



Abhijata Iyengar teaching in the US in 2019. Photo: Iyengar Yoga National Association of the United States.

RIMYI

One year on

Linda Apps

One year on from the sudden death of Geeta Iyengar, how is the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute (RIMYI) faring in Pune, India? How is the international Iyengar Yoga community moving on? And what is the state of the Australian Iyengar Yoga Community?

With the loss of a leader, many questions arise. What is the 'right' way to practice? How do we proceed as a community? How do we train future teachers? How do we pass on what we've been taught and keep it alive? How do we stay true to the spirit of BKS Iyengar without becoming dogmatic? How do we hold steady when doubts arise?

These are all challenges of life that yoga helps address.

Geeta Iyengar was a great advocate for her father's work, teaching, as she said "in his light". Now she is gone, the strength of the lineage is revealing itself as teachers fall back on their practice, seeking answers to these questions.

From all accounts the senior

teachers at RIMYI, including Geeta's sister Sunita, and Raya Uma Datta, who has been studying there since he was 10, have taken to their new responsibilities with gusto.

As BKS Iyengar's 37 year old granddaughter and senior teacher at RIMYI, Abhijata Iyengar says, "RIMYI without Geetaji is a different place. It is difficult, but we do not have a choice. Each one of us at the Institute feels the responsibility and is feeling charged to meet it".

"The biggest challenge is to be honest. For as long as she was there Geetaji made us be honest. Now there are two options. We either just go about things or stand for yoga and be honest. The first option is obviously the more convenient one. The biggest challenge is that each one of us should actually be choosing the second option.



Abhijata Iyengar and Raya Uma Datta with Geeta Iyengar (centre) at the 2009 Australian Convention in Maroochydore.



A huge portrait of Geeta greets students to RIMYI. Photo: Grant Davenport



Senior Australian Iyengar teacher Glenn Ceresoli

“My vision for the future of Iyengar Yoga is that we understand both Iyengar and yoga in 'Iyengar Yoga'. That we pass on to the future generations what Gururji transmitted to us and not only what we have been equipped to gather so far. We need to broaden our perspective and understand yoga.”

“Yoga is timeless. The work of the Iyengars is magnificent because it opened the locks so the common man had access to it. If our learning and practice can reflect the essence of what yoga stands for, we don't have to take a separate route to honour the work of Gururji and Geetaji. It will happen.”

BKS Iyengar's 70 year old philosopher son, Prashant Iyengar, believes Iyengar Yoga is for one and all and that the Iyengar Yoga community should support each other, focus on learning the subject of yoga and not waste time debating whose interpretation of the teachings is correct.

“We perceive things differently, we must be open-minded otherwise we become fundamentalists. It's all Iyengar Yoga. What you learn is Iyengar Yoga, what I learn is Iyengar Yoga, we should not be fragmenting

ourselves. I receive one way, you receive another way. I got it, you got it.”

“If you don't like something on the menu, don't eat it, but you can't tell people to stop cooking it! You don't have to eat everything on the menu!”

“I will never stop learning, and I have tried to share some of these lessons with you. I do pray that my ending will be your beginning. The great rewards and countless blessings of a life spent following the Inward Journey await you.”

Senior Australian Iyengar teacher Glenn Ceresoli travels the world to teach, and has an insight into how the worldwide Iyengar community is coping without its two pillars, Gururji and Geetaji.

“The international Iyengar Yoga community is in a state of generational change. It's the end of one era and the beginning of another. As Gururji said, his ending is our beginning. There is a lot of confusion about how to proceed,

how to practice, but it will settle,” Glenn says.

“It's up to us now, the senior teachers all over the world, to apply what we have learnt from Gururji and Geetaji and keep making it contemporary. Some will hang on to the literal teachings, without the comprehension and the depth

of understanding behind Gururji's words of wisdom. Some will change aspects of the practice too much, and in the process compromise the traditional values implied by Gururji's teachings. The people in between the two extremes will use their practice to continue cultivating Conscious Awareness.

“Iyengar Yoga is here to stay and it will adapt and change over the centuries.”

Many Iyengar practitioners who were first inspired by BKS Iyengar in the 1970s and 1980s have been practising yoga for 40 years or more and are now coming to terms with the effects of ageing. Just as the Iyengar Community is adapting to change, long-term practitioners are adapting their practice to their ageing bodies. While conditions like arthritis are hereditary and often improved and kept to a minimum with yoga practice, we can't assume long-term practice is an insurance policy against pain.

As Glenn says, “we have to accept pain as a reality of life in a body, no-one lives the whole span of a life without pain. Asana reflects our daily existence so we can't just quit when we encounter some pain, an injury or arthritis, we adapt instead.

“There is suffering pain and there is experiencing pain. You can experience pain without suffering it, that's what yoga teaches us.”

Glenn says yoga teaches us to elevate ourselves above the pain, through “non-attachment” by orientation of the mind.

“We either choose to become

victims of the pain, or seek solutions. The latter is an activity of the creative faculty, a higher

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mind function. Whereas the victim mentality is a lower mind function, which all too often gravitates to futility, frustration and suffering. Even when not able to find a solution, seeking a solution elevates the mind, hence you don't suffer the pain, even though you experience it. However, yoga teaches us if you persist, you will always find a solution, at least that's my experience.

“As we age we need to learn how to play the instrument of the body, rather than how to align it,” he says.

“Age and degeneration require

that we deepen our experience of the practice. We have to re-double our efforts, not by being forceful

or aggressive but by being more intelligent, more sensitive, more mature.

“It's like cooking, we don't want to under-do and we don't want to over-do.”

President of Iyengar Yoga Australia (IYA), Simon Joannou, was in Pune recently doing a month of classes at RIMYI. He was impressed with the mood and ambience there.

“It feels very friendly, very welcoming. There's a lot of vibrancy, a lot of young practitioners, a lot of enthusiasm and energy in the

teaching and the practice room,” he says.

“There is a sense of the responsibility of carrying on the lineage, now that our mother is gone. We can't keep going back to have her solve our problems so it throws us back onto our practice. Geeta always said ‘Practice, practice, practice’. She told us to come together as a community, to look to ourselves, to focus and learn from our practice. We're doing that, we're pulling together and working things out as a community.

“The integrity in our system serves us well in times of change and enables longevity.

“In Australia, we're coming up to a new era. Iyengar Yoga Australia is well placed to stand on its own two feet. There are 103 Iyengar Yoga schools in Australia and 433 certified teachers. There are more Iyengar Yoga schools in Australia than any other form of yoga by a long way.

“Our association was built on good foundations, we have our elders guiding the next generation coming through. This is the beauty of being in a lineage, there's a systematic way of passing on knowledge, taking our time to do things thoroughly. Our assessment processes are rigorous and out of that process people become better teachers. As we progress through the different levels of assessment we keep being challenged to improve.”

Simon is optimistic about the future of Iyengar Yoga in Australia.

“Good systems work has been done at IYA, our administration is very solid, we're recognised as a stakeholder in government

discussions about yoga, our ethics committee has been on the front foot in a difficult time, we're all ready to grow into our next phase.

“There are plenty of people coming through at all levels of assessment, we've got a new generation of assessors coming through, we're in a very healthy phase, the future looks good.”

Traditionally Iyengar Yoga teachers have not embraced advertising and social media, but this is changing as a younger generation become involved with marketing and communicating the practice they love. Social media and marketing are necessities in today's flooded yoga marketplace.

IYA's Social Media Coordinator Shula Hampson is upbeat. “We have a strong social media presence, we're the most followed yoga association in the world on Instagram with 12,260 followers and 500,000 people per month see our posts,” she says.

“On Facebook, we have 27,212 followers and 30,000 views per month. We have the second largest Facebook presence in the world for a yoga association, after the USA, although I think we're about to be overtaken by RIMYI, which is fine!”

Abhijata Iyengar has become the public face of Iyengar Yoga, although she resists the implication that she is at the ‘helm’. She is the first Iyengar to be a mother and a travelling teacher. She is busy practicing, teaching at RIMYI, mentoring teachers and teaching conventions.

“Yes, being a woman who has to take care of family and kids makes things hectic. But thankfully I have a wonderful support system. My

family is very supportive and I don't feel any burden at all,” she says.

She travels the world to teach conventions and is visiting Australia 8-12 May next year to teach an Iyengar Yoga retreat at Twin Waters in Maroochydore, Queensland. Abhijata was last in Australia when she accompanied Geeta to the same venue in 2009.

Next year's retreat is open to anyone with a minimum five years Iyengar yoga practice who is a financial member of IYA.

Abhijata sees that yoga is probably more relevant than ever in today's crazy world.

“Yoga in today's world of stress, strain and alienation could be our saviour to maintain our humanity. Though society has changed drastically over the past many years, the core mind of humans maintains the same fabric. Yoga can definitely nurture our sensitivities so that we can stand up as better human beings.”

In 2000 Abhijata started seriously studying yoga with her illustrious family at the age of 16. At the same time she pursued her interest in science, earning a Bachelor of Science in Zoology in 2003 and a Masters in Bioinformatics in 2005. Her next step would have been to undertake a PhD, but when she heard it would be a full-time commitment, with no time for yoga, she decided to take a year off from her studies to focus on yoga.

As she says, “that year never stopped”.

Learning under Gururji's careful eye, she travelled with him to Russia and China, and accompanied Geeta to



IYA President Simon Joannou in Vamadevasana II (Pose Dedicated to the Sage Vamadeva II).

conventions in the UK, Australia, Germany and the U.S.

She was very close to her grandfather.

“I vividly remember he said ‘life is as dynamic as the River Amazon. As that river flows, life flows with that energy, hence your practice and your living has to be so dynamic.”

What inspires her about yoga is its power to always have meaning. “It's experiential potential makes it very accessible, and knowing my grandfather and the time I have spent with him fills me with a lot of joy and happiness to continue doing what I am doing.”

Echoing Geeta's encouragement to practice, she emphasises the importance of prioritising practice in our busy modern lives, especially for teachers.

“I would like to classify our community into two - class goers and practitioners. Teachers and those who are aspiring to be teachers should be practitioners first. If practice is not one's priority, then he or she naturally drops out of the bracket of teachers.

“One's hectic schedule may not allow one to devote as much time as one would like. One needs to be honest and objective about oneself and arrive at a conclusion – is practice not possible because of inevitable circumstances or is it that one doesn't put it at uppermost priority? It is easy to be analysing the world outside. Analysing one's own actions is most important.

“It would be ideal if one can arrange one's duties to accommodate practice. Even if quantitatively, one is not able to give a lot of time, qualitatively, it has to be full. One hour of completely involved and sensitive practice is more valuable than two hours of mechanical doing.”

Iyengar teacher trainers and assessors from around the world will meet in Pune, India December 7-14 for classes with Abhi and Prashant and to hear about changes to the assessment system. Whatever the outcome, the strong practice ethic inculcated into Iyengar yogis, coupled with their boundless love for the subject of yoga and its proponents Gururji, Geetaji and Prashant, will ensure the lineage endures.

The last word goes to Abhi's beloved grandfather, BKS Iyengar:

“I will never stop learning, and I have tried to share some of these lessons with you. I do pray that my ending will be your beginning. The great rewards and countless blessings of a life spent following the Inward Journey await you.” 🕉️

References

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