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# IYENGAR YOGA

## THERAPY

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with

## Stephanie Quirk

As a world leader in Iyengar Yoga Therapeutics, Stephanie Quirk has taught extensively throughout Asia, Europe and America. After more than twenty years working with BKS Iyengar and his family in Pune, Stephanie now runs classes, workshops and mentorship programs out of Marrickville Yoga Centre in Sydney's vibrant inner west. Here she catches up with Simon Joannou about Iyengar Yoga Therapy, her own teaching journey, and just what it was that kept her in India for over two decades.

**Simon Joannou (SJ):** You have just returned from a trip teaching Yoga Therapeutics in North America, Europe and Asia. Have you noticed any shift in how Iyengar Yoga and Iyengar Yoga Therapeutics is regarded around the world?

**Stephanie Quirk (SQ):** In terms of the medical profession, the concept of yoga as a therapeutic tool is still seen as a lifestyle choice rather than a way to remedy conditions. It seems, despite well-researched evidence, medical practitioners are still reluctant to prescribe yoga to

their patients.

Perhaps the exception is in the area of chronic illness, where the medical sciences haven't yet found a solution. It is in these cases that people seem more ready to seek out yoga. Ten years back, people would seek out yoga as a way to address physical problems, such as a sore knee or back conditions. Now, individuals are seeing yoga as a beneficial approach to deal with chronic or complex conditions.

The strength of teaching, knowledge and practice in Iyengar yoga it found



in Yoga Sutra 2:16 heyam dukkham anagatham – the pain that is yet to come can and should be avoided. In this respect yoga is offered up therapeutically for its saucha/santosha riches. By this I mean that through a regular balanced practice of asana and pranayama, the student finds a physical cleansing and mental contentment.

In the Iyengar method, the therapy of yoga is intrinsic to the practice



Teaching in Moscow



Stephanie with Guruji in Pune



Stephanie assisting Guruji, BKS Iyengar

of yoga – right from one’s first yoga class, an Iyengar practitioner is getting the base experience and understanding of the art and science of yoga which is the same knowledge base needed to carry out therapy. There is a direct link between both practice and modifications – the central elements of alignment, precision, timing, sequencing and modification via props. Iyengar practitioners who go on to be

teachers of yoga are accumulating a deeper and deeper insight into the effect of the asanas through their own personal practice. As more Iyengar students and teachers reach further in their own explorations they inevitably find the solutions for themselves and their students.

**SJ: It’s very common for people suffering ailments or disease to visit a chiropractor or physiotherapist. How does yoga therapeutics compare to these healing tools?**

**SQ:** It doesn’t compare at all. There is an aspect of well-learned yoga that can offer some forms of physically targeted healing moments, but this isn’t its purpose.

First, there isn’t really a separate yoga and yoga therapeutics. To have a separate division called 'Yoga Therapy', is just another 'spin off' of yoga – it is just focusing on a part of it.

The kind of physical relief or healing which comes from a visit to the chiropractor or physiotherapist may be found in yoga therapeutics, but yoga therapeutics is of immense value when used in alignment with its aims.

In their own disciplines the work of a physiotherapist or chiropractor, for example, may offer a better relief from physical ailments in some situations. By contrast, yoga is the science and technology of freedom. Physiotherapy and chiropractic treatment is the science of physiology. The aim of yoga therapeutics is to restrain the disturbing fluctuations of consciousness. If we can practice the entire eight limbs of yoga, then as a healing tool it is second to none.

Yoga has always gone to the core of the disturbances that cover us – it is about developing sadhana. Really the success of yoga is it places the seeker within sadhana. By contrast, the success of physiotherapy is in how it has addressed the knee, shoulder or back pain. It is a common understanding of almost all sciences – both modern and ancient – that the body, mind, consciousness cannot be identified separately or located in any one place and it is through yoga and its integrative leaning that a deeper healing will occur.

In the end we all need sadhana, we all need pranidhana – which means to surrender, or to be-supported-by.

**SJ: Most people who visit Pune stay for four weeks but you stayed for over 20 years. What kept you there?**

**SQ:** Fascination. I was like a cat sitting on a wall mesmerised by what it sees. I found myself in a place of fascination and there was nothing more compelling for me than that. Over time – as well as practicing in the classes and assisting and learning in the therapy classes – I became involved in more and more of the institute activities such as publications and festivals. Simultaneously, my ties back in Australia were becoming less connected and I no longer had a home base to return to. In the end when I decided to return to Australia, it wasn't a case of 'going-back' because there was nothing to go back to. It meant a virtual re-starting and re-locating to move to Australia.

**SJ: You often describe how you were never officially trained as a yoga teacher and yet you are considered a world leader in Yoga Therapeutics. How would you describe your own method of learning?**

**SQ:** Currently to do an 'official' teacher training means you have completed a course somewhere – courses are seen as the current model for teacher training. I never did any of this.

Right from the beginning, before India, my teacher in Australia told me she thought I ought to teach. I asked then if I could learn by watching and observing some of her classes. I learnt directly from my teacher's teaching – both early on in



**Stephanie adjusting Adho Mukha Virasana**

Australia and later in India.

In Pune there are no teacher training courses – the method of learning is bound up in this process of attending classes, assisting classes, observing and attending the practice sessions. You could say this is an 'old-style' apprenticeship method of learning but in yoga – in realisation, in transition and transformation – everything takes a long time. In yoga learning is based on experience. So it wasn't a formal course that I ever studied.

I think one of the most important aspects of learning about yoga therapeutics is the ability to connect one's own experience in practice with the specific adaptations needed for students in the therapy setting. Really it seems to me that my years of practising Buddhist meditation, years of working as a nurse, years of living life and studying and practising various disciplines of art all made a significant contribution to my learning process as a yoga therapeutics teacher. We bring all these things to our teaching. As our own understanding of the yoga process deepens with experience,

the way we see and understand our students also deepens.

**SJ: You have been leading the yoga therapy class at Marrickville Yoga Centre in Sydney's inner west for the past twelve months. How do you work out what asanas your students need?**

**SQ:** A lot will depend on the student's level of experience in yoga and on their ability to understand and absorb what the asana brings – it depends on the state, stage or degree of difficulty they are experiencing in their individual situation.

For students new to yoga therapy, I will often begin with a series of asanas that are quite passive and not directly working on the afflicted part. The student needs a space of rest. This is because the tensions, the crisis and the afflicted state needs to quieten – they need a space within which they can begin to feel they can take the first steps. Then I slowly work towards a more direct approach to the core of the problem.



Stephanie guiding teachers in adjustments

**SJ: Many of your yoga therapy students transition to general classes. Is this the aim of yoga therapy?**

**SQ:** Yes. It is true that some people find their entry into yoga practice via remedial sessions, but it is hoped that once they have been taught how they need to work and how they can help themselves, they can then attend general practices or return to their regular classes and continue.

**SJ: In 2018 you will continue your partnership with Marrickville Yoga Centre in Sydney. What else do you have planned for this year?**

**SQ:** I am hoping to involve the teachers more in the learning and work of therapy – I would ideally like to have a team approach, where the referring teacher is involved in their own student's therapy and I am just guiding them in their work. I will continue travelling throughout Australia, Asia, Europe & The US to deliver Therapy training to teachers

and experienced students.

**SJ: What qualities do teachers of yoga therapy need to develop?**

**SQ:** Patience and experience, though the two are linked.

It takes patience to build up experience. So patience is the primary quality. It takes time – time to understand, time to develop one self, time to develop understanding of others. Beginning teachers really need to have the attitude that they are on the long path. Often there is a thirst in the young teacher to know all the sequences, to understand anatomy and physiology, and it is helpful for them to acquire this knowledge. But it really is only through experience that one can see how to adapt a programme for a student. It is all patience – waiting, watching and seeing the changes that come – because often the desired change will occur over some time.

**SJ: What is the student's role and responsibility in the yoga therapy process?**

**SQ:** The student also needs to be patient. As we all strike obstacles there is always a lot of *duhkha/daumanasya* (suffering/despair/negativity), accompanying the problems we face. Yoga becomes difficult, not fun anymore. So to proceed with the practice students need to counter that negativity. There needs to be a positive approach underpinned by a genuine interest in their own process – they need a certain degree of open curiosity or even wonder.

The student's role is also to learn

– they have to learn from the process they are going through. As they learn they need to take on the responsibility, which is ultimately theirs alone. The teacher can initially guide and show them, but for the practice to eradicate the seed of the student's disturbances it will take a while. They must develop an open attitude, where they can come closer to themselves and develop a kind of innocence.

The teacher can point out how and where to look but in yoga it really is that conjunction between body, breath and mind. Unless the student takes on the practice in its full depth, the cause of the disturbances will pop-up again and again.

Many yoga therapy students initially take it on like a visit to the doctor's. We visit a doctor because we don't know what ails us or we don't have the knowledge or access to a cure, so we visit the doctor seeking a fix, an alleviation. In yoga it is different: the positive outcome only comes when the student brings their own awareness to the transformation that happens to them moment by moment in each asana.

Simon Joannou is founder and Principal teacher at Marrickville Yoga Centre in Sydney. He first met Stephanie Quirk in the early '90s, assisting her and BKS Iyengar in the Medical Classes at the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Institute. He is a Teachers Member on the Board of the Iyengar Association of Australia and regularly travels to Pune to study with the Iyengar family.