

In this article I would like to explore the language used in Iyengar yoga focusing on the way instructions are used in a specific form to structure the learning process and the way teachers use these terms as a way to guide and shape the student's experiences.

The selection of specific words at crucial moments to link mind and body is implicit in the Iyengar method in a way that is unique to this style of practice for two reasons. First, because Iyengar Yoga uses the asanas as a vehicle of exploration of the mind it has devised a set of phrases and descriptive terms (because everyday language does not adequately meet the task) to sequence and engage the experience ('draw up', 'lengthen, etc'). Secondly, as asana is an experience in the moment (a philosophy in action) language is also used in a qualitative way (terms such as 'hit', 'cut', 'squeeze', etc). Thus yoga is not only about what you do, but... "how you do what you do", and its language is the medium by which this is transmitted from teacher to student.

I would like to identify four uses of language in the yoga room.

1. Descriptive language

Descriptive language is used for technical aspects of the asana. This often requires the use of anatomical language (eg. femur, iliac) but as an asana becomes more refined and subtle parts of the body require a greater degree of nomenclature. Hence, for example, big toe mound, armpit chest, inner chip of the knee. Anatomical language developed out of a need for finer detail when dealing with the body. In medicine, as discoveries were made and the science of medicine developed, a common language was needed so that doctors could record information and share these advances between one another in an understandable way. Likewise, in the yoga room a language has evolved either to meet the need to describe areas of the body that don't have distinct references in terms of traditional anatomical language, or to utilize when these anatomical terms are too cumbersome or technical. The tension between medical (anatomical) language and common terms requires the teacher to inform and educate the student about both a higher level of understanding of the body, and also of a 'common language' that is unknown outside the Iyengar community. We 'tuck the buttock', 'roll the shoulder blades down the back', 'press the outer heel down'. These terms mean nothing outside the yoga room and are in themselves only understandable through demonstration, repetition and perception of the experience. Thus the words become an experience in each student's body – the words become real through action.

One of the great benefits of teacher training in the Iyengar method is the degree to which a student can move from school to school, and even across countries and find the language and terms almost identical.

2. Language creates a form for us to engage with sensation.

When beginners encounter new sensations, these often intense, and/ or confronting experiences may cause the mind or body to contract and pull away. At time like these, the teacher's words provide a vital vehicle for the student to shape the way they respond to these experiences. In so doing the teacher leads the student through the experience and offers the student a way of holding the asana. For example, in dog pose to 'press the thigh bone back', 'broaden the calf' and 'lengthen the outer heel' is not merely a set of sequenced instructions but a set of individual movements that requires the student to engage in a very particular way. The experience of the dog pose is arrived at rather than aimed for. It is neither something imposed on the body nor forced on the mind. Through this level of work we must look into the asana's sensations and qualify our assessment of what we feel. In so doing, the teacher's language and emphasis creates a structure with which we can engage sensation (to make sense of what we feel) and a comparison point by which to measure our experience (i.e. the teacher's words in comparison with our own experiences). Thus, the teacher makes the pose accessible.

3. Language is used to shape the experience.

Through the use of specific terms we are able to give an asana its intention. By using the instruction 'lengthen the arms' as opposed to 'straighten the arms' or 'lock the elbows' we not only straighten the arms but also add a direction that makes the action more potent and effective. To 'lengthen the arms, and extend from the back armpit through to the fingernails' is a qualitative action.

Thus the placement of a word within a set of instructions gives the language an added component with which the teacher shapes an asana within the student. By listening to the difference in the teaching of Ardha Chandrasana and Virabhadrasana 3 we can hear changes in volume, pacing and quality of language as an example of how a teacher gives voice to the way the asana is to be performed attitudinally. In so doing, the teacher signals the quality of intent the student should use when performing each asana. An effective teacher teaches as much by the way they say something as by their choice of words.

4. teach the feeling of the asana

Having taught the asana (described it, engaged the sensations and signaled its intention) the teacher transmits a final experience of how the pose feels. This level of language is often poetic as the teacher searches for a phrase or word to describe the essence of the pose, and its expression within them as they practice. For example, to 'wring the abdomen' or 'churn the abdomen' in Jathara Parivartanasana are two examples of more than just 'turn the abdomen'. Whilst these expressions may be bad English, they are more effective than good grammar in this case because they take the student beyond simply doing (or forming) the asana to how the action *feels*. In so doing we experience ourselves.

The four stages mentioned above are not sequential or applied in a manner to lead the student from A to B, but can co-exist in each asana and become part of a range of options the teacher has when directing the student in class. Hence on any one day, a teacher may emphasize grounding - points, sequencing, method, definitions etc, and on another expression - lift, lightness, flow and breath.

Often these choices are not thought through or planned by the teacher, but chosen in response to the feel they get of the performance of an asana by the group. If teaching is seen as a response to what the teacher sees in front of them from moment to moment, then the asanas become a forum for two people (teacher and student) to communicate that most intimate experience of how they feel to themselves.

Once a common language has been formed and understood, it can be used to touch on and express a more essential experience within the individual. In this sense teaching is all about timing and delivery because a mistimed instruction or observation does not communicate anything at all instead, it objectifies and philosophizes about 'what could be', and reduces teaching to lecturing about its subject rather than experiencing it.

Each teacher creates a set of expressions or terms - a framework- which, when used effectively allows them (and their students) to move efficiently like a spider on its web. This framework, or web, is a device to traverse quickly, a sensor through which the spider feels out an area greater than its own physical position. What is important here is not that each web is identical but that the way a teacher moves about on their framework allows them to touch the asana in a more comprehensive way.

As a final thought on language it should be acknowledged that there is a role for nonverbal teaching as well. The methods outlined above are tools used by the teacher to enhance and broaden the student's understanding. The student's landscape opens out as the breadth of that experience deepens. Because language by its nature describes, it intercepts the student's attention so that at a certain level of proficiency instruction distracts the student from their own experience. To avoid this, a teacher may move from the four methods mentioned previously to join the students in doing the asanas as a way of exposing them to their own knowledge. Physical adjustments could be seen as an example of nonverbal communication. This touch may be used to bring a student's attention to a particular area within the body or to define a specific sensation.