

Genius in Action

By Patricia Walden

Nothing could have prepared me for BKS Iyengar. With his love of yoga, he was the prince of passion and the king of charisma. In my first class with him, he boomed out, "If you keep your armpits open, you won't get depressed;" and from the feeling in my rising, opening chest, I knew exactly what he meant.

There was fire in his presence, a fire that lit the light of yoga in me and changed my life. He was direct and unequivocal, with a fierceness of spirit that implied he could face any challenge.

That was over 25 years ago. Since then, I have come to see BKS Iyengar as a modern classicist, steeped in tradition, versed in the vedas, and fluent in Patanjali. At 80, he continues to practice intensely: 35 minute headstands, 108 drop-overs (cycles of tadasana, dropping back to urdhva dhanurasana, and then rising back to tadasana), 10 minute viparita dandasanas, and long introverted forward bends. As he says, "When I was young, I played. Now I stay."

In the early years, his teaching reflected his practice. We did many, many poses, including advanced ones, in each class. He rained instructions on us with a torrent of intensity. His focus was on action--- actions that fused body and mind: "Make the mind feel the stretch. Awaken the mind of the little toe." We would leave class, exhausted and exhilarated, soaked to the bone by the flood of his teaching, wondering whether we could even make it to our hotel rooms.

As the years have passed, he has added new dimensions to his teaching. We do fewer poses per class, but he takes us deeper into each. Demonstrating the nuances of practice, he encourages and cajoles us to see and to understand. He urges us to explore, to find out where we are dull or overworking, and to adjust, so that consciousness can grace the body evenly throughout. And most of all, he accents that the purpose of practice is to come closer to the soul, through balancing action and reflection. In his own wry words: "There is pose and repose."

With the mind of a scientist and the soul of a poet, he has spent thousands of hours using his body as a laboratory, experimenting, exploring, observing, and creating. I remember once watching him practice before teaching a class. I was startled to see his body twisted in uncharacteristically poor alignment; but later, in class, I realized that he had been working out the problems of his students within his own body. He once told me that he learned his method by exploring not only what was right, but what was wrong; and that he hoped his students could learn from his experience.

In medical classes, he is a creative and therapeutic force of nature,

a genius in action. For two solid hours, he weaves through the Institute, seeing and responding with lightening speed: a modern healer in love with his work.

It is extraordinary and challenging to have Guruji as a teacher: to learn from him year after year and to experience his genius, generosity, and guidance. His passion for excellence and unrelenting interest in yoga are contagious; and those qualities, along with his courage and will power, inspire my life, my practice, and my teaching.

When I first started yoga, practicing was hard for me. It took tremendous effort and discipline. Watching Guruji practice, by contrast, was paradoxical: he looked effortless and free, even while practicing the most challenging poses. Inspired by his example and instruction, I stayed with the struggle. What followed surprised me: through discipline, I fell in love with practice. An inner freedom flowered.

I bring this lesson to my students: if we stay with our chosen path and develop the discipline to go through difficulty, our efforts will transform us.

Writing this tribute to BKS Iyengar has challenged me: to examine my heart and life in order to identify what about him and his teaching I value the most. Here it is:

The greatest gift a teacher/guru can give a student is genuine interest: such genuine interest can transform and shape a student's life beyond measure.

Guruji is my link with tradition. He shows me what is possible with practice and represents to me a living example of Sutra I.14 ("sa tu dirghakala nairantarya satkara asevitah drdhabhumih): "Yoga is successful when practiced with devotion, uninterrupted, over a long period of time."

I remember one of the first lessons I learned from him: "when confronted with difficulty, take an action, no matter how small." Anything is possible, if you act (and reflect) with love and devotion. Through his challenging style, Guruji has taught me to face difficulty with wide open eyes, to refine myself through the play of passion and discipline, and to feel secure in his method. As a result I feel joy in my practice--- and free in my love for teaching.

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