

INTRODUCTION

I am now in my eighty-third year on this planet and feel a deep urge to share with my friends and colleagues in the Iyengar yoga community the story of my life from the time when I first began to practice yoga.

My interest in Yoga began in the late 60s, when I was a 38 year-old mother of three daughters. Before that I had studied movement and dance, and had delved into meditation. I developed a sense of myself through movement and dance more than through meditation. So when I was first shown yoga asana (poses), it just clicked. I found that yoga embraced all these forms of working with the body/mind, and gave me the integrated practice that I was looking for.

My first yoga teacher was Jutta Weidemann. I took to yoga like a fish to water. It was a natural way for me to find a sense of wholeness in myself. I found myself practicing daily with great enthusiasm and delight. I found myself sharing what I learned through my own practice with other yoga students, and gradually I came to be seen as a teacher.

I began teaching in West Vancouver in a private club, then in Vancouver at Kitsilano and Kerrisdale Community Centres. I eventually started teaching for the school board, teaching Continuing Education classes out of Langara College. Although there were a lot of interested students in Vancouver – and throughout North America – at that time, there were only a few teachers. We practiced together and learned what we could, and within a short time formed the Hatha Yoga Teachers Association. Among the teachers were: Kareen Zebroff, whose TV program generated a lot of interest in yoga, Pegge Gabbot, Jutta Weidemann and myself. We grew in understanding in an atmosphere of exploration and openness to change. As yoga teachers we had no master to teach or guide us. We relied on visiting teachers (such as Joel Kramer), spending time practicing and learning together. One of the books we learned from was B.K.S. Iyengar's *Light on Yoga*.

It was during that period I had the good fortune to meet Donald Moyer in 1974. Donald had recently arrived in Vancouver from London, England, and brought

with him an understanding and practice of yoga that he had learned from his teacher, Penny Nield-Smith; she in turn was a student of the great master from Pune, India, B.K.S. Iyengar. It was Donald's practice and knowledge of yoga that inspired me to start working deeply with this method, and to begin teaching it to others. He happened to be in my house taking a pottery class and he could also see into the room where I was practising my yoga asanas. I was practicing Utthita Trikonasana and Donald could see that I had not been taught this pose well, according to the understanding and depth that had come down from the master, B.K.S. Iyengar. So with kindness and understanding, he began to show me the alignment of the pose. What a blessing! What a gift! The deeper awareness of yoga that Donald gave me opened up a new world for me, and marked the beginning of my commitment to the Iyengar method of yoga, from which I have never turned back.

Donald, my husband Bruce Carruthers and I spent many hours practicing together. I introduced Donald to the teachers of the Hatha Yoga Teachers Association. Not every teacher was willing to open to change as it would mean letting go of the way we were teaching at that time. Although we were teaching from the yoga practice as we knew it, there was much more depth of learning made possible in the Iyengar method.

As I recall Ingelise Nherlan was very enthusiastic, along with many of the students I was teaching. Donald came to my classes and shared so much of his understanding and practice. I eventually asked Donald to teach the class, or perhaps I should say, begged him to do so. It was a great time for both of us. There we were, sharing what we knew about yoga. At the same time we were preparing ourselves to study with the master, B.K.S Iyengar.

GOING TO INDIA IN 1976

In January 1976 I travelled to India with a small group to study with Sri B.K.S. Iyengar at the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute in Pune. Iyengar came into the classroom open and wanting to share, right to his very gut. He didn't hold back. He shared everything. I found that the only way I could receive his teaching was to be fully open and receptive to his presence and allow the teaching to flow

through me. I feel very fortunate and blessed that I was able to learn in those early days, when Sri Iyengar did not yet have large numbers of students. Because our groups were small, we received a great deal of individual attention.

During that first visit to Pune, India in 1976 Iyengar turned me upside down, inside out and shook the living daylight out of me. It was like I was rough clay to be molded. He brought forth buried treasures and gifts of understanding that were deeply hidden inside me. I would not be the person I am today if I had not let this happen. It is obvious to me now that there is very little one can do in preparation except to know how to completely surrender to his presence and teaching and go with beginner's mind.

I have dyslexia, and it has not always been a disadvantage in my life. In fact, one of the gifts dyslexia gives me is that I have a very strong sense of feeling; I have to feel something before I understand it, really feel it, like what does it mean in my body. So when I was eventually taught by Iyengar, I understood his language very well. For example, in order to describe moving muscles and flesh under the skin, he would say, "I want you to bring the space to the place and the place to the space." Not to just be on the surface of the body but to go deeper and deeper. He would ask questions like, "Where is your little toe? There is a mind in that little toe." None of us know where the mind is, but he taught that it is everywhere within us. From that early teaching evolved my understanding of body-mind, which comes when one is actually in touch with feeling the place and being 'in' it at the same time. It's a sense of aliveness. Iyengar would ask questions as he was showing the movement and I felt like I had come home.

I understood Iyengar's work from the very beginning. My way of understanding was often without words. I observed him and I practiced with him and the intimate group, doing different poses where we would experiment with small variations in the asana practice. During one 3-month stay in Pune, Mr. Iyengar's guidance and presence brought me to another level of comprehension and integration of yoga. For example, as part of our intensive study, we'd do sitting forward bends once a week. We would do what we could and he wouldn't give any instruction. He discouraged note-taking, saying it would not help us to

understand what we were being taught; only by practise could we learn. From that depth of knowing, we would come to understand the quality of a pose. This was very helpful to me; it still seems to be the clearest way I can truly learn.

Bruce and I travelled to India many times, most often taking students and teachers with us to attend three-week courses given by Sri B.K.S Iyengar at the Iyengar Institute in Pune. After each course Bruce, myself and some of the students would stay longer to take the public classes at the Institute. During these visits I never knew whether I was going just to work on my own practice or deepen my understanding of teaching. On one occasion when I was observing the therapeutic classes, Iyengar said to me, "Why are you still sitting there? Why are you not helping me?" By that remark I began to realize that I was becoming seen as someone who could progress and learn more. In class the only way of knowing that I was progressing in learning and comprehending was when he would say, "Correct". There were no flowery words of encouragement but his touch and non-verbal expressions told me much more than his words.

In 1977, during one 3-month study and practice period at the Iyengar Yoga Institute in Pune, we had no days off and were in the presence of our teacher most of the time. At first we were with a small group of 8 – 12 students made up of people who came mostly long distances from around the world. At times the group would grow to approximately 20 – 25 then go back to the small group size again.

Our lessons began between 6:30 or 7:00 a.m. each day. The nourishment we had before coming was a cup of strong sweet tea with buffalo milk added. I would cycle to the Institute. As we entered the studio, Iyengar would be doing his practice in a corner of the room. We would start our own practice. Dawn was breaking and the atmosphere was calm, peaceful and silent. Iyengar took up very little space in both his being and the space that surrounded him. All this inwardness changed when he began to teach us. With a large loud commanding voice that filled the studio he would say, "All of you – arm balance." Or "forward bend" or whatever asana he was going to teach first that morning. We would all become very alert and ready to receive and be guided in whatever we were going

to learn that early morning. He was a master and he taught as a master, gave all he had to give and expected us to do likewise.

In my experience it was as though as he gave his instruction and finer details he was opening doorways to hidden places in me. We were deeply involved with uncovering and learning both in asana and pranayama classes. He was in the beginning stages of writing his book on pranayama and wanting his deep understanding and practice to be known to the world, particularly the medical scientific world. He would give Bruce his rough manuscript to look at and comment on. At the same time, Bruce was opening to Iyengar and learning what yoga had to give to the medical world. Bruce had spent many years in medical research at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver. It was a great and meaningful connection. Iyengar was a man who knew truth from his body-mind by years of practice and Bruce was a man who had not spent time in growing and understanding through his kinesthetic body. Rather, he was developing his understanding of the proprioceptive body through his intellectual mind opening to new discoveries. I was fortunate enough to be part of all this and observe, listen and enjoy the dialogue and body language between these two men.

Out of class we were growing closer to Iyengar the man who was equally sharing his world and ways. I was happy Donald Moyer was with us for part of this rich and open time. India itself was a challenge. Having dinner with our teacher in his home with his family in an atmosphere of family life in a Brahman Hindu setting was a challenge on many levels. The meal was prepared and served by his daughters. Iyengar and his guests sat on cushions on a spotless floor and each of us had a beautiful banana leaf as a plate to eat from. We were given a few etiquette points that needed to be observed, one of them being that it was very rude to eat any food with our left hand. The only way we could be sure not to do this was to sit on our left hand. The other thing was that we would have to try and use only our index finger and second finger (ring finger) and thumb to pick up our food. Our food on the banana leaf was a long distance from our mouths. How we were able to manage this all is a marvel. We listened to our teacher and master tell us many interesting stories and appreciated this well and lovingly prepared food.

Bruce and I worked very much with Iyengar, bringing back his teachings and interpreting them to make them viable in Canada. At the same time, we couldn't teach people like Iyengar taught them. In India, he was sometimes very regimental and at times he would say things like: "So you think you're all teachers. You don't know a thing." At other times, he was brilliantly creative and saw things in the body that we were having trouble recognizing at that time. It was only by continuing our own practice and going back many times did we understand a little bit more each time.

After that first trip to India in 1976, Donald Moyer, Bruce Carruthers and I came together with others to form the *Light on Yoga Association* in Vancouver. Later, at Sri Iyengar's request, the name was changed to the *B.K.S. Iyengar Yoga Association of Vancouver*, to conform to other Iyengar centres throughout the world.

B.K.S. Iyengar

Iyengar the creative man brought forth a new and profound way to work with the asana and pranayama based on the lineage he inherited and his knowledge of life from the time he was a child. He is a Brahman Hindu and lived with the daily rituals of this way of life. No one practiced the asana in such detail and ever-growing understanding as Sri B.K.S. Iyengar. He is not only a Master of Yoga but an originator of the form of asana and pranayama practice that the world knows today. He has given the world a precious gift, a new way of working with the body and mind that encompasses the depth and profound way of yoga. As we use this practice and follow the Iyengar method we peel away the layers of the onion. Iyengar yoga gives us a way of incorporating the eight limbs of yoga as written by Patanjali, in our daily practice and way of life, and of experiencing the union of body, mind and soul. A spiritual discipline should not be like a university degree. Iyengar says you cannot learn all the sutras intellectually without going through all the other levels of yoga. Iyengar has brought forth the essence of the sutras. He believes that practising his way, working through asana and pranayama in deeper understanding and letting go, allows the practitioner to work with all the sutras.

How can I put words to this deep experience and how I was able to receive his teachings? After each class with Iyengar, I felt a deep sense of gratitude for his openness and patience in showing me how to go deeper and deeper into the asana practice. As new and beginning students, we knew so little. I was thirsty for more. At the end of the class I wanted to express my gratitude with thanks. He answered back, "Why all this thanks? Just keep practicing and discover, discover." Those were his words to me, in those days, before anything to do with certification. Once I absorbed the teachings, I couldn't lose them because they're so ingrained in me.

Mr. Iyengar used to say, "I'm the one who has to have the ego right now to teach you." That's a very interesting point of view. What he was saying is that yoga is a discipline; you have to be disciplined before you can be creative because that is a very different dynamic. It's complex when you are working with an art form. You don't go to Van Gogh to paint exactly like Van Gogh, or any other master. He wanted each of us to integrate the teachings in our own way; he used different words for different people while keeping the essence of the principles.

To receive the yoga from Iyengar when you are in his presence, you need to be open and porous in every fibre of your being. Then he can begin to teach you and pass on all he has to offer. During one time of being with him you may receive only a small portion of his knowing. The yoga needs to impregnate you and gestate. Only when you practice day in and day out can you pass on to others what you have received. You need to get your thinking mind out of the way. No judgment, no grasping, no logic; that comes later. This is a creative process. You cannot be Iyengar or copy him. You can honour him, love him and be grateful for his mastery, generosity and openness to share the art of yoga with you. I see him as a genius. He is my beloved Guru and never leaves me in my life-long struggle to open to the essence of yoga, connecting with body, mind and spirit.

Evolution of the Yoga Apprenticeship Program

In Vancouver, becoming a teacher of yoga evolved organically through the need of many people who wanted to practice and learn more, along with my passion in wanting to share. I was asked to teach at community centres; the classes grew

and grew and eventually I became a teacher of yoga at Langara College. This process began before Donald Moyer arrived in 1974 and before the first trip to Pune in 1976. Since there were more classes than I could manage to teach, I started to take on apprentices. I chose them from the students who had been coming to my classes for two years or more. In this way the Iyengar method of yoga grew and grew. I would say that in the 1960s and 1970s there was an exploration, openness and enthusiasm for learning groups in many areas. People were coming together in a way that I describe as 'collective'.

Ingelise Nherlan was my first apprentice; she began apprenticing with me after being a student for some time. She did not come to India with us at the beginning; she came the second or third time. Later we suggested to Ingelise that she should lead a group, because I always wanted to pass on the knowledge. I did not want to hold on; I wanted to share and yet still be acknowledged for what I knew.

When I took groups of students to India to study with Iyengar, he would say, "You know I have to be with people for a whole week. I have to feel where they are in their body, in their being, more than just their body. Then I can help them." So that is how the lineage has come through me. The lineage came through me and I did not take one note in India because I was not allowed.

Bruce and I, along with a few others, started an Iyengar yoga teacher apprenticeship program in the early 1980s. When I worked with my apprentices, we worked as a collective. I just happened to be the one who headed it because I went to India and brought the information back. However the information was not brought back in note form, it was in me. Iyengar wanted it that way; he didn't like the idea of writing things down and teaching from notes. And then I would take those people to India and that would be part of their apprenticeship. We were happy in Canada with the apprenticeship program we'd formed. Some of those early apprentices included:

- Susan Bull
- Claudia MacDonald
- Ingelise Nherlan

- Jean Mitten
- Norma Hodge
- Wende Davis
- Elma Tolliday
- Lindsay Whalen
- Gioia Irwin
- Carol Brophy
- Ed Scheck
- Ann Gregory
- Susan Sutherland

There are many more, too many to name in this brief history.

Sri Iyengar came and visited us and our group of people in Vancouver. At that time, he was happy with what we had established with the apprenticeship program. As I worked with these apprentices, some of them became teachers and some of them left the Iyengar style of yoga. There are yoga teachers in Vancouver that are no longer Iyengar teachers; they started with the apprenticeship program and then went on to form their own way. I respect that and I bless each one of them.

Bruce and I were given a lot of leeway by Iyengar to carry on the teachings in our way because he saw that our approach had integrity. We worked hard to understand the depth of Guruji's work and to share it with our students in the organic and experiential way we had learned and observed through working with him; to always respect and maintain the principles of what he had discovered and created. As I integrated Iyengar teachings in my own practice, I was able to share from what I felt and saw. One insight I had was to connect with my "Inner Teacher" and I began sharing this concept.

Certification Comes to Canada

Eventually, there was a move towards a formal and structured certification system that I believe originated mainly in the United States. When Iyengar yoga went into a bigger arena such as across Canada, there was an interest from some

long-time teachers in those different places to have standardized certification. At that time Bruce and I were uncomfortable with a structured and hierarchical system; we wanted to stay with our approach. I was compelled to write to Iyengar to say that I would continue to teach as I have, including the apprenticeship program, but I was not comfortable with the proposed, structured and standardized system of teacher certification. I wrote, “I find that what is being formed is not harmonious with my understanding of the essence of the work that you gave me, as you taught me.”

A group of Canadian teachers met with Iyengar on the steps of a building in Boston at the time of the Iyengar Yoga convention in 1986. We wanted to ask him personally about certification, and I spoke, “Mr. Iyengar, we are concerned about certification; we have an apprenticeship program and it’s working very well. And the idea of certifying is not something we find we could do well. We would like to keep our associations” – because we had associations across Canada – “and keep them so that those teachers in the groups could teach the people and certify them.” At that time his response to us was, “You are an association; that’s fine.” That’s how he was.

Therefore, we kept our apprenticeship program until Iyengar came to a Canadian Yoga Conference in Toronto in 1993. By then, he had decided that teacher certification was necessary for everyone. Once the certification process had been put into place, it became nationalized and internationalized; it grew a great deal.

During the time that standardized certification was formed in Canada, Mr. Iyengar grandfathered a small number of teachers in various parts of Canada. They were people he knew personally and who had gone to India to study with him in his Institute in Pune, India. However standardized and structured assessment and certification was something that myself, Bruce and many other people –in Vancouver and other parts of Canada and the U.S. – were uncomfortable with. We had concerns that such a system could affect the vitality, creativity and brilliance that had been hallmarks of his work.

We were dedicated to the understanding and teaching of Iyengar yoga through our apprenticeship program and had formed a group of people that learned more

in a collaborative, collective way. I could work well within that system, but I could not work with the structured assessment process because of my particular style of learning and understanding of the work.¹

I believe that people must find their own voice in what they are teaching. Not everyone who is a good teacher is able to work within that system. So many committed teachers are being lost because Iyengar yoga certification as it exists today does not suit who they are, and how their gifts are manifested. There are many ways of working to deepen one's understanding of yoga. I would like to see us open to other ways of evaluating and qualifying teachers.

My apprentices have been influenced by me and my way of thinking and teaching. I also understand that there are many ways of learning and I see the importance of not excluding, but rather including other options and approaches as a means to certification. I became an Iyengar teacher through dedication and practice, not just the yoga asana but all the spiritual practice as well.

Maureen's Insights

I really need to add my experience to what is being said by other people elsewhere, so that my voice is heard. I was there before the certification process was implemented and I want to share my insights so that Iyengar's work is more fully understood outside of the system. I want to give recognition to the yoga teachers who were apprenticed through the program developed with myself and Bruce Carruthers. Those long-term apprentices need to be more comfortable in the Iyengar world, and recognized for their teaching abilities without having to go the Iyengar certification route. The tree trunk needs to grow more branches.

This process of growing in yoga started when I was 40 and continues today. For over forty-four years I have taught in this fashion. Because I had direct teaching from my teacher/ guru, I feel confident that I can keep the teaching alive. My journey has been to constantly stay in touch with the knowledge that I received from Sri Iyengar, while being open to change and ongoing discovery as new ways open and the work evolves. This is what Gurujī taught and manifested. Each time

¹ Refer to Vancouver Yoga Archive for details about apprenticeship program.

we studied with him, the work revealed another direction and we would move forward. In this spirit, I believe that we need to keep practicing, learning and sharing with our fellow yoga teachers and students.

Iyengar is a creator and great master of yoga. As Iyengar teachers, we have to recognize that he uses asana and pranayama as a way of understanding Patanjali's eight limbs of yoga. So to say that I'm doing Hatha Yoga is very degrading to Iyengar, because he uses asana as a way to explore deeper levels of being. When he is teaching a class, Mr. Iyengar is an authority inasmuch as he directs the students into poses in a particular manner. In the early days, he wasn't telling people they had to teach everything in a systemized way. Teachers must keep the integrity of Iyengar's work, and also be a creative being. For me, Iyengar yoga is an art form, and as an art form, there must be ways for the teacher to remain open to different ways of being creative and expressive within the form. People will take with them whatever they have learned from exposure to Iyengar yoga. Iyengar methods can't be held rigid and contained; each teacher will integrate and express according to who they are.

I am forever grateful to have been taught the precepts by such a master as Sri B.K.S. Iyengar. He is truly a light on yoga.