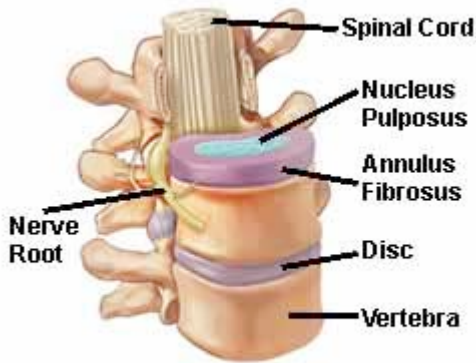


## SLIP DISC CONDITION and HOW YOGA PRACTICE CAN HELP

Discs are made up of concentric circles or rings of fibrous material with a tough gelatinous center. When cracks or fissures occur in the fibrous rings, the gelatinous material in the center can begin to push out. A number of different factors may cause the disc to "slip". Factors that precede the pain and symptoms of disc injury include disc dehydration, and too much load on the disc. Discs depend on water to keep their height and perform efficiently. When we're young, discs have their own circulation that helps keep them hydrated. As we get older, this circulation ends and the spine must move so that water can be drawn into the discs. If discs become dehydrated and lose their height, they become more vulnerable to cracks and fissure.



In our yoga practice, there are 2 actions which allow the Spine to lengthen so that there is space created between the vertebrae and the discs – Poses that provide TRACTION for the spine and SPINAL TWISTS which bring healthy blood flow (re-hydration) into the discs. A student suffering from Slip-Disc Condition should of course provide an x-ray to his/her physical therapist or yoga instructor for a better understanding of their individual condition. In general, the regular practice of lengthening the Spine and practicing Twists will keep the discs healthy and supple.

The "slipped" disc can be a slight, even temporary, push against the nerve or the spinal cord, or it can be a more definite mild, moderate, or marked bulge. Herniated discs occur when a fragment from the central part of the disc breaks completely through the fibrous rings. Whatever the category of disc bulge, the low back pain, leg pain, and muscle spasms require examination and a period of conservative, non-surgical care (Chiropractic adjustments, Acupuncture treatment, Physical therapy, etc), prior to consideration of a stabilization program through the practice of Yoga. And then one must choose poses designed to lengthen and create space in the vertebral column. Yoga students ready to undertake a strengthening yoga practice should always consult with their health care provider: Medical Examiner, Chiropractor, or Osteopathic practitioner in advance and arrange for an individual session with a qualified

Iyengar Certified (preferably) Yoga Instructor. Once the awareness of the individual disc concern is understood, the yoga student may join a yoga class and proceed slowly with deepening their awareness of their unique Spine. **The following is a general Yoga practice recommended for Lengthening the Spine and Spinal Twists to help maintain Disc Health:**



**TADASANA** – The Mountain Pose- Stand with the weight in the feet spreading wide throughout the whole foot – Observe the “Tri-Pod” base of the Feet – Weight centered in the big toe, outer edge of little toe, and the heels. From this awareness in the feet- draw a Vertical Line up through the center of the legs – through the Spine and out the crown of the head. Visualize each and every vertebrae lifting up and separating one from the next. In this practice, use the Breath – Send a deep in and out breath into each and every vertebrae and into the space between the vertebrae where the discs are lifting. A light, unencumbered feeling will follow. Begin to notice if there is a part of the back that feels “heavy” or compressed and bring lightness with the breath to that part. A teacher or yoga partner can observe whether your hips and shoulders are even. Align the head so that it is perched lightly and directly over your pelvis. As you align the bones of the Spine, the surrounding (Erector Spine) muscles and connective tissue will relax and lengthen rather than gripping or overworking and the vertical lift will begin to feel effortless.

just below the creases should be legs and lift the backs of both ultimate Spine Tailbone – Lift the Pelvis – Lift the backs of the legs. Send deep exhalation breaths through the backs of the legs. Students with tighter hamstrings may use a chair to place the hands, rather than placing the hands on the floor, this will decrease the intensity of the hamstring stretch, allowing more ease for the spine to lengthen.



**ADHO MUKA SVANASANA** -Downward Facing Dog Pose – Start kneeling in the middle of your mat in Cat Pose. Spread wide the fingers and keep the elbows very straight. Use a belt elbow creases for support to keep the elbows from bending or hyperextending. The elbow facing each other. Tuck under the toes of the feet, and with Exhalation breath, straighten the weight of the pelvis. Stretch the whole Spine vertically up, Lift the tailbone, stretch open the knees. Try to bring the heels all the way down to the mat. The **Core Lift** is the key is this Lengthening Pose. The Spine is continuously lifting up and out of the hands – Lift the



**PARVSVOTTANASANA** - Intense Side Stretch – Stand in the middle of the mat with feet 3 - 4 feet apart. Turn the right foot parallel to the mat pointing forward, and turn the back (left) foot in about 60 degrees. Place 2 blocks on either side of the forward foot. Hold the hipbones as you turn the pelvis to be squared off facing the forward leg. Hips, Knees and feet should all be parallel. On exhalation breath, bend at the hip joints at the same time lengthening both sides of the torso. Keep the Whole Spine lengthening parallel to the floor and breathe deeply into the vertebral column lengthening.

bone-over-bone. Kneel in the Cat breath, lift the pelvis up into out into the belt keeping the parallel to the floor and the back is



**HALF VERSION – FULL ARM BALANCE** – For Strengthening the Erector Spine Muscles of the Back- Place a tied belt (the measurement of the forearms) around the forearms just below the elbows. This will keep the elbows straight – Pose, with both feet close to the wall and the toes tucked under. On exhalation Downward Facing Dog Pose. Feel the support of the belt and resist the forearms elbows very straight. Walk the feet up the wall until the backs of the legs are parallel to the wall. Let the head hang freely and lift the weight of the pelvis and

the legs up using the strong muscles of the back and elongate the spine. The **Core Lift** is to lift the spine up and Vertical against the pull of gravity. Hold 5 –10 deep breaths. Walk the feet down the wall to come down and rest in Child's Pose.



**SUPPORTED HEADSTAND** - with the use of 2 chairs. Place a yoga mat on the floor parallel to the wall. Bring 2 folding chairs (or other simple straight edged chair) to the wall on the mat with the 2 chairs facing each other, about 6 – 8 inches (15 – 20 cm) apart. The sides of the chairs should be resting at the wall. The mat placed below the chairs on the floor will keep the chairs stable. Place the hands on the sides of the chair and let the head drop into the space between the seats of the chairs. Bend the knees and let the hips rest back at the wall. Slowly straighten both legs up and rest the legs against the wall behind. Squeeze the inner thighs together to come into the quiet still midline. Flex the feet, pointing the toes down toward the floor to receive a greater stretch to the backs of the legs. Let the head hang freely. This supported headstand variation allows the beginning student to practice balance in inversion without any danger to compressing the neck. Practice the **Core Lift** through the center of the Spine lifting up!

Dandasana is the Tadasana of sitting poses. For beginners, or the sitting bones slightly rotation at the tops of the inner toward you. It is also helpful to toward the chest. Lift the spine hang down from the ears.



**DANDASANA - Sitting Staff / Rod Pose**

the Sitting Poses series. It is the foundation, the beginning of awareness in those with tightness in the backs of the legs, use a rolled up mat to sit on, lifting higher than the heels. Stretch the legs straight forward with a slight inward thighs. Keep the kneecaps lifting and push out the heels, pulling the toes back bring a belt on the tops of both feet and holding with both hands, pull the toes up vertically using the strong muscles of the back. Allow the inner shoulders to



**BADDHA KONASANA – Bound Angle Pose**

Sit on the edge of a folded mat, bring the heels together as close to the perineum as possible. Keep both heels actively pushing into each other. The spine must be completely vertical engaging the strong muscles of the back to lift. Hold the big toes of both feet with both hands and pull outward, at the same time keeping the heels equally pushing in to each other - right and left. Again there is a slight backbend at the top of the spine, but take great care to lift the front and back of the waist evenly. Relax the eyes and gaze forward. All the while, the **Core lift** is engaged as you visualize the vertebrae lifting up easefully.

Twist – From Dandasana, bend the sole and heel of the right extended forward in one straight the calf touching the thigh. swing the left arm around the can be used as an extension of hands. Turn the spine to the left Keep the eyes soft. Exhale to move deeply into the twist. Hold 5-10 deep breaths. Repeat on other side.



**MARICHYASANA I** - Asana dedicated to the sage, Marichi –Sitting the right knee and bring the right foot up close to the perineum. Press foot down to the floor. The left leg should remain grounded and line. The shin of the right leg should be perpendicular to the floor with Stretch the right side of the chest forward bringing the right shoulder as Turn the right arm around the right shin. Bend the right elbow and back at the level of the waist to clasp the right hand at the wrist. A belt the arms to catch the ends of the belt if not yet ready to interlock the keeping the whole spine lifting up. Look back over the left shoulder.



**ARDHA MATSYENDRASANA**

Pose dedicated to Lord of the Fish – Sit in Dandasana with a rolled mat to elevate the sitting bones. Extend the right leg forward. Remember to maintain the inward rotation at the top of the inner right thigh. Bend the left knee until the left shin is perpendicular to the

floor. Bring the right side of the chest around to the left so that the right shoulder reaches beyond the left knee. Bend the right elbow and swing the left arm around the back to interlock the hands behind you at the level of the waist. Again, a belt is a very good tool to use to help bring the arms around left shin. Keep the Spine lengthening up vertically as much as possible. Look back over the left shoulder and deepen the twist as the exhalation breath deepens. Hold 5-10 deep breaths. Repeat on other side.

Complete this Yoga practice with 5 minutes in SAVASANA –the Corpse Pose allowing the Spine to relax – Visualize the space created between all the vertebrae and the discs and breathe into that space. Release all the effort everywhere and allow the brain to be still.

## How an Active Dad with Slip-Disc Condition, Low-back Pain and Sciatica Avoided Surgery through an Intelligent Yoga Practice in the Iyengar Tradition

By Ann Barros, Certified Iyengar Yoga Instructor

The following is the story of Rob, a 58-yr.old, active dad and building contractor whose busy life is very physical both with his construction work and his skiing, biking, and soccer playing activities. Fifteen years ago, Rob was diligent in attending my weekly yoga classes and it “helped his aches and pains” mostly in his lower back he said, due to his construction job. He was a consistent student for about two years. Then life got too busy for Rob to continue the yoga classes weekly. His home practice was minimal and soon dropped off altogether as his sports activities increased and his physically demanding construction company grew.

Suddenly 2 years ago, he found himself in chronic and excruciating back pain and constant leg pain. It was unbearably painful for him to walk, sit, and even stand, let alone to move vigorously. He could not work or enjoy his sports activities. He went to see a respected osteopath in San Francisco who took X-rays of Rob’s spine. The diagnosis was Spondylosis – or ‘wear-and-tear’ on the discs causing degeneration and shrinkage, Slip Disc Condition in his lumbar vertebrae, and Sciatica, nerve compression in the major Sciatic nerve and referred pain down through the path of the nerves in his legs. The osteopathic physician recommended surgery immediately. His prognosis was to surgically “fuse” Rob’s lumbar vertebrae to his sacrum thereby stabilizing the lower vertebral column and removing the herniated intervertebral disc pressing on roots of the nerves of the lower limbs; and then - hope for a loss of pain due to lack of compression on the Sciatic nerve. Side effects, however, were reduced range of movement in the hip flexors, thigh extension, and knee flexors. Rob envisioned a life limited to very little movement, no more sports, and possibly a career change. The idea of surgically fused lumbar to sacrum was more terrifying to Rob than seeking alternate methods and so he explored further.

He asked his physician to recommend physical therapy before succumbing to surgery. A physical therapist worked with Rob for approximately 6 months. Gentle exercises to stretch the piriformis muscle, deep inside the buttocks, were given with a few inefficient hamstring stretches. The physical therapist only had a half-hour period with Rob monthly, and then sent him off to work on the exercises at home. Rob began to feel a bit better and wanted to explore more options and a deeper approach to stretching and releasing the pain. That’s when he came to see me – about a year and a half ago, and asked to have a private yoga session. “I remember how good I felt when I was taking the weekly yoga class”, he said. “I’d like to feel pain-free again without surgery.”

I asked Rob to bring his X-rays and we looked at them closely. By this time, Rob was very aware of what was going on in his lower spine and knew that he had to stretch his back and build up his Core Strength. This was a good starting point. This is the stage of analysis according to BKS Iyengar - when we gather all information, X-rays and understanding of the area of concern. Next is to work intelligently and with compassion - to bring awareness - to be fully present with where the pain originates.

My approach to working with Rob was to have him lie down on the floor first, allowing the lower back to lengthen on the floor right at the beginning of his yoga practice. That way, he could feel the lower back spreading wide on the floor and the hamstrings could be more efficiently stretched. We used a belt around his toes as he brought one leg up at a time. Conscious of his tight hamstrings, he only stretched as far as he could keep the knee completely straight (where the hamstrings attach at the back of the knee). He used deep breathing to encourage the hamstrings and lower back to relax. In this floor series, he also brought one leg out to the side to stretch the adductor muscle (inner thighs) as well as the full leg twist – this was painful as the piriformis muscle was rigidly resistant. He remembered that in Yoga, we only go so far as we can receive a comfortably challenging stretch and release; and so he did not push himself but remained aware of slow and deep releases in the tightest places. He breathed a breath of gratitude for each marginal letting go of pain.

Next, he practiced the “P.T.” stretch on the floor (Physical Therapists often recommend this stretch for hip and lower back pain). A simple, but effective pose for creating space in the hip joints and allowing the lower vertebrae to relax and lengthen on the floor. Sure enough, his physical therapist had given him this same exercise to practice. He had at this point already experienced some letting go of the tightness deep inside the buttocks. “I’m beginning to enjoy this” he remarked, as we went through a logical progression of yoga poses.

For building Core Strength, Rob’s practice consisted of standing in Tadasana and squeezing a sandbag placed in between his inner thighs to bring awareness to the sartorius muscles. These muscles when engaged helped Rob to stabilize the pelvis and lift his lumbar up out of the pelvis more freely. A series of modified standing forward bends (or more correctly, lengthening of the spine at the same time hip flexing,) followed to bring more awareness to the positioning of the pelvis, broadening of the lower back and hamstring muscles.

Strengthening the lower back in inversion against the pull of gravity formed the apex of the practice for Rob. He remembered well the ‘Half-version of Full Arm Balance’ and we began in Cat Pose and detailed each and every alignment detail in preparation for this powerful asana. Rob used the belt around the elbows to keep the bones of the arms directly bone-over-bone and vertical, and walked up the wall until his back was exactly parallel to the wall, and his legs slightly higher than parallel to the floor (due to hamstring tightness). Exuberance is what he felt as he came down slowly and absorbed the nourishing blood increase to the spinal column and brain.

The deep-in IlioPsoas muscles were next to be addressed - these muscles are the principal flexors of the thighs and support the vertebral column. They are an extremely important postural set of muscles. Originating at the lower ribs at the front body, they attach along the lumbar spine and travel down vertically and posterior to attach at the head of the femur (thigh bone). A long slow progression of poses to strengthen the Psoas followed with emphasis on the exhalation as the ‘breath of action’. With repetitions, Rob could feel the heat produced in the deep Ilio-Psoas muscles and this brought new awareness to the lower abdomen and back.

Finally, the “prescription pose” for Sciatica was the ending series in Rob’s practice. A reclining series with Legs up the Wall, (hamstrings), Out – to- the-sides, (adductors) and finally – reclining Baddha Konasana (deep-in rotators) - where the knees are bent out to the sides and heels are pressing equally into each other. Because of the external rotation of the femur head(s) in this pose, the lower back and pelvis relax and spread wide along the floor. Often people suffering from Sciatica find almost instant relief when practicing this reclining Baddha Konasana. I showed Rob a gentle partner stretch (for his wife to assist him) which would allow him to relax completely.

Rob’s individual practice is in 3 parts- Asanas for Lower Back Strength , Core-Strength (Ilio-Psoas), Hamstring stretches, and Poses to bring relief to Sciatica. He has consistently practiced his individual series of yoga poses 3-4 times a week for the past 2 years. He no longer needs surgery – the same osteopathic physician has told him his vertebrae and disc health are vastly improved. Rob has virtually no more Sciatica. He is nearly pain-free, but only experiences a bit of fatigue from over-exerting on the job or in sports. His yoga practice always balances out the pain, he says, and he is looking forward to many more years of a fully active life.

To summarize, I believe Mr. Iyengar’s philosophy centers around bringing full self-awareness to the practice of asana. He says that students should be self-aware, not self-conscious. He says also that analysis and intelligence become one in asana practice. In Rob’s case, through analysis came understanding. Through understanding came compassion. Through compassionate self-healing came freedom and release of pain. With his newfound freedom, Rob gives himself permission to heal himself, little by little.

By Ann Barros, Certified Iyengar Yoga Instructor

