

How Yoga Transformed Me

By B.K.S. Iyengar

The course of one's life can be altered by a flash of destiny which is the accumulated actions and reactions of past lives that play a role in the present life. One has to accept the challenges when destiny strikes like lightning. The effects may be visible immediately in some while it may take decades of persistent and patient efforts in others. I belong to the latter category.

Destiny alone cannot open the gates of luck and make one successful in life. A persistent and determined effort is also necessary to mould an individual.

I consider myself to be one in a million who succumbed to the call of that flash of destiny. I stuck to that call with faith although failures after failures brought me despair, dejection and distress. I pursued my fate with restless determination accepting that these failures may act as a step towards success. I am happy that my efforts fructified after 35 years. One may call it fate or destiny or the grace of God !

Faith and untiring efforts made me understand and realize that the purpose of my life was to utilize it for the good of society and the world at large.

It is embarrassing to speak or write about oneself but I will keep aside my false modesty and let you know how my interest in Yoga gathered momentum and transformed me. How, I, with a new light attracted people towards yoga and made it popular. I think that this narration of my early life may help my pupils, whose destiny has brought them to me, to build up courage and strength in their practices.

MY BIRTH

I was born in a village called Belur in the state of Karnataka, India on Sunday, December 14, 1918 at 3 AM during the influenza epidemic of 1918. My mother was in the grip of influenza and there was little hope of my survival but God saved both of us. I looked sickly with thin arms and legs, a protruding stomach and a heavy head. My appearance was not prepossessing.

MY EARLY CHILDHOOD

My health began deteriorating because of bouts of malaria, typhoid and doctors also suspected that I had tuberculosis of the lungs. At that time there was no cure for these diseases and I often faced the jaws of death. I became a burden to myself and to my parents.

My father breathed his last when I was only nine years old and his absence created a vacuum in our family. No one in the house could guide me on how to attain good health. My schooling was affected

as I was forced to stay in bed. I became a "back bencher" in class and I would just manage to obtain borderline marks. The authorities would promote me to a higher class hoping that I would perform better the next year. Studies became monotonous and laborious.

THE 'FLASH OF DESTINY'

My life turned for the better in March 1934. My Guru, Sri T. Krishnamacharya was also my brother-in-law as he was married to my elder sister. Before his marriage, he stayed in Varanasi and studied various darshanas. He then went to Nepal and learned Yoga under a great master named Sri Ramamohana Brahmachari. He conducted seminars on yoga at various places after he returned to his native place in Karnataka. The Maharaja of Mysore, the late Krishna Raja Wodeyar Bahadur IV heard of my Guruji. He opened and patronized a yogashala (shala = school) in the Jagamohan Palace of Mysore. The Maharaja would send my Guruji to various places to propagate yoga. In 1934, the Maharaja sent him with his pupils to visit Kaivalyadham at Lonavala and Bombay. He halted at Bangalore (where I was residing) on his way to Bombay and asked me whether I would stay with my sister in Mysore until he returned from Bombay. I had heard about the palaces and lush gardens of the city of Mysore but had not had an opportunity to see them. So, I willingly agreed to his suggestion and he bought my ticket to Mysore. This is the 'flash of destiny' which changed the course of my life.

I asked my brother-in-law's permission to return to Bangalore when he returned from Bombay. He suggested that I join the High School in Mysore and also learn a few asanas to improve my health instead of allowing me to go home. I was tempted to consent to his suggestion to stay in Mysore and join the local school as I had never experienced good health. He also started teaching me a few asanas to improve my health. I began addressing him as "Guruji" as he implanted the seed of yoga in me.

MY FIRST EXPOSURE TO YOGA

My body was very stiff as I had been bedridden for many years. My arms barely reached my knees when I bent down. I doubted whether yoga would do me any good, as my body was not responding though I was struggling hard. I stayed with my Guru for two years. In the beginning he did not show much interest in teaching me possibly due to my weak physique. He turned his attention towards me when one of his senior-most students left him forever after a year of my stay. He would make me practice yoga twice a day and as he demanded. He was very stern and that inculcated a fear complex in me. I had severe aches, pains and fatigue because of this intense practice. Circumstances forced me to do as commanded by my Guru. I did not turn to yoga as a vocation for I was not born in the house of yogis, saints or philosophers. Now

I consider that it was rather a stroke of good luck that yoga pursued me though I was indifferent towards it.

MY FIRST EXPOSURE TO TEACHING

In 1936, the Maharaja of Mysore sent my Guru along with a few of his pupils including myself on a lecture cum demonstration tour of Northern Karnataka. A number of people including ladies requested us to teach them during this tour. In those days women were very shy to practice yoga in front of elderly men. My Guruji asked me to conduct classes for these ladies, as I was the youngest of the group. They gladly accepted me as a teacher.

Thus, Guruji planted the seed of teaching in me, which has now grown into a mighty tree spreading its branches over all the five continents.

I started getting a lot of offers to teach yoga. Teaching demanded experiences but I was a novice in yoga. My limited practices and experiences kept my courage at bay. I was nervous to take up the responsibility but my mind was saying, "Why should I not take a chance?" I meekly accepted to teach with fear in my heart. This meekness forced me to practice more and more to gain experiences. The interest in yoga came not for the sake of love for yoga but for the sake of earning my livelihood.

HOW PUNE BECAME MY HOME

In 1937, the Deccan Gymkhana Club in Pune wrote to my Guru asking to send them a yoga teacher for six months. Guruji was very keen that someone should go and teach. None of my Guru's students were willing to accept that offer. All his students except myself were from Mysore Sanskrit Pathshala. Only I went to a school that taught English. He ordered me to go and teach in Pune as I knew little English. I agreed because I was looking for freedom from bondage.

I met the club members who asked me to teach in various schools, colleges and physical education centers. It was sheer delight to enter the college premises to teach yoga when I had not even completed school education.

MY LIMITATIONS

The responsibility of teaching was too much for my age; those who came to the classes were older in age, bigger in size and very sophisticated in their behavior. The first humiliation I faced was when the college students laughed at me and sarcastically looked at my physique. (I was weighing about 32 kilos and my chest was measuring 22 inches only. After inhalation, it would increase by only half an inch.) Their behavior made me face them with boldness and accept the challenge. Another of my weaknesses was my language. I was neither good in English nor in my own mother tongue, leave alone the language of the land Marathi. Furthermore, I had no

theoretical knowledge or practical experiences. Guruji did not explain the principles or the subtleties of yoga though I was practicing yoga. I was forced to call myself a yoga teacher although I did not have any qualification.

There were only two ways by which I could overcome these limitations; Acquire second hand knowledge from books or practice vigorously with determination to gain first hand information through subjective experiences. I opted for the latter and began practicing for 10 hours a day to master what little I had learned from my Guru.

Soon, the college authorities appreciated my work and my services were extended for three years. I then continued teaching independently. The intense effort I had put in gave me good health and my teaching helped me earn enough to carry on with my bare necessities. It took me years of practice to gain control over my body. I slowly achieved mental stability and my approach to the problems of life became more spiritual. I confess that my mind could not grasp the vast art and science of yoga in the beginning but with devoted effort my knowledge increased. It took years of patience and hard work to attract people from all walks of life towards yoga. I cannot put into words the suffering I underwent.

DIFFICULTIES DURING MY PRACTICE

My hard practices caused agony to my body, nerves, mind and to my very soul. I was tossed from one side to the other. Sometimes the body and at other times the mind refused to cooperate, moving alternatively. My spirit oscillated. My energies were sapped and I was mentally fatigued. The self within grew restless if I did not try and failure brought on dejection when I tried. Exhaustion very often brought me to the point of collapse. I could neither eat nor drink with comfort. Sleep was almost impossible, as both my body and mind were restless with pain and failure. Dejection and doubt tormented me though I continued practicing yoga for years. My mind found no rest except in renewed effort. Each day was an ordeal but God's grace forced me to make one more attempt for every failure. I made enormous mistakes as I had no guidance but I learned discrimination from observing my own errors. I had to go without food for days when circumstances forced me to live on my own. Often I lived only on a cup of tea. My inner flame kept on persisting me to continue with my daily practice with zeal and zest. Slowly I began feeling that my body was growing in strength and my mind was gaining stability. It was only in 1946 that an inborn interest arose in me though I started practicing yoga in 1934.

MY TRANSFORMATION WITH THE BLESSINGS OF THE LORD

My sudden interest in yoga was brought about by a vision of our family deity Lord Venkateshwara (commonly known as Balaji) who

smiled and blessed me in a dream. It was told by the Lord that my vocation was to practice and teach yoga. The Lord blessed me with one hand and gave me a few grains of rice with the other. The benevolent deity told me that I would no longer have to worry about my physical survival. The same night my wife too had dream where Devi Lakshmi gave her a piece of coin saying that she was returning what she had borrowed from me long ago. The very next day my pupils called up for lessons and from then onwards my stars have been good and the grace of God continues to be with me. My only regret is that I am not thanking Him as I was quick to curse Him during the hard days of my life. From 1934 to 1946, yoga was attached to me but today it is I who am attached to yoga. However, life has not been all that easy.

HURDLES IN PRACTICE

In the year 1958, I felt I was losing my grip on the postures. I felt dizzy, heavy and stiff. Correspondence with other yogis including my Guru brought me no relief. I was told that married life and age were taking their toll. Even the forward bends were very painful. However, after another three years of effort I recovered and regained control. In 1979, I met with two scooter accidents immediately after the celebrations of 60 years of my life. I had to start yoga all over again as a beginner after these accidents. All my old aches and pains reappeared. It took me more than eight years to fight and regain control. This again is due to my determined effort to get back my yoga and yoga graced me to embrace it with reverence.

THE EFFECT AND POWER OF YOGA

I will not say that I have completely mastered this art and science even today in spite of all my efforts. The more I work towards refinement, the more insignificant my efforts appear to be and I feel that the perfection has yet to be reached. This way, I am learning to be constant with this divine discontent that drives me on.

MY ADVICE

Practice takes my mind and intelligence closer to the core of my being. I advise you on the basis of my experiences that we should not reduce our efforts if perfection tries to elude us. Yogic discipline lifted me from a sub-human existence and made me a man of confidence, sincere in my efforts, hardy and honest, dear in my thinking and clean in my conscience.

Probably this art would not have reached the average man nor would it have become so popular if yoga had not stuck to me and me to yoga. I, who was overlooked and branded by people as a mad cap may be pardoned if I say that I am the proudest man on earth as I carried the message of yoga along with many of my pupils in the form of physical health, mental poise, intellectual

clarity and spiritual solace for millions and millions of people all over the globe. Yoga has made me to see God in all. If yoga could do so much for me, who was not blessed in his early life, how much could yoga help those who started yoga in more fortunate circumstances would be beyond my imagination.

No doubt this art and science of yoga is vast and progress there seems- to be very slow. I was expected to live only up to the age of 20 because of my tuberculosis but yoga not only made me live a life of satisfaction and joy but also made me carry the message of Yoga all over the globe. I am now inter-linked with Yoga and Yoga with me. It is now difficult to consider Yoga and myself as different entities. I do not hesitate to share my experiences with my pupils and am still experiencing new feelings and new light even though age is telling upon me. I live in my cells and in my heart. I would like to practice Yoga till my last breath as my humble services to Yoga and my only wish is to prostrate to God, surrender to God, surrendering my each breath while performing Yoga. I am sure that after me, my pupils, my grand pupils and great grand pupils will carry the message of Yoga to every nook and corner of the globe so that all may live as one human race without geographical division or division of caste, color, creed or sex.

SOURCE: YOGA RAHASYA, VOLUME A, PAGES 130-137