

# In her Father's Light

by **Colleen Morton\***

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*Yoga Journal talks with Geeta Iyengar on healing, discipline, and life under the light of her famous father, B.K.S. Iyengar.*

Geeta Iyengar doesn't tire easily. On the final day of the Iyengar Yoga Odyssey, a five-day conference in Pasadena, California, Geeta had invited some teachers to her hotel room for Indian food. "I was too tired to go," laughed senior teacher Patricia Walden, who noted that the invitation symbolizes the way of the indefatigable daughter of B.K.S. Iyengar: "When Geeta is in Pune, she is serving all the time—her family, the institute, and her students." It is precisely this kind of generosity and energy that propelled Geeta Iyengar across the United States in April and May on a month-long teaching tour.

Though most American yogis outside of the Iyengar community know B.K.S. Iyengar, fewer are familiar with Geeta Iyengar. Many within the Iyengar community, however, have studied repeatedly over the years with Geeta Iyengar in Pune, India, at the Ramamani Memorial Yoga Institute where she and her brother Prashant teach the majority of classes. Many have read and recommended her groundbreaking book *Yoga: A Gem for Women* (Timeless Books, 1995). Many love and respect Geeta Iyengar, who is 57 this year, as an authoritative, compelling teacher in her own right. This was in evidence at the convention, where senior American Iyengar teachers took a decidedly supportive, reverential role, demonstrating postures for Iyengar and assisting the students in her daily pranayama and asana classes. Some teachers were brought to tears as they publicly thanked Iyengar, after a question and answer session, for her generosity and wisdom.

Iyengar has not had an easy life. At the age of 9 she was diagnosed with a severe kidney disease. It was either do yoga or wait for death according to her father, since the family did not have sufficient funds for medicine. In 1973 Iyengar's mother, Ramamani (for whom the institute is named), died suddenly. Now, as the presiding matriarch of the Iyengar household, Geeta cooks all of the meals and is responsible for much of the administrative work at the Institute. "She answers every letter she gets," said an Iyengar teacher who attended the 80th birthday celebration for B.K.S. Iyengar in Pune in 1998. At the celebration, when some of the participants present tried to turn the attention toward their beloved Geeta, who had also recently had a birthday, Geeta left the room, protesting that the proceedings were not about her and that she was unworthy of the honor. So I wonder what it must have felt like for Geeta Iyengar to arrive in Pasadena on opening night to a room full of chattering yogis who fell into silent veneration when she entered.

Geeta Iyengar has both her father's famous stern bearing and respect for discipline and her mother's compassion—of which she spoke fondly on Mother's Day, on a rare personal note. Iyengar also has

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a sweet, quiet sense of humor. Several times during the convention, she joked playfully with the students about their laziness, the mind tricks that they willingly go along with to avoid facing their fears and limitations. And at other times, Iyengar was unrelentingly stern, no-nonsense, even impatient—as teachers of great devotion are when their students fail them for lack of commitment or effort.

“People say we are too strong or strict,” said Iyengar as we worked with the placement of the hands in Downward-Facing Dog. “But if you reach through the palms, I will not shout, ‘What is it that makes you not pay attention there?’” Each instruction Iyengar gives belies her conviction that we owe it to ourselves to give yoga our supreme, honest effort. Behind many of her instructions, there is the poetry of a tender heart: “Small mind: short, closed palms. Your hands should open to give.”

Iyengar’s hands are wide open. She is not interested in coddling the ego—her own or anyone else’s. She does not underestimate her understanding of the vast subject of yoga. “I know what I am doing,” she says, but adds, “and I know what Gururji (B.K.S Iyengar) has done.” It is the work of her guru that she wants to clarify in the minds of Americans—often too eager for answers, impervious to authority, or distracted in our bodies to get it. Her mission is clear: to stand, as she once put it, in her father’s light and to illumine the way for the rest of us.

**Yoga Journal:** You commented on the interest in yoga in the United States, “Let it not be a wildfire.” Can you explain this?

**Geeta Iyengar:** The rising interest in yoga and the enthusiasm are always welcome. For me a healthy yoga addiction is better than other addictions. The fire of yoga must remain burning without smoke in the spiritual heart throughout the practice, the sadhana. The interest of the practitioner, sadhaka, needs to be affirmative and dynamic. However, this interest should not be a wildfire burning down the forest; the interest in yoga should not be disoriented and disarrayed. Often the seeker goes to different teachers and different schools of yoga without having the proper aim or background. Instead of getting a solid footing on the path and its subject matter, he acquires knowledge in bits and pieces. The body, mind, and intelligence remain muddled. Going to a new teacher before allowing oneself to practice and digest the methods learned from another teacher leads one toward more confusion than clarity. Learning first with one teacher and getting well-established in practice makes one able to discriminate with maturity. Often pains, problems, discomforts, doubts, misunderstandings, and misconceptions arise because of lack of understanding. This further leads toward lack of inner penetration into oneself. Learning yoga cannot be like eating junk food. One has to stick to the method in order to absorb and assimilate the sadhana precisely and properly. Remember the adage, “The rolling stone gathers no moss.” It is the same with the roving yogic sadhaka.

**Yoga Journal:** You have pointed out that all of the students’ questions about yoga have been oriented toward disease. What are the implications of this, in your view?

**Geeta Iyengar:** Yoga has become popular as a healing method since it has curative and preventative value. But its scope is wider than this. The healing and therapeutic value is a kind of positive side effect of sadhana, a by-product. From this healing process, the urge to go further, to go close to the unknown, may start sooner or later.

The interest and the vision of the sadhaka should not be limited only to therapy. Certainly one has to practice having in mind the disease one suffers from. The practice should not be antagonistic to the healing process. One has to know how to deal with one’s own body and mind so that problems are solved and diseases are overcome. One cannot neglect demands for health from the body and mind.

But at the same time one should not divert one’s attention from the basic yogic approach and the goal: to be closer to the core of being. To let the intelligence touch the inner body also. One has

to learn to look inside oneself to find one's emotional and mental state as well as one's intellectual capacity. One has to learn to see the problems of mind, intelligence, I-consciousness, and egoism, which often need to be corrected to stay on the path of self-awareness anywhere and everywhere. One cannot remain eternally stuck at the physical pains and problems and physical well-being only.

While correcting the posture of the body in asana or the breathing method in pranayama, it is not merely the muscles, bones, or breath that we correct. We touch our consciousness in order to know its moods and modes. The involvement of consciousness in asana is articulated in such a way that the flow of consciousness remains sober and pure.

**Yoga Journal:** You are an Ayurvedic doctor. How much understanding of Ayurvedic principles is essential for yoga students?

**Geeta Iyengar:** Well, any knowledge of healing sciences will be supportive in the practice of yoga, whether it is Ayurveda, modern medical science, or homeopathy. However, apart from the physical body, Ayurveda recognizes the moral, mental, psychological, and intellectual aspects of human beings. Therefore, if along with human anatomy, physiology, and neurology, one understands one's constitutional structure—the three gunas: sattva, rajas, and tamas; and the three humors: vata, pitta, and kapha—one can have a clear picture or X-ray of one's body and mind. Still this is objective knowledge about oneself. With this background of objective knowledge, yoga helps to transform that objective knowledge to subjective experiential knowledge of oneself. For instance, Guruji, my father, did not have a chance to study Ayurveda, but his own sadhana, his thorough practice, total involvement, deep penetration, and complete dedication in yoga helped him to know the body and the mind in depth. In fact, his way of practice, teaching, and treatment is based on his own experience. He used his physical and mental body as a laboratory, yet his line of treatment became universal.

It is only after studying Ayurveda that I realized how close Guruji's experiences are to Ayurveda, as far as the treatment is concerned. I too studied Ayurveda after gaining sufficient understanding about yogic science. One should first concentrate on yoga since that is the main subject. But understanding the basics of the fundamental constitution of the human body-mind according to Ayurveda will be of great help in knowing oneself.

**Yoga Journal:** You have been encouraging students to come to an understanding of the poses through their own experience in their bodies. What should a student do when his or her own internal experience disagrees with what the teacher is teaching?

**Geeta Iyengar:** I did not say that students should understand the asanas through their bodies. The body is the instrument. One has to have a thorough knowledge of the asanas. But while doing the asana or being in asana, one has to learn to experience one's body—outer and inner. In order to penetrate consciousness, one's awareness and intelligence need to penetrate the body as well as the mind so that both cooperate to awaken the inner consciousness. And this is the yogic sadhana in a real sense. Now when I was asking the students to look into their asanas and feel their bodies—the body's positioning, its response—in fact it was to help them learn the process of experiencing the placement of the mind and intelligence. This placement is the art of feeling oneself inside out and outside in.

When a teacher is teaching, it is true that the student has to obey in order to learn. But it does not mean that the student should not use his discrimination. When the internal experience of the student disagrees with the teacher's teaching, the student has to analyze and work more, put more effort into understanding what the teacher is imparting. The student has to rub his intelligence a bit more strongly so that experiential knowledge of the teacher shines forth.

While teaching, this is what I ask the students to do. They have to learn to look within, feel themselves, sensitize themselves. It is not merely an outer performance. It is a method of grasping. It is an art of penetration. To teach the physical procedure of asana is simple, but to teach the mental process in the very asana is a meaningful and in-depth approach.

**Yoga Journal:** American readers will be interested to know what it was like for you being the daughter of such a brilliant teacher and a teacher yourself of your father's techniques. You say he treated you "not as his daughter but as a pupil" in *Yoga: A Gem for Women*. Would you elaborate?

**Geeta Iyengar:** Somebody asked me a while back how I felt being under the shadow of my father and I said instantly, "I am not under his shadow but under the light."

When I teach my father's techniques, he is no more my father but my guru. I follow my guru as any other disciple follows his guru. But it is certainly not a blind faith. Guruji's brilliance in this path has proved the rightness and reality of the subject. His sadhana and experience have become not only a guideline but a beacon light for us. When I teach his techniques, I am sure that it is a proven path. While practicing myself, I have seen its value and result. In teaching, I have seen the results on the students.

When I was undergoing training with Guruji, he did not show his affection as a blind love toward his daughter. Yoga demands discipline. Guruji is affectionate and compassionate, but he would not compromise the discipline. He teaches how we as pupils of yoga need to discipline ourselves for our own benefit.

**Yoga Journal:** You spoke about how your mother was compassionate but stern when she was raising you. How would you define compassion in a teacher? How can a teacher teach with the right balance of compassion and discipline?

**Geeta Iyengar:** Compassion and discipline are not two separate things. They are two sides of the same coin. Discipline without compassion may prove brutal and fatal, and compassion without discipline may prove ineffectual or destructive. A teacher needs the right balance. While teaching, the teacher has to discipline the disciple. But his discipline cannot be a kind of hard and rigid rule because at the end the discipline is meant for the good of the pupil. The teacher should not burden the pupil with discipline. Rather the teacher wants the pupil to go on a right and righteous path. However, this change does not occur instantly. The compassion of the teacher lubricates the stiffness and strictness of the discipline so that the student follows the discipline smoothly.