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The art of alignment

IF YOU HAVE EVER TAKEN OR DELIVERED A YOGA CLASS taught in the Iyengar yoga method, you will understand why emphasis on alignment is said to be one of its defining characteristics.

The method's founder, BKS Iyengar, believes that in order to get the most benefit from a yoga pose (asana), one must be in precise alignment for that particular pose. When performing asanas, correct body alignment allows the body to move and develop harmoniously in an anatomically correct way. Furthermore, correct body alignment prevents pain or injury.

As all bodies are different, emphasis on correct body alignment will enable students to discover their own strengths and weaknesses. If the focus on alignment is missing, strong areas of the body continue to get stronger and the weak areas of the body are often neglected and remain weak. In muscle pairs (agonist/antagonist), if either muscle of a pair becomes stronger than its opposite, an increased risk of muscle injury arises.

Over time, with a consistent focus on alignment, the Iyengar student will develop greater awareness and understanding of their own body. This awareness will not be restricted to yoga poses and will spread into all facets of life. The student will start to question how other activities affect their body, asking themselves; am I sitting correctly? Am I walking correctly? Am I cycling correctly?

Iyengar yoga teachers, when instructing the correct alignment of yoga poses to a room full of students, should observe some considerations that assist in improving students' alignment and their understanding of it.

First and foremost, the teacher should organise the class in such a way that allows them to see students alignment. Have student's place their mats parallel to the walls (assuming the room is rectangular).

Students should be organised so that when they are in a pose, they are all facing one direction. In this way, as the teacher observes the class from different vantage points you can see every student, making it easier to spot anyone who is out of alignment. For example, students may be facing the front of the room in *tadasana* (mountain pose). To correct students' alignment in *tadasana*, it is necessary to view them from the front but also from the side and the back. From the side profile, a teacher can determine if the students' thighs are pressing back, if their tailbone is tucked in or out, if their front lower ribs are pressing forward or if their lower back is excessively arched.

In a room with wooden floorboards or any flooring with straight line markings, these lines can be used as a grid to assist and enhance alignment. Lines on the floor are particularly useful for aligning a student's feet.

It should be accepted that while correct alignment is a goal, it may not be achievable for every student, in every pose in every class. Students will not always be able to perform the pose with correct alignment due to muscular imbalances, weaknesses or pre-existing injury. Understanding correct alignment, however, creates a direction and purpose in every pose.

The following are some common asanas, showing some of the basic alignment points for each pose. The angle that the photos are taken from gives you an idea of where you should be looking from to assess the alignment of some common yoga poses.

Utthita trikonasana (Triangle pose)

Alignment target

(when doing pose to the right side)

- right heel is in line with arch of left foot
- right foot, right knee, right hip/buttock, right shoulder, crown of the head, right arm, left arm should be in the same plane.

Common alignment fault

- right buttock protruding back behind the line of the feet
- head and torso in front of the front leg.

Instructions for improving alignment

- roll right buttock under the right thigh
- line up side ribs on right side above the right thigh
- line up right ear with right thigh (when eyes are looking forward).



Alignment fault



Improved alignment

Ardha chandrasana (Half moon pose)

Alignment target

(when doing pose to the right side)

- right heel is in line with arch of left foot

- right foot, right knee, right hip/buttock, right shoulder, crown of the head, right arm, left arm should be in the same plane.

Common alignment fault

- right buttock protruding back behind the line of the feet
- raised leg is behind the line of the body
- raised arm is in front of the line of the body.

Instructions for improving alignment

- lift left hip up and bring right hip under left hip
- point the crown of the head in the same direction as the right knee
- create a straight line from the crown of the head to the heel of the raised leg.



Alignment fault



Improved alignment

Parsvotanasana (Intense side stretch pose)

Alignment target

(when doing pose with right leg forward)

- right heel is in line with arch of left foot
- torso in line with front leg
- right hip and left hip equidistant from the floor (and level with each other)
- right hip and left hip equidistant from the shoulders (assuming shoulders are square)
- equal length in right side of torso (from right shoulder to right hip) and left side of torso (from left shoulder to left hip).

Common alignment fault

- right hip forward/left hip back
- right hip lower than left hip
- torso is left of the front leg rather than in line with it.

Instructions for improving alignment

- extend the spine over the line of your front leg
- line up the crown of your head with your right big toe.



Alignment fault



Alignment fault



Improved alignment

Virabhadrasana I (Warrior I)

Alignment target

(when doing pose with right leg forward)

- hands, elbows, shoulders and hips in line
- torso vertical
- tailbone moving in to prevent excessive lower back arch.

Common alignment fault

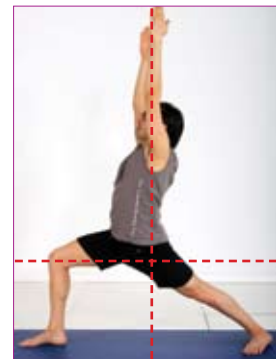
- tailbone pointing back creating excessive lower back arch
- arms behind the line of the trunk, rather than in line with the trunk.

Instructions for improving alignment

- plug tailbone in
- lengthen lower back
- move front lower ribs back so they are not poking outside the front of your skin
- as hands ascend, tailbone descends.



Alignment fault



Improved alignment

Utthita hasta padangustasana I (I)

Alignment target

(when doing pose with right hand holding right big toe)

- right hip and left hip equidistant from the floor (and level with each other)
- right hip and left hip level and not twisted (so if student was standing in front of a wall, the right hip and left hip would be equidistant from the wall)
- equal length in right side of torso (from right shoulder to right hip) and left side of torso (from left shoulder to left hip)
- standing leg straight
- torso in tadasana (mountain pose).

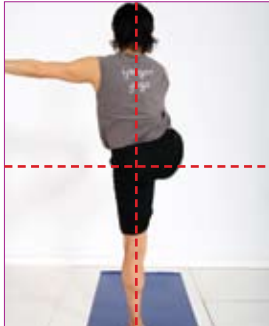
Common alignment fault

- raised leg hip higher than standing leg hip
- torso leaning forward rather than perpendicular

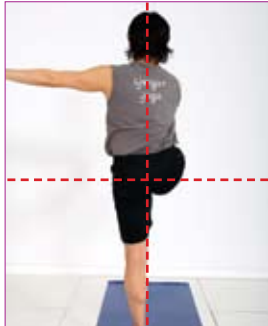
- shoulder of arm that's holding foot is rounded forward rather than rolled back and down.

Instructions for improving alignment

- move the right buttock bone down until it's level with the left buttock bone
- make the distance between your right shoulder and right hip the same as from your left shoulder to left hip

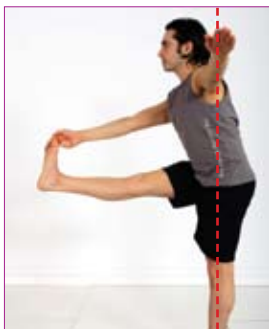


Alignment fault

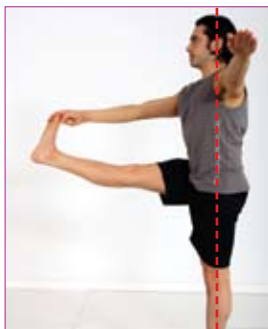


Improved alignment

- pull on the big toe and lift chest
- roll the right shoulder back and down
- tuck the tailbone in and straighten the standing leg.



Alignment fault



Improved alignment

Ustrasana (Camel pose)

Alignment target

- thighs perpendicular to the floor
- tailbone in and lower back lengthening
- sternum chest lifted and open.

Common alignment fault

- thighs falling back
- upper chest collapsed.

Instructions for improving alignment

- tuck tailbone in and move the thighs forward
- press the hands down and lift the sternum bone up towards the ceiling.



Alignment fault



Alignment fault



Improved alignment

Bharadvajasana I (Bharadvaja's twist)

Alignment target

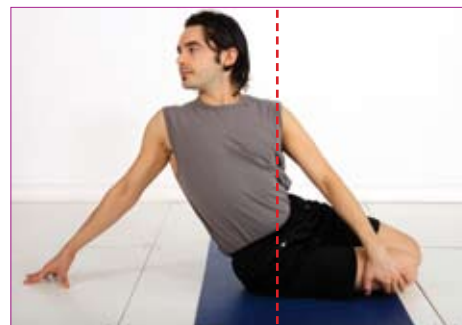
- trunk of the body perpendicular to the floor
- crown of head ascending.

Common alignment fault

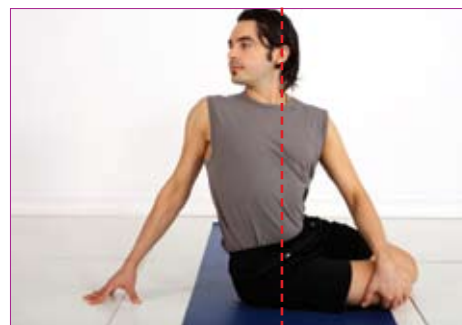
- torso is leaning back
- torso is collapsed rather than erect.

Instructions for improving alignment

- place the back hand close to your buttocks
- use the back hand to push away from the floor
- press the back hand to lift away from the floor
- make your torso erect and tall.



Alignment fault



Improved alignment

Savasana (Corpse pose)

Alignment target

- spine neutral
- body placed symmetrical
- ears equidistant from shoulders (to ensure left and right side of neck are equal)
- ears equidistant from floor (to ensure head is not tilting to one side)
- back of the neck long (if the back of the neck is shortening, this will also be seen in the chin which will be ascending. A folded blanket or towel can be used under the head and shoulders to lengthen the neck)
- limbs (arms and legs) equidistant from median line of the body.

Common alignment fault

- head tilted
- back of the neck short
- legs not turned out the same amount.



Alignment fault



Improved alignment

Instructions for improving alignment

- lie the centre of your torso over an imaginary line running down the centre of your mat
- place the centre back of your head on the line
- your right arm and left arm should be the same distance away from your body – the same part of the back of your hand should be in contact with the floor on the right and left side
- your right leg and left leg should be identical – the right foot and left foot should be the same distance away from the median line of the body, the legs should be turned out the same amount



George Dovas, BCom

Based in Hong Kong, George works for Fitness First in a dual role; he is the freestyle group exercise trainer for Asia and the group exercise manager for the Hong Kong clubs. More recently, George completed a three year Iyengar yoga training program, which involved travels to India and North America.

WHAT IS IYENGAR YOGA?



Iyengar yoga is based on the teachings of the living yoga master BKS Iyengar who began teaching in Pune, India, in 1936 at the age of 18.

BKS Iyengar is widely recognised as one of the premier yogis responsible for introducing yoga to the West. During almost seventy years of teaching, he has developed

an innovative method of yoga that is probably the most widely practiced form of yoga in the world today. Its principles are now incorporated into the teaching of yoga under many names.

BKS Iyengar has been called 'the Michelangelo of yoga' and the 'king of yogis'. Largely because of his dedication to his own yoga practice and his commitment to share this ancient art with everyone, tens of millions of people all over the world are experiencing the benefits of yoga for themselves.

BKS Iyengar is universally honoured for his understanding and teaching of the art and science of yoga. He is the author of many books including *Light on Yoga*, considered to be one of the most authoritative modern yoga texts.

Today, at 87, he continues to teach and inspire students all over the world. His daughter, Geeta, and his son, Prashant, are also accomplished teachers and authors of yoga texts.

In recent years, BKS Iyengar was voted by *TIME Magazine* as one of the world's 100 most influential people.

What defines Iyengar yoga?

There are three defining characteristics: technicalities, sequencing and timing.

Technicalities are the precise and often subtle technical points given to explore the asana fully. These technicalities also aim for correct body alignment. Correct body alignment allows the body to develop harmoniously in an anatomically correct way so that the student suffers no injury or pain when practising correctly.

Sequencing can apply to postures, or even to points in postures, and can totally transform a practice. Renowned in Iyengar yoga, sequencing is the way in which BKS Iyengar has put together postures to achieve a particular physical, physiological or mental effect.

Timings are the ways that the postures can be held for different lengths of time to enable a more profound exploration of the physical and mental challenges in the pose. ■