from INJURY *to* INSIGHT

by Gerald Frape

A diagnosis of a painful condition that erodes bone cartilage would send most yoga teachers into retirement. But for the well-known Melbourne-based Iyengar teacher Mark Gibson, physical compromise is another chance to explore the versatility of yoga techniques for himself and for his students.

A famous story illustrates yoga guru BKS Iyengar's unorthodox approach to yoga therapy. An intrepid elderly couple bring their son, who has lost the use of his legs after being shot down in one of the Indo-Pakistani wars, to see their revered Guruji.

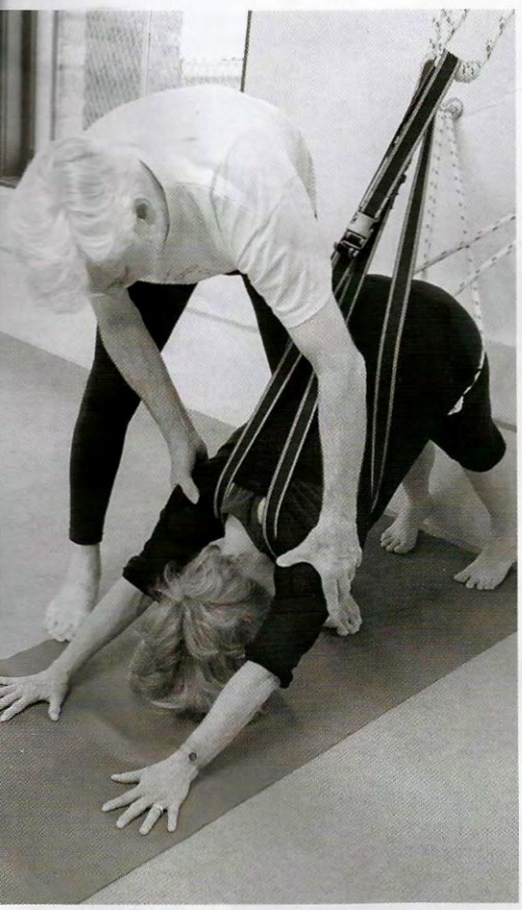
As the crippled pilot struggles across the floor of the therapy room, Iyengar shouts at him to throw away his walking sticks. His parents tremble as the powerful voice of Guruji commands their son to drop the sticks. The tension in the room is palpable as Iyengar finally kicks the sticks out of the downed pilot's hands and booms, "Walk!" At that moment the pilot walks unaided. Everyone in the room exhales.

In spite of the misgivings of some of the student teachers watching the drama unfold, Iyengar had correctly intuited that the man was paralysed more by fear than physical injury and that he required a shock to free him from its grip.

ORGANISED CHAOS OF YOGA THERAPY

Mark Gibson, a senior teacher who has regularly studied at the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute (RIMYI) in Pune, India, since 1990, remembers well what he describes as the "organised chaos" of the Iyengar therapy classes. "There were arms and legs everywhere, assistant teachers propping and strapping people and being barked at by Guruji from the end of the room. It would have been impossible for an outsider to understand what was going on. You learned by observation and instruction and if you failed to read his mind you got a clip over the ear. I remember him strongly adjusting the shoulders of the famous Indian flute player, Hariprasad Chaurasia, and thinking I was glad I was not in the musician's position."

Photography Tom Schroeter tom@yoga-path.com.au



"Iyengar often gets pigeon-holed for being rigid, but I always found him very adaptive towards anyone who was injured and he would use whatever was needed to help the person in front of him. I was inspired by his methods for supporting people and learned yoga therapy by an osmotic process," Gibson recalls.

These days, with yoga teachers wary of law suits and required to take out insurance, Gibson firstly consults his yoga therapy textbooks and tries the postures on himself before introducing them to a student, clearly observing Iyengar's advice to "be bold, be cautious."

A keen amateur mechanic, it was a back injury from lifting motorbike and car engines that initially motivated Gibson to study with Melbourne yoga pioneer Valda Moore in 1978. Moore, at the time President of the International Yoga Teachers Association (IYTA), had studied with Iyengar in the late 1970s after meeting his daughter Geeta in London in 1974 at a fund-raising slide night for the soon-to-be-built RIMYI. Moore later introduced Iyengar's methods into the Association's teacher training course. After qualifying as an IYTA teacher in 1984, Gibson gained Iyengar certification four years later. "I've always had a practical ability to deconstruct things," Gibson says, "initially studying building and always being fascinated by taking things apart and putting them together again."

THE TEACHER AS 'NURTURING PARENT'

If BKS Iyengar symbolises the 'strict father', Mark Gibson is more the 'nurturing parent'. At 60, Gibson is white-haired and trim-bearded, a Clooneyesque father of two adult daughters (one a body sculptor and the other studying exercise science and sports management) and a former stay-at-home dad. He has an unassuming manner that borders on shyness but he maintains warm long-term friendships with students of his 'boutique' yoga studio and regularly shares an after-class breakfast with them.

"Many yoga teachers confuse strength with hardness. Strength has an inherent flexibility, but hardness when pushed to the limit is brittle and snaps," Gibson maintains.

Thirty years ago he would never have imagined that one day he too would be walking with the aid of a stick. Yet that's where he found himself five years ago after being diagnosed with haemochromatosis – a chronic degenerative genetic condition caused by iron overload in the body. Gibson worried that being unable to walk unaided for more than 100 metres was hardly a great advertisement for one of Australia's most experienced yoga teachers and trainers.

Initially, Gibson wrote to Iyengar who invited him to Pune where he worked with a series of corrective poses such as Supta Padangusthasana (Reclining Hand to Big Toe Pose), Tadasana (Standing Pose but with the toes up and stretching the heels down) and 15-minute Sirsasana and Salamba Sarvangasana (Head and Shoulder Stands) to counter the lethargy caused by the haemochromatosis.

YOGA PRACTICE HELPS DETACH FROM PAIN

Years of yoga and learning how to detach from pain enabled him to live with his condition. As he explained, "It's more an ability to step back from what's going on and not identify with the body, thinking, this is happening to me. One of the main benefits of years of Iyengar yoga is being able to watch pain and not attach to it. The other advantage is knowing how to inhabit the body and place it in ways that gives me ease and relief from the pain. Knowing the body helps a lot."

However, it became evident that the excess iron in his system had eroded the cartilage in his hips, ankles and the first two knuckles of both hands. The X-ray of his left hip revealed grinding bone-on-bone contact between hipbone and socket. The surgeon could barely believe Gibson's ability to withstand the level of pain he must have been experiencing in walking. In the past five years Gibson has had operations to replace his left hip and fuse the talus and fibula in his right ankle. He's due to have his other hip replaced and surgery on his left ankle.

Gibson started teaching again two months after surgery but it proved a steep learning curve. He had a scare when he injured himself adjusting students. "By assisting students, and overdoing it, I put more weight on the shaft of the hip replacement pushing down onto the bone, causing deep bone pain," he remembers ruefully.

"Patanjali's great one-liner about finding the sweet spot informs my yoga. Equilibrium has to be there all the time, it's not just push, push, push," Gibson maintains.

The setback meant that he had to temper his teaching, spending more time describing poses than demonstrating them. "I used to demonstrate a lot in class but I had to get other students to do it. I had an attachment to that for a while but it became another thing to throw out. It's ego-battering to be physically compromised as a yoga teacher. However, it also gives me an insight into the experiences of people coming to classes with injuries," Gibson says.

Pressed to explain what he has learned from this experience, Gibson initially hesitates, pondering the question, before replying with a characteristic mix of generic stoicism. "Face the problem and use it. It's another prop for your development," he offers. Warming to the subject, he elaborates on how it has affected his teaching. "Using what I've learned about not identifying with injury means I can assist others who are in pain by showing them how to help themselves," he says.

ADAPTING YOGA POSES AFTER SURGERY

Despite the injury caused by adjusting students, Gibson's experience with yoga props and his mental tolerance of pain greatly assisted his recovery from surgery, as did his knowledge of how to position his body in ways that provided ease. "I had to adapt standing poses and anything involving plantar flexion (where the toes are bent towards the sole of the foot) by using the trestle to take my weight, or straps holding the thigh up and drawing the femur away from the hip socket," Gibson explains.

What would be a clear retirement signal for most yoga teachers has only further inspired him to continue as one of Australia's most creative yogis, designing and making use of yoga props to meet the physical needs of his students.

A typical class at Gibson's Doutta Galla yoga studio - named after the local shire - in Ascot Vale in Melbourne's inner north-west, sees three or more students receiving modified instructions to accommodate their physical injuries or recovery progress.

INVENTING NEW YOGA PROPS

The injury-inclusive class is aided by a range of props of his own invention or adapted from familiar Iyengar ones, built by master woodworker and yoga

student John Droste of the Victorian coastal town of Warrnambool. These props include handmade wooden barrels of different diameters stacked like Russian dolls, an adjustable trestle that has a range of centre poles of varying heights and a set of beautifully crafted, gently undulating timber pranayama supports, stored in their own custom-built boxes like an elite snooker set. Gibson was introduced to these props by Valda Moore but he later modified the barrels so they provided a degree of 'give' and were stackable.

One of Gibson's signature inventions is the thick elastic strap he uses in a variety of poses to provide the quintessential yogic experience of strength and flexibility. The straps are used as biofeedback support for students exploring poses and fine-tuning the subtleties of postures. For example, in Downward Facing Dog they are attached to wall ropes and crossed over the back, allowing the student freedom to explore their own capacity in the pose while their body is supported and their arms, neck and shoulders are freed from the pressure of impact.

Gibson developed the elastic straps while searching for a material thicker than the normal yoga belt. Sourced from a riding supplies outlet, the wide elastic is ordinarily used in girth belts to secure horse saddles. The black and yellow striped straps look like oversized 1950s men's braces fitted with quick release snap locks. They provide firm but flexible support and are a metaphor for his style of teaching. "Many yoga teachers confuse strength with hardness. Strength has an inherent flexibility, but hardness when pushed to the limit is brittle and snaps," Gibson maintains.

Longstanding student and former New York nurse, Janis Ramshaw, who came to yoga in her 50s, describes Gibson's approach as "creative training in being an independent thinker looking after your body." She regularly uses the straps and other props in her ongoing recovery from shoulder surgery and in coping with arthritis and back injury.

Ramshaw finds it particularly inspiring that Gibson is also working with his own degenerative disease. "He includes people with different physical abilities in his classes rather than relegating them to an invalid bolster in the corner." Ramshaw also confirms how Gibson's injuries have changed his teaching. "Although

Mark no longer demonstrates full poses to the same extent as before, it is as though in removing the 'doing' from the equation, he now describes what he knows rather than what he is experiencing. We gain in clarity and conciseness what we lose in visual reinforcement," she says.

Iyengar yoga is sometimes associated with an attention to technique bordering on the pedantic. But according to specialist restorative yoga teacher and director of Reconnect Yoga, Wai Ying Tham, (who is in recovery from breast cancer surgery that took place ten years ago), Gibson stands out as "an intuitive, sensitive and experiential teacher."

Tham describes his teaching as illustrative of Patanjali's sutra on the yoga of action as a way of discipline involving self-reflection based on sacred texts and surrendering the fruits of action to a higher force (kriya yoga is tapas, svadhyaya and isvarapranidhana).

FINDING THE 'SWEET SPOT'

Gibson believes his own physical limitations have improved his understanding of his students and his approach to teaching. "Having had injuries and physical problems you develop empathy to look at whether you're pushing yourself or students in the wrong way. I'm always asking questions: Is the posture creating lightness and joy? Can I breathe and 'pranasise' the whole body? Is the asana stable and comfortable (sthira sukham asanam) as in Patanjali's sutra? You always look for that resolution of opposites where strength and flexibility are in balance.

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Gibson's practice has changed not only in his extensive use of props but also in his increased emphasis on teaching pranayama over the last decade. More importantly, it has strengthened his grounding in yoga philosophy and deepened his understanding of impermanence.

His view now is: "We're all going to die some day. I don't think clinging to anything is particularly helpful. Everything comes and everything goes, including me. I'm experiencing a growing sense of wisdom. I can see the body's going but I subscribe to the French proverb on the wall of my office that says, 'the sign of wisdom is continual cheerfulness'."

Gerald Frape is an Australian writer who has practiced yoga in India, Sydney and Melbourne since 1972.

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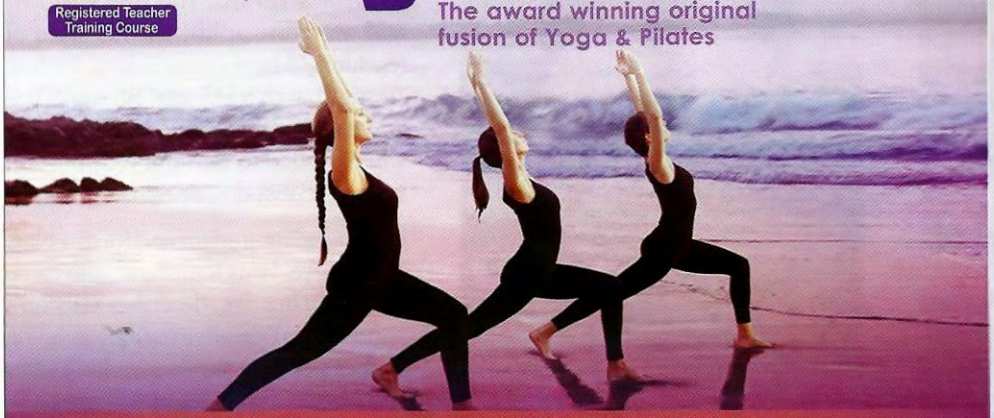

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