A Chair for Yoga

A complete guide to Iyengar Yoga practice with a chair

by

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Based on the teaching of
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Acknowledgments and Gratitude

The source of all the knowledge presented in this guide is my Guru, Yogacharia B.K.S Iyengar, the founder of the Iyengar Yoga method. The use of chairs in Yoga practice was introduced by Mr. Iyenger along with many other tools that he invented and adapted over the years. I wish to express my deep admiration and gratitude for him not only as my personal teacher, but also for making Yoga accessible to millions, enabling every person to benefit from the gift of Yoga. I wish also to thank my Guru, Mr. Iyengar, for devoting his precious time to reviewing the manuscript and suggesting valuable corrections. His feedback improved this guide tremendously and contributed to my confidence in publishing it.

My initial interest in writing this guide was kindled during visits to Pune, while practicing with a chair under the guidance of Prashant Iyengar at RIMYI.

Geeta Iyengar’s DVD: “The role of the chair in the yogi’s life” ignited many of the ideas presented in this guide.

I wish to thank these three great teachers for introducing me to the world of Iyengar Yoga and for being a continuous source of knowledge and inspiration!

I also wish to thank many other teachers, most notably Faeq Biria, Birjoo Mehta and Jawahar Bangera, who deepened and enriched my practice, with and without chairs.

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Introduction

This guide is a modest attempt to present how a chair can be used to deepen and enhance the practice of Yogasana. It was born out of the interest and enthusiasm expressed by my students during classes and workshops in which we explored various ways to use chairs. They requested me to document this work, so that they could continue to practice at home.

We hope that this presentation will help practitioners, students and teachers make systematic use of chairs in their practice, thus helping to spread Iyengar Yoga for the benefit of all!

The Use of Props

B.K.S. Iyengar developed a variety of equipment and accessories that enable every person to improve her/his asana practice and attain benefit from it. The main purposes of these "props" are to help the practitioner:

– Perform asanas which are difficult to perform independently;
– Achieve and maintain correct alignment during the practice;
– Stay longer and relax in challenging asanas, in order to attain their full benefit; and
– Study and investigate the asanas to a greater depth.

Props are indeed an important characteristic of Iyengar Yoga, but they should not be confused with its essence. Props are a means for achieving ends - such as alignment, stability, precision, and prolonged stays in asanas.

This guide focuses on one such prop: chairs! It contains eight chapters, each dedicated to another family of asanas, and an appendix "A chair for all – a gentle practice sequence".

The usages of the chair covered here, are intended to direct the awareness to different aspects of the asanas and to different parts of the body, in order to deepen and enhance the understanding of the asanas. Practitioners should be careful not to develop dependency on props; rather, props should be employed intelligently in pursuit of a mature and mindful practice of asanas.

What Type of Chairs Should be Used?

The chair must be stable and sturdy and have a horizontal, square-shaped, flat seat at the appropriate height (about 45 cm elevation from the floor). It is strongly recommended to use the folding metal chairs used in RIMYI and other Iyengar centers. These chairs are typically equipped with two horizontal supportive metal rungs, one welded between the front legs and the other between the rear legs. The backs of those chairs should be removed, in order to expose the framing of the backrest for ease of gripping and for enabling moving through it.
**Important Notes**

1. This guide is not intended for people suffering from special health problems. If you suffer from a severe health problem please seek guidance from a teacher who is certified to conduct therapeutic Yoga classes.

2. This guide is not intended for newcomers, but for people who have already acquired some basic knowledge and are familiar with the basic techniques of the presented *asanas*. For a complete guide on the techniques of *asanas*, please refer to *Light on Yoga* by B.K.S Iyengar, or other sources such as *Yoga – the Path to Holistic Health* by the same author. *Yoga in Action* by Gita S. Iyengar is a recommended introduction to Yoga practice.

3. The techniques shown here are based on the insights and principles of the Iyengar Method. Using the props without understanding these principles misses the point. Our motivation is to facilitate and deepen the understanding of these principles. For this reason, a practitioner using this guide should have a solid foundation in Iyengar Yoga.

4. For some of the advanced (and less familiar) poses, we have added a reference to the plate depicting the pose in *Light on Yoga*; for example, for *Bhujangasana II* (shown in plate 550) we added the reference: LOY, Pl. 550.

5. Finally, remember that no guide can include all the options of using chairs for Yoga. We encourage you to practice in a playful manner; to explore, invent and discover other ways of enhancing your Yoga practice with a chair! For comments and suggestions, please write to the author at eyal@theiyengaryoga.com.

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**CAUTION**

Users of this guide must have a solid foundation in Yoga practice, preferably obtained through regular classes with a certified Iyengar Yoga teacher. Some of the variations shown in this guide are advanced and should not be attempted without guidance and supervision. The author takes no responsibility for any injury or damage that may occur due to improper use of the material presented.

*Enjoy your practice!*
Adho Mukha Svanasana

Raising the palm support in *Adho Mukha Svanasana* (downward facing dog) helps to shift the body weight to the legs and stay longer in the pose. In this way, even beginners can practice this important *asana* and learn to work the legs, to extend the trunk, to open the chest, and so on.

**Variation 1: Raising the palms**

The following sequence presents three stages of moving into the pose, using a chair to raise the hands and provide resistance for the hands.

*Stage 1: Palms on seat*

- Place a chair with its seat against a wall.
- Place the palms on the seat and step back into the pose.

The high support for the hands is very useful for people who are stiff or have weak arms. It helps to shift the body weight from the arms to the legs.

*Stage 2: Palms on rung*

- Now turn the chair so that its front faces the wall. Place the base of each palm against the rung of the chair.
- Open the palms and spread the fingers apart.

Note that in stage 2, the force you apply on the chair may fold it. To prevent this, place the chair with its seat facing the wall. In this way, the chair will slide and fold slightly until it is stopped by the wall. Then, it will not fold anymore and you will be able to lean safely on it.
Stage 3: Palms on floor

- If possible, take the hands further down and place the palms on the floor.
- Place the chair’s legs between the index and thumb of the corresponding hand.
- Spread the fingers well while pushing against the legs 3.

Variation 2: Chair inverted

The chair can also be used when placed upside down in the following way:

- Turn the chair upside down and place its backrest against a wall.
- Place the palms on the bottom side of the seat (or hold the legs of the chair).
- Step back into the pose.

Pushing the palms against a slanted surface helps to lift the forearms and tighten the elbows. In addition, the legs of the chair support the forearms and elbows. This is very relaxing for the arms and it is a boon for people who tend to hyper-extend the elbows.

People with a wide shoulder girdle are advised to hold the legs of the chair instead of placing the palms against the seat. This also helps to roll the arms from inside out (move the triceps muscles closer to the center line and the biceps muscles away from the center line of the body).
The same placement of the chair can be used for *Adho Mukha Virasana* as shown here:

More on the use of the inverted chair will be presented later.

**Variation 3: Leaning on the chair**

In this variation, the frontal side of the torso is leaning on the chair. The heels are lifted and supported against a wall. It is recommended to place blankets on top of the backrest and the seat in order to soften the contact points 1.

This variation is very useful for releasing and extending the back, especially after backbends practice. It gives rest and extension for the entire body. The abdomen is broadened and receded toward the lower back.

If needed, blocks can be used to support the palms and/or feet 2.
The following examples show the use of chairs for support and stability in several standing *asanas*, thus enabling longer stays and more attention to finer details of the pose. It also enables stiff people to enjoy these poses. Generally speaking, the chair can be used in three ways: behind, in front or inverted.

**Utthita Trikonasana**

*Utthita Trikonasana* (Triangle pose) is a basic standing pose. The chair can help in finding the correct alignment of the pose and in extending its duration with reduced effort.

**Variation 1: Chair behind**

To use the chair on the right side, do the following:

1. Place a chair behind you on the right side, with the seat facing backwards (the backrest closer to you).
2. Turn the right leg out and hold the backrest behind the back with the left hand.
3. Bend into the pose and place the right hand on the seat.
4. Using the hooking of the left hand, open the chest and turn it upward.
5. If possible, bend further down and grip the leg of the chair (as in 3) or the horizontal rung close to the floor.

This variation, where the chair is behind, helps to move the shoulders back – especially the left shoulder (back leg shoulder) – and to turn the torso upward.
The left hand is used to catch the backrest 4.

A helper can give traction for the spine and neck 5.

**Variation 2: Chair in front**

This variation is helpful in case of a difficulty to reach the front leg ankle.

To use the chair on the left side, do the following:

- Place a chair in front of you and align the left side of the chair with the left leg.
- Turn the left leg out.
- Bend into the pose, place the left hand on the seat and hold the backrest with the right hand. Push the right hand to turn the chest.

The chair supports and stabilizes the pose and helps to broaden the pelvis and turn the chest upward.
Variation 3: Foot on inverted chair
Here, the chair is turned upside down and the front foot is supported on the slanted bottom of the seat.

To use the chair on the right side, do the following:

- Invert the chair (legs up) and place the backrest against a wall.
- Turn the right leg out and place the foot on the inverted seat.
- Bend into the pose and hold the higher horizontal rung. You can turn the palm out as in this helps to roll the shoulder back and turn the chest upward.
- If possible, bend further and hold the lower horizontal rung, next to the right leg.

A back view is shown in.

The slanted support of the front foot activates the front leg and helps to shift the body weight to the back leg. This variation is a good workout for the joints of this leg: the ankle, the knee and the hip. It strengthens the knee and helps to move the head of the femur (thigh bone) into its socket in the pelvic girdle.

The rungs of the chair provide hand support at two optional levels: a higher one (to start with) and a lower one (to move deeper into the pose).
Bending forward when sitting on the floor is difficult for many practitioners; it takes time to learn to extend the spine in a forward bend. Extending the spine is vital in these poses, because it protects the inter-vertebra discs from being compressed, thus preventing injury.

In the following examples, a chair is used for learning how to extend the spine safely. We start with *Paschimottanasana* and then show some of the variations for other forward extensions.

**Paschimottanasana**

**Variation 1: Sitting on a chair**

- Place a chair on a sticky mat in front of a wall; put another folded sticky mat on its seat.

- Sit so that the buttock bones are on the seat, near the edge, and the feet are placed against the wall. This way there is no danger of sliding off the chair. Another option is to secure the chair by placing its back against the wall, and place the feet against a block.

- Put the palms on the seat and use them to lift the chest (this is *Dandasana* sitting on chair).

- Raise the arms and stretch them up to get further extension of the spine and more lifting of the chest.
Move the chest forward, and while maintaining a concave back, move the hands backwards to hold the backrest behind you (if you cannot reach the backrest, hook a belt around it and hold it with both hands). Stay in this position to feel the lengthening of the frontal spine.

Now move the arms forward and catch the big toes while keeping the back concave. If the toes cannot be reached, loop a belt around the feet and hold it.

Bend forward and fold the upper body over the legs. At this stage, you can take the arms backwards to hold the legs of the chair.
Move the arms forward, hold the feet, and rest the forehead on the legs 6.

For a more relaxed stay in the pose, place a folded blanket or a bolster on the legs to support the forehead 7.

Most beginners find this variation very helpful. The downward slope of the legs eases the extension forward into the pose while gravity helps to release the spine.
Variation 2: In between two chairs
This is a more advanced variation which helps to open the back of the legs and increase the forward extension. It is suitable for advanced practitioners. The body is supported only on the buttocks and heel bones. Pressing these four bones down to the chairs helps to extend the trunk while keeping the inner organs soft.

⇒ Sit on one chair and place another one at the appropriate distance (measured by the length of your legs). Put sticky-mat pieces on both chairs.

⇒ Hold the backrest of the chair you are sitting on and concave the back.

⇒ Lift the arms, extend upwards and then bend forward to hold the backrest of the other chair. Extend the arms in line with the sides of the trunk and pull the other chair while pressing the heels against it. This will open and extend the sides of the body. Lifting the sides causes the spine to descend more toward the legs. If you cannot reach the backrest of the other chair, hold the seat or use a belt.
Dwi Pada Viparita Dandasana

When done independently this is an advanced back arch (LOY, Pl. 516) but with the chair almost everybody can stay in the pose and enjoy its benefits. Following, are several ways of using the chair for this purpose.

**Variation 1: Legs inserted under the backrest**

This is the classic preparation for the actual pose. It requires a belt and a sticky mat. Most people require some adjustment of the seat height (using a folded blanket) and/or heel support (using blocks).

*Note:* Your pelvis needs to fit through the seat and the backrest; for this reason, the metal back plate that is usually part of the original chair must be removed.

To do the pose follow these instructions:

- Place a chair with its backrest toward the wall at the appropriate distance, so that while sitting the heels will reach the wall. Put a folded sticky mat on the seat and possibly a folded blanket for cushioning.
- Sit with the thighs under the backrest, facing the wall. Tighten a belt around the upper thighs.
- Holding the backrest, lie back on the seat so that the shoulder blades are aligned with the front edge of the seat.
- Lift and open the chest. Use the arms to activate the shoulder blades 1.
- Stay in this position for a while, then slide further down toward the floor, until the bottoms of the shoulder blades just pass the front edge of the seat. Insert the arms in between the frontal legs of the chair and grip the back rung (palms facing up) or the back legs of the chair (palms facing out).
- Straighten the legs and push the feet and heels against the wall 2.
If you find it hard to straighten the legs, use a block to raise the heels ③.

After staying in the pose for several minutes, move the arms out and hold the elbows beyond the head. Keeping the shoulders rolled back, extend the elbows and lower them down ④.

You can then stretch the arms, placing the back of the hands on the floor ⑤.

Gradually, you can slide out of the chair (towards the head) and work on different latitudes of the back. The feet will be drawn away from the wall.

If possible, bend the elbows around the frontal legs of the chair and place the crown of the head on the floor (or on a folded blanket). Then you will feel closer to the classical pose ⑥.

Staying in the pose, one realizes why B.K.S. Iyengar writes the following in *Light on Yoga*: "This exhilarating pose keeps the spine sound and healthy while the chest expands fully... The pose has a very soothing effect on the mind, so that the emotionally disturbed find it a great boon". The pose gives gentle stimulation to the heart and improves blood circulation.

No wonder the use of the chair for this pose is so common (in some of Prashant Iyengar’s classes in Pune, this pose is practiced for over an hour).
More Variations of Viparita Dandasana with chair
The following variations enhance some specific effects of the same pose:

1. Lift the pelvis with a belt.
A belt can be used to lift the pelvis higher:
- Bend the knees and lift the pelvis slightly off the chair.
  Loop a belt around the pelvis and the backrest 1.
- Tighten the belt so it will lift the pelvis slightly off the chair.
- Straighten the legs again. Using this lift, move the tail bone further in 2.
This lift of the pelvis can alleviate and even prevent lower back aches in this pose.
2. **Use a rolled mat**

A rolled sticky mat can be used to increase the movement and to alleviate some problems in the pose. Three alternatives are shown below:

**i)** Support the sacral-coccyx band.

- Place a rolled sticky mat lengthwise, aligned with the spine under the buttocks ①.

This can alleviate pressure on the lower back. A helper can gently pull the rolled mat to lengthen the sacral area.

**ii)** Support the chest.

- Place the rolled mat widthwise under the mid-chest area ②.

**iii)** Support the lumbar.

- Place the rolled mat widthwise under the mid-lumber area ③.

This can alleviate pressure in the lumbar region.