

The Science of the Self

An Interview with Manouso Manos*

Manouso Manos, senior Iyengar yoga teacher from San Francisco, came to Amsterdam in September 2001 to teach a weekend workshop at the BKS Iyengar Yoga Institute Amsterdam as part of his European teaching season. Manouso inspired everyone that was present with his energy, enthusiasm and dedication to the Iyengar style of yoga. He had an intense and penetrating way of teaching that invited everyone to go deeper into each pose and discover for ourselves what each pose was about. It proved to be a wonderful weekend. Lisa Patroni and Ivan Herger interviewed Manouso on his last day in Amsterdam.

When, how and why did you start yoga?

My yoga actually began with a friend of mine handing me a book. In the book he had read a sentence that said that yoga was help for the helpless, and he said, "You're pretty helpless, here, try this book!" What he was really talking about was that I had been plagued with severe back problems for years. And when I started my first few *asanas*, I started feeling better right away. For me that was so surprising, because I had been to all the specialists, acupuncturists, acupressurists, herbalists, and physiotherapists. I had been to every western doctor possible and they had gotten me no relief whatsoever. And on my own, out of books, postures that have been around for thousands of years worked almost instantaneously.

After a few weeks of working out of that very simplistic book, I walked into a bookstore and asked them for something a bit more sophisticated. They pointed me at this silver book with orange letters, which was "Light on Yoga." I began very serious practice of yoga out of that book and worked without a teacher for almost two and a half years. At that point I realized that maybe I was doing things wrong and I'd better have somebody start to look at what I was doing.

I went to a local teacher, who after a few weeks got quite ill and got checked into a hospital and then had me begin substituting her classes. I had complained to her that this didn't make sense because she had people who had been studying with her for years; I had been only a few weeks with her. She said, "Well nonetheless! The first time I ever met you I knew that you were going to be a yoga teacher and now it's time for you to begin teaching." After she got well, she said, "We need to start to find someone who can really teach you, I am not your teacher."

She sent me around to different places, but she had her own individual prejudice against Iyengar yoga; she had met someone whose teaching she did not like, did not mix well with her. She had not

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met Iyengar himself. She started to send me around to different workshops, and at one of these I heard that BKS Iyengar was coming to San Francisco. This was in 1975; he was coming in 1976.

I was a bit in shock, because I had owned this book for years, but thought that the copyright date in the front was the US copyright date, that clearly the book must have been written in the thirties or forties. The pictures were timeless, obviously, and there was no way in heaven that this man was alive or that anyone could study with him. After getting over that shock, I tried for the next several months to do anything that I could to get into these classes, but kept getting the door shut on me. No one knew me; I had no references. But finally I was able to get an observer spot to see BKS Iyengar in Berkeley, California outside of San Francisco in May of 1976.

I begged him to help me with my back and he said I'd have to come to Pune. So, I found the address from someone else in the community, wrote him a letter immediately-which must have been waiting for him before he ever got home, he was still traveling the world-and I got a one-sentence letter back that said, "Come with the group."

Seven month later I'm standing at his door in Pune, not knowing it was really a three-week intensive. I went with a very small American group, there were only twelve of us; and that included myself, my future wife Rita, and Patricia Walden, who teaches in America now. We had intense study with BKS Iyengar; we did three to five hours *asana* classes in the morning and then one to two hour *pranayama* classes every afternoon.

And that's the basic story of me getting started in yoga. I count my real date of starting yoga the day that I met BKS Iyengar in May 1976, I throw away those few years out of the book.

Was there never a question of following another guru?

No. I had studied with everyone. I had read all of the books on this subject, but I kept coming back to "Light on Yoga." My first teacher had sent me to everyone: I studied Asthanga, I studied Kundalini, and I studied all of them but kept coming back to this book. Even though she had no interest in pushing me towards that, that's the only one that suited me at all. I did the meditations, I did the breaths, and I did the cleansings, but none of them worked like the Iyengar yoga worked, even out of the book, even without a teacher.

Could you say something about your practice? It sounds like you very naturally started practicing on your own.

I don't like to talk about my own practice much, and the reason is it would drive most people crazy.

Some days I practice ten minutes and some days I practice six and a half, seven hours. And it goes more, not less. Because I am no longer interested in trying to develop bodywork. I am trying to develop yoga, on its most basic level. Some days it takes me that long to go inward, to penetrate the depth of what I'm looking for. It's a joy.

When people ask me about things like "Do you take a day off," that clearly means that they don't understand what I do. It means that they only see it as something physical. People like that one sentence in "Light on Yoga," when he says, "On the seventh day you either rest or you take only inversion variations." Inversion variations are quite serious practice.

When you tell somebody you practice for six-and-a-half hours it drives them wild, thinking that they have to do the same; but it's not about that. Or they read the sentence the other way, "He only practices ten minutes, what a fool, clearly he has no practice." It means again that they don't understand. All I'm trying to do is pierce; I'm trying to look inward.

On the days that I teach, I don't have as much time to practice; but it's still practice. On the days that I'm off, I practice more, I practice for myself, I go in a little different, deeper. On some days I'll also work an hour and a half on trying to learn the intricacies of *Utthita Trikonasana* or *Tadasana*. On other days I'll do eighty poses.

So it has only a bearing on one's own life, it's not something to really be compared to. I've finally given up trying to be BKS Iyengar, now I am trying to find out what it's like to be Manouso. Who am I supposed to be, where is my niche? It's not the same as his, thank goodness. I have to find my own path, with his, along with what he's taught me, but clearly in that line. And he's never taught me anything different, "Manouso, go find out, go look. Look here, look here, I'll give you a big map, but you have to find your way."

It sounds very living. It's not a routine at all.

No, no. Many of you have seen the pictures drawn by Salvador Dali, or Picasso in their youth; that remarkable head that was drawn by Picasso when he was fifteen, sixteen, easily could have been something that Michelangelo or Rafael did in their heyday, in the height of their career. When I see what this fellow did at young age, I say, he could have done anything he wanted. When he gets to his later life and he's only putting a few brush-strokes, each one of these means a great deal. Or you look at Georgia O'Keeffe; in her younger days, she's got these remarkable flowers with their intricacies, and all of these lines are there. In her older age he's drawing these big clouds. Or you listen to the jazz musicians in America, they're frantic in their twenties, there's hundreds of notes coming out. In their older age, it seems like they're leaving out three out of five notes. And you're going, what are they doing?

The fact is, they can learn to express more with less. This is the path that everybody has to go. Look at the sequences in "Light on Yoga," there are so many poses, one right after the other. Watch Iyengar now. You can watch him practice three, four hours in a row. And maybe he's holding the poses fifteen minutes. But the intricacies of what he's finding inside of there, are all his own. They are all what you really want to look for.

That's why the practice has to be unique, that's why the practice has to develop, that's why it has to change over time, that's why it's not the same on Sunday than it is on Tuesday, it's not the same in 1976 than it is in 2001.

Can you give some advice for people who only just start practicing?

Yes. Go study with people who know. Parrot them; first learn what they have, then go find your own practice. Do what you remember from class, not even so much what you've been told to do. Do what you remember from class, after a while your body will tell you more than your brain will. You'll see that the body has it's own memory. Still today, I'll go to India and start to practice at home. After six month, two years of leaving India, I'll say, "That's what he meant! My body now finally understood what he got me to do, what he was trying to explain to me!" It's the body that tells you more than the brain does; it's that mind-body connection. One sees the other, the other one sees back. All of us need to learn how to do this in time.

A beginner walks into class, and the teacher says *Tadasana*, *Utthita Trikonasana*, *Utthita Parsvakonasana*. Now what am I to get from this? Go back, repeat those, try to figure out, and then learn, how does this fit to me? What can I do that makes this better for me? Do I need the block; do I not need the block? Do I put my foot against the wall; do I not put the foot against the wall? That comes later.

First try to get what the teacher instructs. They know a little bit more about the poses than you do. After a while, you start to develop your own, very specialized practice. That comes later.

What would you say is the very essence of what you are trying to give or do or teach?

I am trying, as best as I can, to introduce people to something that changed and saved my life. This system of Iyengar yoga, developed by this man, changed from the classic system slightly, but right along those same lines, brings an aliveness. What do I want people to get from me? Not the example of what I do. What I want them to get from me is to understand the fire and the zeal that I have for something that can help them so much. If I can get them in that line, if I can get them to start to examine their own lives, if I can get them to start to go into this Iyengar system, not with me as a teacher, but with me as a beginner. Let them study with anybody, let them take the principles that I taught them, and that will carry them through their lifetime. If they get that, they'll get what this is all about. It won't have to do with me telling them "Turn you left foot in, your right foot out."

Yoga is not about the point-by-point collection, yoga is so much more than that; it's so much deeper than that. We lose that as beginners, and as intermediates, in many cases we lose it even harder, we get so confused thinking that our teaching is going to be about collecting, about this remarkable stuff that we do therapeutically and medically. That's the sideshow. That's only because you can't get enlightenment until there is a certain degree of non-pain. Once that comes, then you have a chance. You have a chance. . .

If you only had one hour to teach everything that you wanted to teach, what would it be then?

That the science of yoga is the science of the Self. Not self-culture, but the culturing of one's Self. And not the small 's', the large 'S'. It's the connection of the person with his humanity, with the person, with their sense, of how they feel in the universe, with the person and their god. It's that *purusa* and *prakrti*, it's that personal god with that *atma*, the one who has no real name. Yoga is not a religion, it's the science of religion, it's the understanding of religiosity, of aliveness. This is difficult to convey in words, but can in some case come through with the expression of aliveness. Do you need to do poses to do yoga? Certainly not! Do you need to do *pranayama* to do yoga? Absolutely not! But I have found that the vehicle of the body towards consciousness is the one that works for so many of us. And that's what I want people to get, in an hour or in a lifetime.

Thank you very much.