

# A Portrait of Guruji

by Shirley Daventry French

Not a day passes when I do not feel grateful to B.K.S. Iyengar (Guruji) for the light which he has brought into my life.

There is a large portrait of Guruji in my yoga room and I have placed a statue of Patanjali on one side and a statue of the dancing Siva or Nataraj on the other. Patanjali is an incarnation of Lord Adisesa, the serpent God, and the statue depicts his upper body in human form and lower body as a coiled serpent. To me, Siva and Patanjali symbolise different aspects of B.K.S. Iyengar, and their images have become an altar or focal point for my yoga practice. I always begin and end with a prayerful salute before this altar, seeking divine guidance and expressing gratitude for the teachings of yoga.

Adisesa came to manifest in human form. The Lord Siva played an important role in this event and influenced the path Patanjali would follow here on earth.

It is said that Lord Vishnu was seated on Adisesa, Lord of serpents watching the magnificent dance of Lord Siva. As the dance progressed Vishnu become heavy, making it uncomfortable for Adisesa to support him. When the music stopped, Vishnu became light again and Adisesa enquired what had happened. Lord Vishnu explained that the beauty and majesty of Lord Siva's dance had created vibrations within him, which had made him heavy, and Adisesa professed a desire to take human form and learn to dance. Lord Vishnu predicted that not only would this come to pass and Adisesa would be able to devote himself to perfection in the art of dance, but Lord Siva would command him to write treatises on grammar, ayurveda and yoga. And so Adisesa took human birth and in the form of Patanjali produced three great works: a grammar for the cultivation of language; a book on ayurveda, the science of life and health; and finally the yoga sutras a guide for mental and spiritual evolution.

Patanjali obviously made the most of his birth because he also became proficient in the art of dance and, in the same way that students of yoga pay homage to Patanjali as the father of Yoga, Indian classical dancers acknowledge him as a great dancer and an inspiration for their dancing.

Siva is one of a triad of major Hindu Gods, which includes Brahma, the creator, and Vishnu, the preserver. Siva is the destroyer, but is also known as the compassionate one and his presence is very helpful in destroying those obstacles, which

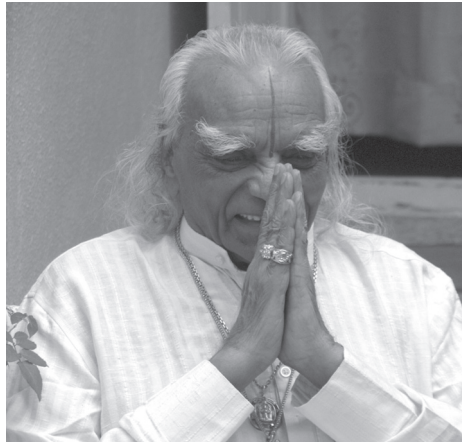


Photo: B.K.S. Iyengar by Kevin Mason

interfere with spiritual progress. Siva dances the Tandava, the dance of death but he also dances the dance of creation. My statue depicts him dancing on the back of a turtle, which symbolises the ego. It is not easy to overcome the power of the ego; it takes all of Siva's fire and passion. It is impossible to make progress on the spiritual path until the ego is diminished, its dominance replaced with that of the Divine. We need our ego for this earthly existence, but not a very large one. The turtle is small, baby-like, reduced to size. In fact, in my statue of Nataraj, the

turtle has a baby's face.

I have seen Guruji dance the Tandava. It is well known that in his classes he tramples on egos with impunity; but what is not so often remarked on is that the purpose of this diminution of ego is to reveal the Divine Light within. This dance of destruction is also the dance of creation. I know, because I have experienced it myself.

Guruji does whatever is necessary to remove the veils of ignorance, which obscure the light and prevent us from getting in touch with our individual spark of divinity. In Sanskrit this is called atman or purusha and in English may be referred to as our true self or soul. The window of opportunity for Guruji to accomplish this task is generally small. With his foreign students he will see them at best every year or two, and perhaps only once or twice in a lifetime for brief periods. You can rely on the fact that he will not waste this precious time.

In fact, he does not waste time at all. A day in the life of Guruji is filled from dawn to dusk and beyond with Yoga in all its aspects: his personal practice, plus interactions with pupils and family as well as constant worldwide demands from those who wish to benefit from the acquired wisdom of this elder statesman.

Guruji never neglects his practice and, since he generally Practices in the open studio at the Institute, many of us have been able to observe him practising. This is another dance, a prayer dance, offering the fruits of the practice to the Divine. He becomes so completely absorbed in his practice that you may not notice he is there; something, which could not possibly happen when he is in teaching or performing mode.

Once, when studying at the Institute, my colleague Marlene Mawhinney and I arrived a little late for pranayama class. We

had had an interview with Guruji, and you don't cut that short! It was a huge class and we had trouble finding enough space for our equipment, and ourselves but managed to squeeze into a back corner behind a pillar close to the balcony. Geetaji was teaching. First we did pranayama in savasana, and then she asked us to sit up. As I turned to arrange my blankets, to my surprise I discovered Guruji wedged into an even smaller corner next to us doing a restorative practice. How long he had been there, who knows? Neither of us had an inkling that he was there; we had not heard a sound or felt any disturbance.

Not only did this demonstrate Guruji's ability to withdraw and to all intents and purposes become invisible, an accomplishment Patanjali mentions in the third chapter of the yoga sutras<sup>1</sup>; but showed another side of his nature, his humility. How many teachers would make do in their own Institute when they had the unquestioned right and authority to ask that others move and space be made available for them?

When Guruji gives a public demonstration it is yet another form of dance, beautiful and fluid, delighting and inspiring his audience – an incomparable artist!

Like Patanjali, Guruji's productive life has brought him prominence in many fields. A consummate teacher and practitioner of Yoga, he is also an author of many books<sup>2</sup> including the definitive text *Light on Yoga*, that is sometimes referred to as the Bible of Yoga. Together with *Light on Pranayama* and *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* it forms a veritable fountain of yogic wisdom for serious students of yoga.

Guruji has also followed Patanjali's footsteps into medicine with his work with health problems and injuries. Sometimes he refers to himself as "a practical doctor". When my husband Derek, who is a physician, was in Pune following Guruji around looking at various cases and trying to understand what was going on, he asked Guruji about one woman. Why had Guruji put her into that position? And Guruji replied: because it works! And it does work!

Guruji's consideration for others was evident on another occasion, a particularly joyous one for Derek and I, when he stayed as a guest in our home during his 1984 visit to Victoria. Much energy had been devoted to getting our house in order (on many levels) to make the most of his short visit. With the help of Derek's mother who lived with us, we prepared special vegetarian dishes, no eggs. It was early September and we had a vegetable garden full of wonderful salad makings, but word had reached us that Guruji was not keen on raw vegetables so I cooked an Indian meal. I was also told he liked warm milky desserts, so I prevailed on my mother-in-law to make a

---

1 "By control over the subtle body, the yogi can suspend at will the rays of light emanating from himself so that he becomes invisible to onlookers. He may again make himself visible by bringing back the power of perceptibility."

2 B.K.S. Iyengar, *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, Vibhuti Pada, III.21.

traditional English rice pudding. He really seemed to enjoy this and expressed great appreciation of the whole meal, but I am sure he would have been diplomatic even if it were not to his taste. Conversation around the dinner table, or anywhere else for that matter, with Guruji is always stimulating, and this was no exception.

Guruji is also a wonderful companion on expeditions. While staying with us we took him down to the park and beach close by our home, and despite a cool blustery day he revelled in the fresh air coming off the ocean and the beauty of the area. He said this was a special place, and we should not move unless it was to another place with such an atmosphere.

I also had the pleasure to accompany Guruji to Niagara Falls when he came to Toronto in 1993. He had a very tight itinerary and when he first expressed a desire to go to the Falls, I thought there was not really enough time, that he would find it tiring, and questioned his decision. No, he said, this is one of the wonders of the world and I would like to see it while I am there. And so it came to pass, that Hilda Pizarro and I went with Guruji and his entourage to Niagara Falls in a van driven by Andy Orr of Toronto. As we arrived at the Falls it literally poured with rain, but Guruji was out of the car in a minute and standing up on the wall, plastic raincoat billowing in the wind, revelling at the splendour of the falls. Laughing, we followed him to drink in this sight. Yes, they are indeed one of the wonders of the world, and consequently the whole area was packed full of people. If I had gone on my own I would have probably balked at lining up for the Maid of the Mist, the boat that takes you close to the falls, or the tunnels which go under the falls and other tourist attractions, but Guruji wanted to see it all. And so we did, and the time waiting in line passed quickly because of the animated conversation, which Guruji always generates.

This was a lesson I needed to learn, that the whole day was the experience including the time spent driving there and standing in lineups, and not just the peak moments. Guruji is a good example of the yogi's creed to live each moment to the fullest.

Occasionally, when a disgruntled student complains about what they perceive as harsh treatment from Guruji, I have heard another respond that he's only human and that it is his human side, which shouts or loses his temper. I don't agree with this. In class, I think it is the Guru side of him that does this, trying at all costs to help an imprisoned soul find freedom. Whether they like him or not, like his methods or not, there is the purpose of spiritual awakening. Outside of class while Guruji can be quick and impatient and sometimes gets irritated by the events of life just like the rest of us, he is often quiet, humble and modest – almost shy on occasions, and with one of the liveliest senses of humour and most infectious laughs I have ever heard. When he is teaching he functions from a different deeper place with the best interests of the student very much at the forefront. To some extent I see the classes as theatre, with Guruji acting out different roles to elicit

certain responses from his students, and he is a great character actor with the talent to play a variety of roles.

This great contemporary Master of Yoga, unparalleled teacher, celebrated author, speaker, diplomat, unofficial ambassador for his country and culture, has another role of great importance to him: that of philanthropist. Never forgetting the humble roots from which he came, his early struggles to survive and establish himself on the path of yoga, Guruji is a benefactor to many charitable causes in his native village, in Pune his city of adoption, and throughout India.

I consider myself fortunate indeed to have found such a teacher, to have been taught by him directly, and to have

known him personally. Such blessings carry responsibility to share what we have been given. The teachings are universal and all of us who have received the teaching of B.K.S. Iyengar, directly or indirectly, have a role to play in keeping this Light alive in our own practice and our interactions with the world and all its creatures.

Thank you Guruji for devoting your life to yoga, for the grace of your teaching, for your many blessings and the stream of consciousness which emanates from Pune into our community. Congratulations on your eightieth birthday and may your journey continue to be illuminated by the Light.

