

INTERVIEW WITH B.K.S. IYENGAR ON BACKBENDS

12/5/91

Questions asked by Victor Oppenheimer and Patricia Walden

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 Francie Ricks.



Victor Oppenheimer: Why backbends?

B.K.S. Iyengar: In the *asana* systems, the most advanced postures are the backbends. The human structure is such that the idea does not strike anyone that the spinal vertebrae can be moved backward as well as forward and sideways, without causing injury. In the field of yoga, backbends are not taught at the early stages in the practice of this art, but only when the body is trained and when it is tuned and toned to such an extent that it can accept these poses. Backbends are to be felt more than expressed. The other postures can be expressed and then felt. But in backbends, like meditations, each person has to feel. And that's why I thought that after fifty years of teaching, at least some of my students should get the background of the right means to perform the backbends. Backbends are not poses meant for exhibitionism. Backbends are meant to understand the back parts of our bodies. The front body can be seen with the eyes. The back body cannot be seen; it can only be felt. That's why I say these are the most advanced postures, where the mind begins to look at the back, first on the peripheral level, then inwards, towards the core.

For a yogi, backbends are meant to invert the mind, to observe and to feel—first the back, then the consciousness and the very seer. Through the practice of backbends, by using the senses of perception to look back, and drawing the mind to the back portion of the body, one day meditation comes naturally. In other poses, the attention on the back is not given to such an extent and the mind moves outside. Backbends have principles of their own and learning the workings of the mind and intelligence in backbends naturally leads one towards the real aspects of life and the higher aspects of yoga. Because I feel that one who knows, and who looks into the back can look into God. And that's the reason I gave these backbends.

Victor: At what level should people start working with this material?

Iyengar: Only a dedicated student should take this degree of practices, and as in the class I jocularly said, to do backbends seriously you need to be like a trained racehorse. All horses cannot be made into racehorses. So a human being should have a special character, special qualities of tenacity, perseverance, and forbearance, to take to these poses. The effect of backbends is that our nerves which originate from the spine are very greatly activated by our will power, logic, and our reasoning in adjustments. The strength of the nerves created is so enormous that when, by the grace of God, the light of Spirit dawns, the backbend practitioners will have absolutely no fear to face that Divine light.

You should know, when I use the word racehorse, that it means a special human category. That's why I did not give this backbend course before, this depth of action which I am only giving you now after fifty-five years. Previously only "touch and go" backbends were given. The depths were not given. The second reason for the focus on backbends is that backbends attract people. Teachers want to do backbends to impress and win more students. Until now, even the teachers had no base in backbends; they taught only according to the possible mobilities and capabilities of their bodies.

To a great extent, all of us know the standard of standing poses, the standard of forward bends, the standard of inverted poses, the standard of sideways movements, even to some extent the standard of balances. One can easily find out whether a person is doing these poses correctly or not. But regarding backbends, I don't think that anybody could judge so easily because there was no disciplined method of practice. Discipline means that backbends have to be done using the discriminative quality of the practitioner, without disturbing the anatomical structure.

When I've seen people giving performances or doing videos on backbends, my impression was that there was no concord, harmony, or balance in their presentations of the spinal movement. (I don't say about the postures, that's not the important thing.) There was no healthy use of the gross as well as the subtle parts of the body, including the spine. Without the spine, bodily movements cannot take place. The spine, the foundation of the human being, was not trained by the practitioners; they just did as they liked. So I thought that some balance and harmony should be given to them, so that when they are doing they cannot injure themselves, and when they go to teach others, they may not injure them. That's the reason for this backbend intensive. I saw people at the conventions in 1984, 1987, 1990—when they performed the poses—a catch in the back might come because they did wrongly. There was no rhythm—or rather, no communication in the various joints of their bodies, various muscles. The intelligence was not in contact with their actions. When I saw this, I thought I would be doing an unfair thing as a yoga master if I did not teach some of my pupils the right method; I thought I would be following an unethical method within myself, and so I made up my mind to conduct at least one intensive backbend class to give the right footing in this style of *asanas*.

So, first I wanted to give a certain standard for backbends. Second, in doing backbends, as I said, you will be prepared philosophically and spiritually by the grace of the Lord, or the grace of yoga, for the illuminative light to open on you. You may not become nervous to face it because your spine will be a tower of strength. As Lord Krishna gave a special eye to Arjuna, to see his Lord, so the backbends are like a third eye. The third eye means such a strength within to face the unseen light when it falls on you.

Patricia Walden: Would you like to talk about any cautions for people who practice the backbends?

Iyengar: The caution is implied in the sentence, “it’s like training race horses.” The trainer takes great care to keep the horse in a good condition. So much or even more than that is required to take your body in a true shape, in a perfect shape to perform these *asanas*. So it’s not just a matter of hit and miss, or trial and error. You can take trials and errors in other poses but in backbends you must be very, very sharp. Sharpness means discriminative power. Backbends demand sharpness of the intelligence. And if that sharpness is not there, then I think you have to wait to do the backbends. It’s certainly not meant for all. It’s meant for those who can bear it. Then it is right.

All around training is also essential, that is, the body, mind and soul have to be understood. Inversions work on certain parts of the body; standing poses work on certain parts of the body, also twistings and balances work on certain parts. But the interpenetration of the spinal nerves and spinal muscles are not touched in any other poses as they are in backbends. When we speak of the extension of the spine in backbends, it is the anterior layer of the spine which elongates, not the posterior. When you do forward bends, you are creating space on the posterior vertebral column of the spine. When you twist, you are creating room or space on the lateral parts of the spine, but so far, there are no movements to extend or expand the interior portion of the spinal vertebrae except backbends. Hence the importance of backbends cannot be measured at all. Because the anterior extension of the spine is unknown. The moment you start the backbends you are in the unknown world. Your body may be known, but your inner spine is unknown. You are entering the unknown world. So you can understand that it cannot be done by everyone.

Victor: You waited fifty years before teaching this. Do you have any advice for people who are looking at the videos of the intensive or who want to do backbends, as to what poses they should have reasonably well perfected, what groups of poses, before they start working?

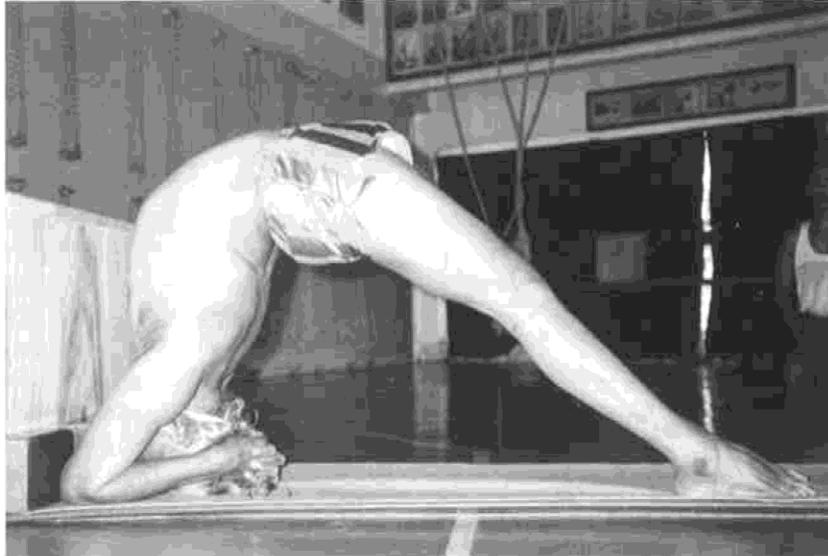
Iyengar: All the participants in this intensive have been practicing for nearly two decades. A minimum of two years is needed to begin backbends, though the simple backbends may be taught after six months. Backbends can be divided into various stages, simple ones, those of medium difficulty, and complicated ones. Complicated ones need lots of training and so one should only begin the harder poses after maturity.

Victor: So people should wait until they’ve matured their practice to try these poses.

Iyengar: They should try only after they’ve mastered the standing poses—particularly the standing poses, twistings and inversions should come very, very well. Balancings are unimportant for backbends, but these others have to come.

And when you ask for the base—I have taught you now for two weeks after ten years of practice. Have I gone, like any others might, jumping around? Or have I been consolidating? What did I say the other day, that *Urdhva Dhanurasana* is the first pose. I said that in standing poses *Tadasana* is the base. When you spread your legs *Trikonasana* is the base. In forward bends *Janu Sirsasana* is the base. In inverted poses *Sarvangasana* is the base. In balancings I said *Bakasana* is the base. In backbends I said *Urdhva Dhanurasana* is the base.

Practitioners must understand the positioning of the muscles, most importantly, the positioning of the muscles and the positioning of the joints when they are doing backbends, or injuries are bound to come. So I decided to conduct this intensive backbend class. Otherwise, until now I have only taught “touch and go” type of backbends.



Patricia: Would you like to say what the effect of backbends is on the emotions and the spirit?

Iyengar: First of all, backbends demand a lot of discriminative power and the emotional center is the torso, the trunk. You can keep your brain quiet, but have you ever experienced that you can keep your brain quiet but the mental thoughts move in the trunk? Can you keep from here to here [clavicle to belly] the silence which you keep here [brain], or which you keep in your limbs?

Victor: It's very hard.

Iyengar: Very hard. And now to speak of the emotions—when you do backbends, what happens to the emotional center? Does it not open more? Does it not go to vastness? So as we say that the empty cup alone is useful, you are creating tremendous vastness so that it can accumulate [absorb and withstand] all types of pressures and strains. So emotionally there is no chance for a person who does backbends to get depressed or distressed. The beauty of backbends is that the person not only remains intellectually—not strong, remember the word stable. “Strong” means like a scorpion sting. So I don't want that intellectual “strong”—the words, when you say he is intellectually strong, they're not correct. Backbends give stability, or maturity, where there's ripeness in the brain, ripeness in the emotion. So we cannot become victims easily, those who very accurately do backbends. You can take catastrophes with a calm mind, which others cannot do. Others have to build up, but for us it becomes a natural process. We need not build up. That's the beauty of backbends.

Victor: The next question we have has to do with people's practices at home. Are there guidelines you would like to give about what to do before backbends, and also afterwards, to avoid any problems in the back?

Iyengar: See, practically, in two weeks, you have the experience of what to do. I have been educating your spine; I have been educating your muscles, step by step, or you can say, progressively, preparing for backbends. The first day, it took one hour for me before you tried a backbend, and now, if you observe, you can see the video later, but the time that you took in preparation today was much less than in the beginning. That means you started very fast. So I built up. In backbends the receptivity in the cells and fibers and joints should be cultivated because the actions are very intense as you go on doing them. So as a learner or an athlete, start slowly, to build up power, to take a chance at the end to reach the zenith. And then afterwards, you should not be like your Olympic players who reach the final stage and do not know how to bring back that used energy. In many cases they depend on drugs. They go to the doctor immediately or they take pills. Backbends are demanding like that. They are athletic poses to a great extent.

So what I did for you or what we naturally should do first is to build up that energy, knowing very well that you have to do backbends. Then when you do a lot of backbends the blood is circulated with such speed, you know, with such force in the system that a practitioner will feel the hotness of the body.

So as that body is warmer than normal, we give soothing or cooling poses afterwards. Soothing and cooling poses like dog pose, a little *Virasana*, which I taught today, bending forward, and lateral *Uttanasana*, are given so that the temperature of the body which increased in the backbends is brought back to normal. And that is the natural "pill" to come back to life.

So every session they should learn how to start and how to end. Not just doing backbends and their job is over. Or as I overheard someone say, "I have done backbends, now let me do *Savasana*." No.

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

Iyengar: No. Because you have already over-strained 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?



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 Bandasana* 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 practiced after backbends also is a half forward bend because there is no pull on the spine; the weight is on the legs, 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. These cycles have to be known. This has been lost, the cycles are lost.

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 time. 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.

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 bend. It's certainly a balancing pose but it's a forward balancing pose—not like *Urdhva Kukktasana*. In *Urdhva Kukktasana* 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.

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 balancings 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 balancings—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.

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 balancings I cannot do that.

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

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.

Victor: You've asked the group that's taking this seminar to do an inversion practice every afternoon and to pay particular attention to some of the *Padmasana* variations and to *Sarvangasana*.

Iyengar: Yes. A few minutes ago Patricia asked me what about twists, what about lateral movements? Now you can understand how many hours gap I have given, before having you do the lateral movements. When you do them after waiting several hours, the soreness of the backbends will not come at all. That's what I said the very first day, and now you all have that experience. If you had not done the inversions every afternoon, particularly the lateral variations, you would not have been able to continue the class.

Patricia: That series has been so helpful and wonderful for all of us.

Iyengar: As I said, after the gap in time you can take the inversions and lateral movements. If you want to you can try, if you are willing to suffer, doing backbends and then immediately doing *Sarvangasana*. Find out whether you can stand on your legs that day. I've done all those things so I know how to safeguard my pupils. I'm not keen like a gymnast or an athlete, saying, "oh, doctor, give me some medicine," after I've done wrong. I don't disturb the inner glandular system, in the art of teaching. I don't think my yoga students will suffer provided they follow these guidelines. If they say, "I don't care, I will do backbends even when I'm menstruating," then it is their strong-headedness and it could be that they will suffer certain diseases.

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

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 you're under a lot of stress...

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, *Kapotasana* 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 question is, are there any conditions that you think indicate the need for more backbending to go into the practice?

Iyengar: There is no fixed rule 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?

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?

Iyengar: What more can I tell you? On the very first day I said that in backbends the load 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 dictation of the spine. You cannot command from the brain to do the poses. As you play with a child—when 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 tear this tendon or that fiber or something, but in backbends, the injury will be weeks in healing. So my 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 they 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 videos and to jump immediately to do anything. It is like keeping your money in safehold 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*, I really haven't been taught. I've watched people do them but I haven't had formal instruction.

Iyengar: 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 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?

Iyengar: 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. The sternum also is activated 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 in 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's 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 center 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. Then you know not only is there a freedom to the spine, there is a freedom to the spirit.

Videotapes of the backbending intensive are available through [Mystic River Video](#).