

## The Girl in the Red Leotard

KATHLEEN COMSTOCK

There were so many yoga books on the bookstore shelves that I wondered where to begin. So many types of yoga, so many colorful covers, all beckoning toward a fresher, more holistic, youthful, and toned body. Giving up on making a decision based on the cover and promotional blurbs, I closed my eyes, and reached for a book. On its cover was a photograph of a young woman, with a long braid and wearing a red leotard, in what I have come to know as Utthita Trikonasana.

The book was *Yoga the Iyengar Way* by Silva, Mira, and Shyam Mehta. On each page was a picture of a pose explained in what looked to be exhausting detail, and the book came with an index and back pages full of yoga philosophy. Good! Everything in a nutshell, I thought as I moved toward the cash register. I can do this.

At home, I began to read. Back then, class time was not an option; I was the mother of a young boy, had a full-time job in the high-tech industry, and lived in a semi-rural town in central Massachusetts. Being able to get to any type of yoga class, let alone an Iyengar Yoga class, was a pipe dream. My best course of action was to establish a yoga routine at home. And for a time, it worked. Tadasana. How hard can that be? To stand straight, with even gaze, hips, arms. But wait. What is all this anatomical lingo? “Move the thoracic spine and the back ribs in,” and “compress the thighs and draw the muscles toward the bones.” These instructions proved barriers to complete comprehension. You’re standing up well enough, I told myself, move on. Utthita Trikonasana. The picture looked straightforward, and I, with a dancer’s background, moved into the pose with what a teacher might have been considered a beginner’s approximation. Okay, so far so good.

But already a questioning imp had tickled my senses. Why the detailed language about placing one’s foot a certain way? What was this about the torso? Alignment? Front body, back body? The words were simple enough, yet when strung together they offered an image I struggled to bring to fruition. As I watched myself in a mirror, I worked to mimic the girl in the red leotard. A part of me noticed that my hips could compact more, my body could smooth out along the sides, my fingertips could be nearer to the floor – or at least at my shins, rather than gripping my kneecap. Looking up sideways? Uh, well, maybe another time. Move on.

And so began a year or so of working with the girl in the red leotard. Some pictures showed her wearing green. Some were of her brother in his short shorts. I read and reread the instructions, trying a move and then returning to the picture to verify. Can she really raise her arms like that in Parvatasana while sitting in Virasana with her butt on the floor? Can he really grasp his wrists while assembling Gomukhasana arms? Photoshopped was then largely relegated to back office tricksters on Madison Avenue, so I doubted the photographs had been touched up. Something in the back of my mind told me these pictures demonstrated a foundation of strength, one that seemed beyond my abilities.

Moving into Salamba Sarvangasana from Halasana caused me lower back pain, and I foolishly continued to do it without blanket support, wanting so to look like the girl in the leotard and feeling more and more frustrated. The final poses just didn’t come, and, even though there were suggestions of blocks and other props in the text, my pride prodded me to execute exactly like the leotard girl, not some struggling nitwit talking to her bedroom mirror.

I continued my home routine, and I also signed up for a class at the local community center, telling myself that clarity would come. And it did to some degree, but not in the Iyengar way. At least with an instructor I would not injure myself, or so I thought. The camaraderie of others in the class, likewise challenged by hatha yoga, was a bonus. The girl in the red leotard took her position on my bookshelf with other books—my college French literature texts, my travel guides, and the books on how to find spiritual greatness. I went to classes to tone and relax. After all, my body is what it is, I rationalized. A western body. Full Baddha Konasana may be permanently out, perhaps too a butt-on-the-floor Virasana. And then one day, when I was cleaning out my house, the girl in the red leotard, along with other dust-collecting clutter, took a trip to the dump.

*“Asana is perfect firmness of body, steadiness of intelligence, and benevolence of spirit.”*

— BKS IYENGAR

Fast forward twenty years. My yoga practice hadn’t changed much, but I had. I had gone from full-time mom and high-techie to empty-nester, ready to let go of even more responsibilities. And I had more time for my yoga practice. One day, determined to become more regular in my yoga practice, I entered a studio where the Iyengar Yoga service mark was posted. In a small anteroom for coats and shoes, my gaze immediately fell on multiple copies of a book for sale. There she was, eight or ten of her, neatly lined up at eye level on the display shelf: the girl in the red leotard in her beautiful extended triangle pose. I smiled at her, then entered the yoga studio. The instant the class stood in Tadasana and the instructor began to speak in the same detailed, pointed way as in *Yoga the Iyengar Way*, I knew I had returned to something important for me. After class, I signed up for unlimited monthly sessions and purchased my second copy of the girl in the red leotard.

From that day, my practice has evolved differently. Poses became an adventure: Tadasana a trusted friend, each time delight marked with an invitation to go further, all those minute adjustments complementing a sense of settling in with the genuine state of affairs for this moment; Utthita Trikonasana, a challenge no matter how stretched or toned. Even inversions and some of the poses that were beyond reach twenty years ago gradually became accompaniments to my daily practice. For several years after knee surgery I was unable to sit in Virasana without lots of height. Now (on a good day) I am able to sit on minimal height and raise my arms in Parvatasana, thanks to the steady routine that has become as integral a part of my life as eating and sleeping. Of course, when one follows the Iyengar way the realization eventually dawns that the physical poses comprise but one part of the practice. There’s so much more: the control of breath; the slow, soft inhalation, slow, soft exhalation; the spreading of consciousness to each and every cell. An openness and expansion evinces from the inside out and from the outside in. As B. K. S. Iyengar points out in his introduction of the Mehtas book: “It is known that each cell has a life

of its own. These cells are the pearls of life. In the practice of Yoga every cell is consciously made to absorb a copious supply of fresh blood and life-giving energy, thus satiating the embodied soul” (p. 6).

Many years have passed since I reconnected with the girl in the red leotard. Now I am able to journey to Boston for a workshop or up north for a weekend intensive. With my home practice and regular classes with my Iyengar Yoga teacher on the Outer Cape, I engage daily in the Iyengar way. And no longer hidden on a shelf, that book with the girl in the red leotard lies open atop a desk in my home yoga space. She shows me how my toes could spread more, how my shoulder blades could be pinned in more, or where to ease my gaze.

For a time following my reunion with the girl in the red leotard, I envied the Mehtas and others who had practiced the Iyengar methodology for so many years while I had not. They were now well established in their practice, closer to B. K. S. Iyengar, his family, and their teachings than I; many traveled regularly to Pune. In our materialistic and less-than-inner-focused world, they had opted for a lifestyle that was not straightforward or easy. But then I realized that such thoughts do not further my practice. Envy keeps me from better developing the yamas, universal ethical principles, and the niyamas, rules of personal conduct. And while my poses may never match those of the girl in the red leotard, I work to be the best Iyengar Yoga student I can be. That is what is asked of all Iyengar Yoga practitioners; it is the great gift of this practice.

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