

Entrevista Guruji: Of Body, Mind and Soul

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The philosophy

"Purity of thoughts, beliefs and actions, all leading to clarity of thought and a calm mind or 'chitta' is how I would define yoga," says Prashant Iyengar, adding, "Yoga means something that you do for yourself to bring about a change within you." When a person does yoga, it means he is employing his five organs to achieve the calm state of mind. "Eyes are not just to see. When you close your eyes, you focus and concentrate, you see something extraordinary. And breathing doesn't mean inhalation or exhalation, but concentrating on the self.

Apply the same principle to your ears as well. When you do this, knowingly, consciously, introspectively, the five organs become 'dnyanendriya'. When all these are attuned together, we call it 'yog'," adds Prashantji.

Gesturing at the photos of his father, posing in complicated yoga postures, he says, "All this cannot be accomplished by a flexible body alone. A strong, stable mind has an important role to play here." Having said this, Prashantji utters what his family has believed all along — "Yoga is for everyone. It can benefit those who are suffering from ill health, those who pursue different occupations, those who are looking to stay fit, those who are seeking spirituality and so on." He elaborates on how his father succeeded in showing different aspects of yoga to those who came to him — from philosophers (J Krishnamurthy) to musicians (Yehudi Menuhin), politicians and litterateurs. While doing this, he wasn't swayed by his success. "Guruji spent his life looking within, trying to introspect. His aim was to make the lives of the people easier through yoga — like teaching the domestic help to learn postures that would make the back pain vanish," Prashantji says.

And, it is for this reason that Prashantji is wary of young people approaching their institute to become yoga teachers. "We have taught almost two generation of people. Earlier, people would come to learn yoga because they were unwell. Recently, many people are enquiring if we offer short term courses or a diploma or teacher's course in yoga. We don't have such courses nor do we intend to start them. This would be commercialisation. Before becoming teachers, they should first become good, disciplined students," he concludes.

Women first

Yoga: A Gem for Women by Geeta Iyengar is a visionary text considering that it was authored nearly three decades ago (in 1983), much before women's healthcare became a matter of concern in popular mindspace. On being asked about it, Geetaji credits it to her father. "Guruji was the one who told me that I need to do something for women's healthcare. He explained to me that a woman's body is different from that of a man and so

we have different health issues. I was a teenager when he brought this to my notice. He was not a doctor, but he could tell when a woman was suffering — be it emotional or family issues — and how it affected her reproductive health," she says. After she began teaching yoga at their institute, Geetaji decided to categorise her father's teachings and put it in a book form. "Not just the physiques, but the energies of men and women are also not the same. In some areas, a female's energy is stronger than a man's. I teach these differences in my classes. A man and a woman will do the same asana differently. I tell them that while performing the asana, they need to concentrate on the positives that each of them brings, and learn from each other."

Geetaji lists a few postures that are beneficial to women on the go. She says that standing asanas, forward bends and lateral twists using props like a chair or a dining table, can really help women, who are on the go, to open their emotional centre and in reducing fatigue.

She has also studied Ayurveda and that has undoubtedly helped her in the work. "Having this background, I can grasp what my student is going through. Constitutionally, Ayurveda explains what the body is — KaphaVata and Pitta — and depending on this, I know what a student can or can't do. I know his/her character, mind, behaviour. I take all this into account before prescribing asanas or props. I ask my students to do certain asanas depending on how they are feeling that day. So the 'one asana for all' approach doesn't work," she adds.

Do they get students who are suffering from lifestyle diseases? Geetaji nods and adds, "People are coming in with a combination of diseases, something they might have suffered in childhood, and was aggravated in pregnancy or in middle age etc."

Just like her father, Geetaji also takes classes abroad. There again, she concentrates on interacting with the women. So how different are the health issues of women there and how does yoga benefit them? "Women there suffer, perhaps more than us. They seem confident outwardly, but when I talk to them and touch them on emotional points, they break down and cry. Healthwise, both of us have the same problems. I explain to them the sequence of asanas in connection with their inner health, with their emotional trouble. Once that is explained, they are able to grasp yoga quickly," Geetaji says. Carrying forward the legacy It's not easy to be the torch bearer of a legacy, especially if it happens to be that of Yogacharya BKS Iyengar. Guruji is still revered; his teachings and life lessons are still espoused. But his granddaughter Abhijata has willingly accepted the legacy. She candidly admits that growing up in Chennai, away from her grandfather who had made Pune his home, she wasn't much aware of her grandfather's contribution to yoga. Says Abhijata, "I knew that my grandfather was a famous man, that people came to meet him from all over the world. After my schooling, I had to make a decision about my further education. I had an aptitude for science, especially Biology. I thought, 'Let me go to Pune and study. I will also learn yoga, see for myself what it is like'. So I moved to Pune, graduated from Fergusson College and did my post-graduation from University of Pune in Bioinformatics." In Pune, she started learning yoga from Guruji, who treated her like he would treat other students.

"Within these walls (gesticulating to the practice room), I wasn't treated as a granddaughter. He taught me with the same approach that he had for his other students. His reasoning was simple, 'If you want to learn yoga, you are prepared to learn it, then I will teach you'. He was strict, no doubt, but he was also very giving. He would scold me often if I was distracted, or not involved enough. **Sometimes, he used to say, 'She is my granddaughter, so I can be double strict with her'.**"

No wonder then that when she had to make a decision between choosing yoga or pursuing PhD in Bioinformatics, Abhijata chose the former. "I discussed with my HoD that I wanted to do both, yoga and study for my PhD. I would spend the mornings at the institute, learn from my grandfather and come to the department later. But I was told that I couldn't pursue Bioinformatics half-time. The HoD gave me the option of doing the course from America, which I could complete in three years or so. In India, the same course would take me five or six years. At that juncture, I didn't want to move away from the institute, so I decided to take a break of one year and see for myself if I really had an aptitude for yoga. Once I started, I got so involved that I forgot that I was on break. There was no looking back," she adds. She learnt yoga and also about life from her grandfather. Says Abhijata, "While demonstrating an asana or pranayama, he wouldn't just insist on the correct posture. His attempt was to take us to sage Patanjali's teaching — yogas chitta vritti nirodha. Our mind is always chattering, so how can we achieve peace and calm mind? Through pranayama and asanas, when your body and mind are completely attuned to each other. With this, chemical changes take place in the body, and you see your own mind, resulting in clarity of thoughts'."

When she decided to become a part of this world, did her relationship with the outside world change?

"I had a wonderful college life — bunking, watching movies etc. Let us remember that Guruji wasn't a sanyasi. He had six children. In his earlier years, monks advised him to take sanyasashram and leave for the Himalayas. But Guruji responded, 'I was born here. Whatever I have to do, I will do it here,' she says on a concluding note.