

Geeta Iyengar in Australia

Open your toes, open your mind.

In September 348 delegates from seven countries attended a six-day residential retreat taught by renowned Iyengar yoga teacher, Geeta Iyengar, daughter of revered yoga master BKS Iyengar. Former Iyengar teacher Michael Hollingworth attended the first two days of the Queensland retreat and interviewed Geeta Iyengar for AYL.

Geeta Iyengar has practised and taught yoga all her life, in India and across the world, under the tutelage of her legendary father, BKS Iyengar. Given her authority and experience, it's no wonder that on Geeta's two previous visits to Australia – in 1996 and 2003 – her workshops were booked out. This third visit was no different: despite the significant price tag you'd expect for a six-day event at the upmarket Twin Waters resort in Maroochydore, all places on the retreat had been filled by the close of early bird registrations in May.

For Iyengar yoga practitioners, the Geeta retreat was possibly a last chance to receive the wisdom of the Iyengar tradition directly from BKS Iyengar's daughter. Geeta, now 65 and facing her own health challenges, indicated at the retreat that she will soon retire from teaching.

She said it was for this reason that her focus was strongly on teachers and how Iyengar Yoga should be taught. More than 60% of retreat delegates were either certified Iyengar teachers or teacher-trainees. The remaining delegates

– who required a referral from their teacher to attend – were Iyengar students of more than eight years' practice.

'All I want to do is more yoga'

With three sessions and up to six hours' yoga practice each day, this was an intense and demanding retreat that is likely to leave its mark on yoga in Australia and New Zealand for years to come. One delegate summed up the retreat's inspirational impact: "It was so intense. I've never experienced anything like it. It was really hard. I didn't think I'd get through it. But now all I want to do is more yoga!"

Practitioners, including those less experienced, were particularly struck by the clarity, depth and comprehensiveness of Geeta's teaching. Her instruction extended beyond the asanas, pranayama and remedial teaching to include chanting and Sanskrit pronunciation, with frequent references to the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali.

Geeta's emphasis on the classic sources and ritual practices of yoga were well received by delegates. In the 1960s



Images: Chandru Melwani, Soti Studio - chandru@sonistudio.com

Caption.

and 1970s, Westerners attracted to the rigorous, powerful teaching of BKS Iyengar were at first, less interested in the non-physical aspects of yoga. But yoga practice in Australia has matured. One trainee teacher commented: "It's great to get back to the Sutras". Another added: "I was inspired to know more about the Sutras."

Geeta taught with fierceness and tenderness, displaying an uncompromising commitment to having all pupils penetrate their bodies, minds

and spirits. In the sessions on asanas, practitioners experiencing difficulty were instructed and corrected in front of the roomful of delegates. One man, who had an unbalanced gait due to leg damage from a bone graft as a child, was shown how to work with his shoulder blade and foot. "She left a real imprint," the student said later. "Her instructions were very clear. Through the clarity, repetition and the way she approached it from different angles, I got a really rounded idea."

Carmela Daly, an Iyengar teacher from Darwin, felt that Geeta had a special talent for bringing out the best in everyone. "We all gave our best and we all did better poses," Carmela said. "Our level of penetration in getting into the poses and the alignment was amazing."

To support her in the demanding daily schedule, Geeta brought assistants with her from the Iyengar Yoga Institute in Pune. Geeta's sister, Sunita Parthasarathy, led the chanting, while Abhijata Sridhar (BKS Iyengar's granddaughter) and Raya



Caption.



Caption.

Uma Datta, representing the younger generation of teachers and assistants active at the Institute, demonstrated poses and supported Geeta's instruction. With their energy, alacrity and accuracy, they promise a bright future for the Iyengar tradition.

'Totally successful!'

Current President of the BKS Iyengar Association of Australia, senior teacher Pixie Lillas, was pleased with the retreat's outcomes. "The retreat was a huge success," Pixie said. "People went away excited – but also with principles they felt would work in their lives for years afterwards. And it was great to see the senior teachers also contributing and creating the community."

Iyengar teacher of 30 years, Alan Goode, agreed that a key source of satisfaction was seeing the contribution to emerging teachers. "For them it's a real affirmation of what they are doing. And Geeta is so skilled and sophisticated – but also absolutely uncompromising in getting her message across."

Organisation of the event was undertaken by a group of senior Iyengar teachers, whose efforts were appreciated by all delegates. Carmela Daly commented: "The venue was amazing – a major resort set on a lake, close to the ocean, with beautiful room facilities and wonderful food. Full credit to the association – it was a totally successful event."

Geeta responds

Despite her busy schedule, Geeta found time to answer our questions. Michael began by asking what she hoped to

achieve through the intense residential format of the retreat:

GI: I want to give them as teachers as much as possible, as they will be guiding the future generation. From morning to evening I will be close to them, so they will understand how yoga has to enter into their blood, so that they are able to give it to the coming generation.

MH: Many people are not teachers and are not able to devote two hours or more a day to yoga practice. How should the ordinary person practice?

GI: Always when we have to work, be in society, concentrate on our profession, limitations will be there as far as time is concerned. Certainly they have to start yoga from the health point of view – to keep the body fit for whatever they have chosen as a profession. [But] yoga has to be adapted to follow their life in a smooth way, because a profession demands a lot from a person. For example, people who are working on the computer – everybody has neck pain, they sit in an air-conditioned room for hours and their fingers, their neck, their spine, everything suffers. Any profession, even that of the housekeeper, demands physical strength, mental strength, or a kind of balance ... That things are progressing is understandable and we have to react to it; we have to be quick about it. But why should we go away from that life which our forefathers lived, where there was quietness, smoothness, simplicity? So through yoga we have to make them aware of it ... that we should have that simplicity.

MH: How should practitioners approach the most demanding poses, such as backbends and balancings?

GI: (In yoga) we cannot forget that part which is difficult, which requires tapas (discipline), which is complex, which really demands the discipline. So as you come to backbending or balancing, it's something which is demanding. You need to be really strict with yourself, where your daily life, your routine, your food is concerned. You have to give yourself to these practices, or sadhana, which demands that kind of inner discipline ... When you strictly have to discipline yourself, these asanas, though they look like asanas, are not just simply asanas.

Backbendings and balancings have a tremendous effect on the physiological body, and in a way the spiritual body ... Effect-wise to a general public you may explain it in a simple way. What does the arm balance or what do the backbendings do? You may say your spine remains straight, your respiration will improve, your arms will improve, muscles will be developing – all these are answers for those people who don't understand the depth of yoga.

But for people like me, who have taken it inside, definitely it has a different meaning. Balancing poses or backbendings, they go somewhere deeper inside. They are taken inside, in which there is pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses), there is dharana (concentration), there is dhyana (meditation) ... For teachers it is very important to know that's

how they can penetrate into that. For beginners, it is not necessary – that's why we have different levels of teaching.

MH: As people grow older, how should they deal with their reduced stamina and strength in practising the asanas?

GI: If stamina has to be maintained, there are certain asanas and pranayama which are very essential to do ... You have been told as a student that you are supposed to do inverted postures every day. At least Sarvangasana (Shoulder stand), or at least Viparita Karani (Supported legs-up-the wall) ... And then if you have half an hour's time you can finish off your Sirsasana (Headstand), Sarvangasana, Halasana (Plough), Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (Supported bridge), and Viparita Karani. These are the postures which bring the recovery, for retuning the body. These are asanas which rejuvenate, bring proper circulation, remove fatigue, and exactly balance, so that over-exertion will be taken out and you are able to relax. If that is followed properly, I don't think that problem ahead for the aged group will come. And

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with an aged group there are certain things to do with the props, for example like Setu Bandha on benches, or Viparita Karani on the bolster, or half Halasana on the bench, or chair Sarvangasana. They are all possible for people to do.

MH: Is it appropriate to devote more time to pranayama, while maintaining a regular asana practice?

GI: This is an absolutely subjective question, what a person can do. So it's not a comparison where you will do less time for asana and more time for pranayama. Earlier when I was doing pranayama, my timetable affected me – I had classes, household work, responsibilities, so that I had to [limit] my pranayama. But now the time has

come where even my sister knows, don't disturb me when I am doing prayanama because I cannot set limits.

What we call spiritual practice is such that we are now going somewhere deeper inside. Then you can't just come out from deeper inside to ... put your head, or brain, or mind, into the outer world. So I won't say I will do two hours of pranayama: it might take two hours – and then sometimes not take that much at all ... It depends upon your physical strength and physical energy.

But I would certainly say everyone has to do pranayama, at least a few cycles, to understand this. How will you go to that depth unless you have done it? As you get the experience, then you can say, OK I can do this much or this many



Caption.

cycles ... You are not forced to do 15 cycles, from A to Z, every time. But try to understand your body, try to understand the mind, try to understand yourself ... The basic thing is that you penetrate in yogic practice. It's a free journey from the body right up to the soul. So how will you have covered that journey, whether you are doing asana, whether you are doing pranayama, or doing meditation? You penetrate, you penetrate from body to the soul ... And then you totally understand that journey.

MH: How should people restricted by health or injury approach their yoga?

GI: According to yogic theory itself, karma will always get in the way. It's not a smooth path. We meet with an accident: we don't know when it's going to happen or how ... So we have to face that karma. And that's why Patanjali says *tapah svadhyaya Isvararanidhanani kriyayogah* (burning zeal in practice, self-study and study of scriptures, and surrender to God are the acts of yoga). He says that knowing very well these hurdles will be there, these karmas will be there, we have to have that *tapas* (discipline). So when someone with injuries or the ageing process gets that limitation, one should not be afraid of it. According to my age, I can adjust. That's why, when people come with injuries, we have taught them. Because at least they want to learn how they can lead a better life, and that is possible. Instead of remaining in bed all the time, saying "I cannot, I cannot, I cannot", at least do this much. So if you make it possible [for the student], if he's lying down, to sit, and if you make it possible to stand ... that is progress.

Geeta Iyengar may or may not return to Australia for future retreats, but the teachers she taught at the Twin Waters retreat will take back to their own students her timely reminders of the essence of yoga. In Geeta's words: "Patanjali says, knowing very well the mind of the human being, that we always race for the quick result. He says in the path of yoga, do not expect that. The mind wants fruit, results, because the mind is unstable. He says wait, continue, without any break. It's a long journey – he doesn't say how long!"

Michael Hollingworth, Iyengar practitioner and past teacher learned yoga from Donna Holleman in Italy, where he lived for 10 years. His life has more twists and turns than asanas. He began as a journalist, studied literature in Canberra and Italy, and has worked as a translator, tourist guide, public relations consultant and trainer. He is now a facilitator of leadership and change management programs. Michael@globallearning.com.au