



Seizing the Whip: B. K. S. Iyengar and the Making of Modern Yoga



Eric Shaw
prasanayoga.com

dedicated to

Mark Singleton

The longtime resident of Pune, Maharashtra, India, B. K. S. Iyengar, is arguably the most influential figure in Modern Postural Yoga; however, the conditions under which he was raised and the work he did to propagate new postural forms worldwide have never been carefully correlated.

It is widely believed that Iyengar received precise training under his celebrated guru, Tirumalai Krishnamacharya in his teen-age years, but that training was actually extremely brief, haphazard and abusive.

This article explains the formative impact of yoga performance and solitary practice in making Iyengar a great posture master and teacher, and—more importantly—examines the anatomy of Iyengar's character and tutelage under Krishnamacharya carefully, drawing conclusions as to their implications for Iyengar's work and the nature of yoga worldwide.

Just as Iyengar was reluctant to confront his master, few writers have confronted Iyengar's self-exposition.

Mark Singleton, Elizabeth De Michelis and Elizabeth Kadetsky are exceptions to this rule.

This essay converses with those authors and integrates the views of Iyengar and his students.

Iyengar's institute declined my request for an interview.

Because I've used numerous quotes from Iyengar's oral statements, his English is awkward, and his words were transcribed into written form by authors with their own tics, I have mostly avoided pointing to the many resulting idiosyncrasies with the term sic ("as written") as it would have been constantly obtrusive. In the same spirit, I have repaired minor inconsistencies that do not greatly affect meaning (e.g. changing "7 am" to "7am") and avoided the many odd italicizations and capitalizations that litter that material.

“Asana was my school, my university.”¹

“I was a star of the stage, a marvel of gymnastic ability.”²

“To love is to be merciless.”³

B. K. S. Iyengar

Elizabeth Kadetsky has said of Bellur Krishnamachar Sundararaja Iyengar (1918 - 2014) that he is “known to tens of thousands of . . . yoga aficionados” for transforming yoga and that “his techniques have healed millions” (*FTIM*, 10). It’s been said that Iyengar Yoga “is probably the most famous hatha yoga in the world . . . [he] has revolutionized the way yoga is taught in the West.”⁴ Like many others, Singleton has referred to Iyengar’s seminal *Light on Yoga* (p. 1966 in the US) as the “bible” of modern yoga (*YB*: 215). As of this writing, B. K. S. Iyengar is almost universally hailed as yoga’s greatest modern authority.

The general lines of Iyengar’s life are well-known; however, the degree of physical and psychological abuse that he received from his teacher has not been fully understood, nor has the link been made between this experience and his yoga.

The story I will tell below is often painful, and shows the dark side of the otherwise virtuous career of his well-known teacher, Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (1888-1889). Krishnamacharya’s acts are forgivable, yet they had lasting reverberations on Modern Postural Yoga through their effect on his most famous student.

Scholarly study of Modern Postural Yoga (MPY) is still novel, so Iyengar (who I’ll sometimes call “BKS”) is only beginning to be oriented methodologically, historically and philosophically.

Elizabeth De Michelis did initial work in her important, *History of Modern Yoga* (2004), which emphasized Iyengar in several chapters. Karl Baier has supplied an extremely thorough explanation of how Iyengar expresses Patanjali’s 8-part practice through the limbs of pranayama and asana,⁵ and Jennifer Lea devoted an article to examining Iyengar’s work through the lens of Foucault,⁶ but there is little more than this. As Joseph Alter said, “Iyengar’s significance to modern yoga is such that an adequate analysis would involve a separate and comprehensive study.”⁷

This article begins that task.

The Research of Elizabeth De Michelis

Without going into her work overmuch, we can say that De Michelis cross-referenced Iyengar Yoga with esotericism’s historical norms. She studied how yoga

gained respectability in the West, and she demystified the language Iyengar used to convey his ideas. Discussions of Iyengar are key to her larger thesis. She situates him in a set of New Age and Neo-Vedantic movements classified by Modern Yoga's growth phases, which she labels "Popularization," "Consolidation" and "Acculturation." Her novel analysis of Iyengar's communication strategies explains them in terms of occult paradigms.

De Michelis' observations are both novel and accurate. Iyengar's self-expression was strongly colored by these paradigms; however, Iyengar did not think of himself as a member of an occult or New Age subculture.

He had a strikingly different view of who his historical dialogue partners were.

This essay will show how—in the latter part of his career—Iyengar took great pains to position himself as an august member of the "Old Age"—that is, as a thought-leader in yoga's thousands-year-old debate about philosophy and methodology.

At the same time, we'll show how this was merely the last of four phases Iyengar evolved through. These phases are of more critical importance than the changing means of linguistic expression De Michelis has emphasized. They make clear his changing sense of identity and his motivations for teaching asana to the world.

The Research of Mark Singleton

Singleton's key work, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*, (2010), details the slice of Hatha Yoga history that precedes Iyengar and looks to the advent of his work.

In his introduction, Singleton states,

It should . . . be noted that De Michelis's study bypasses a full seventy-year period between the milestones of [Swami Vivekananda's] *Raja Yoga* (1896) and Iyengar's [first book] *Light on Yoga* (1966). In many ways, it is in this gap that the present study begins. The vast paradigmatic divide that separates Vivekananda's teaching from the heavily postural forms of Iyengar Yoga simply cannot be explained by the typology of [De Michelis's] Modern Yoga . . . De Michelis . . . does not engage with why [Iyengar's] teaching is so *overwhelmingly concerned with asana* . . . De Michelis's account . . . does little to account for the primacy of postural practical in his teaching (*YB*: 19). [My italics.]

Singleton's book goes on to fill in the first forty years of this "gap." He tells how the Hatha Yoga Renaissance⁸ foregrounded postural yoga, but his story is largely over by 1937, the year Iyengar's independent teaching career began.

Singleton lays the groundwork for understanding BKS by discussing his predecessors, but Iyengar's dialog with the Hatha Yoga Renaissance is *vastly more limited* than Singleton's *Yoga Body* suggests.

This essay looks at new reasons why Iyengar was "so overwhelming concerned with asana."

We'll begin with a look at Iyengar's personal influences and motivations and finish with a description of the cultural markers he steers by.

The analytical method employs Western psychology to elucidate the pattern of his life, and highlights his intimate relationship to Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* in order to show how he positions himself as a liegeholder of yoga's earliest traditions (AY:6: 142).

For students of the evolution of posture, this essay also shows how stage-performance radically re-oriented Iyengar's understanding of himself, his teaching, and the way the modern world now does posture practice.

Iyengar's Autobiographical Material

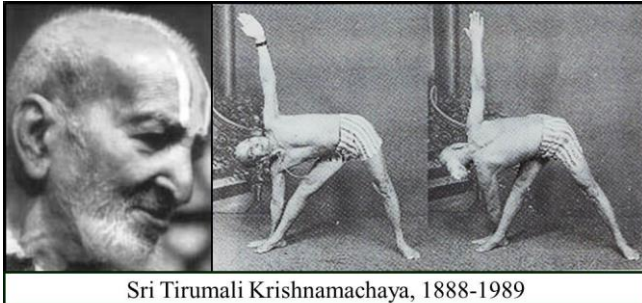
While looking carefully at Iyengar's pressurized upbringing, this essay explains how family conditioning and cultural biases led Iyengar to construct a yoga unlike that of his modern and pre-modern colleagues.

Iyengar re-visits his early training again and again in his biographical statements. Though he is given to hyperbole, his descriptions seem to be honest accounts of his life. His contradictions are rare, and his re-tellings consistently reveal new information.

He speaks repeatedly of the character of his guru.

In understanding Iyengar, it is important to comprehend his first teacher.

We will begin by looking at this man, Sri Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (who I will also refer to as "K.").



Iyengar's Main Teacher: A Good Man, a Dangerous Man

In March of 1934, the ferocious pundit, Sri Tirumalai Krishnamacharya was directed by his benefactor—one of the world's richest men,⁹ King Navaldi Wadiyar of Mysore—to go to Lonavla (875

km. to Mysore's north) to visit the ashram of Swami Kuvalayananda to learn about his scientific research on yoga.

Returning south, Krishnamacharya stopped in Bangalore to visit his mother-in-law, a widow who lived alone with her son, the 15-year-old B. K. S. Iyengar.

Family bonds in India are extremely tight as measured by Western standards, but widows are a pariah class. They often lack any social standing. They are censured because wives are supposed to keep their husbands alive!¹⁰ Iyengar's nine other siblings had already left his widowed mother's home (FTIM: 72), and he was alone with her, and—due to his ill-health and poverty—clinging to survival when K darkened his door.

Krishnamacharya suggested to his mother that he take the boy (FTIM: 75).

Iyengar consented to the arrangement.

He was in for a wild ride.

According to Krishna Pattabhi Jois, Krishnamacharya's longtime student, K was, “a very good man, a strong character. A dangerous man.”¹¹ Long before he turned 37 and married Iyengar's sister, K's passion for learning lead him to abandon his birth family for study throughout India.

According to K's accounts, it was in Patna, Varanasi, Calcutta, the Tibetan and Nepalese Himalayas, Kabul and Mysore that he studied, won scholarships and earned degrees while conquering rivals in debate. His sojourn seems more akin to that of a man of our century than his. He chose to focus exclusively on developing his personal skillset far past the traditional age that even Indian men married in that era.

His biographers tell us that he mastered Sanskrit and other Indian languages, *Jyotish* (Vedic astrology), the six systems of Indian philosophy (the *Satdarshanas*), the medical science of Ayurveda, *Tarka* (logic), chanting, ritual, and pranayama. He learned to play the *veena** and mastered yoga asana (*TYTY*: 16). Iyengar claimed he was a “magical” gardener and an excellent cook, too. “His preparations [were] *madhupakam* . . . like honey” (*AY:I*: 52).

Despite this, K was a harsh personality and had few friends.

In 1936, he stopped his heart for French doctors who'd hunkered down in Mysore to run tests for a month (*TYTY*: 97-99), but it seemed the man's heart of feeling had stopped years before.

In public, those who knew him, feared him. He was lonely and “intellectually intoxicated.” This seemed to prohibit casual or deep relationships (*AY:I*: 55-56).

We can guess that he learned some part of this disposition from his strict father, Srinivasa Tattacharya—also a master of the tradition. He performed Krishnamacharya's Brahmin thread ceremony at the young age of five. He also began teaching Krishnamacharya asana, Sanskrit and the *Yoga Sutra* then (*TYTY*: 30-31, *LTK*: 36-7). According to K's longtime student, A. G. Mohan, Krishnamacharya told stories that detailed the ferocity of K's Himalayan guru, Yogeshwara Ramamohana Brahmachari.¹²

Colored by the awe of his youthful days with K, Iyengar said glowingly, “He was naturally gifted with a well-built body, proportionately muscular, expressing tremendous strength and vigor . . . I'm sure he would have won the title of Mr. Universe” (*AY:I*: 52). In his youth, K's skill in posture won him teaching duties among the children of his professors (*TYTY*: 56). Pictures from his book, *Yoga Makaranda*, shot near the time when K and Iyengar lived together, show him skillfully executing the most elaborate poses.¹³

It is not known how widespread Hatha Yoga was among Indian householders generally, or among the Sri Vaishnavaites of K's family, but considering the conservatism of his caste and the sect, it seems likely that K's childhood tutelage in posture was unusual.¹⁴ Asana skills may have been a source of pride because of their uniqueness and a sign of forward thinking among the educated class K hailed from. It is possible his father was drawn to yoga by the recent upsurge of interest that came with the fight for India's independence (*YB*: 95-11), or perhaps it was an older habit passed through family lines.¹⁵ In any event, K is said to have embarked on his lifelong mastery of physical control when he was extremely young.

* Veena: an Indian stringed instrument.

The rough lines of his later education are well known. Though different dates have been batted around, it was probably in 1911 that K began 7 and a half years' study with the putatively 230-year-old master of the *Sutras*, yoga therapy and asana named (most fully) Yogeshwara Sri Ramamohan Brahmachari Guru Maharaj of Mukta Narayan Ksetra (*ILW*: 52, *FTIM* 79) who may or may not have lived in a Tibetan or Nepali cave with his family.¹⁶ As the story is related, K would have remained with his guru, but Brahmachari told him to leave, marry, raise a family and—despite his prodigious gifts—do something wholly unprecedented in the India of his time: make a “living” through yoga (*LTK*: 47).

Hatha Yoga was not held in high repute then, and it would be *déclassé* for a man so talented and vain to survive from this often lightly-respected art.

Like many great gurus of the day,¹⁷ Brahmachari seemed concerned to popularize Hatha Yoga through the unusual assignment to his gifted *chela*, but he may also have been trying to simmer K down a little—by saddling him with a compromised social profile.

K obeyed Brahmachari—and kept up his yoga skills. Ultimately, he learned to quiet his heart (*AY:1*: 58), stop cars with his hands, and lift heavy objects with his teeth (*YB*: 193). He continued to win praise through asana demonstrations into his 90s.¹⁸

Scarce Teachings, a Rough Start

Few know it, but Krishnamacharya gave Iyengar only scant information on yoga in the three years they lived, worked and learned together (1934-7).

After BKS arrived in Mysore (May, 1934), months passed before he received a yoga lesson (*ILW*: 11). Iyengar's older brother, Ramaswami, had already spent part of 1931 learning from K, but Iyengar said, he “could not tolerate the strict discipline and rigid rules of *Guruji* [Krishnamacharya]. He could not face his anger.”

Ramaswami fled back to Bangalore.

Iyengar's sister, Jaya, also lived with K and received lessons.

She was physically and psychological scarred by him and dispensed with the practices, too (*FTIM*: 81, *AY:1*: 54).¹⁹

Iyengar' early childhood saw him dissolved in a household of nine siblings who teased him for an overlarge head that hung down because of its weight (*ILW*: 3). His father, Bellur Krishnamachar, died when BKS was nine, effectively making him an orphan (*FTIM*: 72). While alive, Bellur married away his six oldest children (*ILW*: 3), and three of the remaining were trundled off to live with those couples upon his death (*FTIM*: 72). Only the youngest of these, Iyengar, remained in the fatherless home to face Krishnamacharya, boy-to-man, in 1934.

Before his siblings were taught, Iyengar had never heard of yoga (*AY:6*: 178). His body was “stiff like a poker” and he “could not even reach his knees” (*ILW*: 8, *AY:1*: 22-3).

When he took him to Mysore, K had promised to teach Iyengar the practice to heal him, but there was was “no yoga and no health” in K's household.

Nevertheless, at the end of the summer in '34, when Iyengar planned to return home, K once more “tempted” him, “promising that he would teach me yoga to improve

my health.” Since he “had not experienced what health really was,” he accepted K’s renewed vow (*AY:I: 23*), and after “three to four months,” K taught Iyengar “three or four asanas.”

Krishnamacharya left it at that, telling him, “Do these asanas, you will regain some health” (*AY:I: 54*).

As Iyengar’s de facto father, K performed Iyengar’s Brahmin thread ceremony around this time, initiating him formally into Brahmin maledom.

Because of this, and the small amount of teaching he received, BKS now honored K as his “Guruji” (*ILW: 11*). BKS’ interest in yoga accelerated, and he began studying on his own (*ibid.: 8*) and perhaps alongside K’s star student, Keshavamurthy, an orphan in the Krishnamacharya household who BKS shared a room with (*ibid.: 9*), but K did nothing to guide Iyengar’s practice (*ibid.: 11*).

Though history protests, K eventually told him, “You won’t do yoga in this life. You are *anadhikarin*—not privileged” (*AY:I: 54*).

Iyengar’s Ungainly Position

After relocating to Mysore, Iyengar found himself lacking athletic promise in a place vibrant with its pursuit. Krishnamacharya was the resident sage and PE teacher of the state’s king, Krishnaraja Wadiyar IV. Wadiyar was a physical culture enthusiast and a benefactor of the still-budding YMCA. (He hosted the Y’s First World Congress in 1937.²⁰) The Mysore kingship had a long-standing relationship to yoga.²¹ In Iyengar’s day, it sponsored Swami Kuvalayananda’s groundbreaking work of running scientific tests on the practice, supported Paramahansa Yogananda’s evangelism in America, and paid a salary to the world-renowned yogi body-builder Kola Venkatesh Iyer. Iyer had his own prominent lieutenants, Anant Rao and S. Sundaram (*YB: 177-8*). These “muscle cult” members published their own books and magazines on yoga and their fame exceeded that of K in their day (*YB: 122-7*).

Singleton has given us a full account of the innovations of these men. He paints a picture of yoga celebrity: famous teachers building bodies “that the gods covet” while promoting Indian nationalism and making the forms of yoga that were bequeathed to our generation.

However, besides K, none of these Mysore titans knew or taught Iyengar. Stranger still, Iyengar knew nothing of them.

A Yoga of the Cave

A Hatha Yoga Renaissance was flowering around B. K. S. Iyengar, the world’s future champion of the practice (*YB: 120, HMY: xvii*) but he was islanded at home, without a true teacher (and with just a single friend) (*ILW: 8*) practicing yoga unstintingly, ignoring life beyond his ardent routine.

There is no evidence in Iyengar’s writings that he had any contact with the Mysore physical culture world described by Singleton—beyond his cheek-to-jowl bond to mighty K. The statements Iyengar makes about the yoga scene of his early years makes

it clear that he believed hardly anybody taught Hatha Yoga besides himself and his master. On several occasions, he has framed an account of his early practice years with statements like, “In those days there were hardly any yoga teachers; we could count them on our fingertips.” In this “count” only Krishnamacharya is named from Mysore (AY:I: 60, AY:6: 88, 303). Iyengar believed that, “In the 1930s, there were only a few yoga teachers in the whole of India including Pakistan and Bangladesh” (AY:6: 303).

In light of the rich picture drawn by Singleton, how is this even possible?

A lack of intellectual curiosity helped frame Iyengar’s isolation.

Because of his poor childhood health, he “never played nor had books to read” (FTIM: 71). Before failing out of school at age 16, he was a poor student. After separating from K at age 18, he said books on yoga “did not interest me at all,” and he decided “to never look at books again” (AY:I: 30, YWP: 13). Hence, upon meeting the world famous spiritual teacher, Krishnamurti and the globally-known violinist, Yehudi Menuhin, he knew nothing of their fame, “as I was not reading books or papers” (AY:I: 42-3).

BKS established a pattern of isolating himself from cultural influences in his youth, and it remained in place until middle age (ILW: 8-9). Such isolation is what we might expect from a boy deficient at school studies, handicapped in language (FTIM, 69-70) and living a life he called a “web of constant fear” (AY:I: 29).

This routine *did* bear great fruit, and hardly changed in the ensuing decades. Modern yoga has gained innumerable gifts from Iyengar’s auto-didacticism. As he put it, “I learned everything on my own . . . Every word of what I am teaching today is my own perspiration and inspiration” (AY:6: 180).

Certainly, the figures of the Hatha Yoga Renaissance (c. 1918-50) described by Singleton, pared down the practice mainly to its postures, making *yoga* into *vyayam* (fitness), but they had no direct influence on Iyengar outside of K’s rarified transmissions.

A Cruel and Narrow Pedagogy

By Iyengar’s report, he “received only 10 or 12 lessons in yoga” from K in his life.²²

And it was all asana.

He got no teaching in yoga history, science or philosophy. Iyengar recalls, “Though I was practicing . . . Guruji did not explain any of the principles or subtleties of yoga” (YWP: 12). K taught the “dedicated students . . . theory classes at home. Unfortunately I was not one of them. So . . . I missed that bus” (AY:I: 53). In later years, he would say that K taught him “nothing” of yoga philosophy (AY:6: 180) and that he “had no theoretical knowledge” suggesting broadly that he “was completely without qualification” in yoga (YWP: 13).

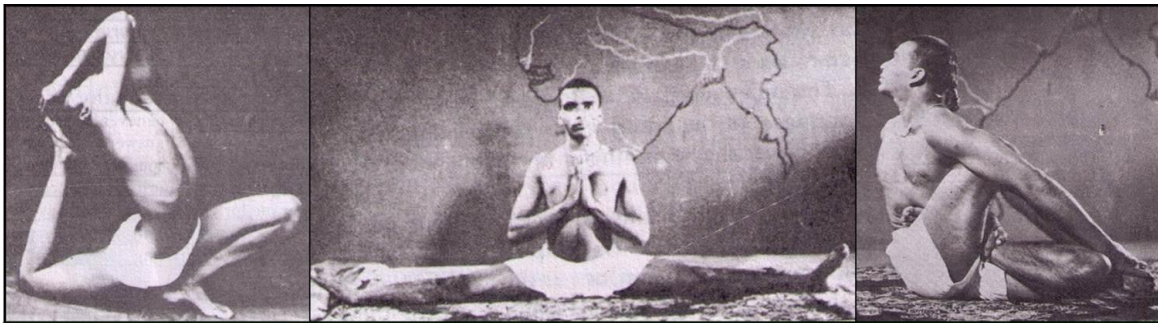
In July-August of 1934, Iyengar got a round of asana lessons “for three or four days,” then K “lost interest” and told him to “absorb his lessons before he would instruct [him] further” (AY:I: 23). These lessons were probably very simple, for later in life he said, “I do not teach like my master did. He just said to do the postures and we did it.” (AY:6: 179).²³ In the following year, Iyengar received no training *at all*. And—from a man who was a master of Ayurvedic herbs and healing (AY:I:52), Iyengar received no assistance in improving his health—which stayed poor despite his yoga.

Indeed, the boy’s life was charged with physiological and psychological *dis*-ease. He was profoundly afraid of his new father-figure.

[Krishnamacharya] would get up very early [2am²⁴] and set things for us to do every day. His temper was always running high. People call me a lion, but I don’t know what you would have called my guru if you had seen him in his early days. My guru was a man of immeasurable knowledge and unpredictable moods. It was not easy to read his mind. If he said one thing at one time, he used to contradict the same at another time. We [Keshavamurthy and he and probably K’s young wife] were made to accept and obey him *in toto* without questioning. For example, if I sat in the ordinary cross leg position, with the left leg first, he would say, “Take the right first.” If the right was placed first, he would say, “Take the left leg first.” If I stood, he would say, “Is that the way to stand?” If I changed, he would say, “Who asked you to change?” If I took my food, using certain fingers, he would say, “Use other fingers.” Subsequently, he would admonish me if I followed his early advice. Life became perplexing. The difference in age set fear in my heart, and his presence was like a frightful nightmare (AY:I 23-4).

When I told him of my pains, he said I should learn to live with them (*ibid.* 26).

My guruji’s way of teaching was that we should present any asana the moment he demanded, without any comment. If we refused, we were not served food and water, and had to forgo sleep (AY:I: 26).



Early Posework by Iyengar, c. 1940

In Indian culture, it is extremely rare for a guru to be confronted by his students; however, at the palace Sanskrit college, where Krishnamacharya first began working for King Wadiyar,

[He] was a strict teacher . . . the students protested against him and the Maharaja soon agreed to replace him (*ibid.*: 53).

By K. Pattabhi Jois's account, K eventually drove away all but three of his students. One of the early members of this group was the orphan, Keshavamurthy, who would run away from K's home one short year after Iyengar's arrival there. This would leave only Jois, Iyengar and a boy named C. Mahadev Bhatt learning from Krishnamacharya in this part of the 1930s.²⁵

Iyengar's sister Jaya, referenced above as another escapee from K's teaching, paints a stark picture of him. Kadetsky reports,

"He used his wrist," Jayalakshmi Shamanna, one of Iyengar's sisters, told me "For that reason, we all used to say, 'Guruji has a very strong wrist.' Some days he would get so angry he would say, 'Today, all of you are going to fast.' No water. Nothing. It was punishment."

Like her brother, Jayalakshmi spent part of her youth living with the Krishnamacharya family. She described her trial with the tyrannical mentor . . . As she spoke . . . a niece brought a silver tray of cups. . . and a pot of coffee . . . Coffee, Jayalakshmi was saying was very important to her mentor, and he took great pains to instruct her in its preparation . . . "I had prepared a silver tumbler of coffee," she elaborated. "But after I set it down in front of him, there was a small drop of coffee on the table next to it. He started to say, 'If you go like this to our in-laws' house—then he lost his temper . . . He threw the coffee tumbler at me. A silver tumbler is sharp," she added, considering . . . She fingered her left scalp . . . "This is the scar." I peered through the hairs to the scalp and there was a thick gash that was the mark of her mentor (*FTIM*: 81).

Amidst his travails, thoughts of suicide haunted the adolescent Iyengar, but Krishnamacharya seemed to control even Iyengar's choice to live or die.

Kadetsky reports,

"He once slapped me early in the morning," Iyengar also told me. "I said, 'For what?'"

"He said, 'You are questioning me,' and he slapped me again.

"I walked ten miles to the river to commit suicide. He came and found me. He was proud. He didn't want people leaving. He pushed me to the car and took me home" (*ibid.*: 80).

Kadetsky tells a story with a similar tone from another student,

Another Brahmin student from that time . . . remembered frequent beatings as well. "If I did correctly, he never beat me, but if I did anything wrong, he used to beat me and say, 'Do correctly! . . . ' He wanted perfection only. He beat us all. After he hit you, you would have the impression of each of his five fingers on our face." (*ibid.*)

Though it flows from impressions made during his adolescence, Iyengar once analyzed the psychology and social predicaments of his teacher,

Guruji had a frightful personality. His back used to be very straight even when he was aged. His eyes were so powerful that anyone would be afraid to look into [them]. Nobody could cross this intellectual giant. The pundits and scholars were afraid of him. I have attended a few of his talks in the early days. As a young and highly educated person, he was intellectually intoxicated. As nobody could come near him, surpass him, or argue with him on his level, he remained lonely. Nobody could equal him in the art of discussion. He could create a “new book” on the spot. He could create Sanskrit stanzas on the spot. He was a *kavi*—a poet. The instant creation of slokas and stanzas . . . was in his blood. This scholarly background, fiery eyes, well-built physique and strong personality paradoxically isolated him.

People were nervous of him. He was a fast walker. Nobody could keep pace with him. Nobody could match his speed. If he were walking along on one side of the pavement, the elite of Mysore would cross over to other side (*AY:I: 55-6*).

K. P. Jois echoed this,

Krishnamacharya’s eyes were very powerful. He had only to look at you for a second and you’d be afraid (*TYTY: 194*).

In K’s home, Iyengar had little to eat and he was so intimidated that he could not ask Krishnamacharya’s wife (his own sister), Namagiramma, for more food (*ILW: 9*). K forced Keshavamurthy and Iyengar to massage his legs; if either moved inexpertly, K struck them.

“If our fingers stopped moving, the marks of his powerful hands were on our cheeks” (*AY:I: 26*).

“He would hit us hard on our backs as if with iron rods. We were unable to forget the severity of his actions for a long time. My sister also was not spared from such blows” (*ibid.: 52*).

Learning asana did not relieve his anxiety.

Iyengar explains, “I had to keep up my practice as I learnt that Guruji could catch me unawares at any time, and ask me to do any of the asana . . . Such was the way and style of teaching of my guru that he could often ask his students to perform asana in public, and that too, without any prior intimation or warning” (*AY:I: 58*).

Krishnamacharya was a renowned gardener, but Iyengar was the garden’s keeper, rising each day at 4am to water the plants (*ILW: 9*).

BKS had moved to a city that was new and largely friendless and where—by his own account—his household pressures, chores, poor esteem and constitution created a desperate situation. Iyengar’s teenage years were shaped by a man he labeled “fanatical” (*LOL: 88*).

Heroic Opportunities

Keshavamurthy, the master's most talented yogi, was K's adopted orphan and lived under the same pressures. Iyengar and he found brief solace together (*ILW*: 9) but in June of 1935, shortly before a major yoga performance, Keshava became a runaway. As Iyengar describes it,

This created a void in me, as I had no other friend except this boy. Whenever Guruji scolded him, me, or both together, we would console each other. In this way, we lived together for a year. His departure was a turning point in my life. Guruji was a very commanding and demanding person. As I was his relative, he had more access to me than to other students. As soon as my only friend and companion left . . . never to return, naturally Guruji's eyes turned on me (*AY:I*: 24).

With Keshavamurthy gone, K needed a new go-to guy. He needed a child posture-master for the esteemed visitors King Wadiyar entertained at court and who could reveal his skill as a teacher (*YB*: 192).

With these pressures, K changed his approach to Iyengar. Several months after Keshavamurthy's exit and a week before a scheduled performance in front of the "All India World YMCA Conference" in December of 1935,²⁶ K spent three days teaching Iyengar "only backward extensions." In this account, BKS offers a counter-story to statements about having been taught "only three or four asanas" during his time with K, exhibiting one of his rare biographical contradictions. He says, "In one day, he taught me thirty to forty asanas."²⁷

Apparently, this teaching (however narrow or broad) was taught partly via our contemporary Acroyoga style (which Krishnamacharya shows with his daughters in a popular late-30s movie of his practice²⁸).

As Iyengar explains it, "Being young, Guruji could force me to do backbends according to his will by making me do [so] on his lifted legs." He adds, "For three days, he broke my back" (*ILW*: 11, *AY:I*: 55, *AY:6*: 179).

However rough the instruction was, Iyengar had finally received a thorough round of teaching from K, but this augured new crises.

Soon after this performance, I was asked to attend the yogashala to train students both in the morning and in the evenings. My daily routine was to get up at 4 in the morning, water the garden and study up to 7am. At 7:30am some students also used to come to the residence to learn the difficult yoga asanas for about half an hour. At 8:30am I took my bath, went to the yogashala and returned home by 10am. I took my food at 10:15am and then walked the three miles to school. Though the school closed at 4:30 in the afternoon, I was not allowed to go to the yogashala direct though it was only a ten minute walk. I had to go back home just to leave my books there and then return to the yogashala. I practiced and taught at the yogashala up to 7pm and returned home for evening prayers, and at 8pm we had our food (*ILW*: 11-13).

Pictures of the young BKS at this time show a thin, but accomplished yogi whose poses lack the discipline of later years (*ILW*: 12, 16, 18; *AY*:6: 96, 102).

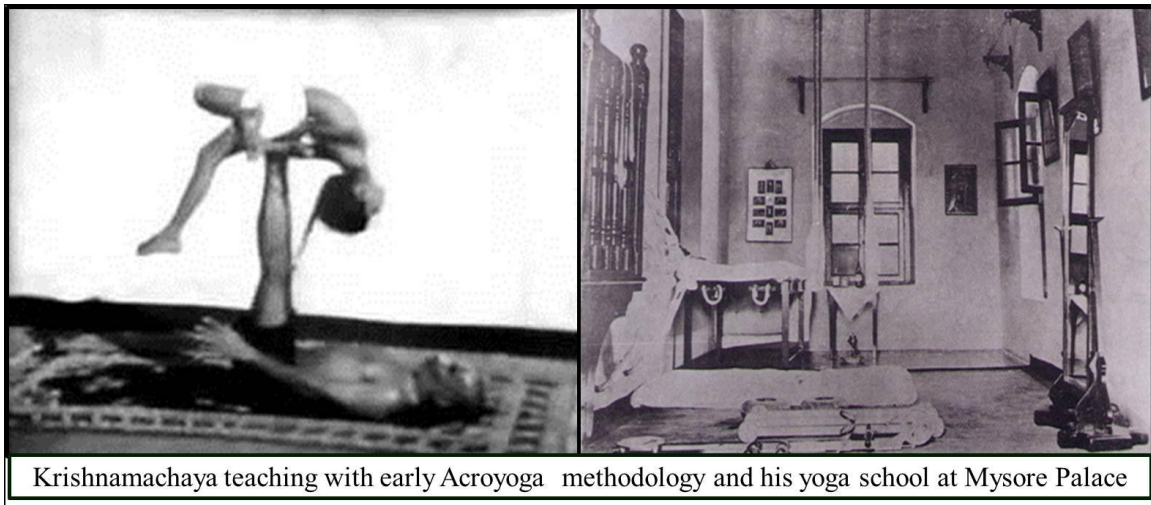
Despite this catalog of suffering, there were moments of sweetness after his exhibition at the All India World YMCA Conference.

Krishnamacharya was impressed, and BKS won 50 rupees from King Wadiyar (*AY*:1: 55). Iyengar relates a rare compliment from K (back-handed though it may be!); he said, “I thought you would not do it at all, but you did it” (*ILW* :11, *AY*:1: 55).

Over the course of a few months, Iyengar had improved his prospects in Hatha Yoga.

Now his pace of learning would quicken.

Iyengar became a full-time yoga teacher and new stage performances



loomed. This set the tone for a laser-like focus on the practice that would stand him in good stead for the ensuing 75 years. At the same time, it crowded out a host of activities a youth his age might use to enlarge his interests and personality.

Iyengar’s life began to follow a singular arc.

Asana became his all.

For the next two years, he fell into a regular pace of performance in Mysore and other Indian cities, both alone and with Krishnamacharya (*AY*:1: 59).

In one early appearance, Iyengar performed for the “well-known criminal judge of the Madras High Court” V. V. Srinivas in late 1935. In this oft-told episode, K demanded he execute *Hanumanasana*, the full-splits pose, but Iyengar protested that his underclothing wouldn’t allow it. “They were stitched so firmly by the tailors that even one’s finger could not pass through.”

K was unmoved and called for scissors.

The underclothing was cut.

Iyengar did the pose.

He tore both hamstrings and, by his account, “could not walk for two years” (*AY*:1: 25, 58).

Pressured by yoga practice, yoga teaching, hunger, household duties, and exhausting walking commutes, Iyengar remained focused.

His circumstances insisted that his yoga practice evolve, and it did, but his schooling received mortal blows.

He states,

The hard practice of yoga, walking every day from house to school, from school to house, from house to yogashala, from yogashala to house, as well as doing my homework, brought about severe aches and pains, and added fatigue to my weak physique. This physical exhaustion was affecting my mind and study became so difficult that I fell asleep whenever I sat for my homework (*YWP*: 12).

The physical exertion stultified my intelligence, and I failed my final exams (*AY:I*: 56).

The exams happened in September of 1935. He would never return to formal education. He was not yet 17.

Hence, yoga practice and performance replaced book study as a field of exertion and reward (*AY:I*: 23). In later years he would say, “Asana was my school” (*LOL*: 224). He states,

The yogashala also conducted its annual examinations and awarded certificates to the candidates who were successful in the elementary, intermediate and advanced diploma courses in yoga. I appeared for the examination in October 1935 and I was awarded certificates. I stood first, securing ninety-eight marks out of a hundred in each course (*ILW*: 13).

These events—school failure in September and yoga triumphs in October—so close in time—must have enhanced the correlation between failure in a “normal” life—the kind of life other boys had—and success in asana for the young BKS.

Iyengar’s Escape and his Second Teacher

Although his day-to-day contact with K ended in ‘37, the two continued to meet and even to work together from time to time (*AY:I*: 25). The unpredictable polymath remained a presence for Iyengar as a brother-in-law, fellow yoga professional and ostensible guru throughout his life.

But K was just one of his chief teachers.

Iyengar’s biography reveals that solitary experiment and performance taught him greater things. His late-career work conjured Patanjali as a significant guru, too.

As we look carefully at his performance on the stage in the section that follows, it will help readers to know that BKS gave thousands of on-stage lecture-demonstrations during his long career.

This theater work shaped his teaching methods, self-understanding and practice, and made singular contributions to making Iyengar “overwhelmingly concerned with asana.”

In May of 1936, Iyengar left Mysore for his first multi-city performance tour with K. Stage performance would become habitual after this point. It would be uniquely influential in his lifelong evolution as a theorist, teacher, and yoga celebrity.

As any veteran of stagecraft knows, performance trains the body toward geometries of external radiance and internal ecstasy. The impulse to physically “show” changes how a body behaves and feels.

Improving this skill, one learns charisma.

Stage-time teaches you how to move provocatively in public spaces and to “work” an audience. The activity grants release and pleasure. Potently communicating to large groups grants the vivifying experience of merging with, and directing a mass consciousness. Performance expands self-esteem (at least while on stage) and makes one appear godlike to others.

It is a powerful high.

As veterans of the stage know, it is a high you may never want to let go of.

In his debut performance, Iyengar learned what the street yogis of old banked on: demonstrating physical impossibilities inspires support from admirers and potential benefactors.

When he was older, Iyengar made the hard-to-believe claim that he performed 14,000 times in his long career.

That work began in this period, when he was facing audiences, “3 - 4 times a day” (AY:I: 57).²⁹

“Acting” like an asana master became a part-time occupation for him (AY:I: 56). This stagework evolved new skills of oratory, body positioning and choreography. Under the klieglights, he applied new forces to his physical form, gaining insights into the alignment of the limbs (AY:6: 203, 311).³⁰ Repeated posture exhibitions also refined his somatic instincts, bringing authority to his teaching and further enlarging his fame.

This rather awkward passage reveals Iyengar’s theory of asana performance:

Both teaching and demonstration needed glamour in the expression. I had to create attractiveness in my presentation to win people towards yoga not only on the physical level but also on intellectual and emotional levels. I was making each fiber, each tendon, each cell express its presence in the asana. I am not sure where anyone presented the asana with the way I was presenting. Each asana has its own profile. I used to trace the profile of each asana and present by expressing from the profiles. This way I used to bring attention in the audience to make this dry subject attractive and tasty (AY:6: 203).

Iyengar was beginning to see asanas as aesthetic architectures. He was realizing the dramatic potential of physical geometries.

Doing so, his poses ceased to be a trifle, a curiosity, or suggestive of semi-grotesque sideshow feats like those of contortionists.



Uday Shankar (1900
– 1977) in 1931

Singleton shows how Europeans first saw yoga performances as circus acts. Late 19th century audiences witnessing these exhibitions saw them as vulgar and vaudevillian (YB: 56-8).

Recognizing this historical background, Iyengar really did do something wholly new, just as he suggests.

He transformed asana from vulgar display to fine art.

His demonstrations created wholesome awe consanguineous with humanity's other classic stage arts of theatre, dance and music.

Whether or not his boastworthy numbers are fact, after his first hastily prepared performance for King Wadiyar, he initiated a life pattern that made investigation into asana through dramatics a main source of insight into, what was for him, *sadhana*—spiritual growth. As if it were not enough so already, performance lead to skill in yoga becoming even more existentially critical for him.

It is little known that Iyengar harbored the ambition to be a dancer.

In 1941 he approached Uday Shankar, the globally known synthesizer of ballet and India's classical dance (called *Bharat Natyam*), to teach Shankar's troupe yoga posture in exchange for dance lessons, but, he reports, Shankar "turned down my offer, and my interest in dancing faded" (ILW: 30).

This is only partially true.

Iyengar's interest in dance persisted. He merely chose to express the instinct for it through a medium he was already at home in.

A Transcendent Philosophy of Asana by Steps

Iyengar's first philosophy of yoga practice tied it to livelihood. As he put it,

I . . . began practicing ten hours a day to master what little I had learned from my guru (YWP: 10).

The interest in yoga came not from the love of yoga, but for the sake of earning a livelihood (*ibid.*).

You know that I am not educated. I am a failed matriculate. Obviously there was no chance for me to get any job, so my capital was only those few asana that I learnt from my guru. I thought, "Let me see if I can could and make a living out of this subject" (AY:6: 228).

I was teaching since 1936 as a mercenary, and it went on till 1946 (AY:6: 308).

His second philosophy of asana tied it to health. It took on a religious tinge,

I began to practice yoga for health and I took health as the main source in the art of living. My ill health taught me that health is very important for mankind . . . I took health as a universal religion and this aspect remained supreme in my mind . . . [this] convinced me of the importance of asana and it stuck to me like a leech (AY:6: 208).

Iyengar would eventually steer his yoga toward its traditional goal of self-realization, but before this late-career turn, yoga spoke to him in a third philosophical language—that of aesthetics. Yoga became his medium for exploring an artistic vision. As he put it,

I practice [yoga] as an artist. (AY:6: 214)

I became a stage performer (AY:I: 56).

I converted what I learned into a performance art (AY:I: 57).

So, from 1936 to '46, I, too, was caught in “Power Yoga.” Then I shifted as a performing artist (AY:6: 309).

He anchored aesthetics at the core of his practice.

Asanas naturally inspire us to express them beautifully, but Iyengar’s passion for aesthetics in asana was preternatural.

The profundity of his vision would institutionalize asana practice for the eye.

His fourth book is culmination of this line of inquiry.

It is a compilation of photographs and lengthy essays on yoga as an art-process. Titled, *The Art of Yoga*, he says there,

Yoga is . . . a spiritual art . . . It is a fine art, since it is aesthetic, expressive, representative and imitative. It is a visual art, since the body is made to form geometrical designs, lines, architectural shapes and the like which are beautiful to behold. It is essentially a useful art for the doer and is presented as a performing art for the viewer.³¹

This statement sounds like Indian temple dance theory³² and new research is revealing the historical relationship of Bharat Natyam and yoga.³³

Though denied by Shankar, Iyengar acquired his method.

He connected two diverse disciplines.

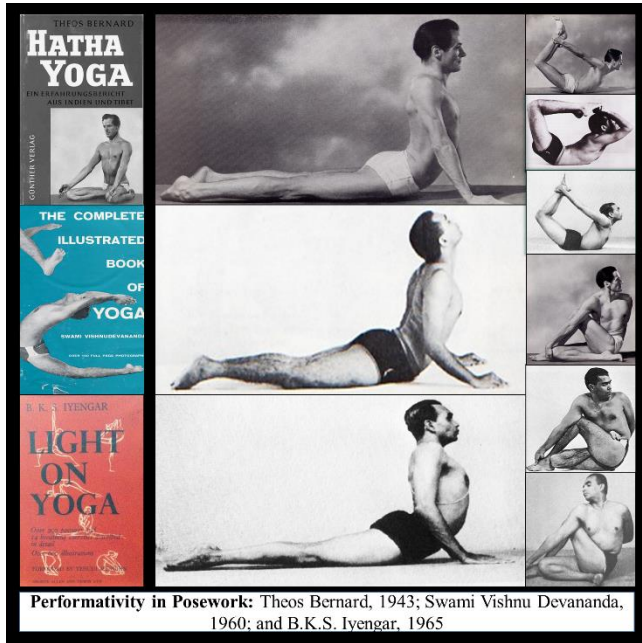
He brought dance’s emphasis on presentation to yoga—making the whole experience more “tasty.”

Performance prerogatives weren’t wholly absent from yoga at the time, but Iyengar made them central.

Iyengar passed the lessons he learned onstage to his students and this further institutionalized aesthetic concerns in the Modern Yoga project.

As we will see, he also brought the harsh style common to the world’s schools of ballet to his teaching.

When Singleton frames the understanding of yoga performance before this transformation, we gain some insight into what Iyengar wiped away, but—because



Performativity in Posework: Theos Bernard, 1943; Swami Vishnu Devananda, 1960; and B.K.S. Iyengar, 1965

Iyengar’s present-day influence is so pervasive—it is hard to fully understand what he brought to bear in its place.

If you’ll permit me a bit of hyperbole and cliché, I think it’s fair to say we’re all fish swimming in the waters Iyengar made. (Having traveled into yoga contexts worldwide, I see these “Iyengar waters” worldwide).

Today, global yogis are challenged to see beyond the fountain of knowledge and awareness Iyengar has given us.

We are challenged to see his innovations in yoga as a affairs—like a stylistic movement

subjective turn of in the arts—rather than as an objective shift in consciousness—i.e., something revealed about the nature of reality itself, or—in this case—about yoga itself.

To grok this stylistic twist he gave to yoga, we’ll briefly detour away from the narrative of Iyengar’s youth and jump 20 ahead years to look razor-sharp at where Iyengar’s stagework landed him.

A subjective development in the arts or sciences or—in this case, in yoga—is understood well through comparison.

I’ll ground this argument by contrasting the posework of Iyengar with that of K and two other yogis who also created shockwaves in the early days of Iyengar’s planet-wide fame.

How They Posed: Iyengar, Krishnamacharya, Devananda and Bernard

In the mid-1930s, Krishnamacharya arranged to have a particularly dramatic set of pose pictures made, probably for the purposes of “propaganda” as he put it.³⁴ He produced dozens of posture-shots in the next 50 years, his students performed for photographers, and Singleton explains their concern with “circus tricks” (YB: 208). As we’ve seen, K exhibited strong-man and heart-stopping feats to draw people to yoga, too (YB: 193).

Iyengar’s master also knew how to astound an audience.

When Iyengar won the favor of the English publishers Allen and Unwin to produce his groundbreaking *Light on Yoga* (LOY) in the early sixties, his photographic pose portfolio lay at the heart of the project.

In the 1950s, Iyengar showed this portfolio (or perhaps another) to his great master, but—in spite of K’s own performance work—he angrily rejected it, calling the poses “all wrong” (AY:I: 59). He also refused Iyengar’s request to write a preface for LOY (AY:I: 59).

Usually, these acts are interpreted as fits of professional jealousy, but there is an alternate view.

K probably recognized how far beyond internality Iyengar had traveled to focus on outward effects.

From where he sat, this was a mistake.

Because we now see posture through Iyengar’s eyes, it is hard to imagine his poses being meaningfully “wrong,” but K had pre-Iyengar eyes.

His understanding of posework had a more classical soteriology.

Krishnamacharya did performance for yoga, but not yoga for performance.

Before Iyengar’s revolution of style—leaving aside the busking of street yogis and the like—posture was meant to transform us internally—and not through levers of exterior reward.

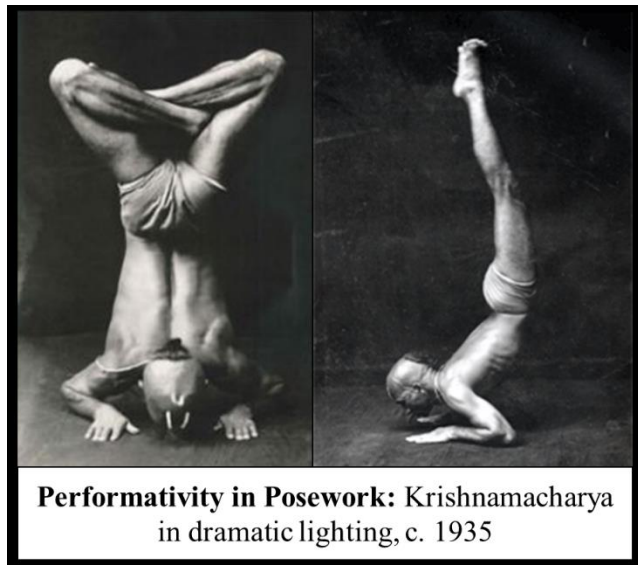
It is surely true that Iyengar discovered how to make prana run more fervently through his limbs by sending it into a crowd. This is one way to stimulate the body, but it is not the way it was done in yoga before Iyengar appeared.

In the images of Krishnamacharya in Trikonasana here (and these are typical) we don’t see him aligning his body in the Iyengarian sense, yet he was a posture master.³⁵

K practiced posture to turn his awareness inward.

This approach has different rewards and looks different. Today, this attitude can still be found in styles of yoga not determined by Iyengar’s alignment imperative. One thinks of Sivananda Yoga, Kripalu Yoga or the styles inflected by the work of Krishnamacharya’s son, Desikachar (formerly called Viniyoga).

If one was originally trained in such a style (as I was in my own yoga career) undertaking Iyengar’s practice comes as a shock. Its over-riding emphasis on the limbs and musco-skeletal language, avoidance of developing the source of prana in the *ghata* (the “pot” of the belly) and—of course—pose-appearance, feels wholly alien.



Swami Vishnu Devananda's 1960, *The Complete Illustrated Book of Yoga* and Theos Bernard's, 1943, *Hatha Yoga: The Report of a Personal Experience*, were the leading texts in the field when LOY appeared in the UK in '65 and the US in '66.

Bernard earned a PhD at Columbia, explored India and Tibet, achieved skill in postures, and was a celebrated public speaker.³⁶ Devananda was an Indian Hatha Yoga evangelist, praised as being enlightened, whose distinguishing skill amidst his fellow devotees of the storied Swami Sivananda of Rishikesh, was mastery of the most dramatic asanas.³⁷

Other historically-important yogis were active on the international stage in the mid-1960s, but these two were responsible for giving posework whatever head of steam in it had in these placid years before a tidal wave of Indian yoga masters established their reputations on Western shores.³⁸

Indeed, English publishers, Allen and Unwin, seeing the rising tide, contracted Iyengar with the express purpose of replacing *Hatha Yoga* as their marquee yoga text (Allen and Unwin published it, too) and the *Book of Yoga* rushed off the shelves so well it was promoted on billboards, its profits financing Swami D's Sivananda Vedanta Center ashrams worldwide.

As something of an impresario himself, Bernard well understood PR.

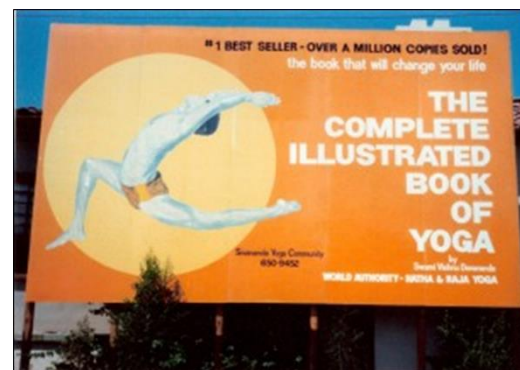
For *Hatha Yoga*, he used a professional photographer with a knack for lighting and—like Iyengar—got a bangin' haircut. Before the shutter snapped, he assumed a blank “yogi face.”

Like Iyengar's LOY images, Bernard's pics have a studied drama. They please the eye.

If we use Desikachar's language of foundational position, Devananda's posework is clearly more advanced than Bernard's and as good as Iyengar's but —legs unshaven, setting badly lit, face ill-composed, and body unaligned—the Swami's portraits from *The Complete Book* aren't that stirring.

Swami D's *Book of Yoga* encourages us to take up posture-work for its ancient spiritual aims, but LOY invites us to embrace the larger drama of yoga's mystery and health.

It's pictures provide a new language of pose-appearance, and—partly catering to Western audiences and partly reflecting Iyengar's philosophical understanding at the time—it's text offers a yoga holistically focused on the worldly aims of beauty and health. Pre-modern Ayurvedic medicine texts had incorporated asana, and Hatha Yoga's medieval formulations utilized poses to vitalize the body's basic functions, but these were not redesignations of the practice. Krishnamacharya and others in the early 20th century had given birth to our modern science of yoga therapy; however, these applications did not magnify the exclusive role of asana as a health intervention. From the 1920s to the 1950s, Sri Yogendra, Indra Devi and Yogi Vithaldas, among many others, had made a



A billboard for Devananda's book, c. 1963

great go of welding asana with regimes of health, and we have pointed to the Hatha Yoga Renaissance's general fitness emphasis, but with Iyengar, it all came together.

LOY speaks only passingly of spiritual reward in its preface.

The book is a course-correction for yoga. It reflects a complete synthesis of an emerging set of ideas about the magical capacity of poses to create soundness of body and mind.

The Light On Yoga Revolution

LOY's paradigm of health was irresistibly wrapped in a visual paradigm of something touched on by Bernard, but realized by Iyengar.

It added an awe-inspiring vision of posture.

The book presented a view of asanas so wholly new, it did something perhaps unintended: it enticed readers with the drama of achieving its stunning postures for their own sake.

LOY offered asana as its own reward.

Iyengar made posturework into a field of risk and an object of ambition. In exteriorizing posture, he exceeded his rivals in the field and took MPY to a goal indicated—but unintended—by K's propaganda work: esotericism was put to one side and yoga took up roles that were primarily exoteric and social. Pressurized as he was by his life-conditions to achieve asana for the sake of asana (as well as life's other rewards!), he taught others to take up that same cross.

Many Iyengar teachers use LOY's photos as an alignment teaching tool today,³⁹ and it is only after LOY appears that we find pictures of other "yogi artists" (to use Iyengar's phrase⁴⁰) whose pose-alignment approaches that of the great master.

Iyengar describes becoming consciously aware of pose alignment in an "ah-hah" moment in 1975 (*ILW*: 197, *YWP*: 28-9), but it's clear that he understood it somatically when his LOY portfolio was made.

LOY is a testament to where Iyengar arrived after 25 years of stagecraft. It makes a textual argument for health while making a visual argument for an exteriorly-focused, exteriorly-regulated, and exteriorly-rewarded yoga of performance.

We can hardly think of yoga now as anything else.

**As Seen on Stage:
Iyengar's Partner,
Dr V. B. Gokhale**

**Iyengar's
development of worldly**



Iyengar with his guru, Krishnamacharya

goals for yoga was accelerated by Dr. V. B. Gokhale.

The relationship has not yet been given the depth of historical investigation its core details beg for.

The doctor filled the role of impresario, amanuensis, and performance partner for the young Iyengar.

We could say he stole BKS from his “previous manager,” Krishnamacharya—whom he knew from overseeing a 1935 heart-stopping demonstration for (*ILW*: 15). It was Gokhale who distributed Wadiyar’s money to Iyengar to make the famous 1938 film of the 20-year-old’s pose artistry, and he who went barnstorming with BKS, lecturing on yoga’s medical benefits while Iyengar silently performed illustrative poses for audiences. Iyengar also gives credit to Gokhale for teaching him pose-precision (*AY*:6: 183).

With its inventory of medical benefits, LOY stands as a catalog of their touring projects, as well as an expression of Iyengar’s then-current understanding of yoga’s supreme value: its capacity for actualizing the “universal religion” of health. At the same time, the pictures point to the next step in Iyengar’s understanding. As stated above, these insights would percolate for two decades, then take clear form in the lengthy aesthetic manifestos making up his *Art of Yoga* of 1985.

Spiritual effects are regularly experienced in Modern Postural Yoga and it is a “gateway drug” to the highest practices of self-realization and self-actualization, but yoga is now significantly practiced as a “performance art for health” as formulated for the stage by B. K. S. Iyengar and Dr. V. B. Gokhale.

Seizing the Whip

In 1936, Iyengar traveled with Krishnamacharya until July, going to Chitradurga, Dharwar, Hubli, Harihar and Belgaum—all in North Karnataka.

The last month and a half, his increased skills allowed him a respite.

Because he was a good instructor and an unsexually-threatening 17-year-old, he was assigned to teach the women of the families of the Dharwar-based Karnataka College staff at July’s end as the rest of K’s troupe decamped to Mysore.⁴¹

After six weeks’ teaching in Dharwar, “They all presented me with clothes, silver tumblers and paid my fare to Mysore. They also gave me a shawl for Guruji” (*ILW*: 17).

By filling K’s classes at Mysore and winning money and gifts for teaching—both at home and on the road—BKS was learning that he could fill the same role as his master.

He could become, like K, an historical anomaly for his time: a professional yoga teacher.

Imitation of K could lead to escape from K.

He could seize the whip.

He says of Dharwar, “This was the beginning of my independent teaching career” (*ibid.*: 15).

His return to Mysore was brief. In February of 1937, he gained new freedoms.

He started and finished a yoga tour alone.

He “gave a number of lecture-demonstrations” in several districts of Mysore state.

On his return, he left alone again for Koratagere, 190 kilometers north. There, he began work with a sick man named Shri Narasingarao. He gave yoga performances locally while treating Narasingarao for hydrocele (swelling in the scrotum).

This was his first recorded experience with yoga therapy (*ibid.*: 19). It would extend his skillset and save him repeatedly from penury in the years to come.

It was on his previous trip to Belgaum (250 kilometers to the northwest of Mysore) that K introduced Iyengar to the surgeon, Dr. V. B. Gokhale.

As we have seen, this introduction had huge ramifications for BKS' later life and career, but in the short term, it would assure his physical escape from Krishnamacharya.

After witnessing a demonstration by K's troupe, Gokhale asked King Wadiyar to send a yoga teacher to Pune's Deccan Gymkhana for a six-month contract to begin in September, 1937. It is possible he asked specifically for Iyengar (*ibid.*: 15-17).

The request was honored and Iyengar deposed.

Iyengar set up one teaching stop en route to Pune. He went to Hubli "with 13 rupees in hand" two months before the Gymkhana contract was to begin.

Foreshadowing the next nine years of his life, he suffered great privations there (*ibid.*: 20), but he scraped through, hitting Pune September 1.

He would never live with K again.

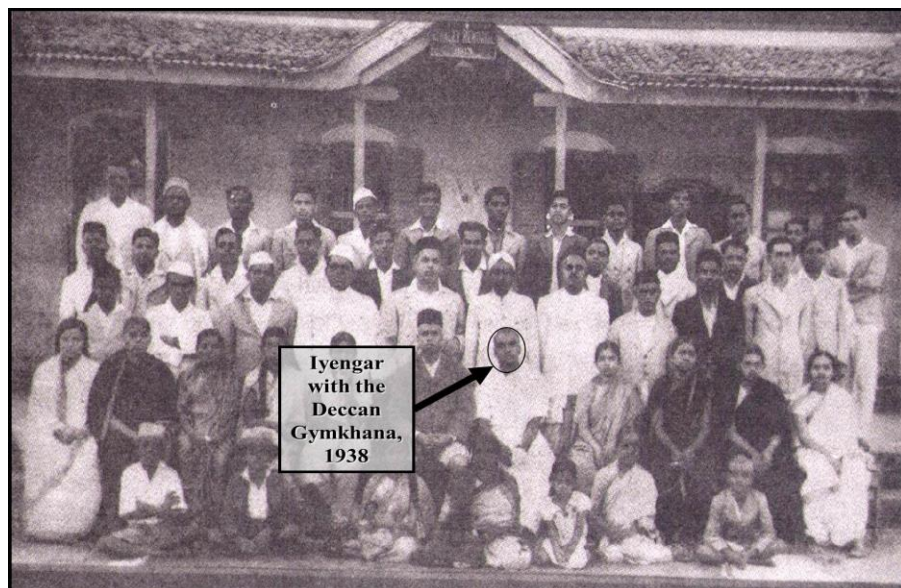
He was free.

He says of the moment,

People called me to teach yoga in schools of Pune for six months. This offer came as a God-given gift. My guru being very strict, I thought it would be a good opportunity to be a free-lancer rather than to be under the thumb of my guru. The moment my guru asked me to go and teach, I was very happy to move away from his clutches (*AY:6: 281*).

His residence with Sri Tirumalai Krishnamacharya over, Pune became his home for the rest of his life.

With his solo departures subtracted, Iyengar's time with K amounts to thirty-four-and-a-half months, though Iyengar commonly abbreviates it to "two years."⁴²



His Escape and Third Teacher

Iyengar made a bold move and landed well.

The Gymkhana was famed for hosting great wrestlers—including the world famous brothers, Gama the Great and Imam Baksh. Their presence provided insights and opportunities for the 18-year-old (born in December, 1918, he was not yet 19).

Local colleges were a part of the Deccan scheme to employ him, and all contributed to his wages, opening the Gymkhana classes to their own students.

His body was spindly and—though he'd won wide praise for his postural performances—his skills fell far short of his later mastery. His immaturity as a teacher stood out sharply in the new setting.

Seeking to expand his capacity to lead the educated student body, he focused even further on practice.

If his biographical claims are to be believed, BKS now continued the 4am wakeup-pattern K had instituted for garden care, but turned it to the care of his body.

Constant solitary experiment in asana practice would become his third great teacher.

In Pune, he initiated his decades-long habit of giving ten hours a day to asana work. Such devotion seemed to be the only way to face the practical and psychological demands of his plight (*YWP*: 13, 52). In a familiar refrain, he says he sometimes had only “a plate of rice once in two or three days. The rest of the time [he] had to fill [his] belly with tea or with tap water” (*ILW*: 30). His unceasing private practice, “caused agony to [his] body” and “sleep was almost impossible due to pain and failure causing restlessness in [his] body and mind.” Meanwhile, in public, he was, “without any qualification, but forced to call myself a yoga teacher” (*YWP*: 13).

But he learned.

Like others who have had a large historical impact, Iyengar bent the extreme difficulty of his circumstance toward extreme development of his skillset.

In these early days, besides the ardor of his physical effort, he struggled toward self-understanding.

His self-definition evolved within the 1930s fitness sub-culture of the Gymkhana and settings like it that he visited.

With the benefit of hindsight, he said,

“Vanity was in the pupils and in me. If I had to prove my superiority, naturally I had to express my vanity more . . . I could see that my own pupils were doing better than me, and that gave me a clue that if they could do well, I should do better” (*ibid.*: 28).

His self-identification as a yoga teacher was solidified in this period. It was his means to secure self-regard and social standing.

In later life, his livelihood would improve, but he still “very rarely” took a holiday. He claims to have taught “all three-hundred sixty-five days, including Saturdays and Sundays” (*AY:6*: 327-8) until his retirement in 1984.⁴³

Though the breadth of Krishnamacharya’s influence was painfully deep, and performance alchemized his method, nothing taught Iyengar more than his heroic capacity for practice.

The Likely Psychological Drivers

*The animal wrests the whip from its master and lashes itself in order to become master, not knowing that this is only a fantasy produced by a new knot in the master’s whip.*⁴⁴

Franz Kafka

Iyengar’s tutelage under K happened in a social crucible that was not Western; however, assessing it with Western psychological models tells us something about the direction modern yoga took as a result of Iyengar’s egoic choices in response to his upbringing.

A psychological analysis that attempts to anchor this idea follows.

Iyengar’s Disposition

Iyengar was bonded to Krishnamacharya by multiple layers of allegiance and archetypical relationship. K was his brother-in-law, his provider, his father-figure, a fellow caste member, a fellow man, a fellow yogi, a man of great reputation, a man of imposing physical and intellectual strength and—perhaps most importantly—his guru.

Any one of these bonds would be sufficient to create coded psychological responses or motivational neuroses, and each one was potentially exacerbated by the psychological violence of Iyengar’s youthful circumstances.

Iyengar’s focus on asana has a manic quality.

Surely, he brought great intelligence, fortitude, and goodwill to his profound focus on poses, but, on the surface, his work appear manic. His singular focus on asana blanketed over, satiated, or substituted for many other wholesome undertakings we might see in a more run-of-the-mill personal history. As he put it, “Asanas are my deity” (AY:6: 323). His actions point to this truth.

Long after he had gained professional standing, unchallengeable skills, financial security and opportunities for a more open life, he continued waking at 3:30 or 4 in the morning to practice—in his own words—“like a fanatic.” This approach only began to taper off in his 70s (AY:6: 324, YWP: 52).

Iyengar’s commitments made an unassailable icon out of “perfect” posework.

As De Michelis tells us, idealism and orthopraxis defined his method.

The narrowness of this view shaped his style of teaching and his convictions, and his pedagogic approach—colored by his experience with Krishnamacharya—was transferred to legions of followers.

Because of the profound power of Iyengar's personality and the authority he gained from his long, faithful and singular focus, he re-defined yoga as aligned posture for much of the Modern Yoga world.

He wished to have no life outside asana, but his relatives forced a wife upon him. Probably out of solicitude for his social standing, Krishnamacharya threatened to disown Iyengar if he did not marry. His family arranged for him to meet 16-year-old Srimati Anabel Ramamani on a train station in Bangalore in July of 1943, and they were wed right there and then (!). She joined him in his home in Pune in November (*ILW*: 35-8). This would lead to a family and a widened range of concerns (the first of his 7 children, Vanita, was born in '47). Nevertheless, he claims that his daily 10-hour yoga practices continued (*ILW*: 192, *AY*:5: 229).

Iyengar and the Guru-Disciple Relationship

The drama of the guru has inspired many public dramas since Indian teachers first came to the West in the 1890s.

The shortcomings of the guru-disciple relationship are broadly trumpeted, but its deeper positives and negatives remain unpublicized to the culture at large.

This much can be said: it appears rare that an escape from some or all of the shadowy aspects of a guru's personality can be had in a guru-disciple bond. The psychological shadow seems to remain present even in the most rarified and holy interactions.

The guru-disciple tie is sacred and mysterious, and—because of Iyengar's powerful worldwide impact—the consequences of Iyengar and Krishnamacharya's unique bond has had a ripple effect on the wider yoga world.

The side of this story that belongs to the light is well known: Iyengar learned from a man of profound understanding, stayed loyal to him, and—through a trail of sweat equity that inspires awe—shared his own understanding and that of his guru on the world stage, but there is a dark side to this story that completes the picture—that anchors it in a interpersonal struggle that is less fairy tale and more real.

This essay has already sketched out that struggle in some detail.

The next section of this essay explores how Iyengar's devotion to his guru did not inoculate him from commonplace neurotic responses to threatening circumstances. Those responses served to immeasurably advance Modern Postural Yoga and to impart a distinct character to it.

My Motivation and Bias

At this point in my essay, as I delve into the realm of psychology to explain Iyengar's teaching style and impact on the yoga scene, it is responsible to say something about my own psychology and the motivation behind this paper.

I studied Iyengar Yoga intensely for two years and less intensely for a long time after, and it continues to inform my point of view and my yoga practice.

At a very shallow level, I am a member of the Iyengar Yoga “club.”

I recognize an unconscious element in the pedagogy of the Iyengar classes that I have taken—mainly in San Francisco, but in India and elsewhere, too.

I feel like I am witness to something being passed on in Iyengar classes that stands out as starkly unconscious, unconfessed, but somehow bonding to the group. Along with this, there is a passion with which Iyengar’s followers praise him that seems to be compensatory—as if they were trying very hard to direct attention away from the man’s faults—away from his simple humanity.

In these settings, Iyengar the choicemaking man seems to become the source of a transcendent wisdom that is beyond investigation or question.

I do not hesitate to call all of this—the compensatory praise, the *di rigueur* depersonalization and aggression that seems unconscious in the teaching method—as “shadowy” in the Jungian sense.

To be even more confessional, I remember being confused and often hurt by the pedagogic style of Iyengar teaching, the brittle allegiance to his method, and the pedestaling of the teacher.

As is my wont as a scholar, I wanted clarity around this. I needed to articulate what I did not understand.

I needed to be free of Iyengar. I needed to comprehend where his worldview and the character of his community came from.

As I say, I turn at this point to Western psychology to throw light on the Iyengar phenomenon.

I am aware that a psychological approach of this type, especially when it is posthumous, has a reductive quality to it. An aggressive analysis of a person—especially an historical titan—can strip away much of the subtlety and conscious goodwill of someone’s character.

It can read as a slander.

Slander is not my intent.

However, I do see dysfunction in the Iyengar community. I have mostly stepped out of this community, but I believe scholarly criticism has a role to play in making it whole. Members of that community might respond that they are quite whole without my help, thank you very much. I respect their feelings, but I have my own, and retain some small communal voice as a part-member of that group.

I have my own passion to know where the things I see in the “Iyengar phenomenon” came from.

This essay searches in Iyengar’s biography, psychology and hermeneutics to understand the culture that flowed (and still flows) from Iyengar’s long, unbroken efforts in yoga.

I hope that it doesn’t read as a hatchet job.

Iyengar as Victim, Iyengar as Guru

*Young Children are at the mercy of their parents' power. Aware only of the sharp power differential, they do whatever they imagine will draw the parents' love, protection, and regard. Children do not have a conscious relationship to their parents' power until much later in life—if they ever achieve it. Similarly, students new to the path are unaware of the unconscious power dynamics at play in the student-teacher relationship, and enact a range of behaviors they imagine will garner the teacher's love. All such behaviors, of course, are cleverly cloaked in the clothing of spiritual dharma.*⁴⁵

Mariana Caplan, *The Guru Question*

“Introjecting the Aggressor” is seizing the whip of ones master. It is the psychological condition that mirrors the Franz Kafka quote that provides a part-title for this essay.

First described by Anna Freud, it is familiar to many of us in examples of abusers who abuse others, or members of an underclass who adopt the norms and prejudices of the upper classes who have victimized them.

I am aware that the reader may be made uneasy by the starkness of terms like “abuser” and “victim” but I believe we see these roles in the Iyengar story.

I will speak of Introjecting the Aggressor from Michael Kahn's work in the pages that follow, but first, I'll explore a preamble to it which also seems to apply in Iyengar's case—and the language is very stark in this conversation, too.

This collection of behaviors falls under the umbrella of the “Stockholm Syndrome.”

Articulated by Frank Ochberg in the early 1970s, Stockholm Syndrome tries to explain why hostages develop positive attachments to their captors. (Journalists still highlight the syndrome when detainees say something praiseworthy of their imprisoners in the popular press.)

The confessedly extreme analyses of Stockholm Syndrome prepare us to understand how Iyengar's style of “introjection” played out in the extensive ways that it did.

Ochberg provides a list of the ways a traumatic episode can impact a victim. It evokes Iyengar biographical details and his resultant psychology:

[The victim feels] shame: deep embarrassment, often characterized by humiliation or mortification.

[The victim is left Feeling] belittled, dehumanized, lowered in dominance, powerless, as a direct result of the trauma.

[He has] Paradoxical Gratitude [and] positive feelings toward the victimizer [including] . . . compassion . . . [and] attachment. The feelings are usually experienced as ironic but profound gratitude for the gift of life from one who has demonstrated the will to kill.

[About himself , he has the feeling of] defilement: feeling dirty . . . disgusting, tainted, “like spoiled goods.”

[He experiences] socioeconomic Status Downward Drift: reduction of opportunity for life-style.⁴⁶

Aspects of Stockholm Syndrome specifically include,

The hostage endures isolation from other people and has only the captor's perspective available. Perpetrators routinely keep information about the outside world's response to their actions from captives to keep them totally dependent.

The captive sees the perpetrator as showing some degree of kindness. Kindness serves as the cornerstone of Stockholm syndrome; the condition will not develop unless the captor exhibits it in some form toward the hostage.⁴⁷

Iyengar dehumanizes himself and describes his powerlessness in relationship to K again and again. He says of their time together, "I was an orphan and was treated like a slave" (AY:6: 179), "I was a non-entity, but *Guruji made me a hero*" [italics mine] (AY:1: 59).

Indeed, in his striving for perfection, he recreated himself as a hero of yoga.

As we have seen, many things drove Iyengar toward his mind-boggling achievements. But I believe his drive was significantly colored by psychological elements that remained unexamined and unresolved and that troubled his work. These are a type-specific responses to his circumstances like those described here.

In line with the psychological bonding mechanisms described by Ochberg, BKS recounts receiving occasional unexpected kindnesses from K, telling his audience that this bonded him to his guru.⁴⁸

Above, we noted K's compliment when Iyengar performed well for King Wadiyar. Iyengar says of that occasion,

My Guruji was impressed and asked me, 'How did I manage?' He said, 'I thought you would not do it at all . . . but you did it.' *This first demonstration of mine tied me to yoga and to Guruji* [italics mine] (AY:1: 55).

His passionate gratitude toward K is well-documented (AY:1: 51-61).⁴⁹

Yet, there is always a profound paradox in these thankful statements. He praises K even as while describing reprehensible acts like those recounted above.

The ambiguity in Iyengar's emotions is palpable.

The violence of Krishnamacharya, Iyengar's dependence on him, his entrapment even when he fled to kill himself, his profound gratitude to K, his low status in his company, and his cultural isolation are consistent with Ochberg's descriptors.

The Dicey Subject of How Introjecting of the Aggressor Works

Michael Kahn's "Introjection of the Aggressor" concept is similar to Ochberg's Stockholm Syndrome. Both Kahn and Ochberg built on Anna Freud's work.⁵⁰

Kahn explains the condition this way:

. . . It is very anxiety provoking to be confronted with someone more powerful than you who has aggressive intentions toward you or who you fear may have such intentions. It may also be anxiety provoking to have aggressive intentions toward that powerful person, because of fear of retaliation. Identification with the aggressor is a defense designed to protect against anxiety stemming from conflict with a powerful person or from being at the mercy of such a person.

. . . Identification with the aggressor plays a major role in the resolution of . . . the adolescent's identity and in the formation of the superego.

Introjection implies unconsciously assuming that a given attribute or collection of attributes of the other person reside in me.

Identification of the aggressor enables me to increase my perceived power by introjecting some aspect of the dangerous person. I may introject one or more of his or her personal characteristic: I may introject aggressiveness . . . In the classical Oedipal resolution I become like my same-sex parent . . . It is probably that I become like that parent in a lot of other ways as well. I construct an important part of my identity through this introjection.

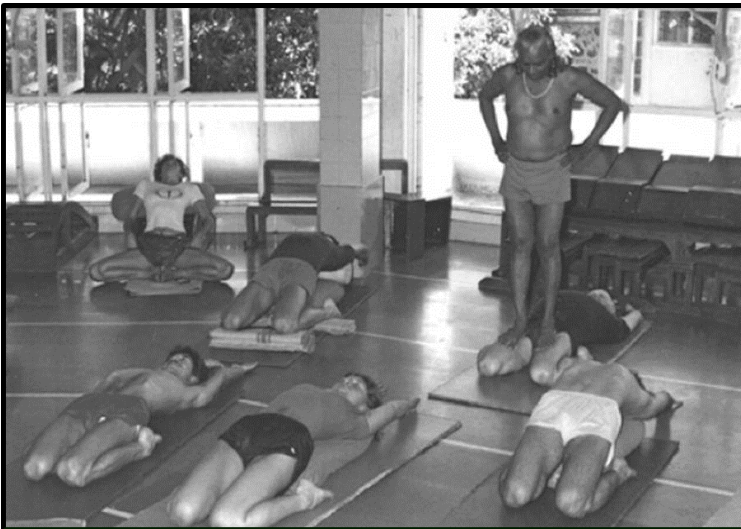
In this defense I may also use projection. I project my aggressive intentions onto the other person to protect myself against superego anxiety . . . Thus I'm not aware of feeling aggressive toward my father; I'm only aware of fearing him. Because I have introjected his power, the fear is manageable. Children who play at being omnipotent super-heroes are employing an everyday, adaptive version of this defense. They are, of course, identifying with a fearfully powerful person, often a parent.⁵¹

It isn't uncommon for a kind of fetishization to accompany Introjecting the Aggressor conditions, as when a victim of a shooting becomes manic about the structure, use and history of guns, or when a person who has struggled out of poverty must have the

Cadillac (and only the Cadillac!) that his upscale neighbor drives.

There is no doubt that Iyengar imitated his master. He was "a man of immeasurable knowledge and unpredictable moods" like K, who displayed an "intoxication" with his achievements and knowledge.

It is rare that any person on God's good earth fails to brag, but Iyengar's words impart the specific taste of his self-



Iyengar Teaching

concept. He has said, “Believe me, no one can point their finger at me about my moral, mental physical or spiritual character, because there is no blemish or flaw in those qualities” (AY:4: 59).

This heroic attitude is also present in his prideful braggadocio and body language on the various prosceniums where we see live-action shots of his performances.⁵²

Iyengar’s Krishnamacharya-esque teaching style of intimidation, shouting at, and striking students is well-cataloged.

In my many interviews with his students, aggressive patterns of behavior were repeatedly described.

Like his master, Iyengar has been called “violent, “harsh,” and “aggressive” (*ILW* 260, 262); indeed, longtime students have joked that his initials (BKS) mean “Beat, Kick, Slap”⁵³ and Iyengar has said, “Give a hint, nothing happens, give a hit, see what happens!” (*ILW*: 525). Outside the classroom, he has shown the habit of demanding poses at a moment’s notice like his master did (*FTIM*, 30).

One of his most famous disciples, who agreed to speak to me outside attribution because she, “still has to work in the [yoga] field,” described her experience thus:

The potential for violence was there in the background. There was always a threat. I didn’t want to be afraid in my yoga class.

It was an atmosphere of aggression. He could be talking and turn around and light into somebody, or kick somebody in the calf.

[After the aggression] he would say, “It’s because I love you.”

I couldn’t fit in that psychodynamic anymore. He would say, “I’m not really angry. I love you.”

It was a strange mix of threat and anger and it was not clean psychodynamically.

She offered the perception that, “he had a lot of unresolved issues and anger and needed love. He didn’t get the maternal love he needed to be OK in the world.”

San Francisco Iyengar teacher, Barbara Weichmann, agreed to speak to me on the record if I would also mention her, “respect and appreciation for the contributions that the Iyengars have made to the field of yoga.”

She said,

I came to study . . . knowing that BKS and Geeta (his daughter) were demanding and harsh teachers, coming from a tradition . . . that was much different from . . . the West. Geeta was primarily teaching . . . but BKS Iyengar would “storm” through unannounced . . . and woebetide you if you were doing any “warm ups” that he didn’t approve of.

He unjustly gave a hard time to a woman who was from Germany who didn’t understand his British/Indian accent. She froze up when he started up on her. He said . . . “why can’t you understand English, it’s your language!!!” She left the intensive after the second week.

I also found the way he would slap people difficult . . . even though I knew from first-hand experience that the slaps were “stage slaps,” never really hurting, but just bringing energy to the area he wanted to call attention to. The angry yelling as he

slapped made it hard to take the slaps in a good spirit. He was also very hard on my teacher, Ramanand Patel. I found it particularly distressful that he would hit Ramanand in the head . . . a slap on the thigh is one thing, hitting someone in the head is another!

There were assistants that as far as I could tell just watched and sometimes laughed at the students. Only twice in the four-week intensive did an assistant actually "help" me, and neither time was the help done with compassion or care.

Neither Geeta nor BKS appeared to enjoy teaching, though they were extremely knowledgeable and clear.

I never had the desire to return . . .

BKS has called himself “harsh,” “furious,” and “intense” (AY:4: 59).

When we look at Iyengar’s teaching disposition and the way his behavior recreated for his students the same feelings he had with Krishnamacharya, there is a clear Aggressor Introjection pattern.

Perhaps the West’s passion for psychoanalysis never touched BKS and, of course, I am not his counselor. But I cannot help wondering whether the Iyengar tradition and—by extension—the larger modern yoga project would not have been even more advanced by Iyengar’s genius if he had resolved the conditioning that had devolved upon him by life with his guru.

Iyengar’s Gift

Iyengar received a skeletal instruction in asana by his guru. From this and his ardor, he developed profound postural mastery. Beginning in the late 1930s, he found an audience in physical culture and therapeutic contexts for these skills. He has a relationship to the pre-1940 yoga teachers Singleton describes through his similar reliance on asana, his tie to Krishnamacharya, and his brief residence in Mysore. The work of his predecessors and contemporaries contributed to an understanding of a pose-focused form of Hatha Yoga in the wider climate he learned and worked in, making the people he came into contact with receptive to his work.

That said, the distillation and radical development of his postural intelligence—the key to Modern Postural Yoga’s popularity as it flowed from Iyengar—arises almost exclusively from his wholly personal experiments and, partly because of that, retains prominent elements of his unique psychology.

His understanding of the minutia of posturework was more systematic, complex and empirical than anything taught by the Hatha Yoga Renaissance figures that preceded him.

In addition to his conscious drivers of livelihood, health, aesthetics and—in his later career—self-realization, it must be acknowledged that trauma partly impelled Iyengar to attain his bodily understanding.

It spurred Iyengar’s to focus daily on the “somatic laboratory” of his own body for eight productive decades.

In the larger picture, his fetishistic attachment to asana in response to his trauma helped posture take pride of place in the modern yoga project.

His full-time work as a teacher, performer and disciplinarian inspired a worldwide demographic to take up yoga, and those who specifically followed Iyengar Yoga learned a pedagogical style that elevated the status of asana in isolation.⁵⁴

This has touched the yoga world in ways that are both problematic and salutary.

With his lifestyle established, and his personality identified with yoga and asana at many levels of awareness, Iyengar's final personal revolution brought him to the well of yoga's first philosophies.

As he neared 50, he developed an interpretive matrix that took Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* as its near-exclusive hermeneutic support. This expanded his teaching's influence and coherency and provided a framework for his final formulation of transcendent understanding.

Iyengar's Final Metaphysic: A Fourth Teacher

As Singleton shows in his work on yoga and New Thought, Hatha Yoga in the 20th century unburdened itself of old philosophies and methodologies and adopted metaphysics and movement patterns that were distinctly American.⁵⁵

In a similar way, Iyengar would graft a modern metaphysics onto his work, but it was not consciously scripted by New Thought or even New Age thought—as De Michelis suggests—but from the Indian traditions he was born to—that is, if we listen to how Iyengar tells it.

Iyengar baldly adopted the philosophy and soteriology of the 2000-year-old *Yoga Sutras* for his neo-Hatha Yoga work beginning in the late 1960s.

The *Yoga Sutras* seemed to explain what he was learning in the lonely laboratory of his body. After Krishnamacharya, practice and the stage, this text became his main guide.

Patanjali was a teacher and—like Gokhale, Yehudi Menuhin, Krishnamurti and other famed associates—a support. His association with the book legitimized his role as the standard-bearer of a hoary tradition, both in his own eyes and that of his students.

Patanjali's Doppelganger

“Iyengar sees everything . . . He's like Patanjali, the founder of yoga. Patanjali passed down his teachings to that student alone. Iyengar is his heir . . . He has eyes all over his body, to the tips of his toes”

A statement by one of Iyengar's Indian pupils⁵⁶

Iyengar practiced yoga as a health therapy and performance art for two decades before he began composing *Light on Yoga* in 1960 (*ILW*: 428). At that point, he took up bookreading again, studying yoga philosophy for the first time. As he put it,

This was the period when I had to teach intellectual people as well as the philosophers. This forced me to read *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali and conversing with intellectuals and philosophers helped me in forming the *Light on Yoga* book. All these things helped me to develop my intelligence to reach a sense of maturity in 1968 (AY:6: 309).

His “mercenary” period of yoga teaching ended after he dreamed of a Patanjali-like figure (FTIM: 99) and, though the early *Light on Yoga* showed greater affection for the *Bhagavad Gita* than the *Sutras*, his post-LOY work is dominated by discussions of Patanjali.⁵⁷

He published a translation and commentary on the *Sutras* in 1993 and a second, general *Yoga Sutras* commentary in 2008.⁵⁸ His final book was a thoroughgoing analysis of the *Sutras* in light of the larger Hindu tradition⁵⁹ and all his post-1968 books thickly quote the treatise.

Eight volumes of his informal writings, interviews and lectures bear the name, *Astadala Yogamala*—an echo of Patanjali’s approach. (Patanjalian yoga is sometimes called *astadala*, “eight-pedaled,” similar to its more common label, *ashtanga*, “eight-limbed.”)

Hundreds of those pages are taken up with the topic of the *Yoga Sutras* and bear titles such as, “Patanjali and his Yoga System,” “On Patanjali and Yoga,” and “On Astanga Yoga” (AY:1: 177-265 & AY:7 : 57-208, respectively).*

Iyengar has said,

It is not ‘Iyengar Yoga.’ It is Patanjala yoga gifted to us by Patanjali (AY:6: 142).

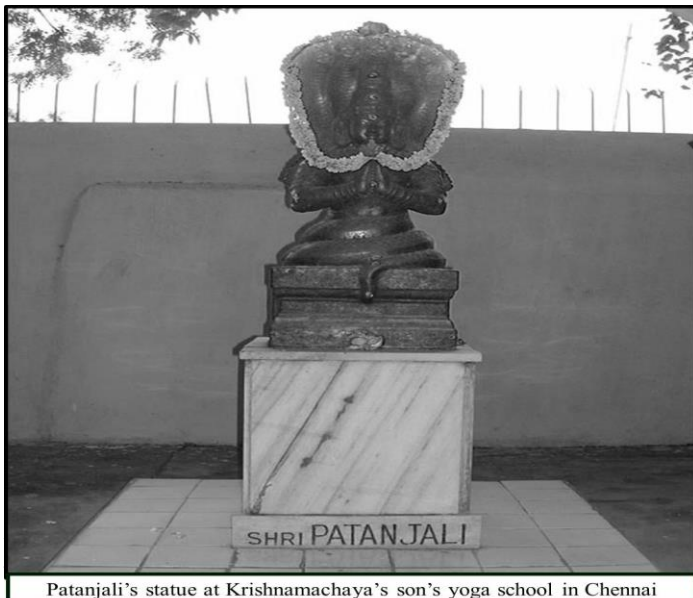
I do not see the difference between Hatha Yoga and Raja Yoga† (*ibid.*: 123).

Iyengar Yoga is different because it is Patanjali Yoga (YWP: 68).

In answer to a question about whether his yoga is “basically the yoga of Patanjali,” he answered:

“Well, I say 100% it is based on Patanjali” (AY:6: 298).

Iyengar lacked knowledge of Patanjali during the first 30 years of his practice. Since 1968, his neo-Hatha Yoga (HMY: 236)



Patanjali’s statue at Krishnamachaya’s son’s yoga school in Chennai

described in the *Sutras*. For an extended David Gordon, 2014, *The Yoga Sutra of* 27 – 135. For its older designations see incarnations of the King of all Yogas,”

has adopted the categories and language of the *Yoga Sutras* to articulate its method.

Though they do not take up the specific case of Iyengar, both De Michelis (*HMY*: 149-80) and Singleton⁶⁰ offer explanations as to how the *Sutra* was integrated into modern yoga culture generally.

The way Iyengar philosophically re-constructed his practice after 1968 is a classic case of “re-inscribing Patanjali into established yoga practices” as described by Singleton,

[The *Yoga Sutra*] is popularly regarded in many modern and transnational milieus as the ur-text of yoga and is used to sanction and legitimize contemporary practice. Often taken as the quintessential expression of “Classical Yoga,” the *YS* has come to symbolize, among other things, the ancient authenticity of modern aspirations and the fidelity of contemporary practices to the “yoga tradition,” in spite of the often-radical divergences between text and praxis.⁶¹

Such “divergences” are plain in Iyengar’s case, and he clearly does what Singleton describes; however, I would not suggest—as Singleton’s tone does—that a strategy like the one BKS adopted was insincere. Iyengar was frankly passionate about Patanjali. His study of the *Sutras* provided legitimate insights into his own hatha yogic experience.

The third limb of Patanjali’s system is asana. Around 1963, BKS began teaching Patanjali’s fourth limb, pranayama (*AY:I*: 343). Thirty years later, he penned a book on breath practice.* Like his contemporary and fellow-student of Krishnamacharya, K. P. Jois, Iyengar’s approach to yoga was through physical culture, so his interpretation of Ashtanga Yoga—like Jois’s—focusses near-exclusively on Patanjali’s physical elements (asana & pranayama). Both avoid the higher-impact physical practices found in the Hatha Yoga systems of India’s Middle Ages—which are the more obvious precedent to their respective styles.

Many teachers and schools[†] have undertaken to teach some or all of the physical approaches found in early Hatha Yoga. Even if some of us have read this list, in the contemporary passion for asana we easily forget Hatha’s original breadth. It is inconceivable that Iyengar was unaware⁶² of *amaroli*, *anusandhana nada*, *bindu*, *dristi*, *gupta*, *manonmani*, *mitahara*, *mudra*, *sahajoli*, *shatkarmas*, *shambhavi*, *trataka*, and *vajroli*[‡] but he gave them no emphasis.

* *Pranayama*, is breath practice, and Iyengar’s book on it is titled, *Light on Pranayama*, 2008 (1993), New Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers.

† Parayoga, Shadow Yoga, and the Sivananda and Bihar Yoga schools teach all or some of these techniques.

‡ This list is culled mostly from the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*. In short, *amaroli* is drinking urine, *anusandhana nada* is using sound to bring concentration to the subtle vibrations beyond sound as we know it, *bindu* is fixing the attention in some spot on the body, *dristi* is fixing the gaze outside the body, *gupta* (secrecy) means not speaking about the practices to the uninitiated, *manonmani* is clearing the mind of thought, *mitahara* is proper diet, *mudras* are architectures for the tongue, hand, eye and limb that move and/or stabilize life force (prana); *shatkarmas* are the six internal cleansing practices, *sahajoli* is drawing liquid up through the vagina, *shambhavi* is fixing the eyes at the eyebrow center, *trataka* is gazing at a flame or point till tears come, and *vajroli* is sucking liquids up through the penis. Obviously, the list includes practices that would not be easily transmitted to modern—and especially Western—audiences.

In his *Light on Pranayama*, Iyengar states, “The stages of Yoga are eight” and then lists Patanjali’s eight-fold path.⁶³ This ignores the codifications of the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, for example, and misleadingly suggests that his own yoga uses Patanjali’s full system. That said, Iyengar does provide extensive explanations as to how other limbs are expressed through limbs 3 and 4 (asana and pranayama) and these explanations do have their own coherency. As stated above, Baier⁶⁴ explains these explanations with sympathy and in great detail.

It has been said that his orthodox Vishnu-worshipping (*Srivaishnavite*) roots leads him to eschew the more carnal, Shiva-associated (*Saivite*) practices of the Hatha matrix.

The practices of the *Sutra* are “cleaner” than the *Pradipika*’s and more consistent with Iyengar’s upbringing.

Astadala Yogamala discusses Patanjali’s more subtle limbs of practice, i.e. *dharana*, *dhyana* and *Samadhi** (*AY: &: 179-208*, *AY: 5: 133, 139*, *AY: 1: 166, 204-206*, etc.) but BKS did not teach these limbs outside of asana.

His neo-Hatha Yoga, to the degree that it is Patanjalian, leans preternaturally on the physical approaches of the *Sutra*.

Like others, BKS has contributed greatly to asana and pranayama becoming Modern Postural Yoga’s near-exclusive set of practices and helped make Patanjali the near-exclusive member of MPY’s brain trust.

Conclusion

Iyengar’s long years spent on the nail-bed of posework transformed his master’s fierce instruction and iconic personality into an existential formula, a scheme for inventing an adult self and way to gain fame as the teacher of an obscure craft.

Traditional Hatha Yoga’s emphasis on raising Kundalini was never his subject. Through a concerted effort to elaborate a slim catalog of teachings about asana he aimed a titanic effort in self-education toward improving students’ well-being and health. This effort was adumbrated by a late-career embrace of the *Yoga Sutras* and a rejection of Hatha Yoga’s pre-modern path.

B. K. S. Iyengar carried forward psychological elements of his guru’s character and teaching style that have imparted some darker tones to modernity’s larger yoga project. At the same time, he instilled yoga with imperatives of performance that made the practice more extroverted than it had ever been before.

Armed with a unique understanding of posework and a dramatic teaching style, Iyengar recapitulated the life-mission given to his guru—he married, raised a family, and lived only by yoga. He built on the knowledge he received from Krishnamacharya to create a physical and proprioceptive yoga⁶⁵ that found legitimacy in the *Yoga Sutra* and changed the world’s understanding of what yoga could be

* Defined roughly, *dharana*, *dhyana* and *Samadhi* are—in Patanjali’s view—concentration, meditation, and merging with the object of concentration.

Like the any advanced work of fine art or fresh technology, yoga scholarship is the product of many late-night hours.

As Eric's reader, please support his non-institutional study into the tradition.

Please join his community of supporters at with a generous donation at:

<http://shop.prasanayoga.com/shop/support-erics-scholarship/>

Eric may be reached at prasanayoga.com

Abbreviated Sources:

- HMY** De Michelis, Elizabeth, 2004, *The History of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Western Esotericism*, London: Continuum.
- TYTY** Desikachar, Kausthub, *The Yoga of the Yogi: The Legacy of T. Krishnamacharya*, Chennai: Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram.
- LTK** Desikachar, T.K.V. & R. H. Cravens, 1998, *Health, Healing and Beyond: Yoga and the Living Tradition of Krishnamacharya*, New York: Aperture.
- FTIM** Kadetsky, Elizabeth, 2004, *First There is a Mountain: A Yoga Romance*, Boston: Little, Brown.
- YWP** Iyengar, B. K. S., 2009, *Yoga Wisdom and Practice*, New York: D. K. Publishing.
- LOL** Iyengar, B. K. S. & John Evans & Douglas Abrams, 2005, *Light on Life: The Journey to Wholeness, Inner Peace, and Ultimate Freedom*, U.S.A.: Rodale.
- AY:1, 5, 6 & 7** Iyengar, B. K. S., 2000-08, *Astadala Yogamala (Collected Works)*, vols. 1, 5, 6, 7: *Articles, Lectures, Messages*, New Delhi: Allied Publishers Limited.
- ILW** Iyengar, B. K. S., & Manuso Manos, ed., 2001 (1991), *Iyengar: His Life and Work*, New Delhi: CBS Publishers and Distributors.
- LOY** Iyengar, B. K. S., 1966, *Light on Yoga*. New York: Schocken Books
- YB** Singleton, Mark, 2010, *Yoga Body: The Origins of Modern Posture Practice*: Oxford: Oxford University Press.

ENDNOTES

¹ **LOL**: 224

² **LOL**: 221.

³ **ILW**: 522.

⁴ **Cushman, Anne & Jerry Jones**, 1999, *From Here to Nirvana*, New York: Rider and Co., 221

⁵ **Baier, Karl**, 2011, “Iyengar and the Yoga Tradition,” *BKS Iyengar Yoga Teachers’ Association News Magazine*, Glossop, Derbyshire, Winter 1995, 12-32.

⁶ **Lea, Jennifer**, 2009, “Liberation or Limitation? Understanding Iyengar Yoga as a Practice of the Self,” *Body and Society* 15(3): 71-92.

⁷ **Alter, Joseph S.**, 2004, *Yoga in Modern India: The Body between Science and Philosophy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 249 n. 20.

⁸ Though the term “Hatha Yoga Renaissance” seems to be the exclusive creation of Sri Yogendra in the given period, it accurately describes the flowering of yoga at the time and I will make use of it. See **YB**: 120 & **HMY**: xvii.

⁹ *Current Biography*, 1940, v. 5, issue 1, 833.

¹⁰ **Doniger, Wendy**, 2009, *The Hindus: An Alternative History*, New York: Penguin Press, 611-12.

¹¹ **Medin, R. Alexander & Deirdre Summerbell**, ed., 2004, “3 Gurus, 48 Questions: Matching Interviews with Sri T. K. V. Desikachar, Sri B. K. S. Iyengar & Sri K. Pattabhi Jois,” Namarupa, Fall, 7

¹² Personal communication, 3/12/13.

¹³ **Krishnamacharya, Tirumalai**, 2011 (1934), *Yoga-Makaranda: The Nectar of Yoga*, Chennai: Media Garuda, *passim*.

¹⁴ Though the picture is complex, historically, yoga had more often been practiced by unorthodox sects, non-caste yogis and Saivites—worshippers of Shiva.

¹⁵ It may be meaningful in this context to note that K echoes the oft-heard legendary claim that, “In older times, all were adept in *Yogic* practices.” **Krishnamacharya, Tirumalai**, 2011 (1934), 58.

¹⁶ For a fuller discussion of the dates and routes of Krishnamacharya’s peregrination to see Brahmachari, please see **David Gordon White**, 2014, *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali: A Biography*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 223-247.

¹⁷ One thinks of the actions of the 123 year-old Sri Madhavadasaji, the Guru of Kavalayananda and Yogendra, who promoted their work in Hatha; of Sivananda and his diaspora of teachers (e.g. Devananda, Satchitananda, Satyananda & Swami Radha); and Sri Yuktswar’s teaching of Hatha to the famous brothers Lal Ghosh (Paramahansa Yogananda) and his brother, the prominent physical culturalist, Bishnu Ghosh.

¹⁸ His asana skills are evident in the many images of him in his 40s and 50s and into his 90s. See **Mala Srivastan**, 1994, *Krishnamacharya, The Punacharya*, Chennai: Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram, 42-3; **LTK**: 82-4, 86, **Desikachar, T. K. V.**, 1995, *The Heart of Yoga: Developing a Personal Practice*, Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International, 3-4, 8, 16, 24, 44, 52, 76-8, 86, 92, 96, 106, 120, 124, 135; & **AY:6**: 99-101. These images were taken for the second edition of K’s *Yoganasalgalu* in 1981, when he was 93 years old. Be that as it may, Krishnamacharya may have had an interruption in practice in the 1930s when K was in his 40s, for he advised BKS to leave off asana because of age on two occasions (**AY:I**: 48, **AY:6**: 189, 311) and Iyengar recalls that in 1935, in regards to asana, “Guruji had lost the touch at that time” (**AY:I**: 55).

¹⁹ Because the film was shot in Mysore where she lived, K’s wife, Namagiramma is probably the “sister” that Iyengar says joined him in his well-known 1938 film (**AY:6**: 108), though there are two different women in the film. It is my guess that the other woman is his other sister, Jaya, since she too studied with Krishnamacharya at one point.

²⁰ Please see note 27.

²¹ See **Sjoman, Norman**, 1994, *The Yoga of the Mysore Palace*, Delhi: Abhinav/Shakti Malik, *passim*.

²² From personal communication with Chase Bossart, a 17-year disciple of T. K. V. Desikachar. He visited Iyengar in Pune with his master where Iyengar told this story.

²³ This is a common refrain for Iyengar, but it is contradicted at one point by Pattabhi Jois. Perhaps Krishnamacharya taught Jois in a different manner, or Jois was simply making a point. See **TYTY**: 195.

²⁴ **LTK**: 140

²⁵ **Stern, Eddie**, nd., *Guruji*, unpublished essay, 2.

²⁶ The date Iyengar gives for the YMCA conference in most of his accounts is December, 1935, however in one account it is September (**ILW**: 11). This is one of the few sticklers in Iyengar's yoga memories, for it is a key event, and he seems to mis-remember it. According to Singleton's more reliable sources (**YB**: 178) the celebration occurred in January, 1937.

²⁷ This is another rare point Iyengar has consistently contradicted. His more usual statement is "He only taught me a few asanas." **Medin & Summerbell**, 9.

²⁸ Acroyoga's general architecture uses two people, one of whom is suspended on the feet of a second lying on their back with legs vertical. Krishnamacharya demonstrates this with his daughters in the well-known 1938 film of him and Iyengar (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9-EcePRXOP4&feature=fvsr>, 1.18.2011)

²⁹ In a later quote, he claims only 10,000 demonstrations. **Medin & Summerbell**, 12.

³⁰ However, he would not formerly articulate his alignment theories until 1975. Indeed, it was that year that he realized what he had been doing instinctively for many decades. See **ILW**: 197.

³¹ **Iyengar, B. K. S.**, 1985, *The Art of Yoga*, New Delhi: HarperCollins Publishers, India, 14.

³² For excellent discussions of Indian temple dance theory, please see **Marglin, Apffel**, 1985, *Wives of the God-King: The Rituals of the Devadasis of Puri*, Oxford University Press; and **Srivastava, Ranjana** 2004, *Tantra Mantra Yantra in Dance*, Delhi: DK Print World Pvt. Ltd., *passim*.

³³ Please see the work of Sanskritist, **Christopher Tompkins**. The seminar in which he shared this information is no longer listed on his website, but he will continue to teach this material in other settings. <http://shaiyayoga.com/Offerings.html>

³⁴ **Mohan, A. G.**, 2010, *Krishnamacharya: His Life and Teachings*, Boulder: Shambhala, 46-7.

³⁵ That said, it seems Krishnamacharya may have been gradually convinced of Iyengar's postural wisdom. BKS reports, "I am sure that though he let me down without writing a forward [for *Light on Yoga*], I had seen my book, which I presented to him after its publication, in his hand, many a time" (**AY:I**: 59).

³⁶ For biographical details on Bernard, please see, **Hackett, Paul G.**, 2012, *Theos Bernard, the White Lama: Tibet, Yoga, and American Religious Life*, New York: Columbia University Press, and **Douglas Veenhof**, 2011, *White Lama: The Life of Tantric Yogi Theos Bernard, Tibet's Lost Emissary to the New World*, New York: Harmony.

³⁷ For biographical details on Vishnu Devananda, please see, **Krishna, Gopala**, 1995, *The Yogi: Portraits of Swami Vishnu-Devananda*, St. Paul, MN: Yes International Publishers.

³⁸ The teachers most important here include Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, of Transcendental Meditation fame (arrived in '58, but his notoriety would be established through the Beatles in 1967); Amrit Desai, founder of Kripalu Yoga (arrived in '60, but would not establish a yoga center until 1966); Swami Bhaktivedanta Prabhupadha, founder of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness (arrived 1965); Swami Satchidananda, founder of Integral Yoga and Yogaville (arrived 1966); Swami Rama founder of the Himalayan Institute (arrived 1968); Yogi Bhajan, founder of Kundalini Yoga (arrived 1968); and Bikram Choudhury, founder of Bikram Yoga (arrived 1970). Iyengar had gone to Europe in 1954 and regular visits followed. He first traveled to America in 1956, but did not return until 1973. He began perennial returns then.

³⁹ Author's own fieldwork.

⁴⁰ **Iyengar**, 1985, 10, 26.

⁴¹ Krishnamacharya taught his daughters yoga. They perform in the 1938 film. There is also a shot of him in yoga posture with both of them in **TYTY**: 94. It is well-known that he taught Indra Devi in the 30s. We have already mentioned his teaching of Iyengar's sister, Jayalakshmi.

⁴² **Medin & Summerbell**, 9, **AY:I**: 51.

⁴³ **Avery, Laura**, 2005, *Newsmakers: The People Behind Today's Headlines*, 201.

⁴⁴ **Kafka, Franz**, 1954, *Dearest Father: Stories and Other Writings*, New York: Schocken Books, 37.

⁴⁵ **Kaplan, Mariana**, 2011, *The Guru Question*, Boulder, CO: Sounds True, 100.

⁴⁶ **Ochberg, Frank**, 1988, *Post-traumatic Therapy and Victims of Violence*, Brunner Mazel, 8-9.

⁴⁷ **De Fabrique, Nathalie**, et. al., 2007, "Understanding Stockholm Syndrome," in *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, 76(7), 10-15 quoted in http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stockholm_syndrome, accessed 1 March, 2011.

⁴⁸ The kindnesses that BKS notes receiving from his master are few, and they are spread out over the years. See **AY:I**: 59, **AY:6**: 90 & **ILW**: 448.

⁴⁹ In a contrary view, Kadetsky tells us that Krishnamacharya went to his death thinking of BKS as a *guru drohi*—a guru betrayer (**FTIM**: 152).

-
- ⁵⁰ **Ochberg, Frank**, “The Ties that bind the Captive to Captor,” *Los Angeles Times*, 8 April, 2005.
- ⁵¹ **Kahn, Michael**, 2002, *Basic Freud: Psychoanalytic Thought for the Twenty-First Century*, New York: Basic Books, 131-3.
- ⁵² Some examples of such events can be seen in these videos:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fcPjvp4La8A>,
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JrveBAnKNyE&feature=related>, .
- ⁵³ Author’s own field work. See also **ILW**: 259 where Iyengar is described as “thumping” students with his hands and feet.
- ⁵⁴ **Baier** does an excellent job of orienting the reader toward Iyengar’s understanding of how all of Patanjali’s eight limbs are expressed through asana.
- ⁵⁵ **Singleton, Mark**, 2007, “Suggestive Therapeutics: New Thought’s Relationship to Modern Yoga,” *Asian Medicine* 3, 64-84.
- ⁵⁶ *FTIM*: 94-5.
- ⁵⁷ Although **Michelis** (p. 209) has suggested the *Gita* is primary, she is incorrect.
- ⁵⁸ **Iyengar’s** *Sutra* translation is titled, *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, 2008 (1993), NOIDA: Uttar Pradesh: HarperCollinsPublishers (sic), and his second, general commentary is, *Light on Astanga Yoga*, 2008, New Delhi, Alchemy Publishers.
- ⁵⁹ **Iyengar, B.K.S.** 2012, *Core of the Yoga Sutras: The Definitive Guide to the Philosophy of Yoga*, New York: Harper Thorsons.
- ⁶⁰ **Singleton, Mark**, 2008, The Classical Reveries of Modern Yoga: Patanjali and Constructive Orientalism,” in **Mark Singleton and Jean Byrne**, *Yoga in the Modern World: Contemporary Perspectives*, London: Routledge.
- ⁶¹ There is reason to dispute **Singleton’s** thesis (2008) that the *Sutra’s* pre-modern historical position was weak. The *Yoga Sutra* appears to have always been a conversation partner in yoga’s historical evolution throughout. See **Vasudeva, Som** Dev, 2010, “Hamsamithu: ‘Patanjalayoga is Nonsense,’” *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 1.4.2011 and **Vidyasankar Sundaresan**, “Yoga in Sankaran Advaita Vedanta: A Reappraisal,” in *Yoga: the Indian Tradition*, **Ian Whicher & David Carpenter**, eds., London: RoutledgeCurzon, 99-129. It is odd that Singleton does not fully account for Sundaresan’s account, for he quotes other material from this volume. Of course, **White**, 2014, suggests the fading of the *Sutra’s* importance too, but his thesis seems to contradict itself often (*passim*).
- ⁶² For example, Iyengar’s ghostwriter, B. I. Taraporewala notes that the Hatha texts, *Gheranda Samhita*, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* and the *Siva Samhita* were all in his library in 1960 (*ILW*: 429).
- ⁶³ **Iyengar** (2008), 6. The limbs are *yama*, *niyama* (both rules), *asana*, *pranayama*, *pratyahara* (sense withdrawal), *dharana* (concentration), *dhyana* (meditation) and *Samadhi* (in Patanjali’s system, this word denotes meditative absorption, though in other systems it denotes spiritual realization).
- ⁶⁴ For **Baier**, please see note 5.
- ⁶⁵ See **Singleton’s** greater elaboration of this concept in, “Salvation Through Relaxation: Proprioceptive Therapy and its Relationship to Yoga,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 20/3, 289-304.
-