

GURUJI'S 100 YEARS

In 1918, 100 years ago, the deadly Spanish flu pandemic swept across the world, killing 30 million people, 17 million of them in India.

The village of Bellur in South India was hit hard. Two who succumbed but survived were Seshamma and her newborn son Bellur Krishnamacharya Sundararaja (BKS) Iyengar.

The flu left BKS Iyengar, the man who would later be called the Michelangelo of yoga, a sickly child, vulnerable to malaria, tuberculosis and typhoid, with barely enough strength to hold up his head.

Brahmin but poor, his schoolteacher father died of appendicitis when BKS was eight.

Miserably sick and expected to die, Iyengar failed school and at 16 was sent to live with his sister in Mysore, to help while her husband, the great yoga teacher T. Krishnamacharya, was away on tour. He began a difficult apprenticeship with this cranky Sanskrit scholar, who

would not allow him any books and worked him hard.

“My health was very bad,” he said in an interview with yoga teacher Lois Steinberg. “I was looking for something so I would not be a parasite to others. But when strong demands were made of me my mind was naturally repulsed because my sick body could not take it. I was suffering. I knew that the medical people had said I would not live long. My guru, my relatives, were all saying ‘he is a worthless boy.’ I took it as a challenge in my heart to prove I could stand on my own two feet.”

Fast forward 57 years and an almost naked 74-year-old man is standing, very firmly, on his own two feet, on stage at the UNSW Clancy Auditorium in Sydney. It's 1992.

We are an audience of shiny young yoga students, excited to see the master in person. He has won us over with his long, intelligent, amusing talk (no notes!) on Patanjali's Yoga Sutras and the place of asana in the evolution of the self.

“Friends,” he says, in a rich,

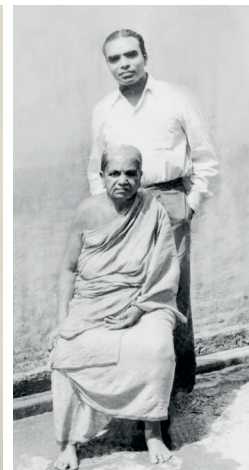
warm, resonant voice, “Now I request you to tune your eyes to the music of yoga.” And Yogacharya BKS Iyengar proceeds to demonstrate asanas from standing poses to his magnificent backbends, maintaining a commentary all the while, his younger students struggling to keep up.

Two hours later we are standing, clapping and cheering, enthused and inspired by the promise of ultimate freedom in our bodies, our minds and indeed our souls. We could free ourselves from our physical and mental limitations, just as he had done, if we were prepared to do the work.

“Example is all,” he once wrote, “and when example expresses truth, it has the power to transform others.”

This is the great strength of BKS Iyengar's lineage and legacy – his example – his unceasing practice of asana and pranayama. As he practised it, in his own words, “Yoga is an art, a philosophy and a science.” His therapeutic recommendations





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: "My partner, my guide" - BKS Iyengar with his wife Ramamani, after whom his Institute in Pune is named, (l - r) BKS, Geeta and Prashant Iyengar with Krishnamacharya (seated), BKS Iyengar with his mother Sheshamma Iyengar, Geeta Iyengar in Ardha Matsyendrasana (Half Lord of the Fishes), The six Iyengar children in Namaskarasana (Prayer Pose), BKS Iyengar with his first child Geeta Iyengar in 1945.

in Light on Yoga are all hard won from his own practice and his work to help his students.

His son Prashant Iyengar says, "He would study on his own body. He had no knowledge of physiology. So, if a person came with a kidney problem, he would study – where are the kidneys? Then, he would practice on his own body to see how he could work on the affected organ. He worked very hard. He had some grace behind him. It is not human to take up such herculean jobs."

Krishnamacharya taught yoga to the Maharaja of Mysore, in the Yogasala in the royal palace. Krishnamacharya's beleaguered assistant disappeared suddenly one day in 1935 and BKS was ordered to take his place. Giving his first public demonstration soon after at the age of 17, he received a 50 rupee (\$10) prize from the Maharaja and an offer to teach at the Yogasala.

In 1937 Krishnamacharya sent him to the Deccan Gymkhana Club in Pune, Maharashtra. Glad to be in Pune

and free from the harsh demands of his guru, BKS Iyengar, who never thought he would support himself teaching yoga, considered finding a job. "I was oscillating between my mind and my heart. My mind was

"You have seen me losing my temper on teachers when they assist me," he said. "I am doubly watchful of teachers because I know the responsibility of a teacher!

saying 'Should I go for a job?' Accept a job and be happy. But somewhere inside I knew that I should embrace this subject of yoga or die for it."

There were still plenty of challenges in store. His classes at the Deccan Gymkhana Club were popular but he was expected to work seven days a week, without holidays, for little pay. Other teachers were jealous and burned his props. He taught therapy students to subsidise the classes, stayed fiercely independent, refused

to compromise and was dismissed in 1940.

Times were very tough. With his last eight rupees, he shared a room with six other bachelors, surviving on a

system of rolling 20 rupee loans from his students. He had 400 students by this stage, but "all my students let me down. Not one came to me to learn though they promised me they would. I continued to borrow and rotate the money. I could not get enough to survive. It was a cursed life for me."

A demonstration later that year attracted a private student, Mr Moti, and BKS began sending money to his mother for food and clothing and for



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: The Maharaja of Mysore , Krishnamacharya (centre) at the Mysore Palace - BKS Iyengar is on the right, BKS Iyengar performing Mandalasana (Circle Pose) for the Queen Mother of Belgium, BKS Iyengar teaching Sirsasana (Headstand) to the 81-year-old Queen Mother of Belgium.

his younger brother's education.

He was living at the time in a hotel with only one toilet for all the residents. "I used to get up early in the mornings at about 3 a.m., to go to the toilet and take a cold bath. My life changed, getting up very early, just to use the toilet. I was practising, then going out to teach. "As it was difficult to go to the toilet at 3 a.m., I used to experiment on my body. I learned what asanas did not help. Then when I did five minutes of Salamba

Sirsasana (Headstand), five minutes of Salamba Sarvangasana (Shoulder stand) and Parsva Pindasana (Twisted lotus in shoulder stand), nature called. I discovered which asanas cure constipation. That is how I learned."

In 1943, at age 25, he went to Bangalore to visit his mother. Krishnamacharya came to visit and suggested Iyengar should marry, because he was teaching many young girls. Horrified at the thought of inflicting his life of poverty on

anyone else, Iyengar did all he could to deter future wives, growing a beard and acting like a 'madcap'. However, he relented and married Ramamani. He returned to Pune alone, to find that Mr Moti no longer required his services!

Luckily, four months later he got a job and sent for Ramamani to join him. She was a great asset, acting as his mirror to help align his asanas. He referred to her as "my only friend, my partner, my guide, my philosopher." They began

a tradition that lasted his lifetime, of going to the library in the afternoons to research. He had no time to read so simply looked at the pictures. The shoulders sank in headstand and shoulder stand and he resolved that he could do better.

Of BKS and Ramamani's six children, Geeta, Prashant and later Sunita became yoga teachers. His granddaughter, Ahbijata Iyengar, daughter of Suchita, continues the family tradition. Ramamani devised the Pune bloomers for Geeta to wear when she practised.

By 1947 Iyengar was treating people for polio, heart disease and backache and teaching famous Indians such as philosopher J. Krishnamurti and cardiologist Rustom Jal Vakil.

He cycled 30 miles a day to get to classes and his legs hurt. "I could not sleep at night because my legs ached so much. I kept heavy stones on my legs for them to become a little calmer. I learned a great deal this way, the hard way, how to use props."

This was one of Iyengar's innovations, the use of furniture, blocks of wood, ropes, weights, anything that would serve to open the body, especially the stiffer Western bodies he was soon to encounter.

In 1952 Vakil's wife introduced world-famous violinist Yehudi Menuhin to Iyengar for help with insomnia. Iyengar performed Sanmukhi Mudra on Menuhin, holding his head and granting the violinist an hour's much needed sleep. Menuhin, who later called Iyengar his best violin teacher, invited him to Europe. In 1954 Iyengar left India for Switzerland, taking his yoga to the West.

He taught the Queen Mother of Belgium to stand on her head at 81 and performed for the Soviet Union's Premier, Nikita Khrushchev. His fame and fortune grew, but there were still indignities to endure.

Overseas trips were long in those

days and his family in India missed him, and he missed them. He developed a fearsome attitude and flashing eyebrows to deter potential admirers. He was vegetarian, and often lived on bread and coffee, as vegetarian diets were not well understood in the West. He was sometimes segregated because of the colour of his skin.

The publication of *Light on Yoga* in 1966 was a major achievement. Gerald Yorke, a reader for Allen and Unwin, said on reading the first draft of the book, "He is a first-class teacher, but a third-class writer," and offered help editing. Four thousand photos were taken over 10 years to create the templates.

The book further popularised yoga and created a demand for teachers, so Iyengar began training his students to teach. Importantly, it was his students who named the style 'Iyengar' yoga, not him.

The popularity of yoga and my part in spreading its teachings are a great source of satisfaction to me. But I do not want widespread popularity to eclipse the depth of what it has to give to the practitioner.

He went on to write, sometimes in collaboration, *Body the Shrine*, *Yoga Thy Light* (1978), *Light on Pranayama* (1981), *The Art of Yoga* (1985), *The Tree of Yoga* (1988), *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* (1993), *Yoga: The Path to Holistic Health* (2001), *Light on Life* (2005) and the *Astadala Yogamala* (2000) series for teachers.

Demanding the best from his students, he continually raised the bar on their level of human being, earning the title the 'Lion of Pune.' He expected an ethical and sincere practice, especially from those teaching in his name. "You have seen me losing my temper on teachers when they assist me," he said. "I am doubly watchful of teachers because I know the responsibility of

a teacher!"

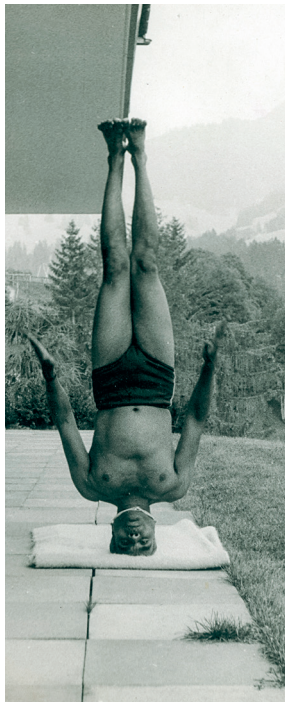
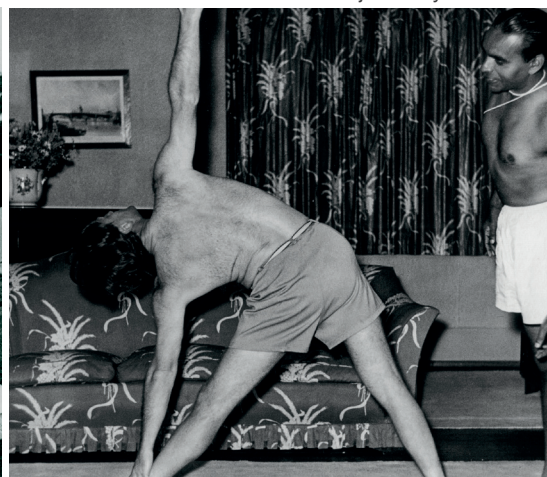
In 1973 his beloved wife Ramamani died suddenly, three days after placing the cornerstone of what would become the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute (RIMYI). Sadly, he was away teaching in Mumbai.

RIMYI was opened in 1975, and students from all over the world began attending classes. They continue to this day, with classes now taught by Geeta, Prashant, Ahbijata, Raya and others and booked out two years in advance.


In spite of his newfound wealth, Iyengar continued to live a simple life opposite his institute, from where he could be seen reading the paper or watching the cricket when not practising or teaching. In 2003 he established the Bellur Trust to provide schooling and medicine for the poor people of Bellur.

In 1997 the International Biographical Centre of Cambridge in England declared Iyengar one of the century's most outstanding men. In 2004 he was named one of the 100 most influential people in the world by Time magazine. He has a star named after him. His name has become a noun in the Oxford Dictionary. Famous Iyengar yoga practitioners include actress Annette Bening and Seinfeld actor Michael Richards (Kramer).

As he writes in *Light on Life*: "The popularity of yoga and my part in spreading its teachings are a great source of satisfaction to me. But I do not want widespread popularity to eclipse the depth of what it has to give to the practitioner."



Demonstration
of
YOGA ASANAS
by
B. K. S. IYENGAR
Yoga teacher of Yehudi Menuhin
and
Author of "Light on Yoga"
(published by Allen & Unwin 75/-)



at
COMMONWEALTH INSTITUTE,
KENSINGTON HIGH STREET, W.8.
THURSDAY, 30th JUNE 1966, at 7.30 p.m.
(Doors open 7.0 p.m.)
Tickets 7/6
(reserved but un-numbered)

may be had at the door or in advance from Miss A. H. Marris, Secretary - Asian Music Circle, 18, Glencairn Road, Streatham, S.W.16 or Commonwealth Institute.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: BKS Iyengar with Violinist Yehudi Menuhin, who took him to Switzerland in 1954. , BKS Iyengar teaching Yehudi Menuhin Utthita Trikonasana (Extended Triangle Pose). ,Poster for a demonstration in London in 1966, BKS Iyengar with his first book, Light On Yoga (1966), Bhumi Pujya (ritual devoted to the earth) for what was to become the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Institute (RIMYI) - Ramamani (to the left of BKS) , BKS Iyengar in Niralamba Sirsasana (Unsupported Headstand) in Switzerland, A healer and a teacher: BKS Iyengar at work in the medical class at RIMYI.



BKS Iyengar teaching Urdhva Dhanurasana (Backbend) to his granddaughter Abhijata , BKS Iyengar at 95 in Virasana (Hero pose) - Photo: Sameer Karmarkar and Raya Uma Datta, At 72 BKS Iyengar in Padangusta Dhanurasana (Big Toe Bow pose), RIMYI Practice Hall in Pune.

Australians began going to RIMYI in the 70s. One of them, Julia Pedersen, went in 1976 and remembers Guruji (the term of affection and respect used by his students) as hard on her at first, but changing when they travelled together. “From the moment we were in the taxi, there was a radical transformation from stern yoga master to the most riotously funny and engagingly brilliant person any of us could ever hope to meet.”

BKS first visited Australia in 1983 and in 1985 he certified 13 Australian teachers to teach in his name. In 1987, with his blessing, Iyengar Yoga Australia began assessments to certify Iyengar teachers.

After seeing him for myself in 1992, I was thrilled when my teacher booked me in to a week’s yoga with Mr Iyengar in Rishikesh, in the foothills of the Himalayas, in 1995. One day he accompanied us on a perilous bus journey to Deoprayag, where we bathed in the confluence of the rivers. I remember

submerging in the cold water, holding the chain firmly so as not to be swept away, and emerging to Mr Iyengar’s laughing face.

The depth of his students’ love for Mr Iyengar reflects the depth of his teaching. This love was palpable in Pune in December 2014, four months after Mr Iyengar’s death at 95. We gathered together for Yoganushasanam, an event taught by Geeta and planned while Iyengar was alive. He insisted the show must go on.

We assembled from all over the world to mourn and acknowledge this inspiring man. He would have been 100 this December 14. He demonstrated what the human body and spirit are capable of, and his teaching has spread wider than the flu that first challenged him, conversely vitalising and enhancing life rather than destroying it. 🌸

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Linda Apps is a senior Iyengar teacher who runs The Yoga Nook in Sydney’s Dulwich Hill. She also teaches retreats in NSW and Queensland. linda@yoganook.com.au.