

Yoga: reflecting on the past, imagining the future

I am pleased to be invited to speak to you today. I wish to thank the Indian High commissioner for the honour to address the gathering and I am proud to be part of the inaugural international day of Yoga.

I am student of BKS Iyengar- the most influential teacher of this era. I am not a historian but a practitioner so the views I hold reflect my experience through my decades of practice and with my teacher. I have bought a series of Photos which I plan to play in the background today as I speak- these photos are of the Iyengar and the Institute in Pune- India

Iyengar was born in 1918 and from his beginnings in yoga at the age of 14 until his death in 2014 he practiced like no other. His was a very physical practice- demanding and precise and when he stepped onto the world stage in the mid-1960s with his book Light on Yoga he captured the imagination of a changing world and made the subject accessible to a new generation who were beginning to travel and explore the cultures of Asia. What many saw in Iyengar was a man steeped in his subject communicating an experience of Yoga through a practice. His approach was systematic, methodical, and scientific. He was both modern and, in his terms, authentic. I quote ...

'I have no right to brand my method of practice and teaching as "Iyengar Yoga". It is my pupils that call it "Iyengar Yoga" to distinguish it from the teachings of others. Though I am rational, I am also a man of sentiment and tradition-bound. I trust the statements of others, follow their lines of explanation and experiment with them to gain experience. If my experience tallies with their expressions, I accept their statements. Otherwise I discard them, live by my own experiments and experiences, and make my pupils feel the same as I felt in my experiments. If many agree, then I take it as a proven fact and impart it to others. The only thing I am doing is to bring out the in-depth, hidden qualities of yoga to the awareness of you all. This has made you to call my way of practice and teaching, "Iyengar Yoga". This label has caught on and become widely known, but what I do is nevertheless purely authentic traditional yoga. It is wrong to differentiate traditional yoga from Iyengar Yoga. Likewise it is unfair to market yoga as raja yoga, hatha yoga, kundalini yoga, and so on. In fact, there is no distinction between one yoga and another; they all have the same root and the same purpose'.¹

Iyengar spoke to a generation that were questioning the values of their cultures and looking for new ways of seeing.

I am surprised to see how far Yoga has evolved in our society. I began Yoga in Australia in 1975 and in those days there were no Yoga schools and training to become a Yoga teacher was unheard of. I stumbled upon a yoga class in a hall in Sydney's southern suburbs at the age of 15 without any introduction or thoughts on what it might be. I left that room changed. I experienced something I had not expected, something that sustains me in my practice today and is the reason I continue to practice Yoga. But before I discuss what that is I would like to reflect on the past, observe some of the trends of the present and consider the future potential of Yoga.

The Past

The history of yoga is vast, its roots are many of thousands of years old and these roots are intimately entwined with the culture of India. The early writings include the Vedas and the Upanishads along with the Bhagavad Gita and Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. Yoga is documented in early carving and paintings. It would be wrong however to think of Yoga as Indian alone. Yoga's subject matter is universal as it involves a fundamental question '**Who am I**'. India has a rich history of thought and philosophy but its questions are our questions. **Who am I** is as relevant

¹ Iyengar, BKS, Article-With Yogic eyes. 1988. ADYM Vol.2

today as it was Patanjali's time. We are inclined to think that today's society is unique and that the pressures and pace of life are unprecedented; but what Yoga documents and reveals is that the same questions existed thousands of years ago and that far from being a modern issue – the questions that we confront today are those of the human condition. To quote Iyengar- How will we differentiate *'between the wavering uncertainties of thought processes and the understanding of the Self ..'*²

Who here has not experienced the distress of meeting deadlines, of worry about an uncertain future, of feeling judged by others. More so as our society speeds up, is defined by social media and the certainties of the past no longer exist. These things affect us profoundly. **Who am I** requires that I am able to discern between the variables of thought and emotion and stand calm and clear

Yoga is a study of the mind and our consciousness. Yoga acknowledges that the mind is volatile and that our perception is often distorted or clouded by our inner state. Our fears and desires crowd in on us and cloud our judgement. The practices of Yoga bring a state of calmness but are ultimately directed towards equipping us to meet the challenges and stresses in our lives.

Looking at Yoga from the outside we see the many different schools and approaches. Each school of thought develops its own unique practices. Some schools of thought practice sitting meditation, whilst others are devotional and apply Bhakti Yoga. Many schools today focus on what is termed **posture based practice** with a focus on the body as does Iyengar Yoga. But one thing unites them- **they all look inwards**. Historically, Yoga is described as a **svadhyaya** (self study) it involves looking within ourselves. Its practices are meditative. These practices develop skills in

- Dispassionate observation
- Learning to sit without reaction
- To observe the mind and its behaviour

Yoga is **Practice based** meaning that what it has to say is revealed through a practice rather than through belief. You can't believe in Yoga and although Yoga has been part of many of the major religions it is not in itself a religion. The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali are more a text on **Psychology** than on philosophy. The Yoga Sutras map the human condition. Patanjali identifies

- there are types of individuals
- Different paths a person can take in life
- different states of mind
- He classifies types of suffering
- Patanjali gives types of practice suitable for different individuals to address suffering
- He names 8 disciplines to live by called Astanga Yoga

With Patanjali's map a practitioner takes a journey into themselves.

Of the 8 disciplines Iyengar chose a physical practice focusing on 2 of the 8 disciplines (astanga) named by Patanjali. He makes the following observation...

'Mahatma Gandhi did not practise all the aspects of Yoga. He only followed two of its principles — non-violence and truth, yet through these two aspects of Yoga, he mastered his own nature and gained independence for India.

² Iyengar, BKS, Light on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, Thorsons 2002, p.8

If a part of Yama could make Mahatma Gandhi so great, so pure, so honest and so divine, should it not be possible to take another limb of Yoga — Asana — and through it reach the highest goal of spiritual development?’³

In this example we see that Iyengar chooses one element namely asana as way to develop himself and create a lens- to focus his efforts and a means to look at something on the edge of his perception- **his consciousness**. Just as an astronomer will need a telescope to look at the distant stars so too a practitioner needs a way to look at the content within themselves. When Iyengar takes the asanas, these physical postures, he is doing so as a **Svadyaya**-a study of the self. **To study Yoga you need a practice.**

The Present

In my 40 years of Yoga I have watched, participated and been part of the development of Yoga in Australia. I have seen Yoga evolve from being viewed as a fringe activity associated with the counter culture (hippies) or regarded as a cult or a religion, to become mainstream. Schools of Yoga, Yoga in gyms, clothing lines and television programs all attest to an industry and a commercialisation of Yoga that bears little resemblance to the Yoga that I encountered in the mid 1970's.

I have to ponder whether we have we lost our way? **Is Yoga in decline?**

I am optimistic about Yoga. How you encounter Yoga is less important than why you might stay and continue in the practice. I've seen many people commence Yoga for its physical benefits or because of an injury and over time take it up as a practice of physical and mental health. It changes the way they lead their lives. When I entered that hall for my first Yoga class in 1975 with my friend Danny I was there because he had injured his knee and had been recommended to do Yoga by his mother to assist his recovery so that his football playing could continue. I was there to support my friend- I had no interest. Danny never continued but that one class changed my life.

Increasingly I see Yoga taught as a physical exercise and often presented as an alternative to gym- get fit, loose weight, de-stress but I see no problem with these views. Yoga does not create a separation between the body and the mind. It acknowledges that the body is not separate to, or distinct from the mind. In Yoga we acknowledge 5 sheaths (or **Kosas**) to each individual. **Speak on these**

- Annamaya Kosa- Physical body
- Pranamaya Kosa- Energetic body
- Manomaya Kosa- Mental/ emotional body
- Vijanamaya Kosa – Intellectual body
- Anandamaya Kosa- Body of bliss

The aim of Yoga is to integrate these sheaths and this integration of the body, mind and breath helps us stand calmly with the events and challenges that arise in our lives.

Yoga is not directed to an other-worldly state of existence but seeks to bring us to clarity to engage in the life we currently live. The image of a Yogi in the cave following ascetic practices is not the Yoga described by Patanjali.

Iyengar was a man of great intensity and energy his practice was very physical, gymnastic at times, but he was always working on the mind. Developing concentration, and continuity of awareness. Referring to it as-

Meditation in action

³ Iyengar BKS, Tree of Yoga, depth of asana, p.46

To the Future

I see an increasing need for Yoga in our society. PM Modi's address to UN opens with the following statement

'Yoga is an invaluable gift of ancient Indian tradition. Yoga embodies unity of mind and body, thought and action; restraint and fulfilment. Harmony between man and nature. A holistic approach to health and well-being. Yoga is not about exercise but to discover the sense of oneness with ourselves; the world and nature.'

PM Modi uses the phrase **holistic approach to health and well-being**. This acknowledges our physical and mental states are involved. Yoga can work on the body providing the benefits of exercise but in a technological world in which our society's overall health continues to improve and longevity increases, the mental health of young people is of growing concern and has become the major threat to health during adolescence and early adult life. Anxiety and depression amongst young adults continues to grow.

In this information era where at the click of a button we can search the internet and find an abundance of information on any subject - where smart phones and computers infuse every waking moment, and the time where we can exist simply without stimulation has become rare if not non-existent, we need ways to go within ourselves, in order to sit with who we are and how we feel that is neither conditioned by the images presented to us through media or the expectations of the wider society. Yoga has a direct application here and it develops the necessary skills to evolve as individuals.

In his foreword to Iyengar's book **light on Yoga** the famous concert violinist Yehudi Menuhin writes *'The practice of Yoga over the past fifteen years has convinced me that most of our fundamental attitudes to life have their physical counterparts in the body.'*⁴

To progress in music requires regular practice. Practice has benefits for the body and it develops skills in coordination but it also develops judgement, concentration whilst bringing an inner stillness and perspective to the other aspects of our lives.

In the same passage Menuhin says *'The practice of Yoga induces a primary sense of measure and proportion. Reduced to our own body, our first instrument, we learn to play it, drawing from it maximum resonance and harmony. With unflagging patience we refine and animate every cell as we return daily to the attack, unlocking and liberating capacities otherwise condemned to frustration ... '*

When I attended that first class in Sydney in 1975 I experienced a state of completeness and integration between my body and my thoughts that I had never encountered. Although quite young, I had an experience of- **being myself**. An experience of simplicity and ease with my thoughts and feelings. This return to stillness is physical, physiological, it involves the mind, and is essential for human wellbeing.

Thankyou for your attention

⁴ Iyengar, BKS. Light on Yoga, Foreword

Notes

BKS Iyengar says 'Patanjali does not say yoga is good for the health. He only says it brings the dual mind to a single mind and that is the philosophy of the asanas'

video-yoga ancient vision of life 35.36 mins;