

To Prop Or Not To Prop

Richard Agar Ward

The matter of when and how to use props arises daily in our personal practice of the Iyengar method of Yoga.

What is a “prop” and how important are they? Generally we take “prop” to mean a material object such as a blanket, belt, brick, chair and so on. Sometimes “props” are manufactured specifically for use in an asana but commonly they are objects adapted for asana use from some other common use such as those mentioned above. However we may see later that the identity of a prop can reasonably be expanded beyond this and if we can expand our understanding of what a prop is and what a prop is really for we may be able to expand our understanding of what is *asana*. We may then reach a point where our practice of *asana* greatly increases in its scope, sophistication and depth. It may eventually become a truly yogic practice.

When should we use props

As practitioners we decide when we should use a prop during *asana* or *pranayama* practice. According to our knowledge of the use of props we decide what type we should introduce, how many to use, in whatever combinations we select and we make a judgement as to how they should be placed and how we should place ourselves in relation to them.

While we are in a class as pupils the teacher may decide these matters for us according to their knowledge and experience or they may allow the pupils with sufficient experience and knowledge to decide what props to use and how to use them to deal with individual personal conditions.

What matters in all cases is the judicious use of props and this is what requires discussion. It makes no sense dogmatically either to employ or to renounce the use of props. Both are thoughtless actions. We should not be addicted to props. Neither should we become addicted or attached to their non-use. Either way we may hinder our practice and its development. We may think “no props equals greater independence” but it could just as well be the case that “no props equals poorer independence.”

What is more important than whether we use a prop

or not is the development of our subjective intelligence, our subjective mind and our intuition. A prop can prompt the arousal of the intuition. Intuition teaches us technique: it is not just a case of a teacher telling us or reminding us what to do to develop technique. The arousal of the intuition is an important part of learning.

The judicious use of props

1. Gradation of props.

When we consider props as material objects they can always be used in gradation for more sensitive use. If one habitually uses four or five blankets for *Salamba Sarvangasana* one can use two or three to vary and then observe the degree, for example, to which the use of the lower back ribs is affected. If one performs *Utthita Trikonasana* and uses a brick on its end for the lower hand to reach down to be placed on to establish firmness for the arm then, of course, as the practitioner’s ability increases as her or she learns to do the pose then the height of the brick can of course be altered (and within a practice). We can no doubt think of very many examples of how gradation can be introduced to the use of props.

2. Alternating use and non-use of Props to learn

There is one material “prop” which is so basic to our needs nowadays that we mostly do not even consider it as such and yet many of the “older” pupils remember a time when they were ignorant even of this particular basic “prop.” How did everyone manage without it? The “sticky mat” was one of the first props to be recommended for common usage, somewhere around the early 1980s and no doubt it would be the last to go if ever that were to pass, so essential is it generally considered.

By alternating the use or non-use of props within our practice we can improve the subjective intelligence and start to develop judiciousness and sensitivity in our practice.

Suppose one practises *Utthita Trikonasana* or another standing pose with legs wide apart on a good quality sticky mat. One assumes that one is performing the pose better because the feet do not slide or slip; they

are protected from doing so and therefore injuries are less likely, so we reason. Yet if we then immediately afterwards practise without a mat we have to modify the use of the feet and employ different minor muscles and vary the use of the skin of the feet so as to maintain the pose. When we then return to the mat for the repeat of the pose we may find that our feet work better than they did previously when they only worked on the mat. The subjective intelligence can improve due to the alternating conditions. Then one might say that one has to learn to create a sticky mat “within”. What impressions arose on the feet? Can we remember them and recreate them? Is this not creativity in practise? This is an example of using the prop to train the mind.

3. Sequences as Props

Props can have more subtle forms than as physical material objects. We can also use different sequences of poses instead of material props. When a pose becomes a prop, a pose can be a prop for another pose. For example, if one does *Dwi Pada Viparita Dandasana* on a chair before *Sirsasana* it can act as a prop for *Sirsasana* by helping one to extend the upper arms more effectively and efficiently helping to create space and lightness in the shoulders, trapezius, dorsal spine, neck and so on. It can provide what previously was relatively inaccessible. It helps one to “do” the pose and also to get some idea of how the pose should be experienced and also what can be learned.

Another example of using sequence in the poses as a prop might be, for example, if one performs *Utthita Parsvakonasana* aware that one is next going to be called to do *Utthita Trikonasana* directly and without coming up from the pose. Then one can start to evolve the leg of *Utthita Parsvakonasana* by preparing for and drawing in attributes of the leg of *Utthita Trikonasana*. This may be helpful for practitioners who find they invariably push back the front leg hip or buttock and make the bent knee go forwards in *Utthita Parsvakonasana*. This idea can take greater shape and reinforcement by carefully transferring the leg from the bent leg pose to the straight one and back again but in a practising mode where learning takes precedence over doing. Sensitivity and skill may increase by this method. In either sequence one can evolve the subjective intelligence and learn what we should be doing. It is a way of using one pose as a prop for another pose as a way of learning to do. It is a way to arouse the intuitive faculty perhaps more

profoundly than what might be possible when using a material prop.

We can also find that a pose we are intending to do “next” becomes a prop for a pose one is doing now. If one does *Utthita Trikonasana* aware that one is next going to do *Ardha Chandrasana* then one modifies *Utthita Trikonasana* by way of preparation and one can develop greater sensitivity and skill by drawing forward the work of *Ardha Chandrasana* into *Utthita Trikonasana* without necessarily actually performing *Ardha Chandrasana*. This may for example affect the front foot toe, inner front foot and leg of *Utthita Trikonasana* and the opening of the hips. We can alternate poses to get other effects. One can also perform *Utthita Trikonasana* after *Ardha Chandrasana* to experience how the movement of the flesh to the bone in *Ardha Chandrasana* can be transferred to the experience of *Utthita Trikonasana*. This helps one to understand what the idea of “linking” in the poses can involve. Again it helps one to learn to the potentialities of a pose. So a prop does not necessarily have to be a material object. It can be another pose or it can be injecting the mannerisms of one pose into another or even an idea of another pose infusing another actual pose or.

The difficulties of practice without props

Without the use of props there is usually a great deal of labour and endeavour involved in “doing” an *asana* but at the same time there is not necessarily a lot of learning involved. Here one learns primarily to “do.” *Urdhva Mukha Svanasana*, for instance, is a difficult pose without props since the body encounters a lot of resistance. With props one learns to make progress in the pose and begin to understand what should happen. *Asana* without props is often largely a performance, of “doing,” whereas with props it may not be not so much of a performance. Again what matters is what one learns. As well as using the props in order to find out how to do a pose one also needs to find out how to use the props in order “to do to learn.” It is quite possible that one employs props in such a way that learning is minimal. That is when the call comes to remove the props, as a means to improve learning and understanding. This can be useful as a way of weaning practitioners off dependency for “doing” with props but in the long run what is required is more sensitivity in the use of props. What is one learning ultimately? One is learning to identify the Self with the help of intuition.

How can props assist in identifying the Self

In-tuition (i.e. tuition from within) is our greatest teacher and it is one who gives us true “independence,” the “in-dependence” which is dependence on that which is “inner” rather than “outer.” That is to do with yogic qualities and it is that we should cultivate. Independence is more important than freedom pure and simple. While freedom is important a yoga practitioner should strive for a better and a greater quality freedom each time, one that takes the practitioner towards “in-dependence”.

Props help one to learn at first but how often does one go back to the props after learning to “do”? Can a practitioner understand a rationale for returning to the ‘propped’ pose instead of only going from the propped to the unpropped pose? Initially one goes to the props to learn to do. Depending on a prop is when we need the prop in order to do a pose. Returning to the props one has to do to learn. After performing prop-less poses, after “doing,” can one not return to the props and learn what has to be learnt in the study of the interactions of body, mind and breath? Prashantji gave his class a practical lesson in this on Tuesday 21 December 2010 at the Institute in Pune. The class performed backward extensions without props, rigorously and vigorously, for most of the class, not with the prior introduction of propped poses at the start of practice, but coming to chair *Viparita Dandasana* at the end of the backward extensions practice and seeing what pupils could learn and understand of yoga by that sequence, primed by the practice of unpropped backward extensions. He asked the class to evolve a mature and profound pose with the stability of the chair, qualitatively and conceptually. He reminded us how often we regard the use of props as a preparation for poses without props as though the unpropped pose were the only “real” or “valuable” or “advanced” pose and yet what one learns about integrity may be greater when this concept is inverted. In this situation one does not have to “do,” and instead one learns the interactions of the embodiment. One is not using the prop when one is helpless and in a raw state but rather when one is well prepared, in order to learn and to study. Here it is about learning better rather than doing better. In a prepared and exalted condition one can for example employ various *bandhas* and *mudras* and create sublime, absorbed yogic conditions as the pupil’s responses are so much better.

Why this use of props is so important

By practising with greater skill and judiciousness one attains maturity, freedom, and efficiency in practice. This leads to effortlessness. This can be described as *prayatna shaithilya*. *Prayatna shaithilya* is not cessation of efforts but the creation of effective efforts, specific efforts. *Yama* is right efforts. So by our right practice we attain a greater depth of *prayatna shaithilya* and *yama*.

For many of us the “learning” ends when the “doing” ends. This is usually the condition of those who practise without props. We need to know how to go on to learn when the “doing,” the “striving” ends and returning to a prop is essential for understanding this. One has to get to a position where one can learn yoga from the pose. Yoga is not only a matter of realising the Self, of identifying the Self however. One has not only to realise the Self but one has to have communion and intercourse with it as it says in *Bhagavad Gita*. The *Gita* says that when the Self is reached doing is over and the intercourse begins.

Sincere thanks go to Prashant S. Iyengar for his teaching and his help in the preparation of this article.