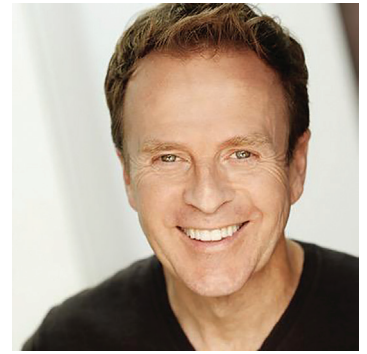


# EXPLORATION. TRANSFORMATION. EVOLUTION.

BY GARTH MCLEAN



**T**he word “evolution” implies a starting point from which a process or series of experiences serves as the foundation for the formation of growth. As we explore and experience, we recruit memory as part of our evolutionary process of consciousness and biological transformation.

In Gururji’s commentary on *nirvatarka samapatti* (YS I.43), memory is defined as reflected knowledge of past thoughts and experiences. He explains that through self-discipline, awareness, discriminating knowledge, and perseverance of dedicated yogic practices, we may come to realize that memory merges with intelligence, memory is cleansed, and consciousness shines without reflection. Newly refined experiences arise.

## The Door to Possibility

I first heard the words “Iyengar Yoga” within hours of being diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS), and I took up the practice shortly after I was released from the hospital. The door to possibility had opened. The practice offered hope for managing the trepidation of an uncertain future with an incurable condition, in addition to polishing the unrefined (*sthula*) nature of body and mind. Pondering the effects the practice began to have on my physical and mental outlook, I recall thinking that if there is one other person in the world who I could help navigate the challenges of MS, it is my duty to do so. Soon thereafter, I embarked on the path toward becoming a teacher of the subject. As a newly Certified Iyengar Yoga Teacher (CIYT), I expressed to Gururji that when I would see others who struggled with MS or other significant challenges, my heart would go out to them. “What good does that do?” he replied. “You must put that in your touch.” Recalling the impact of his adjustments on me, I instantly understood what was necessary.

While I gained experience teaching general public classes in Los Angeles, my discovery continued to deepen in study and practice. As my daily practice intensified, I came to learn more about yogic aspects of the human condition, my MS, and the nature of myself. The vehicle of the body and that which changes, nature (*prakriti*), and the more eternal aspect of the Self, or that which remains constant and unchanged (*purusa*). This resonated strongly with me.

A glimpse into this understanding, along with trial and error in practice and Gururji’s advice, all helped to refine and define my teaching of others—people with MS and people without.

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Soon I recognized familiar universal truths among students. As humans, we seem to share a fundamental desire to improve the quality of our lives. We also have an inherent need to connect with others. The degree of that exploration and discovery varies, of course, depending on the student and their history—whether the motivation to explore yoga is for health, to manage stress, to do a particular *asana*, to maintain calm in the midst of adversity and chaos, to find the courage to face and overcome one’s fears, or to manage the physical manifestation of symptoms akin to a particular condition. All seem to be rooted in freedom. Regardless, compassionate human touch and words of encouragement can make a vital difference in one’s realization.

In 2009, with Gururji’s blessing, I first taught abroad when I accepted an invitation to teach and share my experience at the France Iyengar Yoga Association Teachers’ Convention. I was catapulted into action.

Since that time, I have been invited and continue to offer remedial and general workshops at various locations around the world, primarily in areas where there are higher incidences of MS (Northern Europe, U.K., Scandinavia, Southern Australia, South America). As interest grew, I began to see a wide range of people and ages attending the classes with varying degrees of ability, neurological challenges, and movement disorders from MS to Parkinson’s, ALS, Muscular Dystrophy, Charcot-Marie Tooth (CMT), Progressive Multifocal Leukoencephalopathy (PML), Cerebral Palsy, Machado-Joseph Disease (MJD), and more. Teachers were also interested in learning how to help their students.



Garth does Sirsasana in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, Florence, Italy, and Paris, France.

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Regardless of the condition or motivation, each student has shown up with hope and an eagerness to learn, take action, and enhance their quality of life, or the lives around them. The dualities of fear and skepticism usually lurk close by.

To avoid offering false hope and move things forward, as a teacher I've had to be candidly realistic in telling students that the practice of yoga will not actually cure these more serious conditions. However, if as practitioners we can put fear and doubt aside long enough to open up the door to possibility, we can begin to explore strategies for how yoga can alleviate many symptoms and quell our concerns. While we may not be able to cure an incurable condition, we may be able to slow progression, regain some functionality, and offer relief to perhaps change our future.

### Sensitivity, Observation, and Sensibility

To properly serve people with these varying conditions—especially when seeing students for the first time—it is vital to first get a sense of students' physical ability and experience as quickly and efficiently as possible. This is not always an easy task. In addition to communicating with the student(s), as teachers, we have to employ sensitivity, observation, and sensibility to guide our approach to teaching each class. I often refer to and

encourage other teachers to look at the concept of *parakaya pravesa* (the ability to enter another's body) that Patanjali mentions in *Sutra* III.39, to help assess a student's condition.

While I have yet to develop the skill to actually enter into another's body, I try to imagine what the person may be going through. I then draw on my knowledge, experience, and practice. With discriminative intelligence and memory, I work to safely present and adapt *asanas* and *pranayama* that have proven beneficial in managing my own course of MS or that have had profound positive results for ongoing students in Los Angeles and abroad.

Initially, I felt a responsibility to share the entire scope of everything that has worked for me to help others on their journey. As a teacher I may have an idea of what can help a particular student on any given day. But I also need to be judicious to not overwhelm students so they can actually apply what is taught and ultimately help themselves deal with the challenges life presents. I've observed that this principle holds true for teaching regular classes as well.

For instance, in my experience, inversions have had a profound impact on brain health. So as a teacher, I would like to share this with my students, especially those who have MS, because experientially and intellectually I understand that inversions help to balance the immune system, which is a vital aspect of managing MS. Even if one does not have MS, a balanced immune system is important. However, if a student is weak, unstable in body, and unable to use their organs of action (the legs and arms), or if a student suffers from vertigo, it's important to recognize that student's level of ability and understanding. As teachers, we have to adapt the poses accordingly so the

students can safely practice the inversions as part of their day-to-day discipline—and to allow them to have a long-term beneficial effect.

Over the years, I've learned that less is more. Many students have a multitude of challenges; there may be a knee or low-back problem as a result of a gait imbalance or other dysfunction of the condition they may be addressing. What I've found to be effective is to efficiently distill what is most needed down to a few *asanas* and offer what can be effectively realized in a limited amount of time. I try to present fewer *asanas*, adapted to suit individuals with minimal use of props, and focus on what students can more readily do. This approach has helped remove a lot of fear and provides those with significant challenges the tools to embrace the practice and change their lives. Students with no physical limitations or challenges also benefit and find this of value—to harness a greater sense of confidence and create new avenues of possibility to explore and expand. With increased confidence, we can naturally build upon a foundation of perceptible growth to move beyond what we might have otherwise thought impossible. This technique has been of extreme value in more challenging cases.

For example, one student with Parkinson's is often rendered physically immobile (*bradykinesia*) when faced with new or unfamiliar situations and never thought it would be possible to balance on one leg. Through the evolution of practice and minimal use of props, he now regularly practices *Virabhadrasana III* to help culture greater stability, enhance his stride, and face the unknown with newfound confidence.

I also have a student with MS who became depressed and isolated after losing mobility and strength in both legs. Through consistent practice of *Utkatasana*, with the support of a kitchen counter to hold on to in front and a seat behind so she can sit if she tires, she has regained the strength, ability, and confidence to get up and down from the floor. Learning the actions of a chair twist or seated *Bharadvajasana* has helped some students regain the articulation and freedom of movement to accomplish the simple human function of going to the bathroom unassisted—which in many ways is far more practical and rewarding than being able to accomplish *Natarajasana*. (Though being able to do *Natarajasana* is pretty cool!)

## Community and Inclusion

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MS in Moscow who has continued with the practice after a recent workshop reported, "During the classes we are filled with the warmth of the soul of each of us—the best antidepressant."

I am a lucky man to continue to teach in many locations around the globe. Even though we are pretty similar as humans, every location has a different set of variables. The approach needed for students in Paris one week may be radically different for those in Brazil the next. What works one day may not work the next.

To truly be of service, I need to honestly connect with the human being in each student and "continue to be a learner," as Guruji so often advised. Humility, flexibility, and adaptability are essential when dealing with all students and especially those who have conditions that are as unpredictable as MS, Parkinson's, and other chronic ailments. As a teacher, I have to be able to think on my feet and be prepared and willing to change the approach at any given moment. As memory continues to merge with intelligence, a broader foundation forms, which in turn informs what is needed with refined efficiency and alacrity. The one thing that remains constant throughout is the touch of human compassion.

As we progress in a rapidly changing world, evolving technology, online learning, social media, and increasing artificial intelligence, I am reminded that to survive our accelerated evolution, I must go on learning, adapting, refining, rethinking, redoing, and polishing my understanding of Guruji's teaching. From Los Angeles to London, Sydney to São Paulo, I've witnessed many students, like myself, move beyond the fear of an uncertain future and perceived personal tragedy. The memory of the teacher's human touch is often a gateway to deeper exploration, a transformation of consciousness, and perhaps the ultimate evolution of body and mind toward *kaivalya*.

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**Garth McLean (CIYT Intermediate Senior III) shares his enthusiasm for Iyengar Yoga around the world and at Namastday Yoga Center in Beverly Hills, CA. He is a founding member of Iyengar Yoga Therapeutics in Los Angeles and a Certified Yoga Therapist.**