

First Encounter with Guruji 1976

My first encounter with Guruji came in July 1976. He was visiting England on his way back from a visit to the USA and on that day taught morning and afternoon classes at Cecil Sharp House www.cecilsharp.org (for those who would like to find images) in Regent's Park Road near Primrose Hill in London.



I had started learning his yoga in the autumn of 1975 while in my second year at Oxford University. My teacher, Kofi Busia, booked a group of his pupils into the classes. In those days we did not know B.K.S. Iyengar as “Guruji,” a title that gained common currency some 10 years later. From the start we pupils attended classes of “yoga as taught by Sri B.K.S. Iyengar.” He was referred to simply as “Mr. Iyengar,” an epithet that seems inadequate now but that was what was used then. The term “Iyengar Yoga” was also yet to be coined. Guruji had already achieved widespread recognition as the author of “Light on Yoga” published ten years previously. At that time his remaining remarkable literary output and world wide recognition, fame and acclamation was still to follow. Whatever stature he had then was there to be seen by people around him in much more personal terms, and not yet with the modern day, very famous, very public, indeed iconic aura we now very familiar with.

In those days it is no exaggeration to say that Guruji had a reputation as a strict disciplinarian and for most people in those days, this was possibly the most discussed even the major preoccupation surrounding his teaching. People reacted to this approach in various ways. For some it was very difficult to see that his demands on his pupils were fair. To others, these demands were, on the contrary, not at all personal but a

product of his extraordinary devotion to yoga and an insistence that any pupil of his should pay yoga the utmost respect as a divine art and science.

The classes at Cecil Sharp House were somewhat unusual in so far as they not only had participants both morning and afternoon but an audience of several scores as well, sat on three sides of the very large room serving as the classroom. As I entered the classroom early that afternoon I encountered my yoga pupil colleague Phil, who had watched the morning's class. For some unaccountable reason, so I thought, he revealed a desperate, shocked pallor in his face. "What's up?" I asked. "He ... he's a madman!" declared Phil., who could say little more beyond this. "Interesting," I thought to myself, unimpressed and indifferent, as only a 20 year old can be, "I will have to see for myself."

While all the participants roamed around, assembled and prepared in various ways on the floor of the classroom (note that there were no such things as yoga mats or equipment in those days for people to pass their time staking out their territory) there was no sign of Mr. Iyengar. Then, quite unannounced and unobtrusively he entered the hall at the far end and stopped, head a little raised, without looking at anyone, almost seeming to be sniffing the atmosphere. He was garbed, in what I thought was a singularly inappropriate garish Hawaiian shirt resplendent with palm trees. Clearly Hawaii had been a stop on his American tour. For a moment I thought "Can this be the author of Light on Yoga in this remarkable shirt?" A moment later he took off his shirt and stood before us ready to start the class. In that split second I felt I saw him as exactly that author of Light on Yoga and in that moment realised from deep inside that there was nothing to fear and that I could trust this person completely. To me it was a remarkable transformation before my eyes.

The class lasted some three hours. Guruji combined a remarkable skill and depth of knowledge of the human body together with a distinct flair for showmanship, being ever conscious of the audience as well as his pupils. We had the sense of his always reaching out with yoga to as many people as possible. The more people present the more he reached out. What he taught for us as individuals had a public presentation and we pupils were part of that presentation.

There was of course no hiding place. In Sirsasana everyone who could stay up on his or her own did so, without support. Some teachers were called to give support in the middle of the room to those who could not stay up alone. Near to where I was wobbling unsupported near the end of

what seemed a very long time in Sirsasana a teacher, the late Penny Nield-Smith allowed her charge to come down from head stand. Guru stormed over, "Why did you let her come down?" he roared. "She was tired," came Penny's reply. "She was not tired," Guruji retorted, and without turning to look (so I was told later) slapped my leg at which point I fell over harmlessly, "He was tired, she was not!" This engaged the audience wonderfully.

During paschimottanasana Guruji announced to all that while in the pose one could bear any weight on one's back in the same manner as a horse can carry great weights. I was very close to my legs as he said that and once he finished he stepped up to stand on my back. My further progress was very rapid and complete. "How does that feel?" he demanded. I raised my head enough to exclaim, "Marvellous," which indeed it was. The hall erupted with mirth.

Being taught by Guruji was not without its difficulties. Foremost amongst these, from my perspective, was my unfamiliarity with the Indian accent and his way of expressing himself in English.

While we were doing utthita parsvakonasana he strode over to me and uttered some words of instruction. I was unable to catch his words at all. I had however caught the dynamics of his teaching enough to realise that it would be near fatal to have asked him to repeat himself or to say that I could not understand his accent. In response I tried to make every adjustment I knew instead. I failed to make the correct one of course, so he kicked me on the inside of my bent leg thigh. All I could offer him, was a rather pathetic "I didn't understand." Off he stalked kicking this person here and that person there, barking, "Did you understand? *He* didn't understand. Did you understand? etc etc." It was an episode usually best forgotten but here best remembered.

Without so much as a wall to use as a prop we were orchestrated to do some poses in novel ways. Virabhadrasana 3 was performed in chains with one pupil supporting hands on the back of the person in front and extending one's back leg on the back of the person behind. Remarkably it worked. I was using Angela Farmer, a very well known teacher as my front prop but I forget who was my rear prop!

I remember nothing more from the event apart from loitering on Primrose Hill with one or two colleagues in the heat of the day beforehand. It is a curious feature of memory that some episodes from the day have remained with me vividly for decades but other details have been lost in

the recesses of my memory archives, perhaps never to re-emerge. I like to think that the memories I have retained are the most interesting and personally resonant nevertheless.

The following year I was in Pune at RIMYI for my first intensive course with Guruji.

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