

Yoga in Alabama: Living in the “Now.”

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The *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* begin with 1.1: *Atha Yoganuśasanam*, which BKS Iyengar translates as: “With prayers for divine blessings, now begins an exposition of the sacred art of yoga.” Besides the word “yoga,” I believe the most important word in this sutra is “*atha*,” now. Each time we come to the mat or return to a posture, or simply move on an exhalation, the challenge is to be present—to let go of the past and allow ourselves to experience the moment. To be ready for discovery. How is this *Tadasana* different from the posture I embodied two minutes ago? Or two seconds ago?

As yoga teachers and practitioners, we know how hard living in the now can be. During a class perhaps our mind wanders. Or we see a student look at the clock and we lose our focus and doubt sets in. Perhaps a teacher is shouting off instructions at breakneck speed yet we’re still trying to stabilize our arms or legs. Regardless, we are implored by Patanjali to explore the sacred art of yoga with due diligence and respect. *Now* we are to study the Yoga Sutras, and through their lens, we can begin to penetrate the mysteries of *yogasana*.

Even though my focus is on “now” I am going to begin my discussion of Iyengar Yoga in Alabama by delving into the past. After all, the last year has been a doozy. Where were we just as the pandemic began to spread?

During the last 12 months, so much has happened worth noting. There are things that still resonate with us *now*. For a good amount of time, I was the only certified Iyengar teacher in Alabama. However, in December 2020, my student Beth Pugh earned her Iyengar certification. Alabama’s Iyengar yoga teachers doubled in number just before Covid-19 arrived! Then came the news that IYNAUS was going to change the certification process. At the time I was mentoring several students who were traveling to teacher certification programs in the southeast region (and elsewhere). Their trajectory changed suddenly when many studios were directed to steer away from how they schooled students for certification. Gone were the ubiquitous weekend “teacher trainings.” Mentorship was the new approach, but how that was going to be carried out remained to be seen. Those of us who were interested in getting certified or “going up for the next level” awaited the new guidelines to come in from RIYMI.

In Alabama, Iyengar students are used to traveling to different places across the U.S. and abroad to study with senior level teachers or attend workshops. Since we don’t have a dedicated Iyengar Yoga studio in the Alabama, Beth and I teach Iyengar yoga classes at a local gym. In addition, I rent space in a studio so I can teach a more prop-intensive class once a week. When studios were shut down in the IYASE region, many permanently, we in Alabama were not much affected. Class size in the gym was reduced and masks were required. Likewise, my studio class is socially distanced, class size is limited, and masks are required. So not much

has changed other than our adherence to Covid-19 safety guidelines. In fact, Beth and I are finding that students are even more eager to come to class *now* that class sizes are smaller, and students are given more individualized attention. It is sad that so many of the iconic yoga studios in our region have shuttered their doors and teachers with decades of teaching experience are now only teaching in online formats but, for the most part, Beth and I haven't ever had the "business" of yoga to worry about. Our community is small, but it is extremely dedicated to the practice of Iyengar Yoga.

During the last year, my students and I have been able to study and practice yoga at home more easily. I have helped many of my students develop their own home practices, which gives me great joy. Several others are regularly studying with other IYASE teachers online. I have also benefited from the Zoom format by being able to work with my mentor, Kathleen Pringle, without having to drive to Atlanta. I meet with her twice weekly on Zoom and have cherished our time working together. Since I have always lived far away from senior-level teachers, I never had a mentor before. But through the Zoom boom, I am now able to relish what it is like to be mentored as I progress on my yoga sadhana.

During the last year I have attended each workshop Raya, Abhijata, and Prashant have taught online. It has been a boon to us all to have their wisdom and guidance available during these difficult months. Since the recordings of their classes are available to watch asynchronously, I have been able to teach English full time at the university here in Huntsville and still take workshops in India. Previously, my travel, whether to Atlanta or to Pune, was limited by the academic year. Now it is as if I can go anywhere, anytime. Thanks to these workshops, and my personalized mentoring by Kathleen, I have changed my approach to teaching yoga and preparing for certification. I see the wisdom of Abhijata and Prashant's decision to change the certification process. As yoga sutra 1.14 teaches us: *Sa tu dirghakala nairantarya satkara asevitah drdhabhumih*. Many of us *now* understand what BKS Iyengar means when he writes that "Profound wisdom is gained through steady, dedicated, attentive practice, and non-attachment through applied restraint." Becoming a certified Iyengar teacher involves a lot more than just passing a test or memorizing what was taught in a training program. I believe this past year has given us ample opportunity to become wiser to what is important as yoga teachers and practitioners. This takes steady, dedicated, attentive practice—regardless of the circumstances. We need to let go of all that gets in the way of being a good messenger for Iyengar's teachings and methods. Instead of doing yoga, we need to let yoga do us.

Now that there appears to be a light at the end of the pandemic tunnel, we in Alabama have not just weathered the storm. I pray that we all have learned the true value, quite literally, of cherishing each breath we take.

With each inhalation my intention is to embrace the *now*. *Atha Yoganuwasanam*.