

# Sharing the Light

B.K.S. Iyengar visits America, instilling a renewed commitment to the yogic journey and inspiring a whole new generation of devotees

By Rita Trieger

It had been rumored that as B.K.S. Iyengar approached his 87th birthday, he would make one last trip to the United States. Fifty years after his first visit to this country, Gurujī would be introducing *Light on Life*, his fourth major book in the series that began with the 1966 publication of *Light on Yoga*. Often referred to as "the bible of yoga" *Light on Yoga* is the most popular yoga book ever written, and has been translated into 17 languages.

For a new generation of yoga students and teachers, Iyengar is a legend and considered by many to be the world's greatest living yoga teacher—his teaching has influenced tens of thousands directly, and his books many more.

There are plenty of first-hand accounts of Iyengar's no-nonsense approach to yoga training and his very loyal followers love to tell of their

individual encounters with the great teacher. The impression I got was that he was tough and, even though I had only briefly studied in the Iyengar style, I was very curious to see, or maybe even meet him.

His six-city tour included several days in New York City where he



**The tribute to Iyengar at New York's City Center was an artfully-inspiring, yogic tour de force.**

PHOTOGRAPHY BY VIDURA BARRIOS









# In His Own Words

excerpts from *LIGHT ON LIFE* by B.K.S. Iyengar

## From the Preface

Today you have the benefit of many gifted yoga teachers. When I began yoga, there was, I am sorry to say, no wise,

kind teacher to lead me. In fact my own Guru refused to answer any of my innocent inquiries on yoga. He did not instruct me as I do my students, offering them step-by-step guidance in an asana. He would simply demand a posture and leave it to me or his other students to figure out how it could be realized. Perhaps that stimulated some stubborn aspect of my nature, which allied to unshakable faith in the subject of yoga made me burn to go on. I am ardent and passionate, and maybe I needed to show the world that I was not worthless. But far more than that, I wanted to find out who I was. I wanted to understand this mysterious and marvelous "yoga," which could reveal to us our innermost secrets, as equally as it revealed those of the universe around us and our place in it as joyful, suffering, puzzled human beings.

I learned through practice, earned a bit of experienced knowledge, and reinvested that knowledge and understanding in order to learn more. By following the right direction and with the help of a naturally sensitive perception, I was able to further my knowledge. This produced in me a growing accumulation of refined experience that eventually revealed the essence of yoga knowledge. It took me whole decades to appreciate the depth and true value of yoga. Sacred texts supported my discoveries, but it was not they that signposted the way. What I learned through yoga, I found out through yoga. I am not, however, a "self-made man." I am only what seventy-two years of devoted yoga sadhana has created out of me. Any contribution I have made to the world has been the fruit of my sadhana. This sadhana provided me with the tenacity of purpose to continue even through trying times. My disinclination toward laxer lifestyles kept me on the straight path, but I never shunned anyone, for I have come to see the light of the soul in all. Yoga ferried me across the great river from the bank of ignorance to the shore of knowledge and wisdom. It is no extravagant claim to say that wisdom has come to me by the practice of yoga, and the grace of God has lit the lamp of the inner core in me. This allows me to see that same light of the soul glowing in all other beings.

You, my readers, must understand that you are already starting from somewhere. You have the beginning already shown to you, and no one knows in what wholeness and felicity you may end. If you take up any noble line and stick to it, you can reach the ultimate. Be inspired but not proud. Do not aim low; you will miss the mark. Aim high; you will be on the threshold of bliss.

## From the Foreword The Yogic Journey

This book is about Life. It is an attempt to light the way for you and other spiritual seekers. It aims to map out a path that all may follow. It offers advice, methods, and a philosophical framework at a level that even a newcomer to the practice of yoga may grasp. It does not offer shortcuts or vain promises to the gullible. It has taken me more than seventy years of constant application to reach where I am today. That does not mean that you need seventy years to reap the rewards of yoga practice. Yoga brings gifts from your very first day. These benefits can be experienced even by raw beginners, who feel something beginning to happen at a deep level in their bodies, in their minds, and even in their souls. Some describe the first gifts as a new feeling of lightness or calm or joy.

The miracle is that after seventy years, these gifts are still increasing for me. The benefits of practice cannot always be anticipated. When they come, it is so often as unexpected bounty in forms one had not expected. But if you think that learning to touch your toes or even stand on your head is the whole of yoga, you have missed most of its bounty, most of its blessings, and most of its beauty.

Yoga releases the creative potential of Life. It does this by establishing a structure for self-realization, by showing how we can progress along the journey, and by opening a sacred vision of the Ultimate, of our Divine Origin, and final Destiny. The Light that yoga sheds on Life is something special. It is transformative. It does not just change the way we see things; it transforms the person who sees. It brings knowledge and elevates it to wisdom.

The Light on Life we envisage here is unadulterated insight, pure truth (satya), which, allied to non-violence, was the guiding principle of Mahatma Gandhi and changed the world for all its inhabitants.

From your physical body, you will journey inward to discover your "subtle bodies": your energy body, where breath and emotions reside; your mental body, where thoughts and obsessions can be mastered; your intellectual body, where intelligence and wisdom can be found; and your divine body, where the Universal Soul can be glimpsed. Before we look at each layer, we must first deepen our understanding of how it incorporates the traditional eight limbs or petals of yoga. We must also come to see the relationship between nature and soul; yoga does not reject one for the other but sees them as inseparably joined like earth and sky are joined on the horizon.

You do not need to seek freedom in some distant land, for it exists within your own body, heart, mind, and soul. Illuminated emancipation, freedom, unalloyed and untainted bliss await you, but you must choose to embark on the Inward Journey to discover it.



**The spectacular New York tribute to Guruji was like a beautiful yogic ballet. When it was over, you couldn't wait to get onto your mat.**

would be honored with a special presentation and celebration at City Center, and would culminate in a *puja* or blessing for the new Iyengar Yoga Institute. I was lucky enough to receive invitations to both the City Center event and the *puja*.

## **The Theater of Yoga**

As I took my seat on the evening of the performance, I had no expectations. I assumed it would be a presentation of poses performed by senior Iyengar teachers—and although it turned out to be exactly that, I never could have anticipated the artful beauty of form, or the pure love that emanated from the stage that night.

Set to music and divided into four segments representing fire, water, air and pure consciousness, this live performance was better than any play or ballet I had ever seen. The thirty or so yogis on the stage moved through a perfectly synchronized flowing series of asana that ranged from the simplest Mountains to the most amazing Peacocks. This beautiful yoga ballet was a living tribute to Iyengar and his teachings. I can only imagine how he must have felt as he watched his legacy up there on the stage. Even if you had never stepped onto a yoga mat you couldn't help but be inspired. The performance was a total celebration of the human form, and as I sat there in the dark I couldn't help but think about my own practice, and couldn't wait to get back onto my mat.

When the lights came up, I wished I could see it all over again, but this one-night-only show was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. (Hopefully someone videotaped it!)

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tices led them to start a new business: Yoga Connect, the first online resource for individuals to connect with like-minded yoga enthusiasts.

## Heal

Often, the struggles we encounter in a relationship simply come from the complications of everyday life. When we are stressed, our partner is usually the one who feels the effects. Instead of arguing or transferring tension, Dr. Berman suggests that couples go to a yoga class together. "During a yoga practice, the mind is completely at rest, the body is rejuvenated, and the energy stores that get depleted in everyday life are refilled," she says. Couples are more likely to foster healthy communication from the calm place that yoga provides.

The practice of yoga can also help a couple dealing with a health concern or injury. Since one often feels helpless if a lover is hurting in some way, practicing yoga together supports both people in the healing process. "Just by coming to class together, the partner is participating in the recovery of his or her mate, which brings healing to both people in the relationship," Marcum says.


Sharing your yoga practice sets the foundation for a healthy relationship. Just as we build our practices on the mat, we build our lives together. But, perhaps the best part of sharing practice is how fun and enlightening it can be. Seeing your partner hit an arm balance or touch his toes for the first time is a thrill.

Leaving a class feeling fully engaged in all your senses or bursting with fresh ideas to share is a natural high. Yoga opens multiple avenues of possibility and reminds us that there is always more to learn and let go of in both our own lives and in our lives with our partners. 

## Children at War

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"What we need is education, education, education," says Leonor. "We need to educate ourselves and others. Children are too precious not to." I think out loud, telling her how tragic it is that other countries participate in glorifying war to babies-and then she tells me how right here in the United States, there's a group of mothers fighting to get recruiters out of schools. "We do it here too," she says. "Recruiters stand in American high schools signing up kids for the Army before they've even graduated." Then, I remember that's exactly how I ended up in the military. I didn't sign up until after I graduated, but the seed was certainly planted well before then. I recall taking the assessment/placement test when I was only a junior, at 16, completely unable to understand the full impact of what "military" even meant. I remember my "former-hippy" English teacher, Mr. Giovanni, telling us we didn't have to take it. I didn't understand why a teacher would tell us we could sit and be idle. Now, in one moment, talking to my firecracker friend 15 years later, I get it.

Passing a law that a country can't use children in war is a huge beginning. But, Leonor adds, "Awareness is just as important." Donations to the organizations that fight such injustice are a great way to help. And a film like *Innocent Voices* brings to reality the extreme scenarios in other countries. 

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To learn more about the film and child soldiers, visit these sites:  
[www.innocentvoicesmovie.com](http://www.innocentvoicesmovie.com)

The Child Soldiers Project  
[www.child-soldiers.org/](http://www.child-soldiers.org/)

Amnesty International  
[www.amnestyusa.org/child\\_soldiers/index.do](http://www.amnestyusa.org/child_soldiers/index.do)

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A few days later I headed down to the new Iyengar Yoga Institute for the *puja*—another first for me. Iyengar devotees are very proud of their new *shala*, and rightly so. It's light and airy and includes an incredible rope wall. Anticipation ran high on that sunny Sunday morning as a group of 200 teachers and students gathered to hear Guruji speak.

The actual blessing took about 90 minutes and included chanting as well as offerings of flowers and food. At one point Iyengar walked into the crowd playfully sprinkling rose water as he thanked everyone and gave blessings. After the ceremony it was time for stories, and one by one the senior Iyengar teachers shared their often amusing memories of learning from the master. When it was his turn to speak, Iyengar was playful, gracious and obviously proud. He said he felt like a grandfather to thousands of yogis and yoginis and couldn't believe that the tiny seeds of yoga he had planted so long ago had bloomed into such a fruitful tree.

Before the day was over, each of us was given the opportunity to meet Iyengar and receive a personal blessing. I must admit that I was completely overwhelmed and touched. It was so beautiful to watch all of his loyal students wanting to give back to him in some small way. I felt as though I didn't deserve such a wonderful opportunity. But in the end I was glad I took it—when it was finally my turn, Guruji looked over at me and beckoned me to approach. He had a sparkle in his eye and the warmest smile as I bowed my head and felt him tap it twice. "God bless you," he said, "and thank you." 