Iyengar Looks Back

an Interview with Anne Cushman for Yoga Journal in 1997

Iyengar Lo

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At age 79, one of the world's greatest hatha yogis reflects on more than six decades of practice.

An Interview by Anne Cushman

Photography by Pablo Bartholomew

The first time I heard the name Iyengar, I was still a newcomer to yoga. In college on the East Coast, I had dabbled in kundalini classes with a turbaned Texan, which ended abruptly when he eloped with an undergraduate. After graduation, in Santa Fe, I had sweated through some Sun Salutations with a visiting teacher at a local massage school, which left my body vibrating with energy like a plucked guitar string.

But then I dropped in on a yoga class that bore no resemblance to anything I had ever encountered. Twisted into what felt to my untrained body like an awkward windmill, with one hand on the seat of a metal folding chair and a sandbag under my back heel, I was squeezing a wooden block between my legs as a fellow student tugged on a canvas strap lashed high around one upper thigh.

"The top of the back-leg femur bone tends to roll in," my teacher was explaining. "But Mr. Iyengar says that the top of the femur bone should roll out, while you draw in the skin of the top inner thigh."

At that moment I was too preoccupied with trying to *locate* my femur (let alone roll it in the opposite direction from my skin) to inquire about the identity of Mr. Iyengar, whose name she had pronounced with the reverence with which my Catholic school nuns had referred

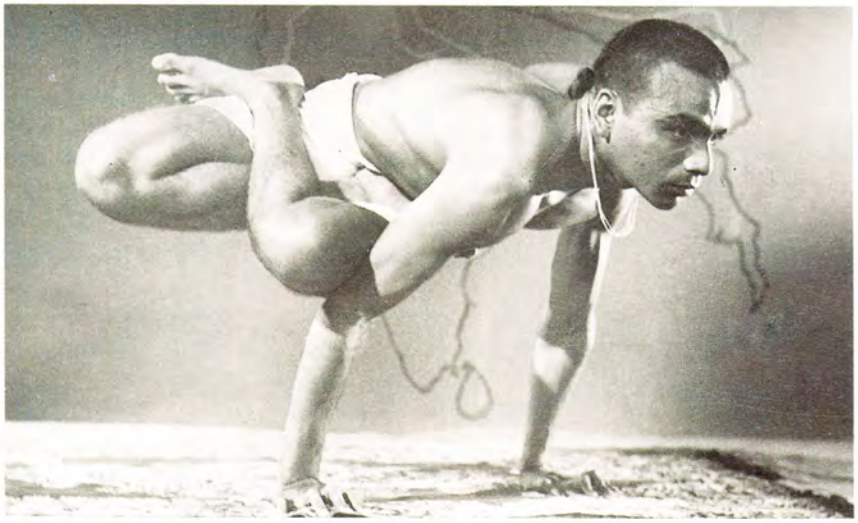
to the Blessed Virgin Mary. But after class, I asked, "So who is this Iyengar guy, anyway?"

My teacher just looked at me with blank astonishment, as if I had professed to have never heard of the Beatles.

As I soon came to realize, for tens of thousands of students worldwide, the name B.K.S. Iyengar is virtually synonymous with hatha yoga, the branch of yoga that emphasizes physical postures (asana) and breathing techniques (pranayama) as primary tools for spiritual awakening. His classic *Light on Yoga* is the illustrated Bible of asana practice, the ultimate reference manual; when teachers refer to the "traditional" way to do a posture, they're usually looking to no more ancient a text than this. His precise approach to asana and pranayama—solidly grounded in Western anatomy and physiology—has revolutionized the way yoga is taught in the West, with even non-Iyengar teachers profoundly influenced by his principles of alignment and therapeutics.

"Unless freedom is gained in the body, freedom of the mind is a far cry," Iyengar has said. "It is through the body that you realize that you are a spark of divinity." Iyengar Yoga emphasizes rigorous instruction in the nuts and bolts of the postures—presented (at least by Iyengar himself) with an almost military precision. The point, says Iyengar, is to awaken intelligence in every cell of the body, so that even the skin becomes conscious. In the process, the mind becomes anchored in the present moment. "If you cannot see your little toe," Iyengar asks, "how can you see the Self?"

Left and below: In 1941, Iyengar demonstrated yoga poses in front of a map of India to make the point that India was the home of yoga.
Opposite right: This 1970 photo shows Iyengar performing Natarajasana in front of the Taj Mahal.
Far right: Iyengar demonstrates Vrschikasana I in1968.



This page: Balji Pendharkar; Opposite right: T.S. Satyan

Asana as Prayer

B.K.S. Iyengar was born in 1918 to a poor south Indian family, the 11th of 13 children. After the death of his father when Iyengar was nine years old, he was raised by his elder brother, an accountant in the city of Bangalore. Weak and sickly at birth due to an epidemic of influenza that nearly claimed his mother's life, the young Iyengar went on to suffer from malaria, tuberculosis, typhoid, and malnutrition. Doctors predicted that he wouldn't live past the age of 20.

At age 15 he was sent to Mysore to live with his sister, who was married to the renowned Sanskrit scholar and yogi T. Krishnamacharya. In the early 1930s hatha yoga—which for centuries had been an obscure art known only to some of the wandering ascetics known as *sadhus*—was just beginning a sort of popular renaissance in India. Krishnamacharya was one of a handful of contemporary teachers who were seeking out the ancient teachings, modifying them to suit a secular audience, and offering them for the first time to the general public.

Under the patronage of the Maharaja of Mysore, Krishnamacharya had founded a *yogashala*, or

yoga school, at the Mysore Palace. Initially, Krishnamacharya was reluctant to teach yoga to his young brother-in-law, saying that such teachings depended on one's karma from previous births. After a few months, however, he offered Iyengar some basic instruction, and eventually installed him as a teacher at the Yogashala.

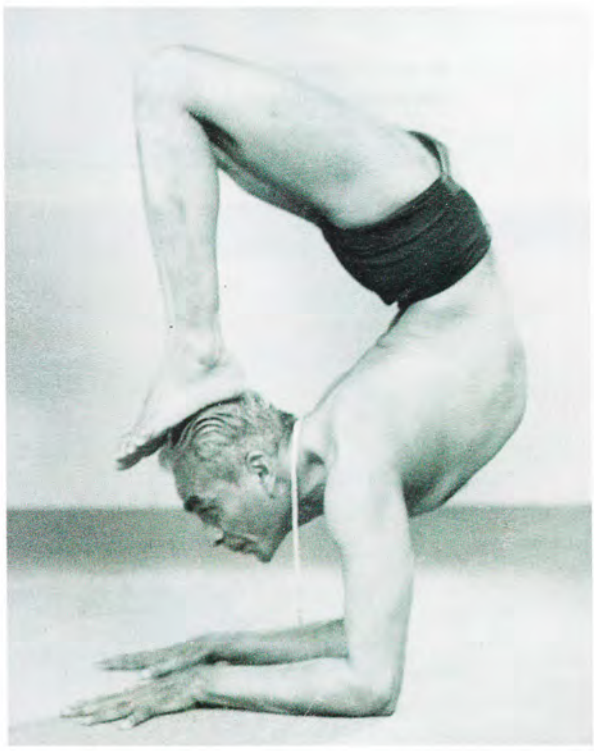
After three years in Mysore, Iyengar went to Pune to teach. For the next decade, he scraped out a meager living as a yoga teacher, while engaged in intense personal practice and experimentation. "I regarded the body as my temple and the asanas as my prayers," he writes in his autobiography. He began to explore yoga therapy; props (such as bricks and blankets) to make poses accessible to people who couldn't otherwise do them; and meticulous and subtle adjustments of alignment.

In the early 1950s Iyengar gave a session to the celebrated violinist Yehudi Menuhin, who was in Bombay giving a concert to raise money for famine relief. Menuhin invited him to teach in Switzerland, a visit that proved to be the first of many trips to the West. Iyengar's largely self-taught system of yoga—with its emphasis on the physical body as the vehicle for enlightenment—was just what many Western students had been craving. By the mid-'70s, "Iyengar Yoga" had taken the yoga world by storm. Today, it's probably the most widely practiced hatha yoga system in the West. And at age 79, B.K.S. Iyengar—still practicing daily—is still an awe-inspiring model of the art of asana.

Iyengar at Home

I first saw Iyengar in 1990, from the back of a packed auditorium, when he gave a talk and demonstration of therapeutic yoga in San Francisco. As he barked out orders like a general, I watched in astonishment while my own august teachers scampered around the stage on their hands and knees to fetch him blocks, sandbags, sticky mats, and blankets. I saw him again at a national convention in 1993—but again, only from a distance, as a Zeus-like figure who would descend on classes to hurl inspiration, insights, and occasional thunderbolts at teachers and students alike.

So I was a bit stunned at how easy it was to approach him for an interview at his Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute in Pune, India, when I passed through last year researching a guidebook to Indian yoga centers and ashrams. Arriving at the Institute—a modest building in a quiet residential neighborhood, with a statue of Iyengar in Natarajasana near the entrance—I presented my



card to an attendant who promptly ushered me straight to the dim, cave-like library where Iyengar sat behind an immense desk, perusing a copy of the *Yoga Sutras*. Dressed in a crisp cotton *kurta,* he regarded me with amused benevolence and amiably consented to an interview later in the week. "First, you come watch my medical class tomorrow," he invited me warmly. "Then you will understand better."

But this avuncular demeanor evaporated the next day, when I dropped in on the medical class, a special class for people suffering from ailments ranging from heart disease to chronic depression. (Iyengar is famous for his ability to alleviate and even cure conditions that medical doctors have despaired of.) The bright, airy practice room was jammed with 50 or 60 people in an array of supported postures: draped over bolsters, suspended from wall ropes, strapped to wooden horses, buried under sandbags and immense iron disks. From my perch in a corner stairwell, I watched as Iyengar, his immense chest and torso swelling over his shorts, darted through the room with the intensity of a sheep dog corraling an errant flock: growling, barking, offering lightning-quick adjustments with a tug here, a slap there.

At age 79, Iyengar still practices yoga daily at his Institute in Pune, India.

Catching sight of me, he strode over. "You people! You say that Iyengar Yoga is only physical! But where is the spiritual person who does not have a body? Show me that person! Where is he standing?"

I meekly admitted that I couldn't produce such a being.

"You say that singing is spiritual. But without the body how can you sing? Tell me that!" He glowered at me. "You do not understand anything," he concluded, and walked away.

This kind of transformation is vintage Iyengar—he

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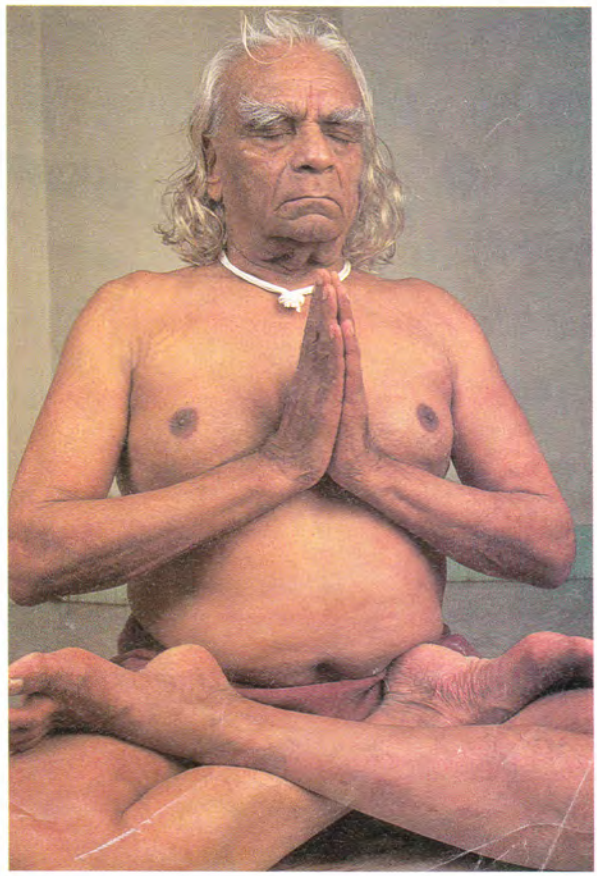


can go from sage to samurai warrior faster than you can say Adho Mukha Svanasana, a transformation that his students say is just a device to prod students into awakening. He's famous for deflating egos—thereby leaving a space where awareness can arise. "I am a fanatic when I am practicing," he told me cheerfully as we sipped chai together in our interview a few days later. "But when I finish my practice, I am just like an ordinary being."

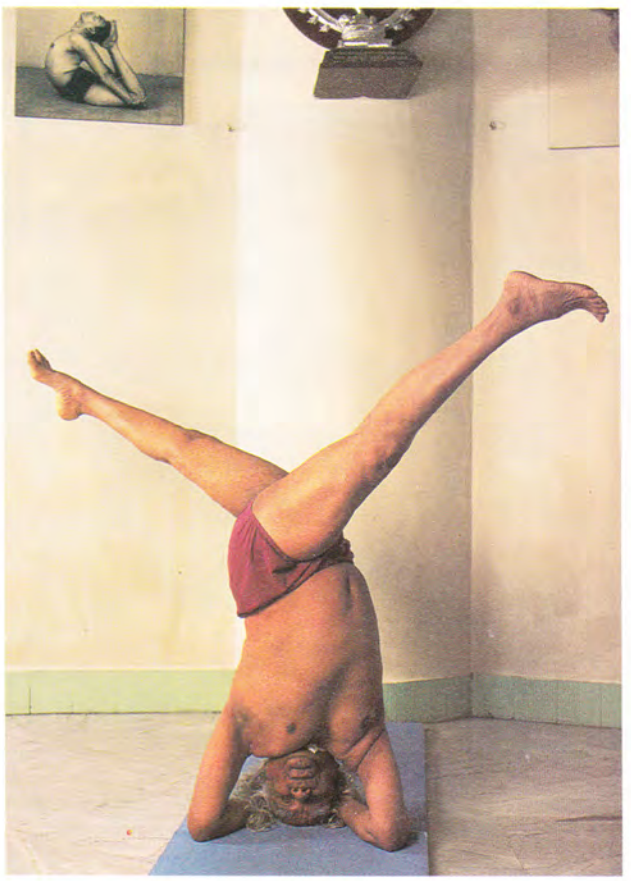
Interviewing Iyengar was like interrogating a river in full flood. A question or comment would barely be out of my mouth before he would be responding in a torrent of anecdote, opinion, and charm. He leapt with disconcerting rapidity from topic to topic, leaving sentences unfinished and stories incompletely sketched in—yet somehow conveying understanding of his meaning (or at least the temporary illusion of understanding) through the hypnotic force of his presence.

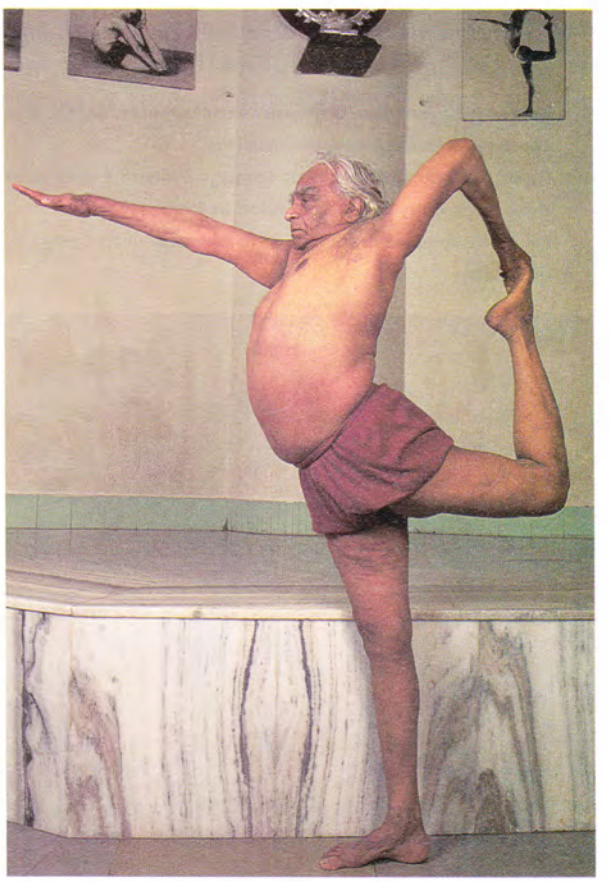
Yoga Journal: *What first drew you to the practice of yoga?*

B.K.S. Iyengar: Actually, I never knew that this subject was for me. It's only coincidence that in 1934 my guru—my sister's husband—went to Lonavala. On the way to Lonavala he stopped in Bangalore to visit. He asked me, "Why don't you visit with your sister in Mysore until I come back?" And Mysore has nice gardens and palaces and all, which for any youngster is attractive. So that was the attraction for me—to visit Mysore—and I accepted.

When he returned after visiting Lonavala and Bombay, then I asked him, "Should I not go back home to study?" Then he told me, "Why don't you join the school here? Both are the same. Why don't you study here?" And for me, whether I stayed with my sister or my brother, there was no difference at all. I lost my

exhibitions to be given, my ga. If there were no exhibitions, not have been yoga at all.





father when I was very young. It was a hard job for any joint family to bring up children not their own. Because my brother's wife had her own children, naturally their desire would be to bring their own children up, not me. So I joined the school in Mysore.

He didn't teach me yoga at all for nearly six or eight months. Then one day he said, "Why don't you do something, go!" I said that I was suffering from so many ailments. He said "Do yoga." But he never taught me what to do.

Finally one day he called me: "Do this, do that, do that." But my body was just like dry wood. He tried to teach me a few asanas. But my body was not able to bend at all. So he sent me away. He said, "Your body is so stiff, only do what you can do, that's all." So that's how the beginning was made.

Then, after six or eight months, he was called to give a demonstration in front of the All-India World YMCA conference which was held in Mysore. That I think shook him a bit, because there was none who could do the hard poses. So he called me. For three days he broke my back, and then he said, "You have to do this demonstration." Only three days he taught me. And the demonstration was in a week's time.

YJ: *How many poses did he teach you in three days?*

BKSI: Only backbends. I told him my body was not forward bending. It was a painful process. But the fear set in, because I was an orphan. I was like a slave. Fortunately, what he had taught me, I presented. So he was very much impressed. He said, "I never thought that after training you for only three days, with this stiff body, that you would do it." I said, "It was a responsibility, I had to do it." That pain continued for six months later.

YJ: *How old were you at that time?*

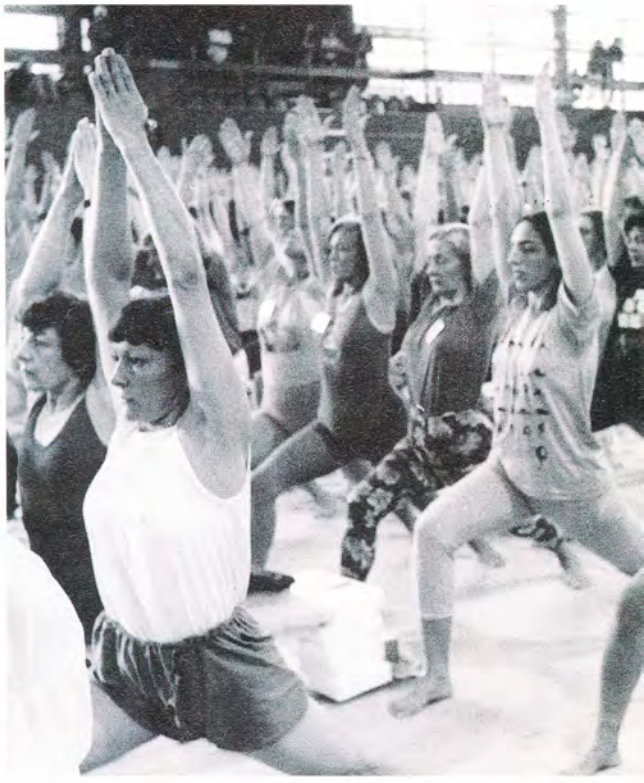
BKSI: About 15 and a half years.

Then he started asking me to go to the yogashala at the Palace. So after school I was going, just practicing a little and coming home. After one year of this, then he said, "Why don't you do some regularly?" Because, as I said, he had no others on whom he could reign over except me. He used to have a very good student who was staying with him when I first came there. That boy was about 15 or 16. But he left the house, because my Guruji was very stubborn and very strict. It was very difficult for anyone to stay with him, because nobody could know his mood every day. That boy ran away, so I was left alone. So the pressure came on me. He taught me for a few months. In 1936 I left him, and I started teaching at various places.

YJ: *Did Krishnamacharya teach you pranayama as well as asana?*

BKSI: I was suffering from tuberculosis. Influenza at

Below: Iyengar's son, Prashant, and daughter, Geeta, also teach yoga at their father's Institute.
Right: Iyengar guides a class through Warrior I at the European Yoga Convention in London in 1995.
Far right: Iyengar marks his 75th birthday with a yoga class in Bombay.



birth, then malaria, typhoid, one disease after the other—it was impossible for anyone to touch my lungs. My breathing rate was 30 to 35 per minute. So what pranayama one could teach?

I was not made for yoga. Because there was some exhibitions to be given, he made me to do it. If there were no exhibitions, probably he wouldn't have taught me. I think my line would not have been yoga at all.

YJ: *And did he teach you yoga philosophy at all?*

BKSI: Nothing! I learned everything on my own. That's honesty. If you ask me if his grace was there, probably I must say it was. Every word of what I am teaching today is my own perspiration and inspiration. But he is the seed, for which I am grateful to him.

YJ: *How did you begin teaching yoga yourself?*

BKSI: It was my Guruji who first sent me to teach in 1936 in Chitradurga and Harihar. When I said, "I know nothing," he said, "Do what you like, but go!"

Then I was called to Pune by one Doctor V.B. Gokhale, who had seen my demonstration in the north of Karnataka. He was impressed by my performance, though he saw I had no muscles at all. He asked, "Why your body is not developed?" I explained to him about my poverty, my diseases. He said, "I have not seen anything in my life as a surgeon like what I am seeing in that presentation."

So in 1936, three months after seeing my demonstration, he retired, and came to Pune, and went around to the colleges of Pune in order to introduce yoga. When the college authorities here promised that they would encourage a yoga teacher, he called me for six months to teach. Because they said, "Call him for six months, and if it is accepted, we will continue, otherwise we will drop." I am the first person in the whole world to introduce yoga in schools and colleges in the year 1937.

So I was teaching in these colleges, and I was teaching also in Deccan Gymkhana. Naturally, though most people were not interested, some people came for health—some rich people. The industrial college, engineering college, all the colleges of Pune and all the top-class schools plus the Gymkhana—they all joined together and were collecting six or seven rupees a month from various institutions to pay me 60 rupees [about two dollars] salary per month. Although they were taking away 20 rupees for giving me accommodations.

But the so-called recognized yogis of Bombay Presidency were dead against yoga of my method, saying that yoga cannot be taught in public, it is only one-to-one (which even now is how my guru's son does it). At that time my age was only 17, and these people were the czars in the field. The government was

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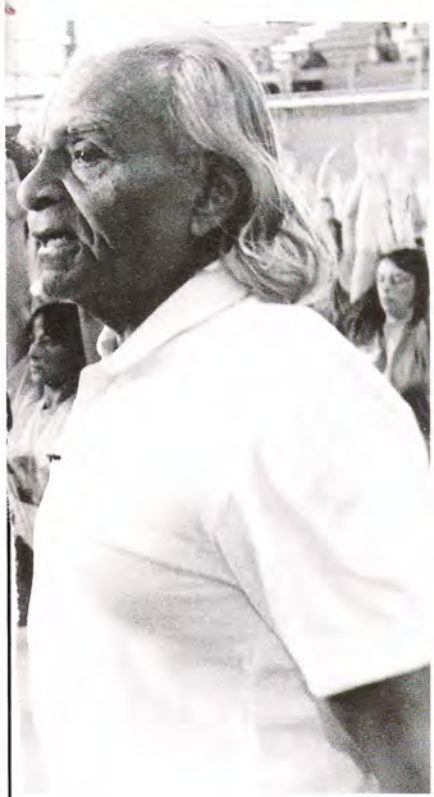
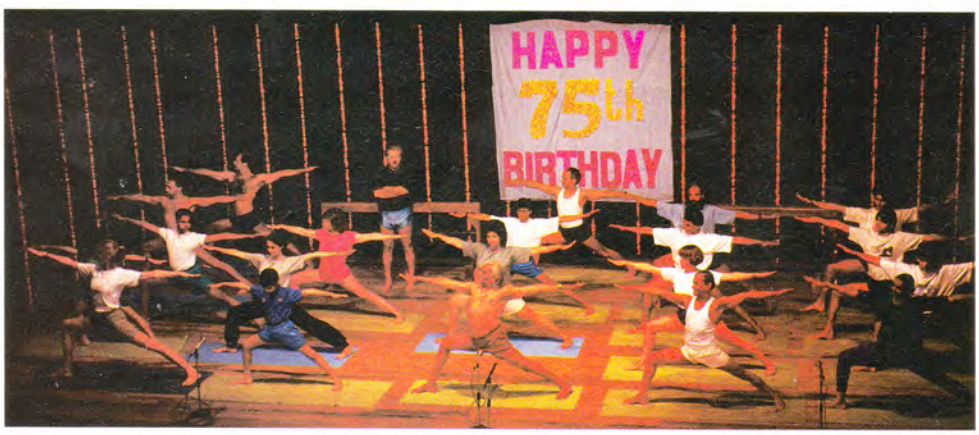


Even if God comes and tells me, "Leave the asanas behind," I will say, "No! I will not leave it."



Iyengar Looks Back

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in their hands. So the end of my teaching came on account of these people. They said that it cannot be taught at all in public, and I was teaching 30 or 40 people at that time. So the institutions said, "Seeing that it cannot be taught *en masse,* we are dropping him, according to the advice of the experienced yoga teachers and yoga masters."

But some of the students were coming to me for health's sake—it was a challenge I had to face, knowing nothing, that I accepted all types of appeals in order to present yoga to the world. They continued coming to me—whatever the lost face to the institutional authorities might be, these students kept continuing. So the classes went on.

YJ: *At the same time you must have been working on your own practice.*

BKSI: No, see, what happened was, I was too thin. Too thin. Pune was famous for wrestling in those days. In the 1930s, if there was a wrestling match in Pune, 10,000 to 20,000 people were coming to watch the wrestling match. I was asked to give demonstrations at the matches. But what happened was, I was so slim, and people were laughing at me, saying, "If you do yoga, the result of yoga is this man."

I had no flesh. If I had some flesh in my body, probably that would have given me some hope. But I had to suffer because I had no flesh at all on my body. People could count easily my veins.

But in the classes I was teaching in the Gymnasium, I would perform myself with the students, and I used to laugh at them: "Hey, see my body, see your body—why are you collapsing? I am not collapsed!" They were collapsing, and I was doing the poses. I said, "I have no muscles. But see, you are tired, not I." So this way, the faith came into them: "See, this fellow has no weight, has no muscles. How this fellow has got this power?"

Though I was a teacher, I was the youngest person compared to all the others. Because they were all college age and I was not going to college. So naturally to face them was a Herculean job for me. And I had no English education. I have learned English all by talking to people, not by reading or studying anything.

I was teaching many classes, one after the other. I was doing these jumpings and all. I was thinking this was only a physical exercise—so jumping, going from one pose to another pose, from one corner to the other corner. After the first class I finished, they were all sweating. During the second class, the ones from the first class

were watching. They said, "We are exhausted, and this fellow is still doing?" So like that I continued and built up endurance. I said, "Ten hours? I can practice 10 hours without sweating." And that created interest in the people to learn yoga.

YJ: *Were the poses you were teaching at that time the poses that are now in* Light on Yoga?

BKSI: No, no, no. Those positions came to me later.

YJ: *There are a wide range of poses that you teach now, and that are in* Light on Yoga, *which are not in the* Hatha Yoga Pradipaka *or other ancient texts. Where did they come from?*

BKSI: No books have said it, it is a fact. My guru had some drawings with him, which I have seen—yoga on the ropes and all, and in trees. It was not printed, it was written by hand. So there we see some of the poses. And I have a book in Marathi which is about 100 years, 120 years old.

But when I started teaching—you know the college students, they will never continue to do the same thing over and over again. Students were leaving if there was only repetition. So that was the time for me to think—how to hold them so that they come back? So creativity came.

I had to create poses—if Trikonasana can be done like this, why not Parivrtta Trikonasana? If Virabhadrasana I could be done, why not Virabhadrasana III? If you can do Vasisthasana, why not Visvamitrasana? Or Kukutasana—if you do, why not Parsva Kukutasana? If Bakasana, why not Parsva Bakasana? So that's how it developed.

YJ: *Your approach to asanas is famous for being very scientific and anatomically precise. How did you develop this precision?*

BKSI: Doctor V.B. Gokhale, the medical man who invited me to Pune, was a great help to me. He used to give talks, and I used to give the demonstrations. Because I could not speak on yoga, and I was not knowing philosophy. He said, "The body is known to me. You leave it to me, I will explain very accurately. And you do the poses." Well, it was a really good combination; I was really happy, and while he was explaining I started getting the anatomical words, which helped me a great deal to develop my subject.

YJ: *Another technique that sets apart your approach to yoga is your extensive use of props such as wooden blocks, sandbags, ropes, etcetera. How did you develop this approach?*

BKSI: My guru had some props. He was using the hanging ropes—three ropes, one on top, one in the middle, one on the bottom. That's all he was using.

In those days, diseases were rampant which medicine could not handle directly. So in order to make people to get some better circulation, I used to try all types of things. In 1937 the principal of Ferguson College in Pune was 85 years old. He was suffering from dysentery. And Doctor V.B. Gokhale asked me whether I could help him. I said, "He can't stand, he can't sit, what can I do?" Dr. Gokhale said, "You are the servant of the Gymkhana. You have to take these people, or face the consequences if you say no." That was the treatment I was given. Whoever comes, I have to give. I was treated just like that only.

That was the first lesson I had in how to teach. How to make him do yoga when he can't stand? So I started teaching Trikonasana lying down. I had to lift his chest to this side, I had to lift his chest like that—all my movements only—so that the intestines get a little movement. Since he could not spread the legs, I used to stick his walking stick between the two legs to keep the legs from coming together. So that's how I learned! And I did one person after the other, one after the other. Just by instinct.

And secondly I was practicing myself. I was not doing Hanumanasana at all when I came to Pune. Baddha Konasana was not coming to me. In the roads, in those days, big big stones would fall into the roads. Nobody would object, so I used to take stones to put on my legs. And whatever I found on the road, that could be something useful for my yoga, I used to carry home.

You know—what they call those—road rollers? For flattening the road? On that one I did back bends. Because my body was not doing on its own. So if I saw a machine in the road, I used to do it. Without moving from the traffic, I used to lie down on the roller! So people used to call me madcap. I was! Because

I couldn't do the pose independently, how to do? So I was curving over the machine, and that's how I learned. "Oh, very good, it curves." So step by step I learned.

YJ: *Your approach proved very popular with Western students.*

BKSI: Yoga became very popular in the West only after 1967 or '68. In 1954 not even one student was willing to come to a demonstration of mine. In London Airport in 1954, when I told them, "I am a yoga teacher," they said, "Do you swallow pounds? We can't trust you, you have to be screened, because you yogis walk on fire, you chew glass, you may also swallow notes."

It took me several years to build up classes in England—it was not so easy to come to the masses. I had to struggle very hard. It took me four years to have a public class. And how many people came? Three, four. But I never lost heart.

Then in 1968, fortunately, Peter Macintosh, the physical director of the London adult education center, wanted to replace calisthenic exercises with some others that would be more effective. And he was a friend of Mr. Menuhin. One day he asked Mr. Menuhin, "What are you doing?" "I stand on my head to keep myself fit. My teacher is here, if you want to you can see him." So Macintosh came to my class in London with his advisors. They made a condition for me—"Can you teach yoga without using any mystical Hindu words? We will only introduce yoga provided you stick to the education of body but not beyond." I said, "Why not?" Then the scientists, the doctors, the educational board members—they all watched my class. They said, "He teaches with language which is of the earth. So we have no objection at all." That's how I won.

Then the problem came—the media started writing that yoga is a philosophical subject, spiritual subject, and only physical yoga is taught in England, which is unfair. I asked Macintosh, "Should I speak on the spiritual level? If you permit me, I can do that." He said, "No, I don't want it. It should be purely practical, on that level only."

See, people say that yoga is a spiritual subject. I say it's a physical, physiological, physioneurological, neuropsychological, and psychospiritual subject. You cannot separate it at all. And a layman can understand only from the known, not from the unknown. So we have to start from scratch. Before this, the people never understood the basics of yoga. They were knowing the effect, the high goal of yoga, and not the starting point.

YJ: *You continue to receive criticism for focusing on the body.*

BKSI: When you have to educate a child, how do you educate a child? Tell me! Do you educate from the spirit? Or do you educate that—what is math, what is a fruit? You bring them, and show the fruit, is it not? This is how the knowledge has to come. That is what I have done.

People can criticize me, but if I had not worked so much, would yoga have become popular? A hundred years of yoga in America—but after Vivekananda, it was sleeping. I have respect for him. He gave the teachings. But what happened afterwards? How many years passed before people began to practice? There are so many people who have come to America from India as yogis. What did they do? House to house I have introduced it.

As a raw student of yoga, you know nothing about philosophy, you know nothing about mind. I try to build you up from the beginning. I use the body as an instrument, as a guide to build up the higher aspects of life.

YJ: *You have said that for you, the physical is spiritual.*

BKSI: The cells have their own intelligence, the cells have their own memories. With yoga you are culturing each and every cell. You are culturing each blood cell—how can diseases come to him? So I say, the gateway for spiritual life is asana and pranayama. If those gates are not open, there is is no difference between a man who says, "I am meditating," and a person who is a schizophrenic.

YJ: *So how do asana and pranayama relate to the other limbs of the eight limbs of yoga?*

BKSI: Though Patanjali has used the word "limb," one is interconnected to the other. To understand your body, your mind, your cells, your nerves—everything comes under that! If you walk zigzag on the road what happens? Tell me.

YJ: *Here, you'd get run down by a rickshaw.*

BKSI: You get hit by a car or anything! So also, how do we know that the energy in our body is running in the right direction or in an exact way? That's why these asanas were given for us to develop, so that the energy flows where it has to flow. And that way we can face the turmoils, we can face even the invisible fears that come to people. If we cannot face the visible ones, can we face the invisible ones? Have you got that strength?

So when we speak of ethical growth—*yama* and *niyama*—it must be ethical growth in the body itself. You people, when you go into Trikonasana on the right side, you are very attentive on the right. And on the left side you don't attend at all. So here you overstrain and kill the cells; there you understretch and murder the cells. People say, "Mr. Iyengar is aggressive," right? But if Mr. Iyengar is aggressive, he is agressive only equally on right and left. If he is nonaggressive, he is nonaggressive equally on right and left.

People say Mr. Iyengar is aggressive. I am not at all an aggressive practitioner. I am intensive. I want to learn how each and every part is interconnected. Even if I stretch my finger, I want to feel how far it goes inside.

YJ: *And by developing that awareness in your asana practice, does it begin to extend into your life?*

BKSI: Automatically it comes! I want my cells to feel the tranquillity, not my brain.

YJ: *And what about the limbs of meditation*—pratyahara, dharana, dhyana, *and* samadhi?

BKSI: Meditation cannot be done in the pose? What is the quotation in *Yoga Sutra*—you can concentrate inside the body or outside the body. The others are teaching outside the body, and with the asanas I am teaching you to concentrate inside the body. What difference it makes?

This question came to me a few years ago: "I have done asana so much. Should I continue or should I stop?" When Guruji came for my 60th birthday, he told me, "Now you stop all these things. Do meditation." I said "No, I will continue." He said "No, you have to stop. Respect

the Guru." So for three months I stopped. What was the effect? I lost everything. You understand now? Three months, and it's taken me years to come back to life.

Like the water finding its level, if my intelligence finds its level in this body, is it not complete oneness?

YJ: *So there's no need to withdraw from the world and be a* sannyasin *to reach the highest stages of yoga?*

BKSI: No, no, no, no. If there was a need, I would have taken long ago. So many yogis offered me. That's not the method at all.

YJ: *Does the idea of God or Spirit have a role in your approach to yoga?*

BKSI: For me, God is invisible. So he is within the body. He is outside the body, also he is in the body.

I say there is a force which keeps me practicing. I have no will power, though people say I have will power. Something makes me to do yoga without missing a day. And that I consider God. Not me.

YJ: *And do you think that a practitioner needs to have some sense of Spirit in their practice?*

BKSI: Whether they believe in God or not is immaterial. They believe in their own selves, is it not? If they are true to their own selves, then everything will be taught. Forget about God. Our practice should be true to our inner feeling.

YJ: *Have you felt your own practice changing as the years go on?*

BKSI: I don't say changing—no. My practice is not changing. My transformation inside is changing. Transformation is taking place, but not change in my practices.

YJ: *What sort of transformations are you finding now?*

BKSI: The clarity, the precision, inside the body. Even my toe—if it's slightly wrong, I know my toe has gone wrong. Can you know that in your practice? Tell me.

YJ: *Not usually.*

BKSI: You can see me when I am practicing. I will tell you—"See, this knee is out. This calf muscle is out." You can't see it. For you, it's perfect. Unless you look when I show you.

So that is known as transformation. The light is coming on that area—because there was no light, it was all darkness.

All these years I practiced yoga to get maturity in my body and mind. Now that I am practicing yoga with maturity, what do I see? I was seeking, then. Now I am seeing. When you practice, or when raw students practice, they seek something. Which I also did before. But in today's practice, I am seeing.

YJ: *Now there's nothing more for you to seek?*

BKSI: Nothing! Everything—it comes on its own, you know? When I practice, you will see. Then you will understand. Even a little mistake of my finger, immediately I adjust.

Subtle things come to the surface. Previously it was all rough: "This muscle is not working, that one is not working." Today it is not like that. Instead I observe even my cells, even my mind—where my energy of mind is going, where my intelligence is going, in which direction is it going? So I observe. That is why it is known as concentration inside.

For outsiders, they only see the contortions, that's all. But what I say is, even in the contortion, can I maintain the expansion of the mind? When I do Tadasana, how my intelligence in the body expresses—how can I express that in Dandasana? Can I express the same in Kapotasana?

Today I was doing the most difficult poses. So people see it and they say, "He is still just doing physical yoga." But what am I seeing inside? That they cannot see.

How far can I penetrate the dark holes in my body? It should become transparent. Each and every part of my body should be transparent to me. And that's why I am practicing.

YJ: *Do you still find challenges in your practice?*

BKSI: Yes, yes, challenges. Still it is there. The challenges are quite different. Previously it was the challenge of the mind. Now—well, nature plays its own role. The body hasn't got that strength which it had years ago. So I have to fight.

I am at the precipice, at this age, in this stage. The body is giving way. And if I surrender to this weakness, I think I am lost. If the slightest idea comes to me that my body cannot take it, I am lost in yoga. So I am doing more and practicing more than before.

I could easily say to people, I practiced for 60 years, now I am on to higher meditation. But for me, I have not yet understood what is lower meditation, what is higher meditation.

YJ: *But the body inevitably grows old and dies. Isn't there a point at which we have to focus our practice on something beyond the body?*

BKSI: That's what I am doing! I have not lost my grace. Even though my poses may not be as good as they were, the grace is more, even now. Nobody can present the poses—not even the youngsters—with the grace I bring you. I create the road in my inner body for the intelligence to move in that road. Not elsewhere.

YJ: *Suppose you reach the point when you can no longer do the physical practice at all?*

BKSI: Well, it is possible. Till then, why should I give up before that? I have had some accidents. Some years ago I couldn't even lift my hand, because my shoulder was all injured. My hip was injured. Three or four accidents I had. So these things happen. Injuries come. And still I have to fight. With that pain, I have to do.

The mind says, "No way, it is painful," so you rest. But if I do that, I am lost. Even if the body wears out, even that worn-out body also should keep doing something. What you call the word—sterile? I don't want to be in that state. Many saints, sadhus, yogis—they can't walk, they can't stand. But I say no.

YJ: *But what is the ultimate aim of all this asana practice?*

BKSI: I want my inner energy to touch the cosmic energy. In Patanjali, second chapter, Sutra number 17, it says, "The conjunction between the seer and the seen is the cause of pain. Avoidance of union between them is the remedy to be free from pain." In numbers 22 and 23, it says, "The moment the purpose of nature for the emancipation of the seer is accomplished, nature's relationship with the seer comes to an end. However, the vehicles of nature continue to function for and affect average seers or ordinary people. For one who is able to perceive his own form, the conjunction of nature comes to an end. For others, the conjunction continues." That means the pain continues.

Then, in 23—this is the most important, this is why I am doing asanas. "The purpose of the conjunction of the seer with the seen is for unfolding the inherent powers of nature and spirit so the seer discovers his own true nature." Why I am doing asanas? Now I have given the quotation from *Yoga Sutra*. Why am I doing? So that the nature—even the subtle part of the nature should be known to me. If I don't know the subtle part of the nature, how can I know the subtle seer? That's why I am doing regular practices—so that the nature teaches me.

Because *citta*—the consciousness—is the subtlest vehicle of nature. When the consciousness becomes absolute, then it is seer. That means it has crossed the threshold of nature to come closer to the the seer.

According to *Yoga Sutra* also, contact of nature and spiritual brings affliction. But nature brings knowledge at the same time. So it is another way of thinking, how we can use yoga as an instrument, a needle, to accept the nature's qualities in our favor. In the favor of the soul.

YJ: *And this is something you experience in your practice?*

BKSI: Yes. That's what is the transformation. Can I keep nature under control so that the seer sees everywhere the nature of the body? That's why I am doing mostly difficult poses even today. Otherwise some of the body is dead. Then I can only give academical lectures.

I am drinking the fruit of nature by the practice of yoga so that I can see the seer.

I have seen, but I can't explain. Because if I say that I have seen, I am telling you wrong. If I say I have not seen, I am telling you wrong. An untruth. It's only an experiencing state, that's all. The moment I come to express it, you know that the seer has gone back. It is the mind, the consciousness which speaks, but not the seer. Seer cannot speak. Seer only experiences.

If the cosmic intelligence exists everywhere, individual intelligence has to exist everywhere. Is it existing in the frontiers of the human body? That's why I am doing asanas and pranayama. For God's sake, even if God comes and tells me, "leave the asanas behind," I will say, "No! I will not leave it." Whatever change has come to me, it has come to me through my own practice. That's my God. So even if a saint comes and tells me, "Stop this, stop," I say, "No, it is my God, I will not stop."

That God has taken me to this level. As I said, I could not speak one word in English. I was not knowing philosophy of yoga. Everything these asanas alone taught me to come to this level. How psychology works, how the mind works, how the intelligence works, everything I have learned through this. So my asanas are my God. I can't leave it.

YJ: *You are sometimes criticized for being arrogant.*

BKSI: Because there is no other weakness in me, naturally they want to find something in me. "Oh, Mr. Iyengar is very hotheaded man." I say, if I am hotheaded, let any another person present yoga like me, so that my head becomes cool! I say in the class, "God has permitted me to be full of vanity."

You cannot show vanity because you have not mastered anything. Why are

you showing vanity when you do not know the pose? If I had not known the pose, why should I have vanity? I will show you each and every part, including even here, your neck movement. I can say that you are wrong.

If I am in the class, it is enough for my pupils to do more. Whether I look at them or not. Why they do better? Ask them! They will tell you! They will say immediately that there is something in the class, a vibration. If I am not there, no vibration! So whether I teach, or I don't teach, the vibration is there. The moment I am there, the vibration comes. Even some people say, "I am thinking that Mr. Iyengar must have walked this way. Something happened to me in my body." And it is true that I went that way!

YJ: *And where do you think that vibration comes from?*

BKSI: My body is singing, ringing yoga. So naturally one has to feel the bell when I walk by.

YJ: *So I suppose that after all this exposure, I should go home and practice right away?*

BKSI: Naturally! That will teach you automatically! Why should I say no? Then you will realize what power it gives. ◆

Anne Cushman is a senior editor of Yoga Journal *and the author of* From Here to Nirvana: The Yoga Journal Guide to Spiritual India, *to be published next spring by Riverhead Books.*

RESOURCES

B.K.S. Iyengar's *Light on Yoga, Light on Pranayama,* and *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* are available from *YJ*'s Book & Tape Source on page 120.