

First and Last

A Life-Altering Journey to R.I.M.Y.I.

by Christopher Briney

It is my hope that my own lowly beginnings and ordinariness may serve as a source of encouragement as you seek this truth and begin a new life. Yoga transformed my life from a parasitic one to a life of purpose. Later yoga inspired me to partake in the joy and nobility of life, which I carried to many thousands of people without consideration of religion, caste, gender or nationality. I am so grateful for what yoga has made of my life that I have always sought to share it . . . It is my profound hope that my end can be your beginning.”

—Guruji, B.K.S. Iyengar, Light on Life

By comparison, my beginnings seem hardly as “lowly” as Guruji’s. I grew up in a small, upper-middle class suburban town in Southeast Michigan. I never went hungry. I never suffered from severe and life-threatening diseases (I was, in fact, immunized for most of them). My parents are still alive. I have largely lived a life of sufficiency and comfort.

However, I did come from a so-called “broken” home. My parents divorced when I was 14 years old. My father “fell in love” with another woman and moved out of the house. My life got pretty wild after that, as I discovered both legal and illegal intoxicants, cigarettes, sex, and a host of other less-than-ideal habits of thought and action. I had been smoking cigarettes for almost a decade, had just graduated from University, and had just experienced my third “failed” relationship when I took my first yoga class in 1997. Though I had graduated with honors, I had no career plans (and, quite honestly, no prospects), nor any strong sense of direction. I feel that I too can say “I . . . started from nowhere,” (Light on Life, IX).

About three years into the practice another style of yoga, I was no longer taking intoxicants (I stopped smoking cigarettes after my very first yoga class). However, still struggling with some of the same unhealthy patterns of thought and addiction (now more to people in general, and specifically to my partner in a fourth failed romantic relationship), I had what I would describe as a nervous breakdown, nearly ending up in a psychiatric ward. After a period of intense emotional agony and significant struggle, I was able, primarily with the gracious help of my father, step-mother, and some very dear friends, to stabilize my emotions and resume my yoga practice.

I began practicing Iyengar Yoga in 2002 with Laurie Blakeney from Ann Arbor, Michigan. I would like to briefly list some of the positive events that have taken place in my life since then. First off, I have not been intoxicated from any substance in over twelve years. I have been an active member in twelve-step recovery fellowships for nearly the same amount of time. I have owned and operated a yoga studio since 2003. I have been married for almost nine years and have an incredible five year-old son. These are

all “achievements” in my life that would have not been possible for the boy or man that I have previously described. I feel that these are ways in which I have been “inspired to partake in the joy and nobility of life,” that Gururji mentions in the quotation above. I have no doubt that I own this inspiration to my practice and study of Iyengar Yoga.

The gifts aforementioned are profound indeed, but I would briefly like to share what I feel as another profound blessing in my life. First, I would like to provide some background: I have had a wish to study yoga in India since the beginning of my practice in 1997. My first teacher had recently return from his studies with Pattabhi Jois in Mysore and the details of his experience awed and inspired me. After meeting Laurie, who I soon learned had (and still has) made annual trips to the RIMYI since 1983, the desire to travel to India began to grow swiftly in me. It was also then that I realized that to be eligible for study at the Institute I needed a minimum of eight years’ practice of Iyengar Yoga plus the endorsement of a senior-level teacher. I began my Iyengar studies in 2002. This meant I would be eligible to attend classes at RIMYI in 2010.

So much about my Iyengar Yoga experience has required (and, ultimately, blessed me with) patience. So there I was looking at eight more years of study before I’d have the chance to get to India. But in 2008 a door opened slightly. A special set of events were arranged at RIMYI in honor of Gururji’s 90th Birthday. Though the events would not include any participation in yoga classes at the institute, there were no requirements or restrictions set for attendance. My wife, Tracy and I began to make plans to attend, but those plans were soon thwarted by a combination of indecision, a short time span to prepare and implement the trip, a seeming shortage of funds for the trip and, quite significantly, the terrorist attacks in Mumbai (where our tentative flight would have been landing).

In 2009, after a conversation with Laurie, I realized that there was generally a two-year waiting list to get into classes at the Institute. So I decided to fill out my application for study in the fall of 2009, hoping I’d get lucky and be able to attend sometime in late 2010. I filled out my application and submitted it to Laurie for her endorsement. After some discussion, she endorsed my application and so the ball started rolling. It didn’t roll very far, however. Not long after Laurie endorsed my application, Tracy and I discovered that she was pregnant. Needless to say, I again chose to postpone the trip to India.

Now, here’s the magic: One of the goals I wrote out at the end of 2012 was to visit the Institute by 2014. Later in 2013 I again filled out my application for study at RIMYI. Laurie again “signed off” and, a couple of weeks later, I mailed my application with deposit to the RIMYI.

On the evening of 16 December 2013 I dreamt that I was practicing yoga. In the dream, Gururji, B.K.S. Iyengar, appeared. He came into the room where Tracy and I were sitting after class. I cannot remember the order of events of the dream, but certain things stand out as remarkable to me. First, there was a very friendly, warm, familiar quality to our interaction. Secondly, I remember kneeling and touching his feet. I was so moved by the love and affection moving between us, by the sense of ease and belonging in his

presence that I began weeping tears of joy, relief, gratitude. At one point in the dream, Guruji looked me in the eye and said, “Why don’t you stay here and practice.” I told him that we were only registered for the one-day event and were required to leave at day’s end. He laughed and said, “well, you do have your monies for classes, don’t you?” I told him we hadn’t brought them because we were told we could only stay for one day, but I assured him that I would make whatever arrangements I needed to make in order to be able to stay on and study, and that nothing would stand in the way.

I awoke the morning of December 17, a bit dazed from sleep deprivation (that baby Tracy was pregnant with in 2009 had been up half the night with the croup). Normally I wake and practice, but this morning I decided to check my email. At the top of the list of new emails was an email from one Mr. Pandurang Rao. It contained the following subject: “Hi . . .,” and the following message, “Dear Christopher, received your draft for \$___ and thank you for the same. As per your request you are welcome in June / July 2014. Please note that the advance is part of the fees and same is not transferable or refundable. Regards.”

Indeed, I did arrive at the RIMYI in June/July 2014. Without a doubt, one of the most momentous days in my life thus far was the first day I learned and practiced yoga at the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute. I have no doubt that I am one of many students who can and will say this, but with all humility I wish to share my experience on 30 June 2014. Before I do that, I would just like to share a few passages from the diary I wrote during that trip:

28 June 2014: “3:00 a.m. I drove in from Mumbai. It has been over 40 hours since I had a full night’s sleep. As I was driving in, dozing and languid, I suddenly had the thought “We must be close,” and promptly looked up. Within seconds, we passed the gate of the Institute . . . “

29 June 2014: “I stepped foot in the RIMYI for the first time today. I imagined it as much bigger in my mind, and it looks much bigger to me in pictures. I have anticipated this moment for years. Guruji’s presence is everywhere. I look forward to having the experience of his physical presence. There is so much to live up to . . . Light on Yoga was the first yoga book I bought. So much through the years, Guruji has been this presence—so many photos, books, videos. There is this mystique, this presence. Here is a celebrity, a figure of worldwide notoriety—one of the “100 most influential people on the planet.” I am sure to be starstruck. Yet there’s this intimacy I feel in some way, not just from having read his books (I am glad I read Sparks of Divinity on the way here), but from the way his words—his writings, his teachings—have impacted my life. But really the sense of intimacy stems from the fact that the voice that guides, that whispers and shouts into this practice that I have spent such a significant portion of my life striving toward, is his. I have had a relationship with this man for over 15 years—a “close” relationship, in the sense of regularity and depth of our interaction. But we have never met. He has no idea who I am. (And yet, as I

write this, I have this strong feeling that he has a better idea of who I am than I do.) So, this meeting “in the flesh” seems somehow superfluous on some level . . .

I had the blessing on 30 June of taking my first class from Prashant-ji. About that much could be (and has been) written indeed (see <https://therimyexperience.wordpress.com/2014/07/12/a-milestone-day/>). After class, I wasn't sure what to do, where to go. The timetable I was given by Pandu said my practice hours were starting, and I knew enough to know it was self-guided practice, but I did not know where to go and what was the protocol. (There clearly seemed to be an unspoken protocol. And, just like with practice, I found it necessary to “observe and learn” to understand it.) Unsure, I walked downstairs (still thinking the ground floor was the first floor and there must be some huge practice hall hidden away somewhere), then outside. I thought perhaps to leave, like many others were doing. (When in doubt, if you follow people who look as though they are sure of what they're doing, you may end up taking the right action, but any mistakes they make will be yours also) Then I stopped and thought, *It says practice hours on my timetable, plain as day. And so, practice I shall.*

I returned to the institute and walked back upstairs, to the same hall I had just left. People were setting up mats and props there, plus I saw someone I knew from my teacher's studio. It looked like she was practicing to me, so I grabbed some equipment and found a spot that seemed appropriate (there was plenty of space; none of the “throngs” that I've heard mentioned). I still wasn't sure what to do (that seemed to be a theme my first several days in Pune). I sat a moment, closed my eyes, took several breaths, and prayed to God for guidance. Then, I started practicing: Adho Mukha Svanasana, Uttanasana, etc., still contemplating what “routine” to do. Suddenly, I don't know how to describe it, the feeling in the hall shifted. I felt something different; there was a palpable shift in . . . presence. As I stood up from Uttanasana, there was Guruji, himself walking into the hall, accompanied by Abhijata. My heart leapt in my chest.

I should back up and say that this was a total surprise for me. It was a surprise for a few reasons: First, I didn't even know for sure I was in the right practice hall (I still thought there were three floors and three halls at this point). Second, though I have heard that Guruji does still practice regularly during practice hours, my landlady said that he hadn't been coming to the Institute at all in June (the same for Geeta as well). Finally, by this time, we were well into the practice hours so I figured he wouldn't be coming for the day.

The “Pune Guide,” for U.S. students at RIMYI advises you to avoid setting up for your practice in a certain area of the hall, which I did, as that is the area reserved for Guruji's practice space. As I came to the hall a bit late (though there's no formal start for practice hours), I didn't think too much about where I set up, except that it was not too near the prop area (i.e. Guruji's practice space, even though I didn't think he was coming), and that there would be room to practice inversion variations and halasana.

Then, in walks B.K.S. Iyengar himself! So much raced through my head and heart so fast. What a thrill! There before me was the man I've waited all these years (and come all these miles) to see. He walks in, very close to my mat, and sits (not really near the prop area at all) quite close to where my mat is; in fact, I felt I needed to move my mat over to make space for all the equipment his assistants were bringing for his practice. Soon a few students walked over and pay their respects by touching his feet. And so, I get up and, not too timidly I must say, do the same. Wordlessly, he receives us with all with a smiling radiance. The touch of his feet definitely sent a wave of emotion--so much joy and love and . . . relief? . . . through me, pushing tears from my eyes.

I resumed my practice. He commenced his. Today I still have difficulty believing that I shared a practice with him. Shared several that first week of my stay . . . Shared his last practice in the main practice hall of RIMYI on 4 July 2014. In that practice hall, Guruji—just as I have done in the pages of your books, in the presence of the teachers you have taught to teach, in the presence of your warm *presence*—I blossomed. Inside of the practice of the yoga methodology you have instilled in me, I have blossomed. I continue to blossom.

I know this is long-winded but there's one other thing I feel compelled to share. It is from something I wrote on 16 August 2014 after hearing that Guruji had been taken to the Hospital in Pune:

“So the first sight I had of Guruji was his entrance for practice in the main hall of the RIMYI. The last sight I had of Guruji was of him sitting in a wheelchair, wearing an oxygen mask. What a duality! My friend and I were both a bit shaken by the sight. This led to several days' diary entries contemplating mortality and death, and several days of direct and profound encounters with *abhinivesha*. I have to say, however, that even in that seemingly weakened state, to me Guruji still exuded tremendous power. When our eyes met, I felt a profound surge within, like a powerful gust of wind moving through my being. I turned my eyes away. For days I have been reaching back to that moment and attempting to resend, with greater force, the love and admiration that being a student of Guruji's teachings has instilled in me. I can only hope to have returned but a small portion of the love that has passed from him to me. Every ounce of the tireless work he has done in his life to enable and empower someone like me to walk the path of yoga with any amount of skill and efficacy is a gift of love generously thrown in my direction.

And Guruji sitting there, with the door to his home wide open, allowing us, his students to see him, to see the physical reality of his situation (rather than shut himself away in hiding or make some other vain attempt to control our image of him) was also an act of great love. For me it is one of the most profound teachings I have received from him. Seeing him there taught me in such a direct and profound way that there is no escape for this body from the crushing hand of death. It showed me that, no matter what mastery I am able (or pretend) to gain over this body—no matter how strong or flexible or seemingly healthy, no matter how fine its biomechanics—I ultimately must yield it back to the earth from which it comes. In other words, no matter what dominion I gain over this body in this life—and Guruji has arguably had

supreme dominion over is body, more than just about any other human being on the planet today—this body ultimately belongs to death.

Guruji, I am moved by your generosity, by what appears to me to be a profound and deep commitment to your students. A generosity and commitment that would have you sit in that wheelchair in the open doorway, taking your oxygen. As I said, I think it is the most important teaching you have given me. To put it in my own words: “You’d better start developing your ability to hold this *asana*, my boy, with ‘perfect firmness of body, steadiness of intelligence, and benevolence of spirit,’¹. You’d best develop the ability to take *this* seat in such a way that the effort (can you imagine the day will come that the effort to take a breath will prove this extraordinary?) ‘becomes effortless and the infinite being within is reached.’² Can you see it’s time to seek out the *mastery* of asana which will allow you to remain ‘undisturbed by dualities?’³ (Because it is quite a duality—the body in the 600-plus photographs in Light on Yoga compared to this one in the wheelchair. It is a duality that easily could be (and for the mast majority is) *quite* disturbing and full of affliction in the absence of certain qualities of character and certain spiritual development.) So, look, listen, and pay attention. Don’t forget to add these qualities of character, this spiritual development, to your list of aims for practicing yoga. Don’t fool yourself. You don’t know how much time you have between the able-bodied reality you now enjoy and the reality of the inevitable decay and dissolution of that body and its ability. One thing however, is for certain: that time is definitely limited. Strive now, for the ‘infinite being.’ The one that peers out at you from behind this oxygen mask.”

My deepest gratitude goes to Guruji for transforming himself (from a parasite) into a gateway to the infinite. May my beginning honor his ending.

¹ Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, pg. 157, Thorsons 2002 edition

² *ibid.* pg 158

³ *ibid.* pg 160