

# THE WHALE in the Room

Melbourne's Peter Harley gives us an insight into the history of props and Australia's contribution to some major innovations.

It was 1988 when I wandered into my first yoga class in inner city Melbourne. Friends had recommended that I try out Iyengar Yoga as a way of managing my wobbly left knee, a legacy of an extremely enjoyable but somewhat harmful football career.

As I entered the inner sanctum of the yoga school my eyes were drawn to a curiously curved wooden bench standing in the corner. What was this? A cabinet maker's fantasy, an implement of torture? What was I in for?

Then there was a web of ropes hanging from the wall, stacks of wooden bricks, a tower of neatly folded grey blankets and a pile of folding chairs that would do a reception centre proud. I soon learned that these objects were collectively known as props and the rack like object was a 'whale bench' used for supporting the practitioner in a back bend.

Now almost 30 years later, and working as a qualified Iyengar teacher, I have become very familiar with these objects, and have even contributed some designs of my own to this eclectic world of yoga props.

Yoga would not be the same without props: wall ropes for supported

inversions, benches for Halasana, the ubiquitous blocks and belts. Not only a whale, but also a horse! Their place in yoga today owes much to BKS Iyengar, a towering figure in the modern world of yoga whose influence continues to grow, two years after his death.

The use of props in the modern practice of the ancient art has become one of the most often-cited defining characteristics of the Iyengar method, though the primacy of this association was disputed by Iyengar.

**In my own way, I have been dismayed** to hear people say upon hearing I am an Iyengar practitioner, "Oh that's the yoga where you use props", upon which I hurry to point out that the practice is not to the glory of the props but that they are but an aid to be utilised in appropriate circumstances.

Iyengar explained "Many practitioners are under the impression that the props I use are a central theme in my practice and teaching. It is not true.... Realising that genuine teachers are going to be rare, I evolved various props to make practitioners learn without teachers and at the same time not commit mistakes in their practices." And he points out that in his ground-breaking 1966 book *Light*




---

Captian?

---

on *Yoga* he demonstrates each of the poses without props.

Iyengar's primary reference point for his practice and his teaching method were the *Yoga Sutras* of Patanjali which begins, *yogah cittavrtti nirodah*, translated as yoga is the cessation of movements in the consciousness.

Not only do the *Sutras* not mention props, they barely mention asana. Iyengar's life work was to immerse himself in the ancient texts and to develop through his practice and reflection a method which could give anyone, who was willing, access to yoga and the path of the *Sutras* in a modern context. Though some may quibble and some purists are occasionally offended, the use of props has become an important element in the modern yoga teacher's tool kit. The 'whale in the room' is outed!

Like all of Iyengar's innovations, the use of props arose from his own dedicated practice over more than 80 years. His practice was threefold —asana, pranayama and teaching — and he became a master developing unparalleled insights in all three areas.

Iyengar did not claim to be the first to use props in his practice, citing many examples from ancient texts of

the use of supports in asana including by forest dwelling yogis who hung in ropes suspended from trees.

Many of his early props were developed from readily available household objects such as bolsters, mattresses, bricks and heavy stones and used to deepen his own practice. They also supported his early forays into teaching, because he was concerned with finding approaches that met the often limited capacity of his students.

**As more students began to seek him out,** Iyengar found himself working with many disabled, elderly and ill people. Now he learned to use props, including walls, to support the practice of those unable to stand or balance independently. As student numbers increased, he developed specialised props to be utilised by entire classes of students.

Iyengar's greatest desire was that people around the world would discover the wonder of yoga and become ardent practitioners. Writing in his ninetieth year on the importance of props, he tellingly noted "The most interesting observation of the use of props is that they allow ninety per cent of the practitioners to stick to their practices. At the Institute (Ramani

Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute in Pune, India), those who perform independently come hours before the class and practice on props and ropes. This shows the props inspire them more toward yoga."

These days Iyengar schools all over the world utilise a wide range of props and their use now extends now well beyond certified Iyengar schools where teachers confronted with stiff and unsteady bodies realise the benefit of taking these ingenious supports for their students.

The most common prop used today is the yoga mat, which was unknown in Iyengar's early days, but is now synonymous with yoga itself. It now seems an obvious aid to help practitioners to practice with security and confidence in their footing. And there is the wall. Iyengar referred to the wall as "my guru", helping him and his students to understand alignment in posture and for those with instability and weakness to attain steadiness in their practice. Even more prosaic is the use of the floor as a prop: Iyengar found that some of his disabled students unable to stand could achieve the form and benefit of standing asanas laying down.

Today we can understand props as serving many purposes: bringing stability, extending the range of movement, overcoming fear, and developing sensitivity as a practitioner.

**PROPS AS A CRUTCH**

For those without the strength to hold themselves, various forms of support are available.

**PHOTO 1.** The trestle or the wall can be used for those with balance problems in standing asanas.



**PROPS TO OVERCOME FEAR**

For many the practice of some asanas can be frightening at first and fear is a powerful inhibitor. Conversely learning these poses can bring courage.

**PHOTO 2.** Dropping back to Urdhva Dhanurasana on the kickboard (Developed at Yoga Mandir, Canberra).



**PHOTO 3.** Full inversion suspended in ropes.

**PROPS TO BRING MENTAL AND PHYSICAL STABILITY**

Props are most often taken to achieve stability in asanas. Overreaching and poor alignment bring with them physical and mental strain and unsteadiness. Iyengar's approach emphasises precision and stability in alignment before depth. Props are an invaluable aid in this regard.

**PHOTO 4.** Blocks for stability in standing poses.



**PHOTO 5.** Swastikasana with support.

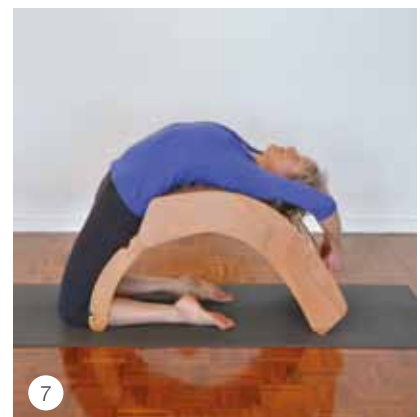
**PHOTO 6.** The trestle for stability in Ardha Chandrasana.



**PROPS TO EXTEND THE RANGE OF MOVEMENT**

In order to deepen engagement in an asana, a prop can sometimes be used.

**PHOTO 7.** Using Foldaway Backbender for Kapotasana.



**PHOTO 8.** Using a belt to achieve Eka Pada Rajakapotasana.

**PHOTO 9.** Using a belt for Supta Padangustasana.



**PROPS TO DEVELOP SENSITIVITY IN THE PRACTITIONER**

Props can be taken simply to bring awareness to certain parts of the body and develop sensitivity.

**PHOTO 10.** Sarvangasana with belt around the calves to bring awareness to the action of the legs. Note also height for shoulders and belt for arms to aid stability in the asana.

**PHOTO 11.** Tadasana with a block between the thighs to bring awareness to the action of the inner thigh.

**PROPS TO EXTEND TIMINGS**

Often props are taken to extend the time a practitioner can stay in an asana to allow the body to release into the form. This is true for restorative asanas and also for creating depth in more challenging asanas.

**PHOTO 12.** Viparita Karani with support.

**PHOTO 13.** Dwi Pada Viparita Dandasana over a chair.

**PHOTO 14.** Supta Badhakonasana.

Peter Harley is the co-owner and a certified Iyengar teacher at Yarraville Yoga Centre in Melbourne.

He is also founder and owner of iYogaprops, suppliers of yoga mats, props and books.

He can be contacted at - [yarravilleyoga.com.au](http://yarravilleyoga.com.au) or [iyogaprops.com.au](http://iyogaprops.com.au)

**AUSTRALIA'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE ART**

Most of the props in use around the world were developed by BKS Iyengar. Because Iyengar encouraged an enquiring approach to the practice many other practitioners and teachers have contributed to the field. Australia boasts its own innovators in the area.

Melbourne Iyengar Yoga teacher Peter Harley is a co owner of Yarraville Yoga Centre in Melbourne's west and the owner of Iyogaprops, one of Australia's leading suppliers of yoga mats and props and now an exporter of novel Australian made products to the world.



Peter Harley with props



Captian....



Captian....



Captian....

Coming from an engineering and industrial design background, Harley first got into prop design 15 years ago with his innovative adaptation of Iyengar’s whale or Viparitta Dandasana bench called Foldaway Backbender. “I saw a way of simplifying the design and making a very large object more compact for storage”, Harley explains. Later he added an extension for the practice of Kapotasana. Foldaway Backbender has since been sold in over 20 countries and is recommended by

many teachers including well known American teacher Judith Lasater the author of *Relax and Renew*.

Since developing Foldaway Backbender, Harley has modified the ubiquitous folding yoga chair and added an attachment for supported backbends. Another adaptation of Iyengar’s inspiration was a form of support for headstand called Headstand Yoke.

Most recently he has introduced an entirely original aid called Multi Function Prop intended mainly for the practice of shoulder stand and plough pose.” I’m quite proud of MFP. It is an entirely original design that I worked on for several years. I was trying to perfect a way of helping those who experience discomfort using a strap around the arms for shoulder stand. I then saw that it could be adapted

for use in many other poses”, Harley explained.

Other developments over the years have been in improving some of the more common props. Higher density foam blocks, foam wedges, easier to handle bolster covers and a novel sandbag design which allows easy filling by the end user reducing transport and energy costs.

While Harley enjoys his various roles he is aware of an inherent contradiction, “My work brings a happy alignment of my skills. I am able to share my love of yoga through teaching and practicing and I’m also able to indulge my passion for design. Probably a little too much designing goes on while I’m supposed to be practicing. We’ve all got stuff to work on”, he adds with a smile.