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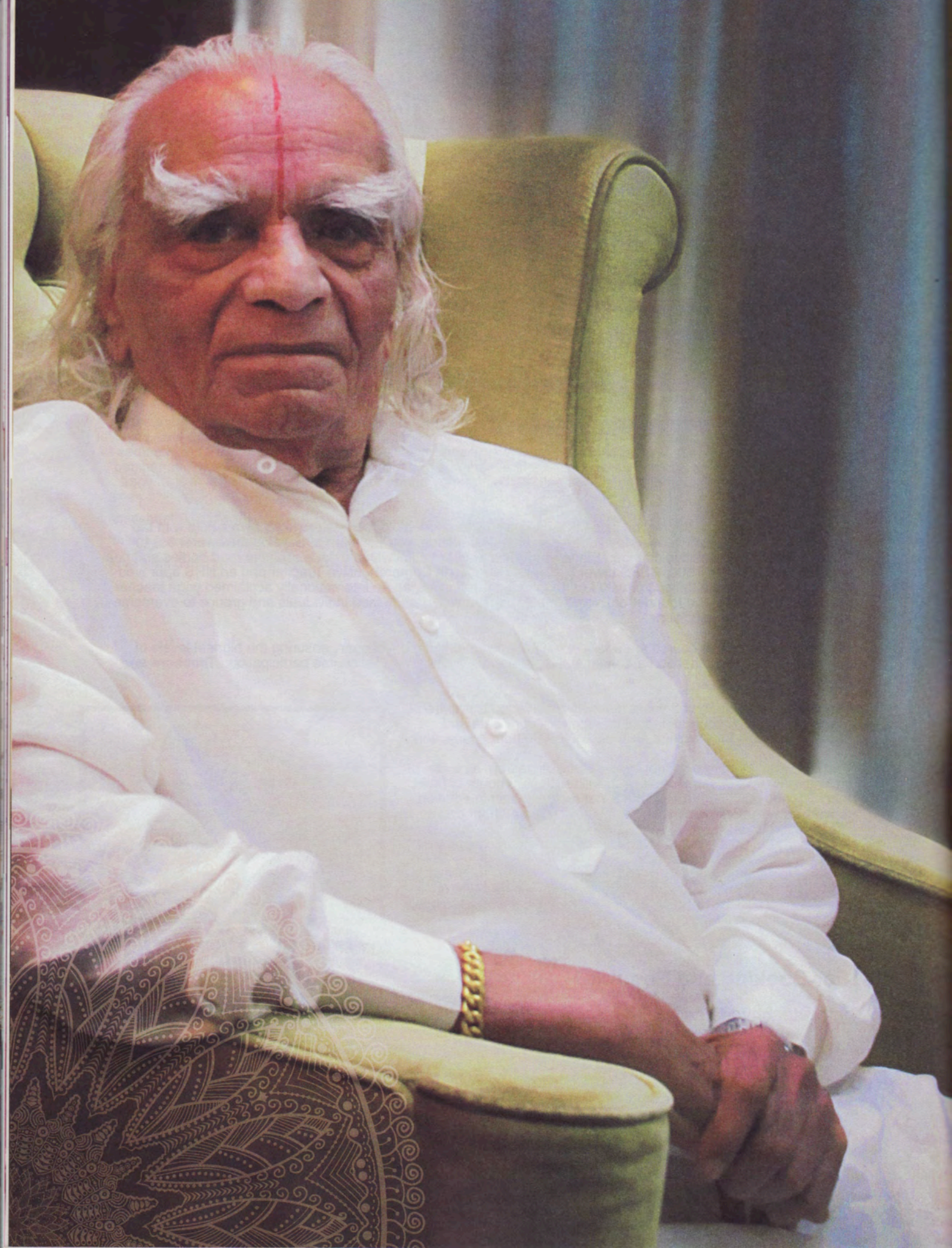
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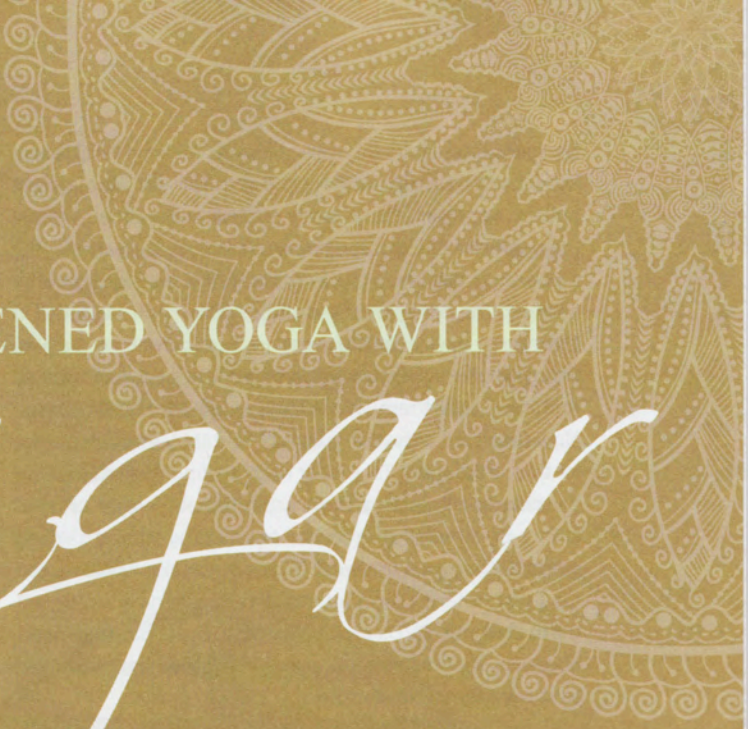
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# ENLIGHTENED YOGA WITH *Iyengar*

DANIEL SIMPSON

Of all the yogic pantheon of swamis, gurus, babas and celebrities, no one living is respected as widely as B.K.S. Iyengar. Half a century after he published *Light on Yoga*, his debut book is still known as 'the yoga Bible', a posture manual referenced by teachers everywhere. Although his name isn't dropped as frequently as Bikram, or the trendier Anusara or Jivamukti, Iyengar's method brought yoga to the masses and shaped how other styles are taught today.

But it doesn't always get the best of press. To detractors, it's too static and precise: poses are held for minutes, while people fret about where to place their little toes without necessarily seeing a bigger picture. Classes can be blizzards of instructions, citing body parts unknown to most anatomists, from the chips of the knees to the dorsal and armpit chest. It's perfectionist, and sometimes unforgiving.

"What's the knock on Iyengar yoga?" one of its senior teachers asked recently. "We are rigid. We are harsh. We are boring." Though peers disagreed, he was posing them a challenge: to embody Iyengar's example more wholeheartedly.

At 92, their mentor still inspires, perhaps even more so than ever. In his twilight years he's retreated from public teaching, and focused on grooming a granddaughter to succeed him. But he's lost none of his zeal, or clarity of insight.

His last book, *Light on Life*, was a yoga memoir, on "the countless blessings of a life spent following the Inward Journey." It distilled more than 70 years of self-analysis, offering guidance with philosophy and frankness. "I am old, and death inevitably approaches," he wrote. "I do pray that my ending will be your beginning." Nevertheless, Iyengar swore a vow: "I have not retired and never shall. I will always keep the inner fire burning." On the book's release, he travelled to America, to give a master-class to teachers from all traditions. In 2009, he made a similar trip to Russia, as a "gift for posterity." Then in June this year he crossed the Himalayas, for what was billed as the 'China-India Yoga Summit', and his final foreign tour.

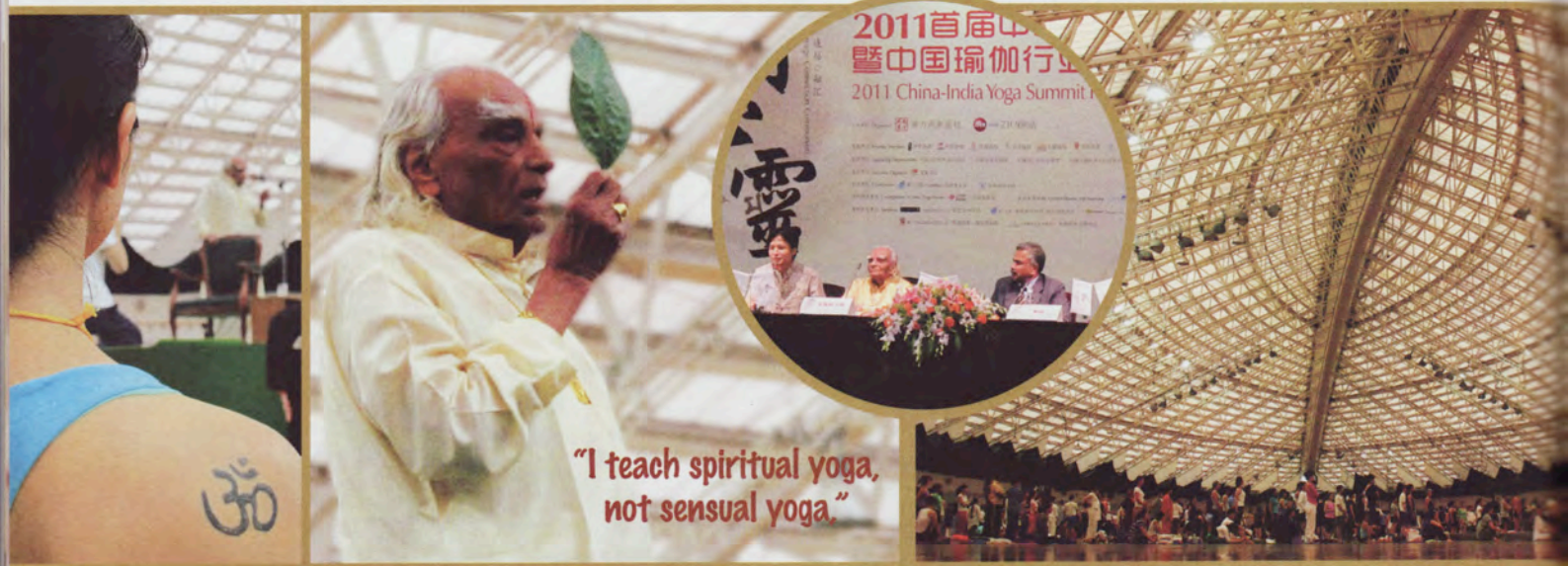


Iyengar's take on finality was different. He said he'd teach "how to start from scratch and aim for the ultimate", a holistic approach that's rarely shared in practice. "I think the responsibility is mine," he declared, "to show how you move from the body to the mind to the intelligence, and finally to the consciousness and psycho-spiritual body." Over three days in a sports hall in Guangzhou, he did just that, with the largest group of beginners he'd ever taught. A decade ago, there weren't any yoga schools in China. Now there are tens of thousands, and they're more popular than traditional Tai Chi, at least among the urban middle classes. Practising is an aspirational lifestyle choice: a way of remaining in shape and feeling modern. Yoga came to China via the west. There are nearly as many yogis as in America, and an industry has sprung up to sell them clothing, DVDs and equipment. But what they need above all are teachers with experience. Iyengar's aim was to show them what this meant.

ist and philosopher, Iyengar prefers to see teaching as a science.

Yoga, he said, is "an investigative instrument", doing "research work from the skin to the self." Although it merges "the individual self of the head with the universal self of the divine heart", it's subtle work, not blissing out with candles. "I teach spiritual yoga, not sensual yoga," he told us. But minds can get distracted by the senses, and by what we think we know.

"You are all speaking of information technology," Iyengar crackled through a headset. Most of the assembled throng were under 40, and brandishing smartphones. "I am giving you technological information. This is far superior." He started by holding up a leaf. Either side of its spine, it looked uneven. "Your body misguides you," he warned. We imagine our postures are balanced when they're not, as the teachers in his entourage revealed when asked to demonstrate onstage. Iyengar showed



### TECHNOLOGICAL INFORMATION

Along with 1,000 Chinese and 300 others, from as far afield as Australia and Europe, I went to find out. Although I'm a committed Iyengar practitioner, I thought I'd never see the maestro who taught my teachers, let alone feel what ignited their devotion. In India, there's a two-year waiting list at his institute. Officially, he no longer teaches, unless you're one of his longest-standing students, or his fresh-faced heir apparent, Abhijata, whom he trains and sometimes helps in women's classes.

At first, I was struck by his size, or the lack of it, apart from a barrel chest. Flanked by his two most senior American teachers, both relative beanpoles, he looked like Yoda sporting a knee-length golden kurta. His silver winged eyebrows and mane lent him the air of a mad professor crossed with a God. Though he calls himself an art-

their legs weren't quite aligned. "To bring these two together, that is yoga," he explained. "You will know that alignment is there when mind does not wander."

One by one, he took pupils and postures apart. "Learn to be humble," he told Patricia Walden, who's worked with him since 1976. "You are misleading them." She wasn't alone. "How pitiable it is they cannot show," he sighed, having called another protégé "a beginner". Then he thrust his arms bolt upright, as if transposed from grainy photos in *Light on Yoga*.

Iyengar was master of ceremonies each morning. Scheduled to teach for two hours, and offered a chair, he stood and overran by 90 minutes. "That's his tempo," laughed Faeq Biria, who runs an institute in Paris, and trains teachers in China. "He's really connected to the cosmic energy. He can go on hours and hours and days and days."



**"If person says pose not for you,  
he is not a real teacher.  
He's a money maker"**

He doesn't eat much food to fuel his stamina, "because my energy is flowing in my body." At home, he has a strict routine: pranayama on waking, then coffee and three hours of asana. The caffeine hit is a single spoon of grounds, with milk and sugar. This habit dates back to his youth. Beset by illness as a boy, he took up yoga at 16 to make him stronger, while living with his brother-in-law. Tirumalai Krishnamacharya was a taskmaster, and Iyengar struggled until he learned that coffee helped. Were his teacher not quite so demanding, what the world knows as yoga today might not exist. Krishnamacharya and his pupils, who included the late Pattabhi Jois of Mysore, were responsible for systematising postures, and connecting them sequentially.

a prop?" he asked, referring sceptics to Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, and the injunction that "the posture should be stable and comfortable."

Disputing his method's entry in the dictionary, Iyengar defines it as: "pure traditional yoga, from our ancestors." If it's characterised by anything more, it's him. Having delegated afternoon classes to Birjoo Mehta, who told us "the message of my guru flows through me," Iyengar intervened on the second day. He wasn't satisfied. "Observe," he chided Mehta. "Teacher should teach from what students are doing."

He took over the session, and stalked us with a microphone. "Imitate what I say," he boomed as he walked. "Do not do what you do." Cries of "Move!" soon snapped one



**"alignment leads to enlightenment.  
It guides you to new light and  
freshness in the pose."**

#### ALIGNED AND ENLIGHTENED

"If person says pose not for you," Iyengar cautioned, "he is not a real teacher. He's a money maker." We all have restrictions on mobility. What matters isn't what we can do, but how we do it. In his eyes, "alignment leads to enlightenment. It guides you to new light and freshness in the pose." Many find this lightness is elusive. Rather than watch people strain, he gives them props, to imprint the outlines of poses on "cellular memory." In Guangzhou, he used blankets, bolsters, bricks and a crash barrier, among other improvisations. "That's how I made yoga to reach the masses," he said. "This much they can take," until "intuitive intelligence" develops.

Nowadays, he also takes support, turning backbends into lengthy meditations. But he scoffs at the notion props are his invention. "Are you not using the floor as

woman into line. Another was adjusted by big toe, while Iyengar balanced on one leg to administer the prod.

I found his presence was enough. Time melted to treacle as he neared. Focused on trying to equalise my posture, I felt muscles hugging bones to twist my torso. My breathing slowed as the concentration deepened. My mind was blank, unfettering awareness. When he'd passed, I saw the mat was drenched in sweat.

Behind me, I heard the voice of Manouso Manos, a 35-year student of Iyengar's. "Do you see what I mean now?" he shouted, at one of his own trainees from San Francisco. "About him being the best yoga teacher in the world? You can't explain that, you have to experience it." His ultimate conclusion was more sober. "None of us can fill Gururji's shoes," Manos confided. Compared to Iyengar, "the rest of us are pretending."