



Finding the feminine

Geeta Iyengar on yoga and women

Perth-based yoga teacher and PhD student Jean Byrne talks to Geeta about her unusual life and her special interest in teaching women about the benefits of yoga.

As the eldest daughter of the great BKS Iyengar, founder of Iyengar yoga, Geeta Iyengar describes herself as not living in her father's shadow, but in his light. In her teens, Geeta decided to dedicate her life to practising and teaching yoga, bucking Indian social norms by not marrying and having children. Now in her 60s, Geeta Iyengar, or Geetaji as her students affectionately call her, has had a lifetime of learning from her father the great BKS Iyengar, founder of Iyengar yoga. Today Geetaji can be found tirelessly instructing large classes of Indian and Western students at the Ramamani

Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute in Pune, India, where she is director of her father's famous school, the home of Iyengar yoga. But during her childhood Geetaji overcame several debilitating illnesses, which soon taught her about the amazing healing power of yoga. As a teenager she decided to dedicate her life to practising and teaching yoga, and has now been teaching at her father's school for more than 40 years. She has become an authority on yoga for women with her wealth of insight and experience chronicled in her seminal book, *Yoga a Gem for Women*.

With yoga's booming popularity, especially among women, there is now a burgeoning interest in how this ancient science of life – which has traditionally been dominated by men – relates to women who have different bodies and often lifestyles. With this in mind I traveled to Pune to speak with this great yogini about her life and practice, and how yoga can truly be a gem for women.

Jean Byrne: When you were younger were there many young girls or women practising yoga?

Geeta Iyengar: Well, when I started there were women interested in learning from me. When I started teaching I was just 16 years old. My schooling was over and I started teaching. So definitely women were coming to practise with me. But still there was always this kind of feeling from everyone as to whether women should or should not practise yoga. After every demonstration, during the question and answer sessions, questions about women and yoga practice were always there. Can they do Sirsasana, standing on the head when the uterus goes topsy-turvy? Will this prevent them from having a motherhood? These kinds of questions I would have to answer very, very patiently.

Now I do not hear these questions as often. Things have changed. So in my journey I have seen that at that stage people were really nervous. Women were really nervous to do yoga. Young women wanted to do yoga, but elderly women in the house – grandmothers – would stop them because they had not done yoga themselves. So there was opposition. In my father's time there was much opposition, but he started teaching women. Because he was young, women felt safe to do yoga with him instead of with some elderly man.

J: Was your father's teacher, Krishnamacharya, teaching many women during his time?

G: Well, I haven't seen him as such teaching women, but my father has seen him. My father says that, yes sometimes the women would come to practise with him, but it was very rare. But still women would approach him for learning purposes. Even my mother was practising yoga. She did yoga in her pregnancies and during her menstruation as well.

J: Would you talk briefly about the movement of prana (life force) in men's and women's bodies? If there are differences, the most obvious example being menstruation, how might this warrant different practices for women?

G: Look, men are muscularly well built up. You don't see their body deterioration as much as you do in



Geeta Iyengar teaching in Sydney, May 2003.

women because of menstruation and pregnancy. That kind of thing makes women's biochemistry change day-to-day. Men do not find such a drastic change happening. Every month a woman realises after menstruation she is different, after ovulation she is different, there is something occurring. Women have always felt it, not knowing the reason behind it perhaps. In women's case, many a time they have to change their practice day-to-day, whereas in men's case it is different.

But I have noticed that for men, all these things get gathered at a certain age and then they feel this kind of thing. In the first 40 to 45 years they are okay. But then a time comes when they also question why

the fatigue is there. Some of the men have also asked the question as to why after a few days they have the fluid flowing out from their organic body. I have explained to them that it is something like the menstruation for women. Men also get it sometimes, having a semen discharge. Their menstruation is not visible, but periodically happens. Then I tell them to stick to the similar program that women adopt during menstruation.

J: Many of the female yoga practitioners I have spoken to in the West find it very difficult to balance an asana (posture), pranayama (breath control) or meditation practice with family life and children. How do you think women might best integrate the two?

G: I think this is a problem with everyone. You see, family life has to be maintained and the practice of yoga has to be maintained, so we have to keep our time separate for this. What I always suggest is that pranayama has to be done before the family gets up. Once the children get up, you are busy with them. Of course I am not married, I am a *brahmachari* (celibate), but I have family around me – my sisters had small children. You would be surprised that my niece and nephew, when I would sit for pranayama in Padmasana (Lotus position), they would come on my lap to observe me. Similarly, with asana practice, you must be disciplined, you cannot think, ‘I will do it later’.

surprised by his knowledge. His perception is so clear. He knows what women have to do at particular times. In my case, being a woman, it is more direct for me. When I have a pain in my body during menstruation, then I know what I should do. So I can relate his teaching to my own experiences and give that instruction to others. Perhaps I am the mediator, to convey his knowledge.

Also, I always feel that a woman has a different heart while teaching. Her mental state is different from men. Because of her womanhood, perhaps also motherhood, she has an inner softness to help people understand. She has patience, which is a great characteristic required as a teacher. I feel that women,

just want to exercise themselves. But yoga is not just exercise. In every posture we are trying to put our body, our mind, our intelligence in a certain state. That is why yoga’s penetration is great, unlike in other exercises. But with yoga something quite different happens. You move somewhere deeper inside; you reach right up to that point where the core of your being is found at peace. That will not be found in any other exercise. But people have to be ready to reach up to that point.

J: You have become a role model for many Western women teachers and students. Are there any female yoginis or women who are role models for you?

G: When I started there were not many women doing yoga and there were not woman teachers. Very selected women learnt. Some came from the West, learnt and returned home to teach. In my case, my mother, even with all her family responsibilities, gave us a chance to do yoga; she gave us the freedom. When I said I was not getting married, she was the person who agreed with my decision. Normally a woman will not agree because she is worried about her daughter’s life. She said, if you are doing yoga, if you promise me that you are remaining unmarried only for the sake of yoga, then I will allow you to. If you are doing yoga I won’t come in your way.

Is it not something great for her to say that in her day? Even with her responsibilities she would find some time for her practice. If she was sitting she would sit in Baddha Konasana (Bound angle pose), if she was cleaning the grains in the house she would do Janu Sirsasana (Head-to-knee pose). She would put us as young children in Sirsasana against the wall and then she would practise herself. She encouraged and supported me thoroughly.

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J: As an Indian woman of your generation, it is quite unusual to have chosen to be a brahmacharya. What do you understand to be the relationship between marriage, children and the practice of yoga and why did you personally choose the path of brahmacharya?

G: As far as my life is concerned, I wouldn’t say I have chosen brahmacharya as such. In terms of my mental gravitation, I never felt like getting married. That will be surprising to others. But perhaps at that age, in my teens, my mind was more with yoga. People ask me, how did you control yourself? For me the question of controlling myself did not arise because I was with yoga. I may not be a great yogini, because I am nobody to level myself as a great yogini, but I had this inner thing, I had my mental gravitation very strongly towards yoga.

J: Do you feel that as a woman you bring a different energy to your teaching than perhaps your father does as a man?

G: I am not sure, but I can tell you, as far as my father is concerned, I am

when teaching, give energy more than men in terms of an inner touch.

J: In all sorts of ways in both India and the West women are marginalised and sometimes disadvantaged within society. How do you think yoga practice might help empower women?

G: Of course it has to help. Even in India it will certainly help women. First of all we need to educate them. In Western countries you have shown an interest. But here in the remote villages women are uneducated and do not know that yoga can be of help to them. Only the educated classes know.

J: In the West, yoga is often used as a means for attaining happiness, fitness, self-affirmation and productivity in the workplace. How do you think the way in which yoga is currently being practised in the modern context differs from the traditional aims of yoga?

G: Of course yoga is the base for everything, so if someone is practising in the gym etcetera, there is no harm done. These days people have become workaholics and exercise-aholics. They

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