

# The Use Of Props For Therapeutic Purposes In Iyengar Yoga

Yoga is by definition therapeutic. In the Yoga Sutras of Patañjali, it is stated that:  
*Yoga not only prevents suffering\* But cures it\*\**

\* — tatah klesha karma nivrittih; Chapter IV, Sutra 30 (Then comes the end of afflictions and action)  
\*\* — heyam dukham anagatam; Chapter II, Sutra 16 (The pains which are yet to come can be avoided)

BY MARLA APT

According to Patañjali's definition, all practitioners of yoga are undergoing a form of therapy, whether it is for a spiritual ailment, a mental misapprehension or a physical illness. In the practice of Iyengar yoga, the therapeutic and meditative benefits are derived through a progressive system involving the sequencing of the asanas (poses) and pranayama (yogic practice involving breath control), attention to the alignment and technique of the practices and the timing in the practices. In the example of the treatment of physical and psychological illness and disease, the therapeutic branch of Iyengar yoga often employs sophisticated props to help the student/patient along the path.

Yogis in India have utilized basic yoga props for centuries. Yogis who traditionally practiced in ashrams in forested areas would hang from ropes tied to thick tree branches. The use of sticks and belts as supports to yoga practitioners (to help maintain an upright seated posture with the spine erect, even at rest) is commonly depicted in ancient Indian art and temples. B.K.S. Iyengar has furthered the usage of props to enhance the yoga practice through the development of many new props with specific uses, especially in the field of therapeutic yoga.

When B.K.S. Iyengar first started teaching yoga as a young man, he quickly realized that the vigorous practice that had been taught to him as a teenager was not appropriate for all of his students. Even though he had effectively healed himself from debilitating illness and disease (typhoid and tuberculosis), he had not been exposed to the therapeutic practice of yoga for students of varying ages and abilities. Having observed and experienced improvement in his own health and in the health of his students, Mr. Iyengar developed faith in the healing power of yoga. He started to adapt the poses to the ability of each of the students so that all could benefit from the therapeutic properties of each asana.

In his experiments with his own intensive practice, B.K.S. Iyengar began to use household and found objects to help him improve. He gradually refined and developed props specifically constructed for use in yoga. Today, many of Mr. Iyengar's innovations with props are commonly seen in the yoga marketplace and their applications are widely used. Perhaps one of the most basic modifications in wide use today is the effective raising of the floor with a block for students, who due to stiffness cannot reach the floor in Trikonasana (Triangle pose).



**LEFT** The block enables the student greater chest rotation, which is helpful for shoulder, cervical, and thoracic problems.

**RIGHT** The block enables students who cannot reach the floor to do the pose. Those who can reach the floor can improve their alignment or address specific issues that may be neglected or injuries that may be exacerbated with the hand on the floor.

## Functions of Props:

- Support • Education • Direction • Intensification of Action • Relaxation and Stress Reduction

## Support

Props can serve several functions in a therapeutic context. In their supportive role props can support the entire body in an asana or support the various parts of the body that require rest. Often, the poses that are considered to be most beneficial for a particular condition may not be attainable to the patient due to physical restrictions or lack of strength. The props can render some of the most advanced poses accessible to beginning, injured or disabled practitioners. For example, a student with only one leg can address structural imbalances in the pelvis sacrum and spine through the practice of standing poses with the support of a tall bench and a trestle (wooden prop also referred to as “horse”). Or students unable to support themselves in an inverted pose such as Headstand (Sirsasana) can experience the many benefits of being upside down while hanging in headstand on the ropes. Some of the most advanced poses can provide the strongest medicine for various conditions and if not for the use of the props, the medicine would not be within the patient’s reach.

In a therapeutic prescription the sequence of the poses, the manner in which the pose is executed (the form and alignment) and the amount of time each pose is held is as important as the poses prescribed. In their supportive capacity, props can enable the student to hold the pose for a much longer duration than when performed independently. Whereas a patient with yoga experience may be able to hold Viparita Dandasana (an inverted backbend) for one minute, he or she can more easily hold the pose for 5-10



**LEFT** Sirsasana (Headstand) on ropes  
**RIGHT** Sirsasana between two chairs



minutes with the support of a chair and not only experience some relaxation in this intense pose but also reap the benefits from a prolonged stay in the pose.



**LEFT** Ustrasana (Camel Pose) **RIGHT** Ustrasana with chair and bolster and blankets

As a support, a prop can also help the patient overcome fear (of falling, losing balance, etc.). Fear can prove to be an impediment in the yoga practice. The protection response to fear can frequently cause one to hold the breath,

to tighten the very muscles and organs that need to relax and extend, or to compensate with gross misalignments in the pose that can destabilize the pose and make one vulnerable to injury.



Virabhadrasana III with support of trestle & stools

Pranayama can be quite effective in treating certain respiratory, nervous, blood pressure, cardiac and psychological disorders. Pranayama is classically practiced in an upright seated position, that when done properly, requires a great deal of strength, endurance and elasticity established from a foundation of asana practice. If the posture and technique of pranayama are not executed correctly, the practice can cause undue strain to the structural body as well as

the nervous system and mind. In order to cultivate the body and the mind for pranayama, it can be practiced in a supine position in a supported version of Savasana (Corpse pose) rather than in a seated position. The brain and nerves relax while one is lying down. The prop support improves respiratory functioning and allows the organs involved in the respiratory process to broaden and take the shape required for stress-free pranayama practice.



Supported Savasana with blankets, eye bandage and weight

## Education

Props can help cultivate an understanding of the correct alignment in the pose so that the pose is done safely. Many structural and systemic problems are caused or exacerbated by an imbalance in the body forming habits that persist, if unchecked, when performing asanas. The props can help form a kind of frame for the body, so that the student can feel where the asymmetries occur- by observing the discrepancy of the contact between

the body and the prop from side to side. In its educational function, the prop serves as a teacher to help the patient study one's own alignment and state of being, and often reveals the source of the problem, empowering the patient in the healing process. The prop can teach one to see and feel oneself from within. The introspection facilitated by the prop increases the meditative effects and mental benefits of yoga.



Parivrtta Trikonasana at trestle/horse

## Direction

Props can also be used in a directive manner so as to highlight a specific aspect of the posture or breath. In this function, the prop calls attention to the area that needs to be addressed for the ailment and provides the student with a sense of direction. The prop directs the student to the particular action of a pose that is therapeutic. For example, a student with cervical spondylosis may be very stiff and immobile in the cervical and thoracic region and cannot independently produce the necessary actions in the asanas that will create traction for the neck. However, with the help of a rope harnessed around the trapezius muscles and pulled downward, the prop can offer relief from pain and, at the same time, teach the student the action he or she is seeking to replicate.



## Intensification of Actions

Props can be used to intensify the actions required in a therapeutic application of a pose. While the props can support and enable the student to hold the pose for a longer period of time, the pose can be made more intense or can take the

student deeper into the position through the specific placement of the prop. In some therapeutic sequences, for example, the intensive contraction of the kidneys, extension of the neck, or elongation of the liver are required to treat a

particular ailment. A heart patient may be given a pose designed to rest the student, lower blood pressure and reduce stress, while at the same time strongly opening the chest cavity, specifically the area proximate to the heart. The props

enable the surrounding body to relax while the targeted areas work more intensively. The prop can transform a pose that could be potentially harmful when done incorrectly, to a pose that brings tremendous relief.



Paryankasana with brick



Props can be used in different ways to enhance specific aspects of a particular pose. A single pose can be altered through numerous prop setups to treat a full range of therapeutic issues ranging from structural to organic to psychological.



**TOP LEFT** Setubandha Sarvangasana over cross bolsters creates space in pelvis and relaxes pelvic organs (menstruation) **BOTTOM LEFT** Setubandha Sarvangasana on bench nourishes heart, lungs (asthma, colds), helps with immune disorder, fatigue **RIGHT** Setubandha Sarvangasana (Bridge Pose) with ropes gives lumbar extension and open chest cavity

# Relaxation and Stress Reduction

Props have proven to be invaluable in the treatment of immune disorders. For relaxation and stress reduction, B.K.S. Iyengar developed what is commonly referred to as a restorative practice, in which props support the student innovative

ways so that the poses can be held for optimal amounts of time. Inversions are a critical tool to aid the immune system and props enable students to hold inversions for prolonged periods for maximal benefit.



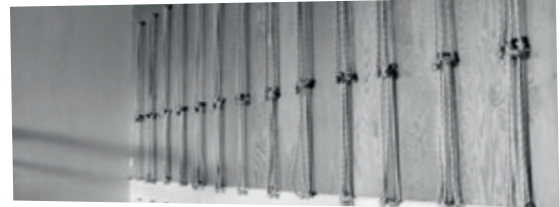
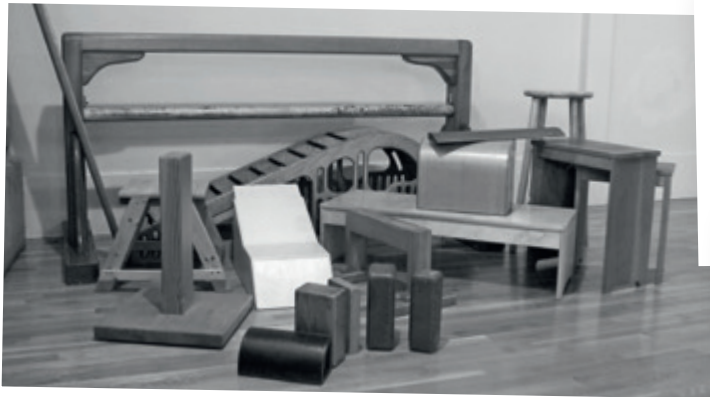
Different variations with props of Sarvangasana (shoulderstand) cycle. **CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT** Niralamba Sarvangasana at wall benefits systemic problems (endocrine, etc.) relieves mental fatigue, benefits reproductive organs; Sarvangasana on Chair increases chest opening (cardiac patients, shoulder problems), reduces pressure on head and lungs (high blood pressure, asthma, neck problems, mental fatigue), abdominal organs relax (gastrointestinal problems, pregnancy); Sarvangasana at trestle improves spinal alignment (disc, sciatica, back ache), increases circulation around spine (arthritis, degeneration, of disc/bone), relieves neck pain; Ardha Halasana with bench rests body and mind, decreases insomnia, relaxes back muscles; Supta Konasana with legs on bolsters on chairs opens pelvic region and widens buttock bones (constipation, hemorrhoids, pregnancy) and increases circulation to pelvic region.

Like the use of medical instruments, the use of props is an exacting science. The patient's age, mobility, responsiveness to instruction and pain, psychological state and strength must all be taken into consideration and adapted to each individual. Before a pose can be modified with the use of a prop, its properties and qualities must be understood thoroughly. As with any healing modality, rigorous training is required. Yoga therapy not only relies on observation skills and correct application but also on practical and

personal experience. B.K.S. Iyengar conducts daily medical classes at his Institute in Pune, India, where innovations in the treatment of diseases and ailments (ranging from Parkinson's, cardiac, polio, scoliosis, spinal & disc injuries, depression, etc.) with the use of props are developed. Yoga Therapy can therefore not be seen as a separate career path from Yoga practitioner/teacher. Without practicing the art under the guidance of a senior practitioner, Yoga Therapy cannot be effective and can even be harmful.

## Types of Props

Material	Works On	Examples
Wood, Metal	Bones	blocks, chairs, benches, quarter rounds, slanting planks, wedges, stumps, horse/trestle, poles, stools
Cotton	Flesh, skin	blankets, bolster
Rope	Ligaments/Joints	belt, wall ropes
Sand, iron	Nerves/Inflammation	weights, sandbags
Eye Bandage	Sensory deprivation/stress disorders	
Various small Pieces	Specific support, Stability	wooden pieces, foam wedges, squares and rectangles, mat pieces, small cloths



**Marla Apt** a Senior level Iyengar Yoga teacher based in Los Angeles, was highlighted by Yoga Journal magazine as one of twenty-one young yoga teachers helping to shape the future of yoga. She has studied in India with BKS Iyengar and his family in India for many years, including a year of study in Pune, India. Marla leads workshops and teacher trainings around the world and has been involved with medical research studies on the therapeutic effects of yoga for various conditions. She is pursuing her interest in making the healing benefits of yoga available to communities in need as founding board member of the non-profit organization, Iyengar Yoga Therapeutics. Learn more at [yoganga.com](http://yoganga.com).

\* - photographs from: BKS Iyengar, Light on Yoga

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