



Establishing and Structuring Self-Practice - Part II

Advice for Advanced Self-Practice

By Eyal Shifroni

This is the second part of Eyal Shifroni's guide to self-practice. The first part on how to start self-practice at home appeared in the last issue of IYN. Here, Eyal offers advice for students who already practice at home and wish to deepen their practice. Our thanks go to Cissy Harrison for commissioning these articles.

Become a Teacher

● There is a saying 'If you want to learn something, teach it!' – and indeed, teaching any subject is the best way to study it. This may not be suitable for everyone, but those of us that want to make yoga a substantial part of life can assume the commitment of teaching, and thus be more motivated to improve and deepen their self-practice. When you take on the responsibility of teaching, you must be determined to practice; this is an obligation for your students, you have to serve as a personal example, you need to prepare your classes and try out variations and points that you plan to teach. This will contribute to your own practice immensely.

2. Define the Objective of the Session

A self-practice session may have different objectives: to improve fitness and strength, to progress with the *asanas*, to work on a specific issue, to investigate a posture or a group of postures, to charge the body with energy or to give it a rest. One can choose a well-rounded practice that covers *asanas* from different groups, or focus on a specific group of *asanas*.

Faeq Biria writes in his article on self-practice: "We must define why we are practicing a sequence or an *asana* and we must not forget it throughout our practice."

Your intention should have an impact on the choice of *asanas*, their sequencing and their duration. Before starting a session, decide what you are going to focus on and direct the practice towards that goal.

3. Define Long-Term Goals for Your Practice

Working towards a long term goal can add additional dimension to your practice. During the phase where I needed to prepare for assessments, my practice was very much focused on the sequence that I had to present for that certification level. That gave my practice a direction as well as continuity for several months.

Occasionally, I browse through *Light on Yoga* (or even just open it randomly...) and select a pose that is just a little above my current ability. I make this pose my goal and work on it for a few weeks to see if I can get some progress and improve my understanding of that pose.

4. Break the Routine Once a Week

In Appendix I of *Light on Yoga*, B.K.S. Iyengar gives a three-day course; at the end of the course he recommends resting or doing a lighter, restorative practice once a week: "Again one can repeat in the same order on the following days resting on Sundays or doing only *Sirsasana I* for 10 minutes; *Salamba Sarvangasana I* for 10 minutes; *Halasana* for 5 minutes; *Paschimottanasana* for 5 minutes and *Nadi Sodhana Pranayama* for 15 minutes with inhalation retention and *Savasana* for 5 minutes."

The wisdom of a resting day after six working days was recognized by most of the civilizations. I believe that in practice too, it's very healthy to break the routine once a week and to rest (or to practice in a lighter manner).

On Saturday (my home country of Israel's national rest day) I often do a restorative sequence; I stay for a while on the *Viparita Dandasana* bench; continue with inverted poses, and wrap up the practice with *Pranayama* and *Savasana* with an eye-bandage. Nonetheless, sometimes I just take a day off and observe myself in that uncommon situation...

5. Become Engaged with Other Components of the Yogic Sadhana

In addition to self-practice, *Sadhana* has other components that you shouldn't neglect; these components will strengthen and nurture your self-practice: Make sure you attend at least one weekly class with your teacher. Attend a long workshop once in a while, read yoga books and incorporate yoga more deeply into your life off the mat. Exchange experiences with fellow practitioners and teachers. Look at yoga classes and workshops as sources of knowledge, insights and inspiration.

Studying texts central to yoga such as the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali and the *Bhagavad-Gita* provides depth and meaning to the practice of yoga. Yoga is a way of life and a way of thought - it's important to place your practice in the general context of yoga.





6. Keep the Practice Going When You Are Away from Home

Travelling can interrupt your practice, and for those of us who travel a lot this can be a serious obstacle: If you don't practice when you travel, restoring the routine after coming back may be difficult. Interruptions can have a critical negative effect, especially in the beginning stages.

So, don't stop your practice; if circumstances shorten your practice time, do at least a few standing and inverted poses. No matter where I go, I always carry with me at least my mat (get yourself a thin travelling mat, which is very easy to carry), a rubber block and two belts. This is enough for practicing most of the poses and is quite easy to carry.

You may have a problem with *Sarvangasana* – but in most hotels you can get a few extra blankets to make the required platform. If no blankets are available I usually replace *Sarvangasana* by *Urdhva Prasarita Padasana*, *Viparita Karani* and/or *Salamba Chatuspadasana* against the wall (as shown in the sequence given on the opposite page).

If you travel to a different time-zone, you will find that yoga practice is a very effective way to recover from jetlag. Often when you travel, you are alone and free from your regular obligations, so even if the conditions are not ideal – do use the free time to keep your practice going!

7. Wrap Up Practice with Quietly Sitting and Savasana

Classes in the Iyengar method typically begin with quiet sitting and chanting of the Invocation to Patanjali. This is a good opportunity to separate the practice from other daily activities. Even if you don't chant loudly, it is a good habit to sit quietly for a few minutes, concentrate and contemplate on how lucky we are to have this wonderful opportunity to practice! Be grateful for the tradition of yoga that has touched your life so deeply, and thank the lineage of all the yoga teachers, from Patanjali up to our own Guruji, B.K.S. Iyengar. By sitting quietly for a few minutes, you create the proper ambience for the practice and sanctify your embodiment.

You can imagine that your teacher is watching you with good, supportive eyes and encourages you to practice. This can help you stay focused. I am often inspired by the photos of Guruji's practice that are hanging in my center (as in many other Iyengar Centers) and imagine him encouraging and instructing me.

Always end practice with *Savasana*. *Savasana* is physically easy but for some it is mentally demanding. You may also be tempted to skip it due to lack of time; do not do that! Spare at least five minutes for this important pose! These final minutes at the end of the session are very precious. Enjoy the total detachment from your worries and obligations. Be absorbed in the sensation of near-floating within your inner world, wholly supported by Mother Earth, half smiling under the grace of tranquility. This is where you reap the seeds you sow in your practice –take time to savor them!

Savasana is the gate to the more internal limbs of Yoga: *Pranayama*, *Pratyahara* and *Dharana*. If you are not practicing *Savasana* on a regular basis, your *Pranayama* will not be deep and you will not develop the ability to concentrate and quiet the mind.

Savasana is the art of non-doing, not-acting, just being in the present moment. In our hectic and erratic culture, deep relaxation is probably the healthiest and the best service you can do for yourself. ॐ