

Level Yourself: Knowing Where You Stand in Yoga

By Alena Gerst, LMSW, RYT

"You're Level THREE?" The man behind the counter asked me.

Such a simple question. But sometimes the simplest things can be very thought provoking.

I didn't expect to be asked such a question when I walked into the usually contemplative lobby of the [Iyengar Institute](#) in New York City to register for a class.

I wanted to say, "No, I'm not Level Three, I'm Alena."

Instead I just looked at the man behind the counter with curiosity. Then he prattled on nervously, "That's impressive. I'm SO not Level Three. I'm Level One. I'm not flexible in any way. I'm just starting out," and so on.

The lady who sat beside him took my payment quietly and pointed me to the correct studio as she instructed him on the payment process. He was obviously new to the institute and was being trained to work behind the desk. I'm guessing he was also new to yoga; but not because he's "Level One".

Iyengar is one method of yoga which, to be very brief, focuses on taking time to fine-tune alignment and increase stability in *Asana* (physical postures). I wanted to tell the man behind the counter that I had just taken a Level One class in the Iyengar method last week, and yep, I was still Alena then too. But I felt more sore than I'd been from yoga in a long time!

While it is true that the higher the level of class, in all forms of yoga, the more complex the postures a student can expect to practice in a class. But I've noticed, at least in my practice of the Iyengar method, that the more prominent distinction between a higher level class and a lower level class is **subtlety**.

Over the years I've slowly come to understand more of what my teacher is describing when he talks about subtle adjustments in my physical practice. They are instructions that cause me to focus on one very small part of my body, usually an area that I spend very little, if any, time ever considering. That kind of **self study** can invite a surprising clarity of *Svadyaya*, or a knowing of the **true nature of the self**.

That's why in Level One classes we talk about the arms, the legs, the feet, parts of the body that we know well and can relate to. In higher level classes, the instructions become even more subtle, and often when I don't understand an instruction, I think to myself, "Ok, I'm not there yet."

I know that in time, and with practice, understanding will come.

The other thing that struck me about the man's "You're Level Three?" question is that in the end, who cares? **It doesn't matter**. I could see in our brief interaction that the man's sense of himself was highly involved in the level of yoga class he took.

What level of yoga class you take, or how physically flexible you are, does not define your "impressiveness" as a person or yoga practitioner. If it did, then what happens if I practice at a Level Three, then injure myself and need to take Level One? Am I any less impressive? (I'd like to think not!) Or, God forbid, I get older and require a less rigorous class.

The Broader Perspective

At the end of the day, it doesn't matter what level of yoga you practice. All that matters is that you practice, not to gain intelligence or intellectual learning, but for **self-study**, to learn about *your self*.

Because who better to know in this world?

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