

IYENGAR YOGA

First timers WELCOME

What to expect from
your first Iyengar class.
By Michael Balshaw

An Iyengar yoga class should leave you feeling physically challenged, mentally stimulated and calm. But you'll be in good hands along the way. It places great emphasis on the alignment of the body and certain actions are required to ensure the body is working correctly. So, if baggy clothes are worn, then the teacher may not be able to see this, and this could mean the student may be prone to injury. So don't be surprised if your teacher asks you to roll up your trousers. Here are a few other things to prepare you for your first Iyengar experience.

All sit down

The class will often begin with everyone seated. This may be on a support to enable the lower back to lift. The teacher will then begin to take your awareness through your body asking you to do certain actions to bring lift to the spine, openness to the chest and a quietness to the head. Sometimes 'Om' can be chanted three times and the invocation to Lord Patanjali can be chanted.

Sequencing

The asanas practiced in the class will vary from class-to-class depending on the focus or theme of the course. However, the asanas will be sequenced to gradually open the body and take awareness deeper to the workings of the body and therefore a quietness to the mind.

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The asanas can include standing, seated, twisting, backbends and inversions. Different asanas have different effects on the body and the understanding of this is the backbone to how to practice Iyengar yoga.

Standing poses

Standing poses are strongly emphasised as they build strength, stamina and flexibility, and everything begins with a good foundation. You'll be told where to put your feet, and how to work your legs and arms. The teacher will look at what you're doing to check if you are following the instructions and may make suggestions to improve or change the asana. So you should expect to be addressed and spoken to; you won't just merge into the group.

Heightened awareness

We often think that we are aware, but with another pair of eyes on you, our own blindness is illuminated. This is something people who have practiced other yoga styles sometimes find difficult – but useful. Sometimes people have been doing *uttitta trikonasana* (extended triangle pose) for years but with no awareness of where their feet are, or how they should be working to get the correct actions of the hips so they can lengthen both sides of the trunk and get the necessary spinal rotation. BKS Iyengar was famous for telling us that we are all beginners and that each time we practice we need to engage with the asanas afresh, as if it were the first time.

Demonstrations

If the class is being introduced to an asana it hasn't done before the teacher may demonstrate what is to be done or how to do a certain action. This may also happen if everyone is not getting the action of the pose. This is not an opportunity for the teacher to show off but



iyengar voga ॐ

a chance to see what is expected. In most situations, it's perfectly acceptable to ask questions if you're unsure. This is a way for the student to be actively engaged in the learning process and genuinely understand. It may be the teacher stops the class as they see something interesting in the way a student is working which is relevant to the others. This is done merely as an opportunity for all to learn. Sometimes seeing something is the best way to understanding.

Use of props

The class may use a prop to help learn a particular action. Other times an individual student may be asked to use a prop to help them with a particular asana. This is done to enable everyone to practice Iyengar Yoga regardless of sex, shape or size.

Advanced postures

Generally, asanas are introduced to the class gradually as the students develop. *Sarvangasana* (shoulderstand) and *Sirsasana* (headstand) are only introduced after a good understanding has been achieved in the standing asanas. It makes sense to only practice standing on our head once we are able to stand well on our feet.

Savasana

The end of your class will always finish with *Savasana* (corpse pose). The alignment consistently requested throughout the class will be emphasised in this asana so the body is placed correctly on the floor with equal awareness to the left and the right and openness in the chest. ॐ

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