

# Los Angeles Times

## Yogis gather around the guru

Many Americans know Iyengar yoga, but not the man. Now he arrives in the U.S., for what may be his last visit.

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As the 86-year-old teacher drew closer to the fans cordoned off with yellow police tape at Los Angeles International Airport, the cheering and clapping grew louder. The group of about 30 people, surrounded by six LAPD officers, had been eagerly awaiting the arrival — the first in 12 years — of the yoga master from Pune, India.

When B.K.S. Iyengar finally walked up to the adoring group, many bowed down and touched his sandal-clad feet in adulation.

"I thought my heart was going to explode," said yoga teacher Aida Amirkhanian, clutching her chest. "I was just overjoyed. A guru puts you in a moment of happiness. There is no love like that. It is just electric."

In the west, where supplication to gurus is not the cultural norm, Iyengar elicits such a response from a cadre of longtime yoga practitioners. They credit him with changing their lives — and the face of yoga in the United States.

In 1966, Iyengar published a landmark book explaining 216 yoga postures called "Light on Yoga," which has sold nearly 3 million copies and has been translated into 17 languages.

His technique was physically challenging, unusual for Americans practicing yoga, but what truly set it apart was his therapeutic approach to the poses. Iyengar devised specific prescriptions, or sequences of poses, to help people with ailments such as backache,

headaches, high blood pressure, diabetes and many more.

Forty years later, the techniques established in "Light on Yoga" are the basis for most of the yoga taught in the United States, and Iyengar is a celebrity among yoga aficionados.

The Los Angeles visit was Iyengar's third stop in a five-city U.S. tour to promote his new book, "Light on Life." This will be his final trip to this country, he says, and devotees here had been planning his greeting for weeks. Ready at LAX on Wednesday, they held up a hand-painted welcome banner and brought a garland of carnations and roses that 93-year-old yoga student Bernard Spira placed around Iyengar's neck.

Later that day, devotees sold out Royce Hall at UCLA for a celebration of Iyengar's life. There he was interviewed by Annette Bening, and he hobnobbed with master of ceremonies Ali McGraw, who wore traditional Indian garb and called him "Guruj," a Sanskrit term meaning "endearing teacher."

Before his stop in Los Angeles, he visited San Francisco, where that city's Board of Supervisors declared Oct. 3 as B.K.S Iyengar Day.

Despite the enthusiastic receptions with which he's been greeted, most people who practice yoga don't know the name B.K.S. Iyengar, even though what they learn in gyms or yoga studios has been shaped by this man with wild eyebrows, infectious charisma and notoriety for a ferocious teaching style that includes whacks on the head and slaps on the bum.

"He has by far had the most profound impact on the global spread of yoga," said Joseph S. Alter, a professor of anthropology at the University of Pittsburgh who wrote "Yoga in Modern India: The Body Between Science and Philosophy." "Light on Yoga" is the yoga canon of this century. It is the most detailed, systematic and precise book out there about yoga [poses and techniques]."

Before Los Angeles yogis discovered Iyengar in the 1970s, yoga classes were a cliché in which vegetarians gathered in dark rooms to meditate with burning candles and incense.

"We would lie down after every pose," recalled Scott Hobbs, a yoga teacher who helped establish the Iyengar Yoga Institute of Los Angeles on 3rd Street in 1984. "Mr. Iyengar and his book literally turned the light on in the room and on the fact that yoga was not a flowery, soft and easy practice. He showed us it could be fierce, dynamic and physical, and he came along just when we were hungry for more instruction and detail."

Iyengar's impact has now spread far beyond the yoga studios. At the Mattel Children's Hospital at UCLA, Dr. Lonnie Zeltzer, the director of the pediatric pain program, has begun using Iyengar yoga to relieve pain in her patients.

"I always thought yoga was something that you had to be strong and flexible to do," said Zeltzer, 61, who took up the practice seven years ago after having hip-replacement surgery and suffering from osteoarthritis. "I couldn't imagine myself doing it until I discovered Iyengar yoga and realized it was particularly suited for people with chronic health problems."

Props like belts, straps, bolsters, ropes on the wall and blocks enable yoga students with physical limitations to get into poses and hold them so they can experience the therapeutic benefits. Studies from UCLA, Oregon Health and Science University and the University of Pennsylvania, among others, have demonstrated that Iyengar's method can relieve back pain, hypertension, multiple sclerosis, depression and rheumatoid arthritis.

Although Iyengar is proud of the research that validates his life's work, he's also quick to share that everything he learned about yoga and physiology was self-taught.

Sitting last week in the bright sitting room of the Beverly Hills home of one of his students, with the smells of a vegetarian Indian lunch wafting in, Iyengar explained why he chose to focus on illness in the physical body.

"I started working with my own body," he said, referring to the oft-told story of his childhood afflictions with influenza, malaria and

tuberculosis. "What if I became invalid, or lost my mind or my leg?" he asked. "I created the props for my own selfish purpose. I used my body as a scientific lab to master the asanas [poses]."

For Iyengar, the therapeutic benefits of his system are far from a passive pursuit. "Health is a dynamic endeavor that requires tremendous intellectual attention. You can't walk into the pharmaceutical shop and buy health. It has to be earned with persistence and sweat."

The idea of health as an intellectual pursuit is why the Iyengar system puts a premium on teacher training and accreditation. A teaching credential requires in-depth knowledge of physiology as well as a minimum of five years' training.

In his late stage of life, much of Iyengar's time is devoted to instructing his master teachers, among them daughter Geeta and son Prashant. "I have to give them the secrets so they can help humanity and carry on."

Elizabeth Kadetsky, who wrote a memoir and history about Iyengar based on her experiences at his school in Pune, says her initial attraction to Iyengar yoga was that intellectual rigor. "In an Iyengar class the level of language is so articulate and smart.... In that way Iyengar has affected the world of yoga by giving it a level of serious professionalism and discipline."

But Kadetsky's book, "First There Is a Mountain: A Yoga Romance," upset many in the tight-knit Iyengar yoga community for its portrayal of Iyengar as a flawed human being, beset by feelings of rivalry with other yoga systems.

"As a journalist, I set out to portray him as a fascinating, complicated genius with all the convoluted character particularities any genius has," she said. "I did not write a hagiography, and that was offensive to people who regard him as an avatar, an embodiment of God on earth."

Iyengar's stature as revered guru was evident at a reception following his Royce Hall appearance. As he tried to make his way

through the crowd, throngs surrounded him, touching his feet and taking his picture.

Although a throne-like chair had been set up on a pedestal festooned with bright orange marigolds, he refused to sit in it. "I don't consider these people my disciples," he said the next day by way of explanation.

"When people bow to him, it's not because he requires it," said Beth Sternlieb, an Iyengar teacher who specializes in therapeutics. "When people bow, they do it because of what it does for them. It's their way of connecting with someone who they believe has made a historic contribution to yoga."