana on a particular day. Your own internal timer should have physiological and psychological dimensions, not merely chronological.

### Be Prudent: Make Slow and Steady Progress

Highly motivated students sometimes start to practice at home, and after a few weeks complain about pains, blaming the intense practice for their injuries. In the transition from a weekly class to a daily practice, hidden problems and imbalances are triggered and may manifest through new sensations and pain.

When starting a self-practice, it's very important to be prudent and progress gradually. I always tell my students that there is no 'instant yoga' - yoga is a life-time project (possibly several life-times project). There is really no point in attempting to move faster than your natural ability. Be honest and accept your limitation. Develop patience

and be satisfied with slow but steady progress. Prepare the body well with the basic poses (mainly standing poses) before attempting more advanced poses. Listen to your body and remember these concluding words of Geeta Iyengar in *Yoga in Action – Preliminary Course*: “An auspicious and good beginning leads one towards the Ultimate end. Slow and steady wins the race. Our duty as a beginner is to keep on practicing with a steady and firm mind.”

### Listen to Your Pain

If you have a persistent pain you must investigate and find its cause. Iyengar says: “Pain comes to guide you; pain is your Guru”. Learn to discriminate between a “good pain”, which indicates healthy progress within the potential of your muscles and joints, and “bad pain”, which indicate that you have violated those limits. Never ignore a pain, but also do not panic. Listen carefully to what this Guru (the pain) tells you; consult your teacher for assistance; and if needed, change your practice to avoid unhealthy pains. If the same pain persists without explanation, consult your medical doctor.

### Do Not Discriminate Between Types of Asana

You have to practice all the *asanas* that are suitable to your level. It is natural to have our likes and dislikes among the *asanas*. However there is signif-

icant learning value in doing the *asanas* which are more difficult for you.

The Bhagavad Gita (II.48) says that yoga is *Samatvam* (equal minded, equanimity) meaning that a yogi treats everything and everyone with the same dignity and respect. So our practice should lead us toward this ideal. Each *asana* has its own unique benefit. Remember that the ultimate goal of *asana* practice is mental; watch your consciousness while performing your less-liked *asanas*; learn from it as you develop endurance and equanimity.

### Adapt the Practice to Your Current Condition

Our practice should never become a blind routine. We need to develop sensitivity and awareness to our physical, physiological and mental condition. The practice should change from day to day according to factors like our current health condition and level of energy and be adapted according to factors like our age, the weather, the time of day and many other factors.

When you begin your practice, assess your condition and select the kind of practice that is most suitable for the day. For example, if you are feeling low on a particular day, it's better to select energetic *asanas* in order to stimulate the breath and the circulation and to open the chest (back bends are ideal for that); on the other hand if you suffer from headache, agitation or high blood pressure, choose a relaxed sequence with long stays in supported forward bends. When you are

exhausted after a long working day, do a restorative practice. Women must also take into account the changes that occur during the menstrual cycle.

### Take Support from Family and Friends When Needed

Supportive family members or friends can help you persist in your self-practice. Once you have decided to practice on a daily basis, make this decision known to your family members and friends, and ask them to support you. For example, your partner can encourage you to practice on a day in which you are not feeling up to practice, and remind you of your decision (of course they must do it thoughtfully and be sensitive enough to the circumstances).

If you have a friend or a colleague that you can practice with – it may help you to commit to the practice. Some people find it much easier to practice with a friend or in a small group. But see

that the practice doesn't turn into a

social event with too much chit-chatting...

Personally, I prefer to practice in solitude, but there were times when practice with colleagues did help me significantly.

### Consider Using Recorded Guidance

There are plenty of recorded audio and video classes on the Internet as well as in CD format. These can help you to establish your own practice, but keep the following in mind: First, recorded lessons cannot substitute for a teacher. The role of the teacher is to observe the







students and correct their mistakes. This cannot be done in remote control. Beyond the technical aspect, a teacher is also a role model and a source of inspiration. The relationship between the teacher and the student is very significant while progressing on the path of yoga.

Secondly, recorded lessons repeat themselves (naturally) and lack the element of observation

and internal investigation. Practice is our opportunity to be with ourselves and observe our mind and its fluctuations in order to learn how to restrain it. That is the greatest gift of yoga and it may escape you when you use recorded lessons regularly.

So if you decide to use recorded lessons, balance it with an unguided self-practice so as to not





develop dependency on external guidance.

*Eyal Shifroni has been an Iyengar yoga teacher since 1985, and is Director of the “Iyengar yoga Center of Zichron-Ya’akov”. Eyal is author of: A Chair for Yoga - A complete guide to Iyengar yoga practice with a chair, and is currently working on a follow-up book: Props for Yoga - A guide to Iyengar yoga practice with props. He has translated two of B.K.S. Iyengar’s books into Hebrew (The Tree of Yoga & Light on Pranayama). Please visit Eyal’s website for a full version of his article on self-practice: [www.eyalshifroni.com](http://www.eyalshifroni.com)*

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