

# Iyengar Yoga's 30 Years in Ann Arbor

Text and Photography by Yoga Instructor Lynlee Sky

Photo by Nancy Wolfe



Yoga Master B.K.S. Iyengar, surrounded by his students, during one of his trips to Ann Arbor in the 1970's. This photo includes a number of yoga practitioners who have gone on to become respected yoga teachers in the area: Laurie Blakeney, David Ufer, Sally Rutzky and Donna Pointer, among others.

"As a well cut diamond has many facets, each reflecting a different color of light, so does the word yoga, each facet reflecting a different shade of meaning and revealing different aspects of the entire range of human endeavour to win inner peace and happiness." Perhaps

it was these words, written by BKS Iyengar in his book *Light on Yoga*, that finally inspired Mary Palmer to travel overseas in the late 60's to meet personally with this author and yoga master. She was also influenced by her friend, Yehudi Menuhin, who, while in Ann Arbor giving a performance, heard of Mary's interest in yoga. He said "you must meet my yoga teacher in India, his name is BKS Iyengar". This was the beginning of Mary Palmer's relationship with Mr. Iyengar.

Mary Palmer and Priscilla Neel, yoga instructors at the Ann Arbor Y at that time, were instrumental in bringing Mr. Iyengar's knowledge of the 3,000-year-old Indian tradition of yoga to Ann Arbor. Yoga was largely unknown in the West until Mr. Iyengar's classic book *Light on Yoga* was published in the early 60's. Up until then, yoga was most likely thought to be a mystical, otherworld practice, involving strict and demanding training, withdrawing from society, renouncing the material world, and obeying a guru.

In 1973, Mr. Iyengar came to Ann Arbor, invited by the Ann Arbor Y. Mary Palmer influenced the 2 directors of the Y, John Williams and Tom Huntzicker, to sponsor the trip knowing it would bring teachers from across the country into town to meet this Indian Yoga Master. His passionate presentation of yoga captured the attention of all those attending those first demonstrations and lectures. He thereafter returned to Ann Arbor many times giving lectures and demonstrations that left audiences in awe at the Power Center and the VFW Hall in the basement on Liberty Street. His last trip to Ann Arbor was in 1993 for the National Iyengar Yoga Convention. In that 20-year span of time, Mr. Iyengar gave classes and teacher training sessions in the Parker Room at the Ann Arbor Y. By the time I began my study of



Joel Singer in Padmasana

Photo by Lynlee Sky

yoga in the 80's, the Ann Arbor Y was the heartbeat of Iyengar yoga in Ann Arbor.

This year the Iyengar "headquarters" is moving to a new building. The Y, now called Ann Arbor YMCA, is having a Grand Opening in April in their new location on Third and Washington Streets. Karen Copeland, the Yoga Program Coordinator at the YMCA, says "We are committed to the Iyengar method of yoga and plan on continuing to offer classes in this method in our new location". Efforts are being made to rename the new yoga room the Palmer Room. Laurie Blakeney, Karen and David Ufer, Donna Pointer, Sally Rutzky, Susan Salaniuk, Ada Cowen, Barbara Linderman, Laura Roberts, Toni Reese, Ron Chalfant, and Susie Vidrih were among those involved in the early beginnings of learning and teaching Iyengar Yoga at the Y. Many of these teachers continue to teach and have branched out over the years to open their own studios to carry the tradition of Iyengar yoga into 2005.

Laurie Blakeney began teaching Iyengar yoga in 1977 and continues to do so today in her school on Fourth Avenue, the Ann Arbor School of Yoga. She travels yearly to India to study directly with Mr. Iyengar, his daughter, Dr. Geeta Iyengar, and Prashant Iyengar at the Iyengar Institute in Pune. The yoga philosophy presented in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, which detail moral, ethical and spiritual growth and responsibility, are the underlying foundation of her school. Techniques are taught in the method of Shri B.K.S. Iyengar to aid and encourage students of every level in developing a regular practice between lessons.

Karen and David Ufer, both with over 30 years experience of practice and teaching carry on the tradition of Iyengar yoga at their studio, Yoga Focus in Eastover Professional Center on Packard. Their studio is dedicated to the Iyengar method of yoga, offering classes for all levels as well as pre natal and gentle yoga, a slower paced approach to the asanas.

Donna Pointer has studied with BKS Iyengar since 1973, and has been teaching since 1975. She is the president of the BKS Iyengar Yoga Association of the Midwest. Sally Rutzky, who now teaches at the Yoga Space, has been teaching since 1981. The Director of Yoga Space, Susan Salaniuk, has been practicing yoga for 24 years and teaching for 15 years. Toni Reese continues teaching at the Y; many yoga babies are born due to her well-attended Yoga for Pregnancy class.

Barbara Linderman has a long yoga history in Ann Arbor. For many, she was their first yoga teacher. One of her students says she "lives her yoga". Barbara left the Y in 1975 to teach independently. She is now the Program Director of the Inward Bound yoga program at the Friend's Meeting House. Inward Bound includes a number of other highly experienced yoga teachers.

Laura Roberts has retired from teaching. She is the director of Yogaware, and she designs yoga clothes and yoga equipment referred to as "props". A noted characteristic of Iyengar yoga is the use of props as an aid to alignment and precision in the poses. Props, such as blankets, straps, blocks, and chairs, make the practice

Tracey  
Metry

Photo by Lynlee Sky



Photo by Lynlee Sky

Susan Christalaw and her daughter, Bonnie

of yoga asanas possible to all. As a result, Iyengar yoga is a valuable aid to those with health problems, physical limitations, aging concerns, arthritis, high blood pressure and “general aches and pains” as one student put it. One doesn’t have to be physically flexible, in shape, or young to begin or maintain the practice of yoga.

Mr. Iyengar’s guru and brother-in-law, T. Krishnamacharya, had a demanding, strict method of teaching yoga to his pupils. In the early classes at the Y, Mr. Iyengar demonstrated a different approach, which was a refinement of his guru’s while still maintaining the link with tradition. He developed a scientific method of sequencing the asanas in such a way so as to take into account the anatomical structure of the asanas as well as the psychological effects they have on the student. As a result of practicing the asanas in a certain order he found they could bring about expected changes, physical, emotional, and spiritual. He divided the asanas into categories according to their effects. For example, some asanas can be calming or stimulating, cleansing, or nourishing. They are also categorized as to whether they are standing postures, seated, supine, forward extensions, backward extensions, inversions, and so on.

Mr. Iyengar teaches instructors to speak in a language that is concise, clear and accessible. Instead of merely calling out the postures and expecting students to perform with minimal instruction, Iyengar instructors observe, guide, and correct students using anatomical references and repeated demonstrations. Physical understanding and technical skills are built in this method of practice. A keener awareness is developed which infuses itself into all aspects of life, physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual.

Yoga is, ultimately, an awakening and observation of one’s spirituality; it is not a religion. At a question and answer session at the Ann Arbor Y, Mr. Iyengar was asked why he continues to practice the asanas.



Melissa Nowak

Mr. Iyengar’s reply is remembered by David Ufer, “ Why should the asanas be done? What is the technique? In common feeling, common life, the mind is very near to the senses. The communication

Lynlee Sky is a certified Iyengar Yoga Instructor and director of Yoga Practice Center in Ann Arbor. She has combined her enjoyment of photography with yoga asanas (postures) in a 2005 calendar. It features “real” people, not masters or models, practicing yoga. The calendar is meant to relay the message that yoga can be practiced by all, despite race, age, religion, or gender. Yoga is practiced to cultivate a deeper sense of who we are, to reveal and discover, layer upon layer, the truer, eternal “Self” hidden within.



tion between the mind and the self, the inner being, the core of our being, the core of our existence. While performing the asanas, many of you must have felt the delight, the joy, pleasure. Probably you may not know consciously why that bliss, why that joy is coming. While performing the asanas, due to the tremendous extension, creating vastness in the body, space is created between the senses and the mind, and the mind goes slightly far away from the body. Thus, the distance decreases

between the soul performing the space increases and the body. the delight. By postures, it takes senses to send mind regarding desires. After finishing for a half-hour or that delight. The from the contact after some time, senses come the yogis say, “Go on practicing.” Continue your practice so that the mind is far away from contact with the senses, so that it will be connected to the self, so that it

The 2005 Iyengar Yoga Calendar, photographed and produced by local Yoga teacher Lynlee Sky, is available through her Yoga Practice Center, as well as at Crazy Wisdom, Shaman Drum and the Food Co-op.

between the senses and the mind is faster than the communication

and the mind while asanas and the between the mind That is why we feel regularly doing a long time for the messages to the attachments or ishing the asanas, an hour you have mind is far away with the senses; but the mind and the nearer. That’s why

may move nearer to the self, so that the mind and the self may become one. That is why we are doing the asanas. It is for this purpose only that the asanas were introduced, not as a physical exercise, not as contortions”.

More than teaching the science, art, and philosophy of yoga, BKS Iyengar, 86 years old, continues to give today’s world the underlying message that within all of us is a divine spark, an eternal lantern glowing unknown, covered and hidden by day to day living until effort and consistent practices of yoga unveil the truer, higher self. Any yoga practitioner, of any style or method, would probably agree that the yoga path is a path richly carpeted with ancient jewels that can be “worn” and shared with all those we meet and love.

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