

I have been blessed with many chances to study Iyengar yoga in many different cultures since I first began practicing in 2005. As a doctoral student in cultural anthropology, I have had to travel a lot for research or conferences. I was often alone, and Iyengar centers around the world quickly became some of the more stable homes I had. I've attended classes in French in Montreal, in Spanish in Mexico City, and in Portuguese in São Paulo. I've even taken classes in languages that I don't understand at all, such as classes in Norwegian in Oslo. I took a class in Copenhagen that began in Danish until the teacher Claus Wittig discovered that I was unable to follow his instructions. He immediately switched from Danish to English, finishing a brilliant lecture about how the "mind is the part of the universe that sees itself," (by which he meant both the universe and the mind).

But until I was fortunate to receive the IYASE scholarship in 2018, I had not yet had the opportunity to study in India. I was eager for the chance to study with Geeta and Prashant, and I was incredibly grateful to celebrate the life of this man whose path I had traced on so many continents, and I was especially excited to have the chance to travel to India with my teacher Alex Cleveland. It felt downright auspicious to get to go to celebrate Mr. Iyengar's centenary with my teacher who had lived there for many years.

When Alex canceled his trip to take care of his mother following a surgery, I felt sad for Alex, sad for his mother, and sad to be traveling alone again. Within hours of arriving in Mumbai, I quickly realized that one is never alone in India. As I sat drinking coffee at 1:00 in the morning while waiting for the shuttle to Pune, I made friends with a woman whose daughter lived in the US and also a man who gave me his telephone to call if I needed anything while I was there. When I got to the Institute the next day, my teacher Karina Grecu from the years I lived in São Paulo was there standing at the gate like a sentinel.

When the fifteen buses lined up on the corner of the Hare Krishna Mandir road to take everyone to Balewadi Stadium, I met teachers and students who had come from all around the world. It was hard to feel alone after meeting a man who was the only teacher in his country. Still I was continually surprised by the sense of community. I got to share many meals with Lois Steinberg and her adoring cohort of students. Two weeks before traveling to Pune, I got the opportunity continue writing my dissertation in Urbana, Illinois where I could study with Lois. As she took me to the best spots for tango dancing, Lois graciously showed me the Pune that only she knew, recounting rich stories from decades earlier.

At the stadium I saw Victoria Austen, one of my first teachers. Victoria was not only an Iyengar yoga teacher, but also a priest at the San Francisco Zen Center, where I was introduced to Iyengar yoga. She had had two severe accidents since I had last seen her, one in which she had been hit and dragged by a car. Practicing next to Victoria practice in Pune, seeing her move forward on her path after such painful experiences was incredibly inspiring. After all, I had begun practicing Iyengar yoga with her 13 years earlier with my own pain from a severe accident. Still, not even practicing next to Victoria prepared me for the inspiring experience of Geeta's teachings in the last days of her life. Geeta taught over a thousand people with her complete attention and care even as her health was failing. Despite being sickly as a child, Geeta insisted that she had a good birth because she was born into her family. In December 2018, she showed that she not only had good birth, she also a good death.

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As I sat down to write this, I opened up small green journal that came with the prop kit for the centennial celebrations. On the cover, it had a picture of BKS Iyengar set against a silhouette of a sunflower mandala: he is sitting in padmasana, his hands in Anjali mudra. The mudra, which is the icon for the centenary year of 2018 appears again in the upper right corner and once again on the back below a quote from B.K.S. Iyengar:

The known is limited. It has a frontier.
The unknown is vast with no boundaries.
In our sadhana, we often touch the unknown.
The moment it is felt, it becomes known.
This is the way to reach the unknown.
The unknown has limitless horizons.

On the first pages were thick descriptions of the Balewadi Sports complex, where the celebrations took place. I had been told that Hindu temples draw your senses out the way that yoga is supposed to draw your senses in. India was constantly drawing my senses out, so I shouldn't have been surprised that Balewadi was no exception. I had been shocked by the strange combinations of smells that floated through the halls as we practiced. Fragrances of rich curries from the hall to one side mixed with pungent wafts from the bathrooms on the other, and the exhaust from the highway drifted in and out. I read notes about the stadium track lights so bright that I began wearing sunglasses inside, like a 21st century colonial hiding from the sun.

There were a lot of notes about traffic. From the moment I touched down in Mumbai, I was mesmerized by Indian traffic. I found it breathtakingly beautiful in its deferential nature. Indeed, the slow harmony of the sinuous circuits rolling buses, cars, bicycles, and rickshaws next to crawling animals and walking humans appeared to me as a beautiful materialization of Vivekananda's speech at the 1983 World's Fair exactly 125 years before. Mr. Iyengar's centennial had got me thinking of the centennial and a quarter of the introduction of yoga to the West. It particularly reminded me of the part where he quoted Krishna in the Baghavad Gita "all men are struggling through paths which in the end lead to me." When I saw everyone grouped at Balewadi by language and nationality, I couldn't help but think of other words that Vivekananda recited "As the different streams having their sources in different paths which men take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee." So, it was not surprising that many of the conversations of the first days were about how to fulfill the promise of Iyengar yoga, in Prashant's words "for one and all."

As quickly as I had started reading the journal, I suddenly stopped. Written on the very first page was a word that made all the other words suddenly, woefully, insufficient: Vaikunth. It was the name of the crematorium where Geeta Iyengar's body was taken on December 16th, 2019. I was at the Pune airport on my way to Mr. Iyengar's birthplace of Bellur that morning. Learning of Geeta's death, I turned around and went back to the Institute.

It can be hard to understand India as a westerner. An insensitive western reporter once brazenly asked Geeta a question that most Indians would never think to ask: Did you ever feel like you are living in your father's shadow?" Without skipping a beat, she responded with something both simple and eloquent: "I consider myself fortunate to be in my father's light, not his shadow."

I'd heard many stories about both of Mr. Iyengar's children long before I ever met either of them. My friends and teachers had told me beautiful anecdotes, illustrating how they complimented each other as only brother and a sister could. Prashant was the philosopher and Geeta was the scientist, one told me; Prashant was poetic and Geeta was precise, another said. Listening to Prashant lecture the first five days of centennial celebrations, it was easy to see why so many people had said this.

Prashant spent an entire day explaining about how yoga is "never yours," but rather only "for you." He compared it to the breath, which is also both for us and yet never entirely ours or anyone's for that matter. We sometimes hold onto the contents of our thoughts by writing them down for all posterity. Other times, we hold onto the form of a thought by endlessly, and perhaps compulsively, continuing to cognize the same way. Some of us attempt to hold onto the form of our bodies by manipulating or maintaining them. Others of us even hold on onto the contents of our bodies, say, keeping a lock of your hair, for example. But there is no way that you could save or store the pranic form or content of your breath, not even in a balloon, not even in an air-tight vault.

Breath, on the contrary, is only for us. We cannot breathe for another. We may choose to use our minds or our bodies for others, and conversely others may exploit our minds or our bodies against our will. But we can neither choose to breathe for others nor can others extract or exploit our breath. The breath is always and only for us.

As Prashant was explaining all of this, I was looking up at the many quotes of Mr. Iyengar that were hanging from banners on the ceiling. Near the center was one that read: "When I practice, I am a philosopher. When I teach, I am a scientist. When I demonstrate, I am an artist." Seen in the light of this quote, one might be tempted to argue that Prashant to be practicing even when he is teaching while Geeta taught even while she practiced. But, of course neither of them could be reduced to such roles.

In the conversations of her last days, just as in the interview above, Geeta showed that she could be just as poetic as Prashant, just as philosophical as her father. On her birthday on December 7th, she surprised everyone by hosting an informal "chit-chat." Geeta said she really had three birthdays: the second when she began practicing yoga and the third after her father died. In the 1950s, Geeta had nearly died as a young, sickly child, just like her father. In 2014, Geeta had nearly died again, with her father.

Geeta spoke beautifully of the kindness of her parents who let her take the life of a Brahmacharya to study yoga and Ayurveda rather than marry. She referred to her mother, Ramamani, as her first guru, and not only because she sewed for Geeta the first pair of Pune bloomers so that she wouldn't have to practice in a sari. Ramamani had an intuitive sense of the practice, Geeta told us, and would insist that Mr. Iyengar help her when she noticed that Geeta had missed something. Her gratitude and love were palpable. Geeta was not only a poet, a scientist, and a philosopher, she was an artist who stood in the light of her family.

Geeta described how she asked people to read Guruji's books to her when — that, when her health was failing. She said she would be happy if we continue to read his books, especially Light on Yoga. Towards the end of the chit chat, she discussed the process of taking the photographs for Yoga: A Gem for Women. She spoke of how she relied on his photographs for years before Light on Yoga was published. When she said that she used the same photographer as her father, I thought of her standing in same studio, standing literally in the same light.

As I returned home from the crematorium nine days later, I knew that Geeta was no longer ours. But like our breath, like yoga, she is nonetheless always “for us.” Like a light casting out on darkness, she is always there for us. Like a light standing in light, she is always here for us. Geeta had her father's picture albums just as he had a photo of his guru. We are lucky to have even more forms of Geeta's light than a single picture or album: we have her books and many videos of her teaching. Her death, like her life, was light standing in light, shining out “for us.” Wherever I travel, I remember that Geeta is there for me, and it makes me feel less alone in this world.