

Lost in Translation

BY STEPHANIE QUIRK



Stephanie teaching in Moscow. Photo: Stephanie Quirk

Sadhana = Accomplishing something, or fulfillment, actualization, realization. An ego transcending spiritual *practice*.

In his introduction to the New Edition of *Light on the Yoga Sutra of Patanjali*, Guruji gives us *sadhana-traya*. He describes it as the methodical and sequential means to accomplish one's aims through the entire *astanga*, encompassing *kaya—manasa—vak*.¹

1. *Kaya, vak, manasa* (body, speech or voice, and mind) — the three vehicles through which we can make and have effect.

I would like to share my thoughts here with you on what you could call being “lost in translation,” which is what happens when we translate the word *sadhana* and house it under the headline of PRACTICE.

It is the *intentional* aspect—practicing something with an intention or purpose—that transforms (pointedly) the ego. Practicing alone won’t do it. It is the intention behind the undertaking that makes it transformative—*sadhana*.

Our intention can only be in the light of our understanding or vision. There is a wonderful Zen saying: “For the beginner, the possibilities are many; for the master, the possibilities are few.” The master’s understanding or “vision/*drsti*” is honed; it is precise. Through *sadhana*, it has been excavated of misunderstandings and ignorance, paired down to the essential and the simple.

Our *sadhana* may be that of a beginner. It is then inevitable that it will be based on an inexperienced understanding. But still, if it has the intention to transform (perhaps in the early days, a sort of “wishing to transform”), we will have begun our journey. But the beguilement that we come under at the start is the erroneous understanding that it is the practice we need to transform.

Starting at this gap in translation, we begin. We begin the construction of endless “projects,” Each of them bearing great aspiration, great hope.

Thom Yorke sings in the song “Creep” (Pablo Honey, Radiohead, 1992) the following lines:

*I wish I was special,...
I don't belong here,...
I want to have control,
I want a perfect body,
I want a perfect soul...*

We have begun, and often in great faith, the project to transform ourselves into a better version of ourselves. I call this the “Ego Project.” We don’t want or can’t yet conceive that we need to unbecome what we are. Instead we want the same, only better. It is a near enemy of *sadhana*. We can waste an awful amount of time on “projects.”

As a project of “I,” we misconceive *sadhana* to be making our practice better and better. The difficulty for us is that *sadhana* will always require practice for it to begin to become effective. The two are inextricably linked. *Sadhana* is a practice. But not all practice is *sadhana*.

In the very beginning, our *sadhana* is necessarily ethnic. Ethnic not so much in that we follow the method founded by someone of a certain ethnicity—in our case, Indian—but moreso that we are being trained, schooled, educated in a particular “style,” approach, or school of yoga. Ethnically, we are practicing Iyengar Yoga. We copy what is shown to us (*agama*). We are in the school or tribe of Iyengar Yoga; it is our ethnicity. We undertake its rituals and make our observances in the fields of alignment, precision, sequencing, timing, and props.²

Perhaps it is from this ethnic *sadhana*, this being led through aspects of practice, that we begin to understand something; it teaches us something. From here, we could say our understanding is provisional. It provides a base, and from that base, we begin to gather experiences of ourselves. We are gathering a picture. Sometimes we catch sight of our situation and realize a need for change. But a need to change what? We often fall into the all-too-familiar place of believing we need to change our practice. Then we have a big project on our hands. “I will change more practice to become MORE ...” It becomes yet another project, not *sadhana*.

So the key element that underlies all *sadhana* is intention. Our intention is always born out of or a reflection of our understanding or vision. This vision or understanding matures as we practice. This vision and understanding is also aided by other aspects of our lives. So it is like a circle. We practice in accordance with an inner understanding of ourselves on the path. That practicing, when taken on with intention to change, to transform our ego, brings us to a deeper understanding, brings us to insight, relieves us from the burden of unknowing. With levels of ignorance and misunderstanding cleared away, we find our sight has deepened, has clarified, and therefore our intention changes. Practicing with a change in our intention fuels a different approach, a deeper penetration. Practicing now gives rise to further understanding or insight. This is an outline of the process, but it isn’t a plan, and our downfall is often to try to make what is a lived in process, a PLAN. (We have far more things that we need to unplan, than we need to make plans for.)

It is in the timeline of all this that things can get a bit crazy. Often change happens to us long before we realize that we are now seeing and being differently. This is because it has to seep and perfume through all layers of our life. As we proceed, we find ourselves viewing and changing aspects of our outer life so that they come to be in alignment with our deepening understanding and practice. We become watchful of our ethics; we restrain excesses in emotions, even the way we earn our livelihood we wish to make more conducive. It is here that

2. From the series of talks given by Prashant S. Iyengar as part of the celebration called *Sahasra Chandra Darshan* and during the 80th birthday celebrations of Yogacharya B.K.S. Iyengar, December 1998.

many wanting to orientate lives toward *sadhana* conceive of becoming a yoga teacher as a form of livelihood (*samyakajiva*). We relate with others who are also carefully tilling the soil called *sadhana*, who are also protecting the new growth and guarding the doors of the senses, who are patiently sitting and watching the garden grow. We align ourselves with clearer and clearer moral precepts. Making all aspects come closer and closer to the central *sadhana* in our lives, we become the knower of our own subtle falsehoods.

It is with becoming the knower of our falsehoods and wishing to rid ourselves of the same that we see the nature of our obsession with the “I-projects” and have a chance to cultivate *sadhana*.

Sadhana might well be synonymous with the practice of the four efforts. As part of transforming ourselves, there has to be a certain amount of freeing, liberating or lightening the load of falsehood. The effect of our *sadhana* is that we abandon harmful or unskillful qualities that are present. These can alone be difficult to trace or to realize in our own behavior. We often immerse ourselves in the very activities that pull us away from our intention. We need to surround ourselves with reminders and supports for our intention. We need to create the conditions in which we established our vision and our understanding. This requires more than just perseverance. It also requires patience, watchfulness, an aware and intentional sense of direction. It is always easier for us to start, to act, to create than it is to control or maintain what has been created. As *sadhana* proceeds, the “error margin” (the time between the dissolving of falsehoods and the dawning or clarifying of understanding) narrows and narrows. The narrowing of the gap means we aren’t having to pull against the current of our habits and our fixed views.

As Western students, we have a great reverence for “practice.” We place an emphasis on practice and believe it is the important part of the goal. As our named important part of the yoga goal, it has acquired its own self-generated esteem. But that type of practice is really a major I-project. Without doubt, practice is a catalyst for change, for developing skillfulness, refining sensitivity, developing courage, patience, and tolerance. It gives us the tools to work with ourselves. But it will forever be in accordance with what we

are currently understanding and our vision. The development of that understanding is key. Setting out to put ourselves into a process where the purpose of transformation is the most important aspect is the key.

Even repeating poses (*abhyasa*) will have the effect of bringing *saucha* and *santosa*. It will bestow the boon of mental, emotional, and intellectual stability. It will endow one with physical enervations. These great boons are not the transforming vision or insight themselves, but they support us and provide us with the ability to clear the way for transformation to arise. There needs to be reflection. We need to reflect on our individual situation (and its unsatisfactoriness) and on a higher state. And then we need intention, based on that changing understanding.

After more than 20 years working with B.K.S. Iyengar and his family in Pune, Stephanie Quirk is one of the most experienced, leading teachers in Iyengar Yoga therapeutics. She has developed a way to help teachers learn through the base of their own experienced practice and how that base is adapted to draw on its therapeutic value. She has taught extensively throughout Asia, Europe, and America. In Australia, at the Marrickville Yoga Centre in Sydney, Stephanie consults and is the mentor to younger teachers, helping them develop their own skill, understanding and insight in the yoga therapy of our system.

