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The Newsletter

Interview with Geeta Iyengar

Geeta Iyengar has dedicated her life to mastering the art of yoga. Born on December 7, 1944 in Tumkur, India, she is the eldest of Yogacharya B.K.S. Iyengar's six children.

by Chris Saudek

CS: *Geetaji, I would like you to tell us about your formation and development as a yoga teacher. What do you remember from the very beginning, when you were a child, about watching Guruji practice or your thoughts about yoga at that young age?*

Geeta: How to say this! You see, it was not that I was completely interested in it or that I was disinterested. I was not a person who just never thought of yoga because it was in the family; it was going on. I was seeing it so there were no thoughts against it. And it was only me who was interested in it in the family. I don't think my brother and sisters were interested in it in the manner I was. But, I won't say that I was totally given for it. However, whenever time was there or I felt like doing it, I used to do.

I was practicing in a playful manner but that was not the age to be serious. When you speak of interest, you think of being serious. But if you mean a light interest, then I was always interested. As a child I would watch my parents when they were doing yoga and obviously I had that interest. But if you ask me whether I was sincere, I would say no because I was not intelligent enough at that age to be sincere. At that age I was interested in playing with friends and being outside and going to parks. But at the same time I was never parted from yoga, only the intensity was less until I grew the seed inside. So I was never completely out of it. It was always around me. I remember very well how I used to imitate Guruji while he was practicing. Guruji used to make me bend and twist and take me topsy-turvy on his feet when he did headstand and shoulderstand.

CS: *When did you become aware of the fact that your father was so special and how dedicated he was to his work?*

Geeta: As a child, when I started under-

standing the life outside, I knew that he was different. Even though he was not having that much name and fame yet, people used to approach him. In 1951 he was teaching Jaya Prakash Narayan and other Indian politicians. Then Krishnamurti came and he was teaching him. Though I didn't know these people, I knew that they were important people. They were coming, Guruji was teaching them and sometimes he would tell us that he was going to teach them. So we knew that he was doing something special. People were coming and asking for him and seeking his advice so we all knew he had some special knowledge.

CS: *In Yoga, A Gem for Women, Guruji wrote in the forward that although you watched him and you saw him teaching, you didn't really show any inclination toward yoga until your illness when he gave you an ultimatum. Did you practice before that except in playing?*

Geeta: I don't think I didn't show any inclination. Maybe Guruji remembers it that way. But I was doing yoga from the age of three or four and even before having nephritis I used to do. I was always a sick child, having cold or cough or fever. Though I used to take part in competitions like jump rope, I had little strength. I was weak constitutionally. Before the nephritis, I played a lot doing yoga. I was never lazy but I had many illnesses which were never diagnosed properly. This went on for two years without knowing what the main cause of these illnesses was. My breathing was affected and at night I used to wheeze and get breathless. Later when I became unconscious with nephritis, they diagnosed that it was the cause of all these other illnesses for all these years. I was already playing at yoga, and then I had to do it because there was no other choice. And I knew that when I did yoga, I felt better. Suddenly I became serious after this illness. But even now I feel I have a weakness and I have to limit myself.

CS: *Did you ever think of your practice as a duty?*

Geeta: No. I would not have mentioned about the nephritis in my book if my publisher had not insisted that I point out that yoga had helped my nephritis. But my interest in

yoga was intuitive and after the nephritis I took it seriously. There might be people more serious than me, who do yoga day and night. But I take it that not only in this life, but in the next life I will be doing yoga, not as a duty but as a way of life. I won't say it is my life mission; it's my life.

CS: *In the book, Guruji says that the medicine that the doctors had advised for your condition was too costly. Do you think that if you had had the money, Guruji would have taken that route?*

Geeta: Actually I don't think so because he had tremendous faith in yoga. As the kidney was affected permanently, yoga was the only medicine.

CS: *When you started teaching, did you ever think it would be your life work?*

Geeta: I started teaching in 1959 when I was in school. I was practicing and the teachers saw me. We had competitions in the schools where groups would perform giving a demonstration. At that time my teacher asked me to help her with a yoga demonstration. Guruji was just coming into the limelight and there were articles about him in the local papers. So people started recognizing him as a yogi who had taught famous people. So my teachers recognized me as well. In the early years when they were doing group demonstrations, they had never introduced Sirsasana and Sarvangasana. So that was the first year that we introduced these poses for a performance. I was the organizer for the teaching of the poses and the formation of the performers so as to make it an attractive demonstration. I even taught Kapotasana and Raja Kapotasana. It was a big success and we received a prize. So that's how I began teaching in school. In 1961 I passed my final exams and started teaching yoga. At first I started because Guruji was going to England and some of his pupils asked him whether I could teach them in his absence and he permitted it. And I kept teaching at my school and some of the other schools started asking me to teach for them also. That is how it continued.

*Interview with Geetaji continued in the next issue.
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INTERVIEW WITH GEETA IYENGAR, PART II

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BY CHRIS SAUDEK

CS: You have told me that you went through a period of tremendous stiffness in your hips. And through that you may know what women are feeling when they complain of the same thing. But you are not going to tell them to avoid certain things; you are going to teach them how to work through it, aren't you?

GEETA: That's right. As I said, I don't worry about the pain. And you know if you really reach deeper then there is no pain. As in the class this morning when we did Virabhadrasana and everyone just bent the legs half way and stayed there. That invites more pain. Face the pain and bend! Then you know how the relief comes.

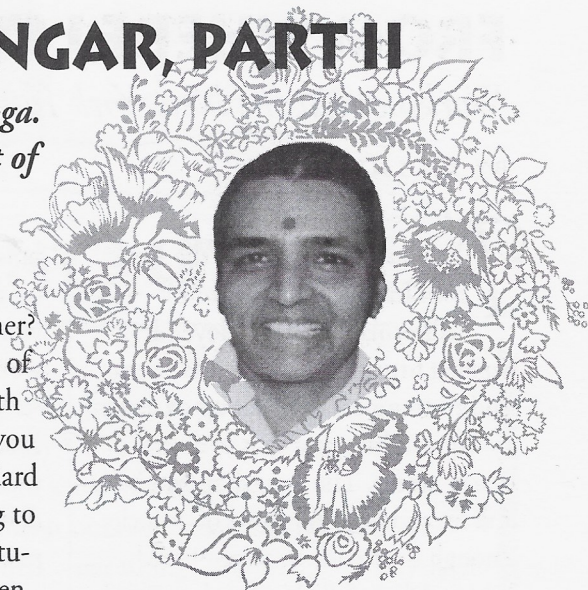
CS: But you know it is very difficult in the West to explain to people that you have to go through a certain amount of pain to get some relief. They may even tolerate the pain but they often don't want to actually face it.

GEETA: That is what is the problem in teaching. How do you convince them? If you don't make them penetrate, it will all be a failure. Take the example of a ballet dancer. Ballet dancing can be painful. But suppose because of that they don't do the ballet the way it has to be performed. Would you appreciate that? Would you call it a good ballet program? Wouldn't that bring the standard of ballet down? Would you

allow that art to die in that manner? Now ballet is just art for the sake of art, it is not a healing art. But with yoga, if you say it is painful and you keep going on bringing the standard down and underdoing, is it going to lead you where it should? The intuition and penetration we have been discussing will not come unless we reach that depth.

Suppose from here you have to go to Pune city. In between there are many roads where you don't want to walk. They may be dirty; there may be bad traffic or whatever. But still you have to reach there. And once you reach the city those dirty streets or traffic are behind you. In the same way the crossroads in yoga will be there. So who has to cross them? We have to. You have to convince your students. Of course some may leave and give up. But this psychology you can't leave. The crossroads will be there. And it's not only a question of body pain. Mental agony will also be there. But how long can you hide? Suppose I want to look younger so I go on using makeup and polishing my nails. How long can I hide? You have to face the truth. If one does not face the pain in the present, the pain is stored for the future. It will be worse by that time.

CS: Many of us are wondering what you see for your future. Sometimes you talk about wanting



more time for your own practice and work. And now that Guruji is retired you have such a load. Of course we, your students, hope you will teach forever! But how do you see the future? You are the teacher here now. What will happen if you don't teach so much?

GEETA: Some day I will have to retire, that is true. but when I don't know. There are many youngsters who will come up; they will teach.

CS: But isn't it hard to turn things over to the youngsters who don't know what you know and who may not be as devoted?

GEETA: Some day it has to happen. And when I was young, I was not a perfect teacher. Gradually perfection comes. If they are honest in their approach they will pick up the knowledge. If they are not, what can be done? This is the world. It is all up to the upcoming teachers. God takes care of his creation. When I will retire and what will happen, only He knows. I need not worry about that.

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