

A biography of BKS Iyengar

by
Kofi Busia

1) A good time to be born?

During 1918, children all over the world who were playing jump rope were skipping and jumping, and singing a mournful new ditty doing the rounds:

*I had a little bird,
Its name was Enza.
I opened the window,
And in-flu-enza.*

Two terrors had gripped the world. One was the First World War of 1914-18; the other was the worldwide 'flu pandemic of 1916-18. The 'flu was far and away the bigger killer. The 1918 pandemic is widely regarded as the most devastating epidemic in recorded history. It affected one-fifth of the world. It killed more people in one year than were killed in all the four years in which the Black Death, the bubonic plague of 1347-51, raged. The virus responsible was particularly virulent, striking grimly, effectively, and without warning. Another feature of this epidemic was that whereas most types of 'flu virus tended to pick off the old and the young differentially, this particular strain seemed to prefer those between 20 and 45. Its effect was so great that the average US life span declined by 10 years. Physicians all over the world were rendered powerless. People walking to work would suddenly be struck down with illness and be dead within hours. In one case, four women sat down for a hand of bridge, intending to play late into the night. But by dawn, three of them had contracted the 'flu and had died.

Although this was a worldwide scourge, killing upwards of 70 million in its wake, no country suffered more gravely than India. According to some estimates, 16,000,000 Indians died during the 13-month period between June 1918 and July 1919. India suffered more casualties in those few months than were inflicted by the entire War in the rest of the world put together. The first cases of the 'flu were recorded in Mumbai (formerly known as Bombay) in June 1918. By July, Karachi and Chennai (formerly known as Madras) were being devastated. India's situation was greatly exacerbated by the fact that most of its doctors were in active service with the British Army. This left the country unable to cope effectively with the epidemic. There was a shortage of doctors, nurses and medical supplies. To add to the situation, this was an era when antibiotics did not exist. Bodies piled up everywhere as the high death rate so characteristic of the epidemic took hold.

2) The five duties of the Iyengars

Inevitably, the '16-'18 'flu pandemic made its way to the small village of Bellur, in Karnataka State, South India. There lived a small community of Brahmins, all bearing the name of 'Iyengar',

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an Anglicized version of a Tamil/Kannada name originally meaning ‘the people entrusted with the “pancha samskara” or “five duties”’. Although members of the Iyengar community were far from wealthy, the five tasks they had been charged with gave them esteem and made them socially prominent.

The Iyengars were traditionally Vaishnavites and Vedantists. They were followers of Vishnu, the second deity in the Hindu Trinity; and they were also followers of the Vedanta philosophy, one of the six classical ‘darsanas’ or ‘visionings’ of India. These are based on the Vedas and the Upanishads, traditional religious and philosophical texts. More specifically, the Iyengars followed the Visisthadvaita or ‘qualified non-difference’ personalized philosophy of Spirit so brilliantly codified by Ramanuja. It declares that there exists an Ultimate Reality which is in Itself the source of all things, and which is also the foundation for the existence of all things. This Ultimate Reality is the ‘in-dweller’ in all things no matter how diverse, and no matter whether they be animate or inanimate. This being so, it is the duty of all beings to seek ‘moksha’, the final liberating communion with that Most Gracious, All-Loving and All-Powerful Supreme Being. The way to that moksha is through complete self-surrender, allied to a ceaseless and loving meditation upon that Supreme.

So that all beings might ultimately attain moksha the Iyengars, as a community, are charged with these five tasks:

1. thapa samskara

where a disciple’s right and left arms are ritualistically embossed with the sankara or conch, and the sudarshana chakra or discus respectively. Vishnu, the god of preservation, holds a conch which represents space and also the life that emerges from the life-giving waters. He also wields the sudarshana chakra which is created from the energies of the trinity of deities, Brahma, Vishnu and Siva. Since Vishnu supports all beings, and all things are composed of Him, when He releases His sudarshana chakra it remains constantly within His power, flies to exactly the point intended, decomposes that object back to its essential ingredients—which is Himself—and then returns back to Him. So also, the ritualistic embossing of the conch and the discus upon the arms of a disciple signifies the acceptance of the fact that Vishnu pervades all, is the origin of all, and that to Him all things will ultimately return.

2. pundra samskara

which is full knowledge of the 12 places in the body in which Narayana, another name for Vishnu as the Supreme Lord, resides. These are also the 12 places in which He can be readily saluted by any who care to study their body. These 12 locations are: the forehead; the right, the middle and the left sides of the neck; the chest; the right and the left arms; the right, the middle and the left sides of the lower abdomen; and finally, the upper and the lower parts of the back.

3. nama samskara

is where the disciple places the epithet 'dasa' at the end of his or her name to signify that he or she has become, and forever will be, a servant of Narayana. The Lord's earnest servant Ramanuja proclaimed the name of God with such intensity, fervour and devotion that all beings were led to understand more clearly the eternal truths contained in the Vedas and Upanishads. All disciples should seek to emulate Ramanuja. The reception of the dasa name helps to inculcate this devout and reverential attitude.

4. mantra samskara

which is the regular repetition of the three great secrets of existence. This is achieved by the constant chanting or recitation of three important mantras. These are:

(a) 'aum namo Narayanaya'

which is the ashtakshara or eight-syllabled mantra of Lord Narayana. It is also known as the 'mula' or 'root' mantra and means 'aum praises to Narayana'. Chanting it releases all beings from bondage.

(b) the dvaya mantra

which is two lines long and says 'Sriman Narayanaya charanau saranam prapadye; Srimate Narayanaya namah'. This is also often called the 'mantra ratna' or 'jewel amongst mantras' and means 'I seek refuge at the feet of Sriman Narayana; My salutations to Sriman Narayana'.

(c) the charama sloka

the third great secret or mantra, and possibly the most often-quoted verse in the *Bhagavad Gita* or *Song of God*, India's most popular religious text. In the last chapter, in verse XVIII:66, Krishna says 'sarvadharmam parityajya mam ekam saranam vraja; aham tva sarva papebhyo moksa yisyami ma sucah' meaning 'Having given up all religious injunctions, surrender yourself fully to Me. Be not afraid for I will release you from all sins'.

5. yajna samskara

or the dedication duty which is a promise to learn and then to undertake the proper ways of worshipping Narayana. There are both external forms requiring ritualistic observances and duties; and internal forms requiring a correct inner attitude along with suitable prayers and mediations.

These are the five accepted duties of an Iyengar, having both gross and subtle, and external and internal forms.

3) His parents and his birth

Counted amongst the Iyengars, and resident in Bellur, were Sheshamma and her husband, a school teacher by the name of Sri Krishnamachar Iyengar. When Sheshamma fell pregnant, the 'flu pandemic had yet to hit India. But by the time she was ready to deliver, it was at its peak. On Saturday December 14th, 1918, due to the efforts of the suffragettes, British women were at last able to stand as candidates for a general election and to vote. The first woman elected was the Irish nationalist Countess Markievicz of Sinn Fein, although she could not take up her seat for she was in jail. But since she was not in any case prepared to swear allegiance to the British Crown, the point was moot.

At 3 am in the morning of that same day, Sheshamma gave birth to her 11th child. But since she had in the mean time contracted the 'flu, her new arrival was weak and sickly, and few held out much hope for his survival. Sheshamma's latest child was a boy—an Iyengar. He was given the names Bellur Krishnamachar Sundararaja.

4) His childhood

BKS Iyengar was born into a large but poor family. The omens for his survival were not good. As he put it: 'I looked sickly with thin arms and legs, a protruding stomach and a heavy head. My appearance was not prepossessing'. He was weak and sickly, and his childhood was marked with one bout of ill health after another. Most notably, he was a victim of malaria, typhoid and tuberculosis. The general malnutrition caused by poverty merely exacerbated the situation, and sometimes he would have more than one of these ailments to contend with. At one point, the doctors predicted that he would not live past 20. The constant bouts of ill health kept him away from school for long periods, and his education suffered. Fortunately, however, the school he attended taught English, a subject that would stand him in extremely good stead later.

5) Krishnamacharya: the Guru

When BKS Iyengar was but eight-and-a-half years old, his father, Sri Krishnamachar, died. This put further stress on his family, and the young Iyengar was sent to Bangalore to live with one of his brothers. But while he was passing through his painful and difficult childhood, an extremely accomplished man named Tirumalai Krishnamacharya was busy educating himself widely and deeply in yoga and the Indian philosophies.

Krishnamacharya studied in Varanasi, Nepal and several other places, including seven years in Tibet. A polymath, he gained degrees from some of the best universities in India, including the Royal College of Mysore. In 1924 he returned to his native Karnataka. Against much opposition, for even in India yoga was not yet recognized as a serious profession, Krishnamacharya decided that he would teach yoga. It was not long before he came to the attention of Sri Krishnaraja

Wodeyar Bahadur IV, the Maharaja of Mysore. The Maharaja offered Krishnamacharya patronage, and he became a personal advisor to the Royal Family, having the run of the Jagamohan Palace in Mysore. The Maharajah also endowed a Yogashala (school of yoga) for Krishnamacharya. And now that he had status, a profession and money, Krishnamacharya felt ready to marry. As fate would have it, the woman Krishnamacharya married was Namagiriyamma, one of BKS Iyengar's older sisters.

Krishnamacharya and Iyengar met for the first time in March 1934 when Iyengar was 16. It was the Maharajah of Mysore's custom to send Krishnamacharya to various places to spread knowledge of yoga. On one of those educational visits Krishnamacharya and some of his pupils were due to visit Kaivalyadham at Lonavala, in the foothills between Mumbai and Pune (at one time often written as 'Poona'). Krishnamacharya stopped off in Bangalore, where Iyengar was then living with his brother. He asked Iyengar to please go to Mysore to take care of Krishnamacharya's wife, and Iyengar's sister, until Krishnamacharya could return. The young Iyengar had heard of the lush palaces in Mysore, and curious to see them for himself he was more than willing to accede to this request. His new brother-in-law therefore bought him the fateful railway ticket to stay with his sister that would change his life.

When Krishnamacharya returned to Mysore, Iyengar asked for his brother-in-law's permission to return to his home in Bangalore. To Iyengar's surprise, Krishnamacharya refused. He instead suggested that Iyengar should remain in Mysore. He could enrol at the Mysore High School while Krishnamacharya taught him a few yoga asanas, or postures, at the Yogashala to improve his health. The two offers were tempting for Iyengar was not only grateful for the opportunity to perhaps catch up on some of his missed studies, but of even greater interest was the possibility that he might at last be able to improve his health. The plan was duly set in motion. And when Krishnamacharya was confronted with Iyengar's stiff, weak and sickly body, he apparently predicted that Iyengar would never amount to much in yoga. But since it was Krishnamacharya who planted the seed of yoga in him, BKS Iyengar calls Krishnamacharya his guru.

6) First steps in yoga

The young BKS Iyengar had spent most of his childhood in bed recovering from one bout of sickness after another. He was understandably extremely weak and stiff. When he bent down in a despairing effort to touch his toes, his hands would barely reach down as far as his knees. His body did not take well to the physical activity imposed upon it by the new regimen of asana practice prescribed by his recently acquired Guru. Iyengar worked hard but his body just did not seem to respond. Krishnamacharya was stern and demanding—a perfectionist and a taskmaster. He would force Iyengar to have classes at least twice a day, and sometimes more. Iyengar recalls suffering severe aches and pains and intense fatigue, but his diligence was unrelenting. Iyengar was not

developing much of a love for yoga. Another problem was that outside of the asana classes, Krishnamacharya paid virtually no attention to him.

The plan to study at Mysore High School having fallen through, Iyengar's life was far from enjoyable and he spent his time in between asana sessions doing such things as watering the plants and undertaking other menial tasks. About the only relief he had was a friendship he formed with his roommate, Keshavamurthy, who also happened to be Krishnamacharya's favourite pupil and chosen protégé. Although Krishnamacharya continued to pay scant attention to Iyengar, Iyengar himself noticed that the magic of yoga was beginning to take hold. His health was slowly but surely improving.

7) The supremely diligent student

The Maharajah of Mysore still liked to send Krishnamacharya and a few of his star pupils to various locations around India to give lectures and demonstrations on yoga. Sometimes, however, those lecture-demonstrations were held at the Yogashala itself. After Iyengar had been with his guru for about a year or so, one such important demonstration, to be attended by some important dignitaries, was pending. As usual, Keshavamurthy was to be the star attraction.

BKS Iyengar's new life was set firmly on its new path when, early one morning, Keshavamurthy simply disappeared off the face of the earth and could not be found anywhere. He was never to return. Being only days away from the Yogashala's very important demonstration, Krishnamacharya grew desperate. He had little alternative but to turn his attention to his earnest new pupil. He quickly began teaching Iyengar some of the more advanced asanas that were to be the climax of the demonstration, and Iyengar could do nothing but make the best efforts he could. He practised diligently and surprised his teacher by performing exceptionally well at the demonstration.

If Krishnamacharya now realized that he had the stuff of gold in his hands, he did not show it in any way—except to begin instructing this exceptionally diligent pupil in earnest, and to impose upon him the toughest and most difficult of routines. Iyengar responded to this attention by making extremely rapid progress. He was soon assisting his guru in the classes at the Yogashala. He also took Keshavamurthy's place and accompanied Krishnamacharya to a variety of yoga demonstrations around the country.

Although people were beginning to sing Iyengar's praises both inside and outside the Yogashala, relations with his guru did not improve much. At one demonstration Krishnamacharya had indicated to Iyengar which poses he was to perform, and in what order. Iyengar had practised them, only for Krishnamacharya to suddenly change the content and order of the programme. Amongst other things, he was now to perform Hanumanasana (the full splits). Iyengar complained that he had never been taught this and so could not do it, and in any case his shorts were too tight.

Krishnamacharya simply called for a pair of scissors, quietly cut a slit along each side of Iyengar's shorts, and said "You can do it now". Iyengar was forced to comply and tore his hamstrings in the process. Feeling hemmed in on every side, Iyengar was now praying that he would soon leave what he later came to call 'this bondage'.

8) The first classes

Fortunately for BKS Iyengar, his escape route from this perceived tyranny was at hand. In late 1936 the Maharajah of Mysore instructed Krishnamacharya to go to northern Karnataka to give a lecture and demonstration in yoga. Krishnamacharya took Iyengar with him. Some of the ladies in the audience were very impressed and wanted to learn something of yoga. But with the Indian modesty of the time, they were very unwilling to be taught by any of the older men. As the youngest in the group, the 18-year old Sundararaja was deputed, by Krishnamacharya, to instruct them. Thus begun Iyengar's career as a teacher of yoga. In the mean time, he continued with his intense practice routine and his health continued to improve.

The fame of Krishnamacharya and his Yogashala had spread far and wide. In 1937, Dr. Gokhale, on behalf of members of the Deccan Gymkhana Club in Pune, Maharashtra State, wrote to Krishnamacharya asking him to send them a yoga teacher on a six-month contract. The Deccan Gymkhana being one of the oldest and most prestigious sports clubs in all of India, Krishnamacharya was thrilled to receive such an honour. Unfortunately, in spite of the importance of the offer, none of the Yogashala's students was particularly keen to go. To begin with, they had all, except Iyengar, studied at the Mysore Sanskrit Patshala. So although fluent in Sanskrit as well as their native Kannada, none of them could speak either Marathi, the language of Pune and Maharashtra, or English. And since, although it was at that stage still poor, the young Sundararaja Iyengar spoke the best English, Krishnamacharya ordered him to go and fill the position. And with that, BKS Iyengar's two-year apprenticeship with his Guru came to an end. He went to Pune to try his hand at being an independent teacher of yoga. Although, given the nature of the appointment, he went with some trepidation, he was also very relieved to be leaving. He would much prefer if he did not have to return.

9) The beginning of "Iyengar yoga"

When BKS Iyengar arrived in Pune to begin his new life, he had no family around him, no friends, and no money. He was now 18 years old. His grasp of English, the one factor supposedly in his favour, was very shaky to say the least! Due to the fact that his ill health had made him constantly miss classes, he had ended up failing his matriculation examination in English by three points. He was doubly disadvantaged in that he also could not speak Marathi, the local language. Never having finished even his High School education, he was acutely aware that he had no real skills. It

was make or break time for the young man. Either he began making a living from this opportunity to teach yoga, or he return to the Yogashala penniless and without any real prospects for an independent life. He had but one thing going for him ... his immense dedication to his daily practice routine.

Although India was the home of yoga, it was still a minority interest. Only those with a sufficiently large surplus of funds to devote to such an interest could possibly afford to attend a yoga class. Having come from an extremely impoverished background Iyengar therefore found himself mixing, through his work with the Gymkhana, with a wordly and accomplished group of people, all with a far higher educational level than his own. None of them, furthermore, had had to contend with the problems of malnutrition, illness, and weakness of health that he had had to contend with. Iyengar therefore found himself teaching yoga to people who were not only wealthier and better educated than he was, they also tended to be bigger, stronger, better fed and healthier. The Deccan was, after all, a very serious sports club that regularly produced national and international champions and had a membership to reflect this. It was humiliating to him that some of his early students, particularly those coming from the Deccan Gymkhana's famous gymnasium, seemed to have a native talent for doing the asanas, and so could do them better than he could even though he was supposed to be the teacher. They could also sometimes even correct his faltering English while outperforming him in the postures.

Iyengar had an additional problem. His own guru, Krishnamacharya, had never really divulged any systematic techniques for achieving the postures. So Iyengar did not know how to transmit the techniques effectively. He realized for himself that there were only three ways out of this particular difficulty. His first option was to consult his Guru regularly. His second was to read many books, to memorize their contents, and then to divulge them to his students. His third was to instruct his students from a direct personal experience. As to the first option, since Krishnamacharya was now hundreds of miles away, this was not possible. In any case, their personal relations had never been of this cosy nature which is why Iyengar had come to Pune in the first place. As to the second, Iyengar did not know where to get such books ... and even if they could be obtained, such was his character that he was not prepared to pass on second-hand information. So only the third option remained. Iyengar therefore opted to practise with renewed vigour so that he could gain as much first-hand information as rapidly as possible so that he could then pass it on to those who came to study with him. With a zeal and an intensity unmatched virtually anywhere in any discipline, BKS Iyengar set about gaining the first-hand direct experiential information that he needed in order to fulfill his new responsibilities as a teacher of yoga.

10) The news begins to spread

Unfortunately, Iyengar was still not earning enough money from his yoga teaching to survive. But this did not deter him from what he saw as a necessity. Hungry or not he would continue with his strict and rigorous practice routine. Days would go by when he had no more than a cup of tea to sustain him. A plate of rice would have to be rationed out to last him for three days. At other times he would fill his belly with water from an outside tap just so that his stomach would feel full enough not to bother him for a while. That done, he would return to his practising. Nothing swayed him from his dedication to his chosen task: to become the most effective teacher and practitioner it was in him to be. The only alternative was to return to the Yogashala in Mysore and lick his wounds. He was not yet ready for that.

Slowly and gradually, the many hours of intense practice that Iyengar put in began to bear fruit. As his knowledge and understanding increased, so also did the clarity, acuity, perceptiveness and relevance of his instructions. His pupils noticed these things ... and his reputation as an accomplished and effective teacher of yoga began to grow. Word of his skill as an instructor reached the authorities in charge of the Deccan Gymkhana and they duly showed their appreciation by extending his original six-month contract to three years. They also wanted him to teach more widely in a variety of the schools, colleges and physical education establishments that they oversaw around the city. This stability also allowed him to try to find other locations in which he could try his hand at teaching some of his own classes. It was still difficult to make a living, particularly because he was sometimes forced to cancel classes at the last moment when it turned out that one or another of the locations he was slated to use was suddenly unavailable because of some more important engagement. But his reputation for excellence eventually reached as far as Mumbai some 220 kilometres away. In 1940 he agreed to start a regular weekend class in the Bulbai Memorial Institute in that city even though it meant a six-hour train ride there, and then another six-hour one back in order to honour the commitment. But ... this turned out to be one of the wisest decisions of his life. His Mumbai class was to prove possibly the most critical engagement of his career.

11) The blessings of marriage

Iyengar's obsession with practice did not go unobserved by his neighbours. Some of them thought him frankly insane. He could be observed prowling the streets looking, for example, for heavy cobblestones. When he found them he would then sit calmly down in the street, draw his heels in close to his perineum, spread his knees wide out to either side, place the stones upon his knees, and then sit there steadily for hours at a time ostensibly improving his baddhakonasana (the wide-angle or cobbler's pose, one of the classic yoga positions). Or ... a road-building crew would pack up for the night or for the weekend and leave a previously innocuous object such as a steam roller parked there until its return. Before anyone knew what had happened, BKS Iyengar would arrive and have

worked out some way to drape himself over it in an effort—ultimately successful—to improve his practice and understanding of urdhva dhanurasana (the raised bow or “wheel” pose, another of the classic yoga asanas).

The neighbours might have been concerned, but they had in fact been given a front row seat from which they could observe the genesis of another of the distinguishing hallmarks of the developing Iyengar yoga. The master was trying to find a method to deal with yet another of the challenges that faced him as a teacher. The people now coming to him for classes were far less fit and accomplished than were the people who had generally enrolled to study at Krishnamacharya’s Yogashala. Krishnamacharya’s students at that time tended to be young people. They were usually boys of roughly school-going age and therefore largely without the array of problems and difficulties facing the much older students now confronting Iyengar. Iyengar’s concern was finding ways to enable those who were that little bit stiffer and older to master the postures he wanted to teach them. It was thus Iyengar who devised methods to use simple everyday objects—things that could be found in any home—such as walls, ropes, chairs, belts, blocks and blankets, as aids and props. His intent was to enable people of every shape, size, and level of ability to place themselves in the most beneficial positions so that they could derive the maximum benefits that yoga had to offer in any and all poses they attempted. So effective was this approach that a healthy market now exists for ‘yoga props’ and for accoutrements of every description. And when standard everyday objects would not suffice, Iyengar proceeded to invent his own. A healthy commercial market also exists for ‘backbenders’, ‘heart chakra openers’, ‘yoga walls’, ‘halasana benches’, and other such devices, all originally invented by him and built to his precise design specifications by local craftsmen ... who were generally mystified as to what exactly they were building.

Iyengar was deeply concerned with helping the sick people who frequently came to his classes. He did not want to turn anyone away. He had used yoga to heal himself, and he was completely convinced that if he would but put his mind to it, he would be able to devise healing methods and practices to benefit his students. To Iyengar, therefore, asana became a healing practice. Yoga was therapy. He set about devising specific programmes of practice to benefit students. Due to the rigour and intensity of his own practice, his observation, and his complete familiarity with the workings of the human body, he was ultimately able to bring relief to thousands of people sporting a bewilderingly wide array of health issues and disabilities be their problems physical, psychological, emotional or spiritual. Although other yoga systems and teachers began to advertise themselves as also having therapeutic benefits, Iyengar’s expertise remains untouched. Anyone seriously wanting assistance in yoga therapeutics, or else wanting to undertake research in the efficacy of yoga, either goes straight to BKS Iyengar or to someone trained by him and in his methods.

But since these achievements of BKS Iyengar were still some way in the future, the neighbours' concerns needed to be addressed. Word about their doubts and worries concerning his overall mental state reached his brothers who then felt it best to take action. Their solution was to advise him to get married. They were convinced that this would force him to 'settle down' and adopt a more normal pattern of life. But Iyengar was resistant. His classes were growing, albeit slowly. In any case, what other trade could he ply? He did not want anything to interfere with his long practices. They were the foundation of his entire technique. Moreover, he did not feel that he was yet earning enough to support a family. He was barely able to support himself. But Iyengar's brothers were insistent. They cast around for a suitable match. They eventually found a delightful 16-year old girl, Srimati Ramamani. They then went back to Iyengar to promote her as a prospect. The most they could get from him was a grudging agreement to at least meet her. And upon meeting her he was most taken with her, as she also was with him. They both willingly consented to the arrangement. He and Ramamani were duly married in 1943.

When she married her Sundararaja, Ramamani knew nothing about yoga. That notwithstanding, she soon became the unwavering source of all his strength, of his commitment, and of the progress that he continued to make in his career as a teacher. She supported his practice, providing him with everything he needed in the way of space, time, and energy. She became his finest critic and his most knowledgeable advisor. She provided him with feedback in his many investigations. But Ramamani also bore him five daughters and one son which she took care of happily, making sure that her husband had all the time he needed to continue with his investigations into the mysteries of life through asana, and so that he could then pass on what he had uncovered to others through his teachings. Indeed, it was Ramamani, and not her husband, who introduced their children to yoga.

That Iyengar had made another good move in marrying Ramamani, and that she was the ideal partner to him, is confirmed by a story he often recounts. He dates his 'sudden interest in yoga', as he later put it, to 1946—when he had been married for three years, and had already been practicing with ever-increasing intensity for over twelve! Iyengar apparently dreamed that he saw the family deity, Lord Venkateshwara, also commonly known as Balaji, who blessed him with one hand and gave him a few grains of rice with the other. Balaji also spoke to him and told him that yoga and its practising and teaching were to be his vocation, and that from that moment on he was to have no further worries about his welfare. Iyengar awoke to find, to his surprise, that Ramamani had also had a dream that very same night. In her dream, Lakshmi, the goddess of prosperity, had placed a coin in her hand saying that it was the return of some money borrowed from Iyengar long before. They were both amazed. And the very next day some of Iyengar's pupils contacted him wanting to arrange a fuller programme of lessons. According to Iyengar, up until that day he had done yoga not for any pleasure it might have brought him, but simply as a way of earning a living.

But from that point on, his attitude shifted and he began to do yoga for its own sake and for no other reason.

In spite of their concordant dreams, life for the Iyengar couple did not improve immediately. Nevertheless, it was also true that from that point on their stars remained constantly in the ascendant. Iyengar began to gain influential pupils. He was soon teaching many members of Indian royalty, along with many of the country's most prominent business, sports and entertainment personalities. He also gave hundreds upon hundreds of demonstrations before dignitaries of all kinds such as Rajendra Prasad, the first President of India. Thus within a few years of the auspicious dream, Iyengar was teaching people as famous as the philosopher and sage Jiddhu Krishnamurti, and Jayaprakash Narayan who was involved in the fight for India's independence. He became one of India's star attractions and was regularly called upon to give demonstrations to visiting dignitaries and heads of state so they could admire, along with the Taj Mahal, some of the other wonders that India had to offer. He gave demonstrations in front of Pope Paul VI, and Mohamad Hatta, the President of Indonesia. Dr. G. S. Pathak, the Vice President of India, was but one of the famous people who became an Iyengar student. Another famous student who was to become particularly significant to the development of Iyengar's career was Dr. Rustom Jal Vakil, India's internationally renowned coronary and hypertension specialist. Vakil is widely regarded as 'the father of modern cardiology' and was awarded the highly prestigious Albert Lasker award in 1957 for his 'brilliant and systematic studies on rauwolfia [used as a traditional Indian/ayurvedic herbal remedy] in hypertension and his effective bridging of the gap between Indian experience and that of Western medicine'. BKS Iyengar was soon busy snapping up students of no mean distinction. Many of them were garnered through the reputation built up by his initially unrewarding classes in Mumbai.

12) The maestro and the queen

In 1948 the famous violin virtuoso Yehudi Menuhin was sitting in his osteopath's office waiting for his appointment when a small book on yoga caught his eye. He was already suffering from a variety of the muscle and skeletal aches and pains that have ruined the career of many a budding string player. Since he knew nothing about yoga Menuhin, a very curious man with immensely broad interests, opened the book. He was immediately fascinated by the contents and felt he would like to know more about this subject.

As well as being one of the greatest violinists of all time, Yehudi Menuhin was an enormously generous man with global and humanitarian interests. He was famous for his charity concerts in support of causes that interested him. In 1952 he was invited to India by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, to give such a series of concerts. He met Nehru for the first time after one of the scheduled concerts and mentioned the book he had read. Nehru smiled and

immediately dared Menuhin to stand on his head. Much to everyone's surprise Menuhin accomplished this successfully. Nehru then displayed his own headstand. This relatively light-hearted incident made the headlines all over India. Yoga teachers from every quarter tried to contact the violin wunderkind to offer him their guidance. Menuhin met and took lessons from a goodly number, but none of them particularly impressed him. But he did mention his interest to Dr. Rustam Vakil's wife. She immediately referred him to the family guru, BKS Iyengar.

Word was sent to BKS Iyengar, and arrangements were made for them to meet. The only time Menuhin could find free for his first yoga session was 7 am in the morning. Somewhat reluctantly, Iyengar made the 7-hour journey for what was supposed to be a quick five-minute session before Menuhin had to leave for another appointment. The five minute session stretched out into three and a half hours as Menuhin began to feel transformed and revitalised doing a few asanas under Iyengar's instruction. And when Menuhin mentioned that he was almost constantly fatigued, was never really able to relax, and was unable to sleep, in less than one minute Iyengar apparently had him dozing and snoring gently away for the first time in days! The two men formed an extremely close friendship which lasted until Menuhin's death 47 years later in 1999.

In 1954, Menuhin returned to Mumbai. He and Iyengar had corresponded regularly. Even by mail, Menuhin had received enough assistance and benefits for him to know that he wanted to commit himself as a regular student. He informed Iyengar as much. Menuhin became an earnest and diligent student, making his yoga practice a regular feature of his life. In 1982, for example, he was invited to conduct the celebrated Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra at its 100th jubilee celebrations. He conducted the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony standing on his head while directing the orchestra with his feet. Under the programme of asanas that Iyengar prescribed for him Yehudi Menuhin's muscular pains disappeared completely. Menuhin wrote that "yoga made its contribution to my quest to understand consciously the mechanics of violin playing", and he also called Iyengar "my best violin teacher".

Menuhin's schedule was busy and it was not practical for him to return constantly to India to have yoga lessons. He therefore invited Iyengar to leave India with him as his private tutor. A benefit would be that Iyengar would also be able to pass on his teachings to others. Iyengar accepted this invitation, and travelled with Menuhin to Britain, France and Switzerland, giving his first demonstrations in all those places. Iyengar met and taught some of the most famous artists and musicians in the world such as the pianists Sir Clifford Curzon and Lilli Kraus, and the cellist Jacqueline du Pre.

One particularly significant person that Iyengar met during this period was the redoubtable lady Queen Elisabeth, the Queen Mother of Belgium. She and her husband King Albert I had together steered Belgium through the disasters of the First World War. Her husband's heroic resistance leading the Belgian Army against superior German forces had given the French enough

time to stage what became known as ‘the Miracle of the Marne’. Elisabeth had distinguished herself in the war by not only opening a field hospital, but by serving in it personally as a nurse, even though it was at that time unheard of for any member of any Royal Family to minister to wounded common soldiers. Unfortunately, King Albert died tragically in a mountain accident in February 1934, the same year that Iyengar met his Guru and began his life of yoga. Queen Elisabeth was therefore alone when a second and far more devastating invasion by the Germans occurred in the Second World War. This time she was relatively helpless to assist. She found solace in her art, her music, and her charitable works. But once her country was liberated, she swung into action, involving herself deeply in the restoration of her country. In 1958, she became the first member of the European royalty to be received at the Kremlin—something that resonated with Iyengar given that he himself gave demonstrations in front of Marshal Bulganin, an ex-Premier of Russia, and Nikita Krushchev, First Secretary of the Communist Party of Russia. In 1961 the Queen Mother even visited China despite the fact that it was against the express wishes of her grandson King Baudouin. He said ‘Grandmother, you are going to bother quite a few people’. She replied by saying ‘... thanks to the Lord those people are fewer and fewer every day’.

BKS Iyengar was introduced to Queen Elisabeth in 1958 when she was already 85 years old. She wanted to learn to stand on her head and was not about to take ‘No’ for an answer saying: ‘if you can’t teach me to stand on my head, you can leave’. With some trepidation, and acutely aware what headlines there would be if the august queen did not survive the experience, Iyengar carefully positioned his feet and his body to allow for the maximum possibility of success and hoisted her up onto her head. Although this was remarkable enough, everyone around was rather more concerned with whether or not he could bring her down safely again. Queen Elisabeth was so taken with Iyengar that she gave him the first of the two gifts that ever afterwards remained precious to him. This first one was a bust of herself. She had sculpted it with her own hands. He treasured it ever afterwards, and it would take pride of place in the institute he would later build.

In 1965 Iyengar was teaching in Gstaad, Switzerland, when he received a telephone call from Queen Elisabeth, then 92 years old. She had just suffered a stroke. She requested his presence. He flew to her immediately. Under his instruction she was able to regain a respectable amount of movement. She could again hold and use a fork. He received the second of ‘the two great gifts she gave to me’, as he would later put it, when it was time for him to depart. Iyengar’s erstwhile queen tearfully held up her right cheek, spoke directly to him and commanded: “Kiss me”. He bent forwards and did so; and when she offered the other cheek he kissed that one also. With the tears now rolling freely down her face the Queen bade farewell to her Indian guru for the last time. The great lady died shortly afterwards on November 23rd., 1965.

13) Light in Europe

BKS Iyengar had now had the opportunity to visit Europe. He had met many dignitaries, formed extremely close relationships with a few of them, and been able to give them the benefit of his many deep and intensive years of practice and reflection. But if that had been his sole achievement, the story of Iyengar yoga would have ended right there and then. People like Menuhin and Queen Elisabeth of Belgium would have died with fond memories of their private yoga teacher and the rest of the world would have been none the wiser. But ... that was not all there was to Iyengar; and no more so was that all that there was to the unique insights and teachings he had developed.

India was granted its independence from the British rule on August 15th, 1947. All through the 1930s, '40s and 50s interest in all things Indian grew. The world at large learned more about India's ancient heritage, its philosophy, its arts and crafts, its music and its culture. When Iyengar first went to Europe in 1954, it was the first time that many Westerners had been exposed to yoga. As the 'counter-culture' revolution of the 1960s hit its stride, such things as yoga and meditation became a part of world culture. The name of BKS Iyengar may not, at any one given moment, have been as widely recognizable as that of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, Sri Chinmoy, or Ravi Shankar, but he has lasted as long as any and he is now at the very least as well known as they. He is considerably better known than many others who had their ten minutes of fame and then disappeared into obscurity. His name is associated with his great discovery. Iyengar yoga is a household term and has entered the Oxford English dictionary. It is indeed arguable that over his lifetime BKS Iyengar has done more than any other person to spread the word about the practice and benefits of yoga. This begs the two questions 'Why?', and 'How?'.

Iyengar's achievements rest on his pedagogical approach: his theory of and approach to practising and teaching. His own adventure with teaching yoga began because he wished to resolve a specific problem: how to teach what he had himself learned in such a way that it was clear and easy to understand to those who came to study with him. Days and weeks and months and years of deep and intense study and reflection had gradually enabled him to draw forth the essential principles. Yet although the essential principles he elucidated were easy to grasp, the depth and profundity of the human mind and spirit—the real topics in yoga—remained ever evident. Even as his steadily increasing number of 'Iyengar yoga students' set to on absorbing the fundamentals he gave them, they could appreciate, right from the outset, that he was also making available to them a lifetime of opportunities for the study of body, mind, and the spirit ... of the diverse interactivity yet unity of these. Iyengar's students were able to make immediate, genuine, but non-trivial beginnings to a study they could see would reshape their lives. The same technique he had used to help Queen Elisabeth stand on her head at 85, or remedy Menuhin's musculature in his violin playing would work for anyone no matter what their build, disposition or circumstance. The Iyengar

techniques were not reserved for the famous or for royalty. They were intended for, and available to, anyone.

As yoga, meditation, and other such distinctively India activities increased their profile, so also did Iyengar's name. The reason was simple. He was offering ordinary people the same commodity he was offering the entitled, the rich, and the famous: an opportunity to grow in spirit and to gain satisfaction in life by applying the deceptively simple techniques he had gleaned through years of dedicated study. Word spread, all over Europe, about the magic that BKS Iyengar could weave by no more than getting people to move their fingers and toes. From all corners of the continent, students flocked to him.

14) Light in Inner London

When his great patron Queen Elisabeth of Belgium died, Iyengar had already been teaching yoga for nearly 30 years. His life was his teaching; and his teaching was his life. The two were infused with an intensity and a clarity of practice that were second to none. They had also become a conscious expression of two great traditions to which he constantly referred. They were in many ways personified in and by his wife, Ramamani. He often expressed his motivations by saying that he lived his life in the light of the two great deities which had infused his life. One was his family deity, Lord Venkateshwara or Balaji who had told him he was to devote his life to yoga, and blessed him with his dream of a few grains of rice. The other was Sage Patañjali, legendary author of yoga's great text the *Yoga Sutras*, and its systematizer and codifier.

Iyengar had been born into a Vaishnavite and Vedantic tradition. He thus believed that an Ultimate Reality existed. It dwelt inside everything. Everything was composed of it. It could be sought. It ought to be sought. Iyengar's own Vedantic tradition stemmed from Ramanuja. As with most Vedantic schools, it was monistic. Ramanuja's praise and devotion tradition sought an active communion with the Most Gracious All-Loving Divine which is in all things and composes all things. This contrasted with Patañjali's codification of yoga which is dualistic. Where the Vedantic-Ramanujan tradition sees the world as composed of one substance which is inherently divine, Patañjali's yoga universe is divided into the separate realms of matter and Spirit. The two are utterly distinct. But as a follower of Ramanuja's brand of Visisthadvaita or 'qualified non-difference', Iyengar believed that the Supreme was expressed in a much more personalized form than was the case with most other schools of Vedanta. His view was therefore that each individual contained an in-dwelling spirit. That reality was to be sought for and expressed. That ceaseless search for the liberation of that inner being led to his specific synthesis—the very particular approach he developed to yoga in general, and to the asanas in particular. The perfect divine was to be sought in the endless possibilities for perfection in body through asana.

Iyengar's whole approach to yoga stemmed from his background. He had first come to the practice in great sickness. It had then healed him. In doing so, it had brought him to a new understanding of the reality lying behind existence. His practices had led him to that vision and understanding. In *70 Glorious Years of Yogacharya B. K. S. Iyengar*, edited and published by the Light on Yoga Research Trust, he expressed this view by saying "... the body is a temple. The 'atma' needs a clean place to live". Through his practice and experience he had found the method to provide that clean place. That discovery became the primary focus of his teachings. It was his duty not only to convey his personal experience that growth was indeed possible through yoga, but also to show how to come by that growth. He therefore had two essential goals in teaching. There was no getting away from the fact that each individual, through due practice and diligence, had to develop himself or herself emotionally, intellectually and spiritually. But he as a teacher could show how this could be done. His duty was to describe spiritual growth as a goal in a clear and systematic way so all could not only see it, but would be motivated to strive for it. But he also had to make the method to attain that goal equally clear and systematic. That search for clarity on both points was the heart of his teaching.

Thirty years might have passed since Iyengar first went to Pune, at his guru Krishnamacharya's insistence, to begin teaching, but the path he was to follow had become increasingly clear. In 1954, he visited the United Kingdom for the first time as a guest of Yehudi Menuhin. He had only two students: Menuhin himself, and the Polish pianist Witold Malcurzynski. There was not enough interest even for a lecture or demonstration. Nevertheless, London was to become the source of his lasting fame and renown.

Iyengar started humbly enough. He gave a few private lessons to some of Menuhin's musician friends. Year by year the numbers grew, and he gained enough of a reputation to allow him to give a lecture-demonstration to 200 people in 1960. This was promptly followed by a few more private classes. In June 1961 he gave his first 'official' class, but still in a private home. In the mornings, he taught a few musicians. In the afternoon, he taught six non-musicians. This latter group—who many regard as the first "Iyengar yogis"—was so inspired they agreed to meet regularly so they could keep practising what he had taught them. They told all their friends, who then told their friends. When he returned in 1962, BBC Television broadcast "Yehudi Menuhin and his Guru" in which Menuhin was interviewed by David Attenborough. This considerably raised his profile. On the strength of it he was able to give his first properly public classes in North London. And ... such had become the demand for his teachings that he authorized six of his students to begin teaching in his name so they could pass on to others what he had taught them.

The next year, Iyengar was back in London for six weeks to teach his new students. He returned annually thereafter. Word was beginning to spread. And then right at the end of 1965—the

same year Queen Elisabeth of Belgium died—George Allen and Unwin at last published his stunning book, on which he had laboured many years, the classic *Light On Yoga*.

15) “Light On Yoga”

Iyengar made his declaration of intent clear in the first sentence of his acknowledged masterpiece, *Light On Yoga*:

The word Yoga is derived from the Sanskrit root yuj meaning to bind, join, attach and yoke, to direct and concentrate one’s attention on, to use and apply. It also means union or communion. It is the true union of our will with the will of God. ...

As if to further clarify this, his second paragraph was:

Yoga is one of the six orthodox systems of Indian philosophy. It was collated, co-ordinated and systematized by Patañjali in his classical work, the Yoga Sutras, which consists of 185 terse aphorisms. In Indian thought, everything is permeated by the Supreme Universal Spirit (Paramatma or God) of which the individual human spirit (jivatma) is a part. The system of yoga is so called because it teaches the means by which the jivatma can be united to or be in communion with the Paramatma, and so secure liberation (moksa).

But when Iyengar tried to publish his work, he straight away ran into perhaps the biggest problem anyone faces in trying to present yoga and its core ideas to a Western audience: the Western predilection to (a) compartmentalize; and (b) see the world from a non-religious or non-spiritual perspective.

When two out of Iyengar’s six original London pupils, Angela Marris and Beatrice Harthan, were on holiday in Switzerland, he asked them to help him with his manuscript. They were happy to help, but could only find continental European typewriters, with the letters in a different arrangement from the standard English ones they were used to. Harthan therefore took the manuscript back to the UK with her to correct the numerous errors she had made. She went straight to a Buddhist Society Conference from the airport, and so still had the manuscript for *Light on Yoga* in her bag. She happened to sit next to Gerald Yorke, a friend of hers and a reader and editor with the London-based publishers, George Allen & Unwin. As they were conversing, Harthan mentioned that she had just returned from Switzerland where she had been studying with her yoga teacher. Yorke then said that he was searching for a new yoga book to replace Theos Barnard’s *Hatha Yoga*, published by Rider and Co, a rival company. She immediately took Iyengar’s manuscript out of her bag and showed it to him. As he thumbed, with sheer delight, through Iyengar’s text and photographs, he said “I have been waiting many years for a book like this”.

Iyengar’s original manuscript for *Light On Yoga* had a very extensive introduction. In it he explained yoga’s philosophical and intellectual background. He also placed his own work, and his approach to yoga, firmly in that overall historical and spiritual context. But on reviewing the

manuscript more closely, and particularly when looking at the photographs and their lucid explanations, Yorke told Iyengar that the unique part of the book lay in those photographs and the extensive accompanying descriptions of how to attain them. Those were certainly unique and had of course come directly from Iyengar's own experience. When he had first started teaching, nearly thirty years before, he had had very much less confidence in his English. Added to that, his guru Krishnamacharya had never divulged any specific or systematic techniques for performing the postures. Iyengar had therefore found himself unable to explain to his students how the postures were to be done. Consulting Krishnamacharya on a regular basis was quite out of the question. In the first place, Krishnamacharya was now hundreds of miles away ... but, and in the second place, the two had never had that kind of a relationship. That was why he had been quite happy to leave Krishnamacharya and come to Pune in the first place. Iyengar could also have tried to fulfill his duties as a teacher by reading whatever yoga books he could lay his hands on. He could then have memorized them and passed their contents on to his students. But the few books he could find were inadequate. They did not give sufficiently clear instructions. They were also contradictory. If, for example, one book suggested doing a headstand on one part of the head, he could be quite certain that the next book he would look at would suggest doing it on another part. It was in any case against Iyengar's nature to pass second-hand information of this kind, not validated by his own experience, on to others. This left him with only one alternative: to instruct his students from direct personal experience. He therefore opted to practise with a renewed vigour and intention. The purpose of his new practices was simple: to gain as much first-hand information as he could, and as rapidly as he could. He could then pass that information on—with due clarity and conciseness—to those who came to study with him.

Iyengar's decision on how best to proceed was underlined by a deep desire again grounded in his own experience. He had found, in yoga, a deeply therapeutic and healing practice. It had cured all his childhood diseases and turned him into a fit and healthy person. And that, more than anything else, was the gift he wanted to pass on to others. He wanted to help any and all sick or injured people who came to his classes. Yoga had healed him ... and it surely had the power to heal them, also. He had only to unlock the key—the method. BKS Iyengar took his responsibilities as a yoga teacher very seriously, and he set about gaining the first-hand and direct experiential information he needed to fulfill them. The intensity and devotion of his practice could not have been exceeded by anyone no matter what their field, be it art, music, sport, or anything else. For the next seventy years, continuing even into his 90s, Iyengar practised several hours every day, investigating and learning about the postures, their workings, and their effects on the human anatomy and its psyche. No matter what ailments his students might come to him with, Iyengar devised specific programmes to benefit them. He was able, through his insights, to bring relief to thousands sporting a bewilderingly wide variety of issues and disabilities. It did not seem to matter whether

those ailments were physical, psychological, emotional or spiritual. Iyengar has set down all that knowledge—that plan of approach, those insights, and achievements. And ... in the beginning, in his very first draft manuscript of *Light On Yoga*, it was to those early original insights and that method that his publishers were drawn. Those were the things they wanted him to send forth into the world.

In his original introduction to *Light On Yoga*, Iyengar had quoted extensively from the *Vedas*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Upanishads*, the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* and various other such works. And on behalf of George Allen & Unwin, Gerald Yorke set about persuading him to remove all such traditional texts and commentary. Yorke made the point that those quotations and Iyengar's accompanying analysis and argumentation detracted from the true virtue of the book. Dissertations on Indian thought could be read anywhere, including in academic texts. Iyengar's description of these was, in the end, just another description. Many others of that kind were already available. They also made the book too much like an academic text. Iyengar might be able to justify his philosophical approach to yoga and to asana, using such texts, but that was still only a description and justification, of "the Iyengar style". Yorke felt that Iyengar's Introduction, as it originally stood, did not have the power, the freshness and above all the originality that the rest of the intended book would then display. In Yorke's opinion, the whole book would then suffer by comparison. He said: "Unless you manage to make something original from the Introduction, the book won't have a second edition". Iyengar could have objected but instead decided to take Yorke as, in his words, 'my literary guru'. Guided by Yorke, Iyengar therefore rewrote the Introduction. But Yorke was still not satisfied and asked him to cut it and rewrite yet again. When he saw the second rewrite, Yorke was at last happy. The book then proceeded to publication. Yorke seems to have been correct. *Light On Yoga* has not been out of print since. It laid the seeds for Iyengar's constantly growing and ever-lasting fame.

16) Becoming a global phenomenon

Iyengar might be making inroads into both British and European society, but his stature could not have attained the heights it did unless he had, at some point, come to the attention of the USA. Indeed, nothing symbolized the world events that facilitated the spread of his methods in yoga than what befell him there.

The spread of Indian thoughts and ideas was greatly—and negatively—affected in 1924 when the United States passed a law setting a quota to the number of Indians who could visit or immigrate. Shortly after Iyengar's first visit to Europe at Menuhin's invitation, in 1954, he came to the attention of one of Menuhin's influential friends, Rebekah Harkness, an heiress of Standard Oil. She was drawn to his ability to explain how to use yoga to resolve specific health problems in a clear and easy manner. In 1956, she invited him to visit her in the USA so he could help her

A biography of BKS Iyengar by Kofi Busia (<http://www.kofibusia.com>)

with some stomach problems she was having. He fell within the quota system and so was able to visit. Although he was in the USA for three weeks, the only people to benefit from his instruction were Mrs. Harkness, some members of her family, and a few of her close friends. While there, he gave demonstrations in New York and in Washington, DC. But unfortunately, he did not find this first visit to the USA particularly pleasant. He later said: “I saw Americans were interested in the three W’s, wealth, women and wine. I was taken aback to see how the way of life conflicted with my own country. I thought twice about coming back”.

In 1965, the same year Queen Elisabeth died and that *Light On Yoga* was at last accepted for publication, the US Congress abolished the 1924 quota system on Indian visits and immigration. It paved the way for Iyengar and other Indian savants and made possible the sudden influx of Eastern teachers and knowledge that typified the counter-culture and social revolutions of the 1960s. And as yoga, ayurveda, meditation, sitar-playing, and other such distinctively Indian activities increased their profile, so also did Iyengar’s name. The reason was simple. He was offering ordinary people the same commodity he was offering the rich, the entitled, and the famous: an opportunity to grow in spirit and to gain satisfaction in life by applying the deceptively simple techniques he had gleaned through years of dedicated study. Iyengar’s book began selling well in the USA, but nevertheless ... he did not return there until, as he put it, “a student came to my hometown and tempted me to visit”.

In 1966, immediately after *Light On Yoga* had been published, Iyengar was back in the UK. He gave classes to 100 people in London, along with an important lecture-demonstration at the Commonwealth Institute. The next year he was back again. This time, he began training teachers for London County Council, which would not accept any yoga teachers unless he had personally authorised them. In 1968 he gave a large demonstration in Manchester which spurred his presence and penetration into a whole new and important area. Then in 1969 Peter Mackintosh, Chief Inspector of Physical Education for the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA), officially introduced yoga classes for the general public into the adult education curriculum—but only as specifically taught with the methods of BKS Iyengar. He found them clear, safe, effective and beneficial. Regional and local authorities across the length and breadth of Great Britain, and also Ireland, soon followed. In 1970, the first official Iyengar teacher-training programme, taught by his devoted pupil Silva Mehta, was established, again under the auspices of the ILEA at the College of Physical Education, Paddington. The demand seemed insatiable and “Iyengar yoga” was growing throughout the United Kingdom at phenomenal speed. The penetration of his methods into the UK, and the size and enthusiasm of his student base there is still unequalled anywhere.

All over Europe word was spreading about the magic that BKS Iyengar could weave by no more than getting people to move their toes, fingers and limbs. The same technique he had used to help Queen Elisabeth stand on her head at 85, or to remedy Menuhin’s musculature in his vio-

lin playing, would work for anyone, no matter what their build, disposition or circumstance. The Iyengar techniques were not reserved for the famous or for royalty, and nor did he want them to be. They were intended for, and available to, anyone. Iyengar believed firmly that yoga was not a practice to be restricted to specialists. It could and would benefit anyone. He had taken his first real lessons in making the practices therapeutically effective from Dr. Gokhale, who had been responsible for first bringing him to Pune. “The body is known to me”, Dr. Gokhale had said to Iyengar. “You leave it to me. I will explain very accurately. And you do the poses”. Thus Iyengar performed numerous yoga demonstrations, while Dr. Gokhale explained. Meanwhile ... Iyengar learned. And now knowing very clearly what effects he was trying to achieve, he incorporated the aids for which he became famous such as ropes, belts, blocks, chairs and much else into yoga routines for the benefit of those who needed them. Many flocked to his classes and his methods. Using them, they could accomplish feats they would not have previously have believed possible. Iyengar was himself also living testimony to the idea that yoga could aid in the solution of even the most serious health problems. From all corners of Europe, students flocked to him.

Meanwhile, yoga was rising steadily in popularity in the United States. In July 1961, Richard Hittleman hosted ‘Yoga for Health’, a regular week-day programme of yoga exercises, in the Los Angeles area. Shortly afterwards, he published his best-selling *Richard Hittleman’s Yoga; 28 Day Exercise Plan*. Then in 1969, some fifteen years after Menuhin had first invited Iyengar to London, Menuhin gave a concert in Ann Arbor, Michigan, the home of Mary Palmer. Before her own first teacher in yoga had left Michigan, she had recommended *Light On Yoga* to Palmer, saying “You have the finest book on the subject. Use it”. Her husband, a Professor of Economics in the University of Michigan, was due to take a sabbatical in India. Noting Palmer’s interest in yoga, Menuhin said to her “you must meet my yoga teacher in India. His name is BKS Iyengar”. Inspired both by Menuhin and this coincidence, she determined to meet Iyengar. Once she had reached New Delhi, she wrote to Iyengar and was able to go to Pune and study with him for three weeks. She also travelled to London to study with him at his ILEA classes.

Rama Jyoti Vernon, another notable and earnest student, also travelled to Pune to track BKS Iyengar down, and she was also eventually able to find him in his home in Pune. She invited him to California. Iyengar told her to contact Palmer to make the arrangements to extend his visit to California. In 1972, the Public Broadcasting System hosted the television program ‘Lilias! Yoga and You’, fronted by Lilias Folan ... and Mary Palmer opened the very first ‘Iyengar Yoga’ studio in Ann Arbor, Michigan. In 1973, Iyengar at last made a return visit to the United States to Ann Arbor, to teach Palmer and a class of about 40. Palmer’s daughter Mary Dunn was then living in Berkeley with her husband and two daughters. She went to study with him at his first West Coast classes, along with Judith Lasater and a few other US notables who formed the nucleus of his all-conquering American Iyengar missionaries in yoga. Meanwhile, back in the UK, several of his

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more senior teachers had decided to form a Teachers' Association so they could better manage their common affairs. By 1977 the first BKS Iyengar Yoga Teachers' Association had been formed. In 1984, the first International Iyengar Convention was arranged in San Francisco, drawing a crowd of 800 of Iyengar's trained teachers along with many of their students. By this time, there were trained Iyengar yoga teachers, and at least the nucleus of burgeoning Iyengar Yoga associations, in all major cities and countries across the globe. In April 2004 *TIME* magazine named him—along with the Dalai Lama, Nelson Mandela, Bono and David Beckham—as one of the world's 100 most influential people.

17) Ramamani remembered

BKS Iyengar's influence on his chosen subject can be measured by the sea change in attitudes to it that have occurred around him. When he arrived at London's Heathrow Airport on his first visit to the West, at Menuhin's invitation in 1954, Customs and Immigration asked him if he could chew glass, drink acid, swallow razor blades, or walk on fire. When he admitted he could do none of these things, they then asked him what kind of a yogi he was, and did not really believe his continuing protestations. And when he went on to give a demonstration at the 1954 World Trade Fair in Lausanne, the Indian Embassy had to declare—in writing—that he would wear only his swimming trunks; would not be carrying either a razor blade or a matchbox; and that his hands would be in full view at all times. He was also checked and vetted before being permitted on stage to address his waiting audience. Iyengar's main concern, in writing *Light On Yoga* was therefore to cast light on his subject. His most famous of all his books got its title because he wanted to counter the woe-ful ignorance he saw around him, and to dispel illusions about it. He also wanted to spell out the benefits and—above all else—demonstrate their ready accessibility to one and all. *Light On Yoga* succeeded in its aims. It has been translated into a score of languages, and remains the best-selling of all yoga books. He has admitted that he would write the book very differently if he were to write it today ... but this is mainly because of its success. Knowledge of yoga is now so widespread that he would have a luxury he did not have at the time: that of presenting many of the other aspects of a now well understood subject.

When Iyengar married Ramamani in 1943, she may have known nothing about yoga, but she soon became the unwavering source of all his strength, inspiration, and dedication. She bore him five daughters—Geeta, Vanita, Suchita, Sunita and Savitar—and one son, Prashant. It was she who introduced them all to yoga. Their marriage was joyful, becoming particularly deep when they both had their dreams about the future upon the same night. This confirmed to them a shared destiny. She was still alive when *Light On Yoga* was published, and she both contributed to and enjoyed its success.

When a group from South Africa travelled to Pune to study with Iyengar in 1972–73, he had to hire a local school hall to hold the classes. Ramamani then suggested that they procure their own hall to accommodate future groups. Thus in mid-1972, using some of the proceeds from *Light On Yoga*, Iyengar purchased the land he needed to realize her vision. Through the rest of '72 and into '73, various students made donations. On 25th January, 1973, the traditional purificatory puja, or ceremony, to bless the land was conducted. And then ... three days later ... BKS Iyengar's beloved Ramamani suddenly sickened and died. Plans proceeded, and the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute was dedicated to her memory on January 19, 1975.

As Iyengar's influence has spread from the Institute named in his wife's memory and knowledge about his subject has grown, so has he been able to highlight different aspects of his subject. His life, as an author and teacher, has in many ways been that of extending the necessarily abridged introduction to *Light on Yoga*. The essential principles he elucidated there were certainly easy to grasp. The depth and profundity of the real subject he addressed—the human mind and spirit—remained evident, but he nevertheless devoted increasing attention to those topics as his life as an author progressed. His interests also broadened as he, for example, established a charitable foundation to alleviate poverty in his home village of Bellur. But possibly the greatest testament has been that, both inside and outside India, nearly every teacher who stands in front of a class to teach yoga has been influenced—sometimes unknowingly—by the contributions made by BKS Iyengar.