

BRING THE BREATH BACK TO YOGA

By Rama Jyoti Vernon

Last year, the *New York Times* ran an article entitled, "How Yoga Can Wreck Your Body." Those of us who are the veterans of Yoga in America, who have been practicing and teaching since the 1950s, when people confused Yoga with yogurt, have, for years, been concerned over the new fitness direction that Yoga has taken in this country.

Let's face it: The term Yoga has been hijacked. The author of the article, William Broad, narrowly defined Yoga according to his experiences with his injured Yoga teacher, Glenn Black. For those of us who have been enlightened by Yoga for nearly six decades with no injuries to self or others, the article was horrifically corrosive. After reading it, I was worried about the risks of getting out of bed or of walking. I could shorten a hamstring without realizing it! But what about the risks of sitting at a computer all day and incurring repetitive stress injuries? Where can we go? There is nowhere to hide, not even in the inner sanctums of *Shavasana*, the Corpse pose.

No mention was made in the article of varying methodologies of Yoga. All paths and lineages were painted with the same brush. Indra Devi, Swami Sivananda, Pattabhi Jois and Mr. Iyengar although very different from one another, were lumped together from their early teachings in the mid-20th century.

As I discovered over the past 55 years, Yoga is a way of "being" not just doing. It is the exploration of what Sri Krishna, in the *Bhagavad Gita*, calls inaction within an action, is the essence. The practice of Yoga quiets the waves of the mind. When the waves are still, as Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* say, "The seer and the seen become one." Perhaps it would be more accurate to say, "They realize the oneness that already is."

In the 1950s, '60s and even in the '70s, Yoga was still intact. However in the late '70s, Yoga began to slip into a mode of physical exercise. The old English prefix "ex" means to project outward. Instead of exercise, perhaps it is more accurate to view Yoga as "innercise." To experience Yoga as an "innercise," it's important to bring the breath back into our practice and teaching and allow it to move the body organically into a pose.

Swami Satchidananda, founder of Integral Yoga and a disciple of Swami Sivananda Saraswati of Rishikesh, was once asked if he was a Hindu. He thought for a moment and then answered slowly and pensively, "I like to think of myself not as a Hindu but more as an "Undo." What a revelation! There's nothing to do but undo. Instead of

"doing" Yoga, perhaps it would be more accurate to say we are "undoing" through Yoga.

As the essence of all Yoga is to "still the waves of the mind," if we practice asana rapidly without attention to breath, we create more restlessness, the opposite of Yoga. The breath, not the teacher or the clock, is the gauge as to when it is time to come out of the pose. If the breath is erratic and staccato, it is time to slowly exit the pose.

In 1970, I was asked to give a talk and demonstration of Yoga to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's cabinet ministers. The presentation was well received and afterward some of the cabinet ministers said, "You looked so relaxed, you didn't even look as if you were in pain. You actually looked as if you were enjoying it." I was stunned. "Yoga helps us to come out of pain, not create more," I finally replied. "Yes, I do enjoy it, it is my communion with God." They were astounded. Mrs. Gandhi's Yoga teacher, who was in attendance, was fascinated and then offered to demonstrate how he practiced Yoga. He grabbed his leg and forcefully put it on his opposite thigh and then grimaced and grunted with pain as he forced the opposite foot over into *Padmasana*, the full Lotus. There are different approaches, I realized that day, and that this "yang" approach could lead to injuries. He was surprised that my approach did not create but helped to heal peoples' past injuries.

If our lives are not evolving from the practice of Yoga, perhaps we need to change our practice and our teachers. This *New York Times* article was a wake-up call for the Yoga teaching community to slow down and re-evaluate one's teaching and practice style and perhaps contemplate bringing the focus on the breath back into Yoga.

Years ago, I hosted Indra Devi, as well as Mr. Iyengar. I went to Indra Devi's class. She did not just teach Yoga, she *was* Yoga. Her presence filled the room casting a mantle of light upon us all. I realized that we, as teachers, need to keep our connection to the Divine. It is the unspoken that touches the hearts and minds of the students far more than the technique. Indra Devi's presence was a reminder of why we were practicing Yoga—not just how.

It's not Yoga that causes strokes in relatively young and healthy people but the way in which they practice, with rapid movements and no preparation, which leads to spinal (and neck) compression rather than elongation. William Broad wrote of Mr. Iyengar emphasizing in the cobra, arching the neck as far back as possible. However, the neck should not be forced back in any pose, as it



Rama Jyoti Vernon with Sri Gurudev, Russia (then-Soviet Union), 1986.

creates cervical compression and restricts the circulation from moving between the spinal cord and brain. I remember many years ago, Mr. Iyengar emphasized the extension of the back of the neck, because cobras didn't throw their heads back and look up but drew their head back and elongated what would be the back of their necks. The eyes, instead of looking upward, would feel drawn toward the back of the head and intently gaze straight ahead without wavering.

In the case of the college student who intensified his practice by sitting in *Vajrasana*, on his heels, for hours a day, his injury cannot be blamed on Yoga but on his own ambition and lack of discernment. *Vajrasana* is not a classical sitting pose for meditation.

The article also alluded to the Shoulderstand, as "tucking the chin deep into the chest." No! That is not the way it is practiced. In *Sarvangasana*, we bring the chest to the chin, not the chin to the chest. We roll the upper arms outward affixing the outer elbows to the earth. "This is a *shoulder* stand, not a *neck* stand," Mr. Iyengar would say. Known as *Sarvangasana*, meaning the whole or entire parts of the body, the Shoulderstand is commonly referred to as the "queen of asana" (the Headstand is the king) and is known to affect and benefit every gland, organ and system of our body. It affects the physical as well as subtle body. The article mentioned it stimulates the thyroid. No,

it doesn't, unless the thyroid is hypoactive (underactive). *Sarvangasana* balances the thyroid rather than stimulates it. *Matsyasana*, the Fish pose, is the one that is stimulating to the thyroid and is excellent for those with hypoactive thyroid. The Fish without the Shoulderstand first, can be over stimulating to the nervous system because of the effects to the adrenal glands. Those of us who have practiced these poses for half a century can testify that they balance the thyroid and parathyroids, which are responsible for our metabolic processes and metabolism of calcium.

In Shoulderstand, the 7th cervical vertebra eventually does not even touch the mat. *Sarvangasana* is known to prevent strokes and heart attacks as well as alleviate neck and shoulder tension. It beneficially affects the cerebellum, which not only coordinates muscles but is what the yogis call the seat of the subconscious mind. Mr. Broad also related this pose to the thalamus gland. However, the thalamus, which relays sensory messages to the outer brain, also relates to subtle energy centers that awaken our conscious to vaster states of awareness. The thalamus, which holds a blueprint of every cell of the body, sits above the hypothalamus, which is now known as the master endocrine gland. Perhaps one day the thalamus may be recognized as the true master endocrine gland that regulates all others under its hierarchical structure. This gland relates to the crown *chakra* and is impacted by *Sirshasana*, the Headstand, far more than the Shoulderstand.

In relation to *Sarvangasana*, the article refers to the pons, attributing only the role it plays in respiration. It is also the switchboard or relay center between the spinal cord and the brain. When there is compression or tension in this area, we see the aging process and the slowing down of the reflexes. *Sarvangasana* preserves the youthfulness of the reflexes. The area of the pons, where the spinal cord meets the base of the brain is known as the medulla oblongata. This is the area that Paramahansa Yogananda calls the “seat of the soul.” Within the arena of the “back brain” is what is known in the *Yoga Sutras* as the “Cave of Brahma,” the Creator.

Sarvangasana is a pose of meditation where the heart is above the head, which the yogis relate to the ego. In it, the ego is humbled and the heart reigns supreme over the mind, if only for a short time. This is an extraordinary pose that also elongates the carotid sinus and arteries and can diminish excessive plaque, which, instead of creating, can actually help prevent strokes and heart attacks. *Sarvangasana* increases circulation of blood, lymph and cerebral spinal fluids. The article stated concerns for the basilar artery, which arises from the union of the two vertebral arteries that feed the pons. He referenced that reduction in blood flow to the basilar artery has been known to produce a variety of strokes. In a correct Shoulderstand there is no

pressure upon the basilar artery, but the pose can benefit its circulatory flow.

In referring to the woman of 28 who suffered a stroke while attempting *Urdva Dhanurasana*, which is correctly known as the “Upward Bow,” it is not the Wheel, which is something different. Again depending upon the teaching, the head is not placed on the floor, as this can induce compression in the neck if the arms are weak and the shoulders are not flexible. In any pose, the neck is never compressed or arched. Again, what were the instructions? What was trying to be achieved? What is being promoted in the name of Yoga? There is also no mention of the impact of pharmaceutical drugs and the effects of legal or illegal drugs ingested into the system. How do we know the condition of the people getting injured?

Please Mr. Broad and Mr. Black, do not blame Yoga but look to the teachers’ interpretation of what they call Yoga. Many years ago, a group of long-time teachers came to Swami Satchidananda voicing their concerns over the direction that Yoga was taking in this country and how it was taught as aerobic exercise that would eventually lead to injuries. He was pensive and then said, “You must trust—trust in Yoga.” Thank you for opening this discussion that will allow everyone in the Yoga community to stop and take a big breath.

THE FUTURE OF TEACHING YOGA

An Interview with Rama Jyoti Vernon

Integral Yoga Magazine (IYM): You’ve been training Yoga teachers for fifty years now. What type of evolution have you seen over the years?

Rama Jyoti Vernon (RJV): Many years ago, Nancy Ford-Kohne, Nischala Devi and I met with Gurudev to talk to him about our concern that Yoga was moving in the fitness direction and becoming more like an exercise. Gurudev told us not to worry—that people come into Yoga wherever they are, that they’ll get a little and it will lead them eventually to the center of Yoga. He told us to, “Trust Yoga.” I say that all the time because I see that happening. In Yoga classes, students are breathing more and getting more into the philosophy. In the past year, I really feel something happening and it’s wonderful. I was recently on a teaching trip in Chicago, and all the spiritual aspects of Yoga were represented. It left me feeling like maybe the work *is* on its way. Yoga is now taught in community centers, in prisons. It’s taught to military veterans, to inner city gangs. I feel this is the blossoming of seeds planted, of the dream I had in 1967 that Ayurveda would become our system of medicine in America and Yoga would be used in hospitals as therapy,

that it would be part of the curriculum in school systems and it would be used to help people to get off drugs—it could be utilized in every element of our society.

IYM: Do you have concerns about Yoga getting more integrated into Western medicine?

RJV: I’ve been concerned about making Yoga adaptable to fit into the allopathic system. I see Yoga teachers and therapists adapting the language to make it more palatable for those in the medical system rather than expecting the medical system to adapt to Yoga. We have to be careful, because sometimes, in trying to adapt ourselves to the criteria of what is already acceptable, we can lose our own spiritual essence and vision. I think it’s okay to bring Yoga into the mainstream and make it acceptable and then, later, come back and pick up the deeper essence of the spiritual practice. I believe what Gurudev said, that we have to trust in Yoga and its essence will have a way of coming forth.

IYM: Do you have that trust in the young people coming forward to be trained as the next generation of Yoga teachers?

RJV: I used to feel that the young people needed more experience, but they actually are brilliant. In the 1960s, we didn't have the access to all the Yoga resources that abound today. Yoga is everywhere, which is great, but it also takes greater discrimination because so much is available. Young people need to see what their *svadharma* is—what's right for them, for their own practice, for their teaching. In the past two years, I've seen an exponential evolution in the field of Yoga. The information technology and sharing Yoga through social media is incredible. I've been awestruck at how it is evolving. I used to believe we needed teachers of Yoga everywhere—now we have them and maybe too many (*laughs*)! I wonder what Gurudev would say? I'm sure he would say to have trust in Yoga, the integrity of the people it will be passed on to and that it will be passed on with that same integrity of spirit.

IYM: What concerns do you specifically have about how Yoga is transmitted via the Internet and social media?

RJV: Well, the written word doesn't always carry the inflection of the spoken word. Even with Skype and telecommunication, it's not like sitting with a person in a room to get that *darshan*. When I would sit in a *satsang* with Gurudev, with Santji (Sant Keshavadas) and other of the great Masters, there was an amazing transmission of the energy of the room that went right through my heart. I don't think one quite gets that through the new media. The *darshan* from those Masters was just so powerful. Still, I think that people can still receive *darshan*. But, now they have to glean it from here and there. They can go to *satsangs*, to workshops. The female masters (like Amma, Mother Maya) are coming out and people get *darshan* there or they hear about it from someone and get indirect *darshan*. The new wave involves how to integrate it into the center of one's being and to not get confused by the vast amount of information out there.

IYM: Are you concerned about the tendency today to have many teachers rather than one main teacher?

RJV: I think young people today need to find the place from which to draw teaching, to do their own practice and to see if it works before ever giving it out as teachers. They must find that mastery from within because they don't have the same availability of the traditional Yoga Masters as we once did. Maybe young people can seek out the swamis in Yogaville and others who are carrying forth a lineage passed on to them by their teachers so that now they are that source of transmission. It's up to the individuals to find that point of integration within the center of their own being. They need to find the teachers that resonate with them. They might start with Bikram Yoga, and then they may want more philosophy so they will go to Ashtanga and then go to Integral Yoga for more spirituality and a deeper meditative practice.



Rama Jyoti Vernon

However, if they simply go from one teacher to another, they won't get steeped in a tradition; they can't go deep. Everything moves so fast in our world and young people can get caught up in the frenetic pace. A more *pitta*-oriented person will be drawn to hot Yoga—exactly what they don't need! They need a slower Yoga style that incorporates lots of breathing. It's ironic how it works and what we need to balance our systems. Who is there to guide them if they are new to Yoga? So, that's one challenge. But there's another challenge and that's following a teacher who is more invested in building an empire or franchises, which we've seen. But now some of the empires are crumbling. This can turn off people to Yoga for the rest of their lives. So, ultimately, it's about the *teaching* rather than just the teacher. The teacher inspires us to dive into the teaching and then we have to find the connection to the source, the divine within our own being. Then we find that teacher from within. Yogi Bhanjan used to say that the Guru is like the finger that points to the beauty of the moon. Sometimes people cling to the finger.

IYM: Are there pitfalls that today's Yoga teachers can avoid?

RJV: It's important for a teacher to not parrot their teachers. They need to take what's given and practice, and practice, in order to take it deep within and to deeply integrate it so that, when they teach, it comes from their experience. Teaching is essentially sharing our own experience—we can't do more or less. The deeper we go, the deeper we can bring the students into the process we call Yoga. Teachers must find their own voices or they'll get bored and dry out if they just parrot their own teachers.

As our practice evolves, new awareness comes and teaching should evolve from within us. As we share the outgrowth of our own experiences with students this helps them find out within themselves. This is the mark of a true teacher. The other end of that is that we must honor the teachers we've learned from. Today's teachers need to acknowledge the tradition and their own teachers by sharing quotations from their teachers and by transmitting the love and guidance they themselves received.

In my fifty years of training teachers, I always advise my trainees to be balanced in how many classes they teach each week. If you teach too much, you will go dry. You need to practice. Mr. Iyengar said that we need to practice twice as much as we teach. So, I tell my students that sometimes they need to curtail their teaching because they need to develop a very deep reservoir within themselves to draw upon. When they do that, there's another presence that enters the room when they go to teach—it's like the ancestral lineage, presence of the masters, comes in, and that's what people feel in Yoga that is different than other forms of exercise. Exercise means to project outwards. But Yoga is more of innercise. Then students start to feel that darshan, that illumination of spirit manifesting through their Yoga teachers.

IYM: What's your advice to the next generation of Yoga teachers?

RJV: The role of modern Yoga teachers is to go as deep into themselves and into the traditional studies of Yoga as they can so they can integrate that into their teaching. It's critical that teachers bring the breath back to Yoga. Breath is spirit. When we use the breath it's like surgery: We open ourselves to align with our inner being. Then, when we do the asana it becomes meditation in movement. The *Gita* says, "inaction within action." Sri Krishna was preparing Arjuna to go into the battlefield of life. We need to learn this through asana. Breathing and an infusion of meditation must flow into every aspect of our lives, so we don't put more stress into the atmosphere and so we emanate that peace into the world. That's what Gurudev and the other Masters did. They, in their very being, are the example of the teaching.

Those of us who've been teaching for many years are springboards for the next generation. The younger teachers today, who haven't been steeped in Hinduism and classical Yoga, can get competitive with other teachers because they aren't secure in their inner beings. They can't feel the joy in being a springboard for the next generation and they even get competitive with their own students who become teachers. Instead of seeing it as competition, they could see it as joyful. The mark of a great teacher is one whose students surpass him or her. Through teacher training, we give our students the platform to take this quantum leap,

and I'm sure this went on for thousands of years, with teachers mentoring their students like Sri Ramakrishna with Swami Vivekananda, like Gurudev, who groomed all the teachers who carry forth his teachings. This is how a lineage continues. As Yoga teachers, it's not what we say that matters as much as the presence we share. I would like to see teachers become the presence of that spirit manifesting on earth.

IYM: There is a lot of competition today between Yoga studios that are trying to stay afloat financially. What is your advice in that regard?

RJV: I know that for marketing you need a name, you need to distinguish yourself from the next Yoga teacher or studio by your name or style or what have you. But let's not create too many separations in the name of Yoga. We have enough separation. Yoga can bring us to the place where there's no separation. Yoga is not going anywhere. There's nothing to do in Yoga, but we are undoing, as Gurudev always said—we're releasing all the impediments that keep us from seeing we are already one. It's not like we need to yoke between the individual and the universal—but we need to release that which keeps us from seeing the One. We can't join what hasn't been separated.

There's the old saying, that "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." I turn it around. I found that when the teacher is ready, the students appear. It's a natural process. If it's your *dharma* to teach, people will come. If we try to put things out and market to what's popular, we lose. We can accrue karma vs. working our karma out, so one has to be very careful. If you are to teach, the situations will occur, people will come and ask you to teach, different doorways will open. I once told Mr. Iyengar that I wanted to retire and asked him how many more years I still had to travel the globe teaching. He replied: "Go into your class and if there's someone there say, 'thank God I have someone to teach.' One day if you go into the class and there is no one there, say, 'thank God, I am free.'"

Rama Jyoti Vernon's interest in metaphysics and mysticism began in her childhood. Her parents were pioneers in holistic health. Ultimately, she became one of America's first Yoga teachers, and was instrumental in bringing many great teachers from India to the USA, co-founding Yoga Journal and developing organizations such as Unity in Yoga, to unite all lineages of Yoga. As a housewife, mother and Yoga teacher, Rama began applying Yoga philosophy in a whole new arena, international peacemaking. During the 1980s she made dozens of trips to the USSR and founded the Center for International Dialogue, based on the idea that people can join together to initiate solutions for political, economic, ecological, humanitarian and cultural conflicts. For more information, please visit: www.ramajyotivernon.com.