

Shaping enlightenment

The man who brought us yoga tells Lisa Grainger how, at 86, he can still bend over backwards

Gazing into an octagonal room ringed by glassless, barred windows it is hard to believe that I am in the inner sanctum of B. K. S. Iyengar, the man who brought yoga to the West, and whom *Time* magazine nominated last year as one of the most influential men of our time. In the muggy, light green space, where bodies in unflattering elasticated bloomers are contorting themselves with the aid of ropes, straps and nooses, twisting against walls and doing backbends over chairs, only one man is still.

Iyengar, 86, has been hanging upside down on a rope swing for about 20 minutes. Neither the height (a few feet off the floor) nor the rush of blood to his head seems to be bothering him. But then, he's used to it.

Every morning for 72 years, the man who gave his name to a strand of hardcore yoga (think of a regimen of 200 difficult poses and strict breath control) has spent three hours a day working on his body, before teaching for up

to ten hours more and, most recently, writing his autobiography.

"Guruji", as he is affectionately known, has handed the day-to-day running of his Pune Yoga Institute, in the Indian state of Maharashtra — one of more than 1,500 Iyengar centres that pupils have constructed around the world — to his children Geeta and Prashant. But the guru is still involved in the classes. While obviously not as toned as he was in the Seventies, when pictures of him in more than 200 *asanas* (poses) were published in his international best-seller *Light on Yoga*, his legs are wiry and muscular, his chest muscles taut. A modest paunch, sporting a thick gold chain which hangs over his red cotton bloomers, is the only sign that his regimen is not as strict as it once was, and shoulder-length Billy Connolly-style grey locks are a signal of his "much gayer, not so strict" self. But his face is animated, his dark brown eyes bright and darting, his body scarily elastic.

His new book, *Light on Life*, illuminates readers on the subject of his life's journey from sick child to holy man. His mind is as agile as his body, he asserts. And despite his age, he claims that there isn't a single pose that he can no longer do, voluntarily standing on his head when I'm invited to watch him at closer quarters, although, to the natural showman's embarrassment, he falls over on his initial attempt.

"If you have the right mind, your body can do anything," he states, before doing the vertical splits against a wall. Yoga has also been responsible for his wellbeing, he says. He's been ill only once as an adult; a cough he had in 1983 for seven years, as a result of dust and cotton fibres in blankets at a mass class he held. Even when he dislocated his shoulder falling out of a pose in his eighties, he refused to go to hospital,



he says, before going on to explain how Martin Luther King, like him, shared goals of freedom for all and non-violence.

Although few people reach the ultimate goal of freedom, he says he has done so. He no longer dreams, for example, "as I have nothing in my subconscious mind... it carries no weight at all, thanks to yoga". He can empty his mind in *asanas* and still sets up a stopwatch in front of him before he begins, to see how long he has managed to maintain his brain in a state of utter stillness. His feet and hands are baby-soft, apparently because they have been sensitised to be "sensory organs which are perfectly balanced, so they get no rough skin or callouses".

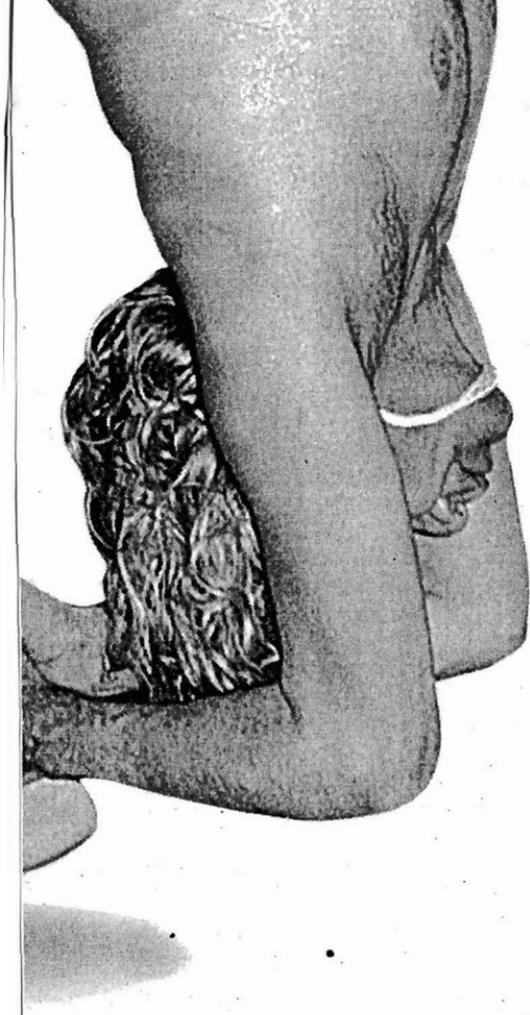
In his medical class in the afternoon, there is no shortage of patients to give testament to his skill at strengthening both minds and bodies. After the class, depressed men assure me that, having hung upside down, they feel no burdens at all; even a clearly disturbed woman roaming about appears to have calmed down. "With her, you have to calm the body and it stills her mind," Iyengar says.

While being a highly regarded guru brings the 87-year-old a great deal of satisfaction, he says he is content to leave most of the classes to his children, who rule the rooms with a similar approach to discipline. The family's fierceness in the classroom has a point, he says defensively. When he kicked his 22-year-old granddaughter Abhijata in class that morning, it wasn't to inflict pain, he insists. "You saw me. I kicked her very specifically, not with the sole, but with the heel, right by the shoulderblades. And why? Did you see her face? The moment I hit someone, you see the knowledge come to them, as if to say 'Aah, now I have got it'. Because they felt that place where they should be feeling the ener-

Discipline has always been core to the man who, once he'd escaped his brother-in-law's tutelage in the Seventies, worked with a medical doctor to explore the body's physical limits, and then slowly started his own classes.

Unlike many yoga practitioners, the instruction given by him and his children is neither quiet nor peaceful. Even in his thrice-weekly afternoon medical class, which aims to teach people to heal their bodies through yoga, he marches round the room, barking orders, kicking, admonishing and pushing the 50 or so pupils. In Britain, where he taught briefly, one pupil joked that his initials should stand for Bang Kick Slap, all of which he administers freely as he walks around the room.

But if he pushes people, it's for their own



pose in his eighties, he refused to go to hospital, getting a pupil to reset it without any pain relief.

But given the pain he went through as a child, that "short discomfort" was nothing, Iyengar says with a saintly smile. Born in 1918 during the global flu pandemic, the boy suffered from constant bouts of malaria, typhoid and tuberculosis. It was only after ten years of assiduously practising *asanas*, from 1934, that he forgot his suicidal thoughts and fully regained his health.

In spite of accusations that he is a "furniture yogi" and contortionist who spends too much time winding his pupils around tables and ropes, and too little on internal peace and well-being, Iyengar takes pains to emphasise that his brand of yoga, brought to the West in the Fifties by the violinist Yehudi Menuhin, one of his pupils, is not just about perfecting *asanas*. "It's about educating every layer of the human, from the skin to the soul, which are like petals on a flower," he says. "And that takes discipline. And dedication." In his case, a torturous apprenticeship with his guru, and brother-in-law, Professor T. Krishnamacharya, who pushed his nephew to such extremes that he tore ligaments during demonstrations. It enabled Iyengar, he says, to get in touch with his core self, "the nucleus of every cell of my being" which, with spiritual oneness, is the goal of all yoga practitioners.

It took him at least 30 years, he says, to feel that his *asanas* were good enough to photograph for his books. And about 50 before his nerves became so highly attuned that he could hear vibrations in his body, when his *asanas*, energy and self are as one. And a lifetime of pushing himself to extremes to reach spiritual peace.

'YOGA IS A PAINFUL ART. NOTHING TO DO WITH EXTERNALS'

But if he pushes people, it's for their own good, he says. Not that anyone, of course, complains. "If you come to the medical class this afternoon, you will see. People who couldn't stand are now walking. We have cancer patients who've lived for decades because of constant practice." For some patients, who have come from all over the world, for weeks or sometimes months, to see if his hardcore approach can help them, just having five minutes with the guru is akin to a personal chat with the Pope.

The late Pope was one of his admirers. And as well as Menuhin, Guruji has taught Indian prime ministers, film stars, politicians, and even Queen Elizabeth of Belgium, who he taught to stand on her head when she was 80. "Once she'd done it, I taught her gardener to help her up," he says.

In the Pune institute, which he built in 1975 as a tribute to his late wife, he is treated like royalty. Pupils shyly come forward to prostrate themselves before him and to kiss his feet. The idolatory, he says with a fey giggle, is "a little bit strange. How would I know I would become an icon? That people would think of me as legendary? I did not know the meaning of the word legendary when I was young. Yes, yes, it is odd."

Nevertheless, he's not dissatisfied at being in such an elevated position. When speaking of his goals and achievements, he often compares himself to other people who he believes have had an equally profound effect on humanity. "I wanted to be to yoga like Mahatma Gandhi was to non-violence, like Menuhin was to music, like Krishnamurti was to philosophy, by revealing the hidden things that could be revealed,"

that place where they should be feeling the energy." Besides, the pupils tell me, although he often inflicts pain, his eyes are always soft, as one said, "filled with love". Or as Iyengar put it: "The perfect teacher is someone who roars like a lion on the outside, but is as meek as a lamb on the inside."

Iyengar claims to have no need of material goods and he has no personal possessions. The money from the sale of his books apparently goes into a public charitable trust, to fund the teaching of yoga around the world. He is displeased that yoga has become a fashion, "spreading like wildfire through the West". He has little time for models, such as Christy Turlington, capitalising on the craze by creating ranges of yoga-based products. "It is good when people want to be better, physically, morally, spiritually, intellectually. But a fashion?" he says, his face twisting with anger. "No! Yoga is a painful art. It's not like dance or music, where the person watching gets pleasure. Only the person doing it finds joy. It has nothing to do with externals."

In a month, he will be on his way to the land of external temptations, America, to promote his autobiography. "But I'm not looking forward to it. I haven't been there for 12 years and now my publishers need me. But I'd rather be here, working on making my brain more restful. That is the only thing that matters now."

Light on Life, by B.K.S. Iyengar (to be published September 30 by Rodale, £12.99), is available from Times Books First, at £11.69, post free: 0870 1608080; timesonline.co.uk/booksfirstbuy
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