

Yogacharya B.K.S. Iyengar

The life and work of Yogacharya B. K.S. Iyengar are of epic proportions.

Sri Iyengar is credited with bringing the ancient art of yoga into the modern world. His extensive demonstrations and teachings planted the seeds for the phenomenal flowering of yoga in the West over the last 30 years, while also winning innumerable converts around the world – including in India, where yoga began.

The method he refined for eight decades is one of the world's most widely-practiced yogas, with Iyengar Yoga institutes and associations, teachers and students in 77 countries around the world –while each morning he reaffirmed his lifelong commitment to yoga with his own personal practice, surrounded and observed by generations of his admiring students, at the method's mother institute in Pune.

Mr. Iyengar died August 20 in Pune aged 95, after a brief illness.

His seminal *Light on Yoga*, first published in 1966 and continually in print since, is the Bible of yoga for teachers and students of all methods. His 2005 international bestseller *Light on Life* summed up a lifetime of teaching and practice, advising readers on the journey to wholeness, inner peace and ultimate freedom. And he continued to publish: his most recent work, *Core of the Yoga Sutras*, was released in 2012.

Well into his 95th year, he continued to teach around the world. In 2005 he led an International Yoga Conference sponsored by *Yoga Journal* magazine in Estes Park, Colorado, in the United States. His groundbreaking journeys to Russia, where he taught in Moscow in 2009, and to China, where he taught in Guangzhou in 2011, sparked the burgeoning interest in yoga in these countries.

Called the “Michelangelo of yoga” and the “king of yogis,” included in *Time* magazine's global list of the world's 100 most influential people and -- only the most recent of his dozens of honors -- named a recipient of the Padma Vibhushan, the second highest civil award in India, B. K. S. Iyengar, universally acknowledged as the world's greatest yoga teacher, remained its most knowledgeable and respected practitioner.

Mr. Iyengar pioneered countless innovative ideas during his eight decades of teaching; perhaps the most revolutionary is that yoga is for everyone. With this in mind, he developed and refined a complete array of yoga props, including ropes, belts and blocks, which allow practitioners of all ages and levels of fitness to achieve correct alignment, a deeper penetration into the posture as well as a longer stay, helping them to experience the state of Meditation in Action. It is Mr. Iyengar's unique perspective that the yoga *asanas* (postures) and *Pranayamas* (control of the breath) can be a template to

explore and experience each of the other limbs of Astanga Yoga, including those of the Innermost Journey.

“Iyengar” is officially recognized by the *Oxford English Dictionary* with this definition: “Noun: A type of Hatha Yoga focusing on the correct alignment of the body, making use of straps, wooden blocks, and other objects as aids in achieving the correct postures. Origin: Named after B. K. S. Iyengar (born 1918), the India yoga teacher who devised this method.”

For residents of Bellur, the definition following the name B.K.S. Iyengar might well be “benefactor”.

Over the last decade, he led a transformation of his ancestral village, building a free hospital, water treatment facilities, India's first temple dedicated to Patanjali, and a free school which supplies uniforms, books and a hot lunch, not just to the children of Bellur but to those of surrounding villages. In addition to the primary school, he also established a secondary school and a tertiary college.

It was in Bellur that Yogacharya Iyengar’s glorious life story had its humble beginning.

There he was born, into a large family and a poor one, on December 14, 1918. The village is located in the Kolar District of Karnataka, India. The family migrated to Bangalore in 1923; his father died in 1927.

At the young age of fifteen, Sri Iyengar went to Mysore to be initiated into yoga by his brother-in-law, the well-known yoga scholar and adept, Prof. T. Krishnamacharya.

Though weak and sickly, Iyengar immersed himself totally in yoga practice, so much so that he had to discontinue his school studies at matriculation level in 1936. He suffered tortured nerves and bruised muscles but gained proficiency in a large number of yoga *asanas* (postures) in an incredibly short time, going on to perform a number of yoga demonstrations and successfully complete a yoga teaching assignment for faculty members and their families at Karnataka College, Dharwar. After receiving a diploma in yoga from Sri Krishnamacharya, he began teaching classes in Hubli and Dharwar in 1935.

Dr. V. B. Gokhale, civil surgeon and yoga enthusiast, arranged for him to join the Deccan Gymkhana in Pune as a yoga instructor in 1937, but that small but steady income came to an end in 1940. He began teaching yoga privately in Pune, but financial insecurity pursued him through his marriage in 1943 to Shrimati Ramamani.

In time, however, his reputation as a yoga expert and therapist grew, and more and more students sought his help. In 1948 he taught Sri J. Krishnamurthi, who described him as the best teacher; their association continued for two decades. Swami Shivananda

of Rishikesh granted him the title of Yogi Raja. Distinguished pupils included Indian national leaders Sri Jayaprakash Narayan, Sri Achyut Rao Patwardhan and others.

In 1952 celebrated violinist Yehudi Menuhin met Sri Iyengar, whom he describes as “my guru in yoga” and “my best violin teacher”. Though Menuhin was eager to introduce the teacher who had helped him overcome numerous health problems to the West, Iyengar was only able to visit Europe two years later.

It was the start of scores of trips to all corners of the world.

In 1954 he began teaching in Bombay.

Iyengar’s comprehensive *Light on Yoga*, published in 1966 and hailed by critics as “the best book in English on hatha yoga” and “A superb volume, unlikely to be superseded”, remains the classic guide to yoga. It has been translated into seventeen Indian and foreign languages; more than three million copies have been sold.

His second book, *Light on Pranayama*, was published in 1981, and a third, *The Art of Yoga*, in 1985. *The Tree Of Yoga* appeared in 1988. *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patañjali* was published in 1993, and the “Light on ... ” series also includes *Light on Astanga Yoga* (1999). *Yoga Wisdom and Practice* was published in 2009 in English and *Yaugika Manas* in 2010.

Just three days after laying the foundation stone of the yoga institute in Pune in 1973, his wife suddenly died. The Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute was named in tribute to her. For four decades it has served as the world’s foremost seat of yogic learning and a center of yoga pilgrimage for students and teachers from around the world. It was here that, each morning, Mr. Iyengar, known to his students as “Guruji”, renewed his commitment to the practice of yoga.

Over the years, as Mr. Iyengar’s teachings and travels continued, the honors accorded him multiplied, including honorary doctorates from the Medicina Alternativa Institute, affiliated with the Open International University for Complementary Medicine; the University of Mysore; the Tilak Maharashtra Vidyapeeth, Pune; the Rajiv Gandhi University of Health Sciences, Karnataka, and most recently from the Swami Vivekananda Yoga Anusadhana Samsthanam, Deemed University.

In 1991, he received the Padma Shri award from the government of India. The Padma Bhushan award followed in 2002. On Republic Day, Jan. 26, 2014, he was awarded the prestigious Padma Vibhushana, officially conferred at a formal ceremony in March in New Delhi.

In 1971, Mr. Iyengar introduced yoga in the London Educational Auditorium in the United Kingdom. In 1982, at the invitation of the Educational Department of the UK, he participated in the Festival of India in London. Two years later, he returned to London

to inaugurate the Iyengar Yoga Institute there, and Iyengar Yoga continues to gain adherents throughout the UK.

In 1985 he was invited by French President Jacques Chirac, then mayor of Paris, to the Festival of India in France.

His memorable lecture-demonstration at Harvard University in Boston, drew attention and devotees from across the United States, and was acclaimed as “an experience that comes rarely in one’s life.” The event inspired the creation of a monumental sculpture, “After Iyengar” and were followed by the First International Iyengar Yoga Convention held in San Francisco.

Iyengar has been the subject of many filmed tributes. The Film and Television Institute of India produced a 22-minute tribute, *Samadhi*, which earned the Silver Lotus Award. The film *Guruji*, which depicted his heroic struggle from poverty and failure to prosperity and success was released in 1985. A follow-up to *Guruji* the Life of BKS Iyengar came in *Leap of Faith*, released on his 90th Birthday.

Additional essential publications include *Body the Shrine, Yoga Thy Light*, a commemorative volume published for his 60th birthday in 1978 by the Yoga Research Trust, Bombay, and a 1990 commemorative, *70 Glorious Years of Yogacharya BKS Iyengar*. In 1991, *Iyengar: His Life and Work* was published. On his 82nd birthday the first of an eight-volume project collecting yogic knowledge and experiential wisdom, *Astadala Yogamala*, was released, with other volumes following every few years. *Yog Sarvansathi*, published in 2001, is in the Marathi language.

All over the world, Iyengar Yoga, a method which transcends caste, creed and race, and brings the benefits of yoga to people of all ages and physical capabilities, continues to grow and prosper. Hundreds of Iyengar Yoga institutes, centers and studios train students and teachers in the method in all parts of the world including his native India (with centers in cities including Bangalore, Bombay, Delhi, Madras, Dehra Dun and Rishikesh), Argentina, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Chile, China, Denmark, France, Germany, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Japan, Kenya, Korea, Lestho, Malaysia, Mauritius, Mexico, Morocco, Netherlands, New Zealand, Poland, Republic of Czech and Slovenia, Russia, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Swaziland, the United Kingdom, the United States of America, the Ukraine, Uzbekistan Zimbabwe and others.

Mr. Iyengar received other major Indian awards including the *Rajyotsava Award* (1988) and the *Patañjali Award* of the Government of Karnataka (1990), the All India *Vasistha Award* (1991) and a gold medal for outstanding contribution in the field of yoga education from the All India Board of Alternative Medicine. In 2012, *The Times of India* included him in a list of the greatest men of India, after Mahatma Gandhi. In 2013, he received the Mother Teresa Sadbhavana Award for outstanding achievements in the field of yoga from the Indian Solidarity Council, New Delhi.

Over the years, Mr. Iyengar's birthday celebrations highlighted his ongoing mastery of his subject and the dedication of his students. In 1993, for his 75th birthday, he conducted mega-classes in the US (750 students), Canada (250 students), Bombay (300 students) and Bangalore (300 students). More than 1,050 delegates representing 33 countries attended the mega-class at the Crystal Palace in London. In December 1998, The Light on Yoga Research Trust celebrated Guruji's 80th Birthday with a 10-day festival near Pune; more than 700 followers attended. During the celebrations, the Arsa Vidya Gurukulam conferred upon him the title of *Arsa-Kula-Sresthah* for his achievements in introducing yoga all over the world using innovative teaching methods without compromising its classical form. Similar celebrations marked his 90th birthday and his 95th, in January of 2014.

In 1999, the Prime Minister of India, His Excellency Sri Atal Bihari Vajpayee, visited the Pune Institute in its Silver Jubilee year. The Prime Minister was shown a demonstration of yoga *āsanas*, and Mr. Iyengar explained the development of yoga as therapy for various ailments as well as the innovative use of props which distinguishes the method.

Sri Iyengar was included in many national, Asian and international lists and directories of prominent personalities and achievers. Among them are the *International Directory of Distinguished Leadership*, *500 Leaders of Influence of the Twentieth Century*, the *Dictionary of International Biography* and *2000 Outstanding People of the Twentieth Century*. A 2008 story named him one of India's "Influentials," the people who impact the country, calling him an "ageless wonder. If the world does Pranayama [yogic breathing] today, the credit goes to him." It continued: "His long life is proof of the restorative effects of yoga."

In 2011, Guruji met His Holiness the Dalai Lama for a discussion moderated by Shi. Rajiv Mehrotra; the DVD *Path to Happiness* records this historic occasion.

On the eve of the ceremony of being awarded the Padma Vibhushan in 2014, Guruji was found in the practice hall of his Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute where he continued to practice daily and, surrounded by his students, to teach and guide the coming generations in yoga. It is these many many teachers and practitioners of yoga who mourn his loss and commit themselves to keeping alive his bright, vibrant legacy of yoga.