

## **BRIGITTE WOMAN INTERVIEWS GURUJI B K S IYENGAR**

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**BW-** Thank you for giving me this interview. I am very glad to be here. You have given the world the fantastic presentation of yoga.... (nervous laughter) I am very excited)... and now a lot of people all over the world are practicing yoga. Do you think you have reached everything in your life that you wanted?

**BKS Iyengar-** If you ask me about myself, by the grace of God, I feel I have touched the ultimate. This is certain. If one sees me working with my students he or she may think that I am just a teacher. No doubt I am a teacher in the eyes of many, but when I am teaching I treat my students as my sons and daughters with parental feeling. This feeling of closeness will not be seen by anyone except my students. Regarding myself, I say, I am the most liberated man in the world, I live without any attachments. Nothing attaches me. No pains bother me either. I accept them, that's all. So I have reached that level of equanimity.

**BW-** There was a lot of pain in your life when you were young.

**BKS Iyengar-** Indeed there was. It is an old story. Let me not speak about the early days. It is past.

**BW-** Is pain something that gave you the chance to develop mentally and physically?

**BKS Iyengar-** My friend when I started teaching yoga in 1936, yoga was unknown to the masses, except a few people. Even my Guru, T. Krishnamacharya had no more than half a dozen good students. Today he is called the head or the master of

modern yoga. He is the modern founder of yoga, no doubt. But even in his time when he was considered the top, he had hardly any students. He had to struggle to maintain an institute and family.

Even the journalists those days had no interest in writing about yoga or the personalities of yoga as you find today. I do not think that they had any background of the history of yoga or its effects. Then yoga was not only not respected, but it was thought to be repellent amongst the Indian intelligentsia. They were thinking that yoga was only meant for those who are rejected in life, who have quarrel with their parents, who have no house to stay. Indian people were thinking that these were the people likely to go to yoga. And from that state to today, that yoga is now seen as a household need, is simply amazing.

So I thought of finding out the reason for such ideas and in order to dispel these ideas, I studied the differences in practice of yoga between others and mine, and what I should develop. Why were people not attracted to the subject? Though there were platforms for demonstrations in those days, I could see that their presentations were not attractive or instructive to the people. Yes, presentations were there! Such as Sirsasana head balance, full arm balance, but they were done on a very superficial level. What was missing was how to bring the mind to connect with the action. Though my Guru was at the very top, he was very good in connecting, but he was not able to convey that to the audience. So I thought to bring out all these missing aspects. I brought all my Guruji's knowledge and what was missing, what was missing in the Bombay masters, in the Rishikesh masters. Why with all these writers, presenters and masters, how had yoga not become attractive and popular?

Hence I made up my mind to attract people by presenting yoga practically in the public eye. In order to present it, I had to cultivate a lot of variations and

presentations so that even if I stretched my finger, people's eyes were attracted to that movement of my hand. This way, I developed this skill of observation with reflection in my practices, as yoga is considered to be an art. Yoga is the base art to all other arts. Yet nobody ever explained yoga as an art. So I started presenting practically in an artistic way so that people could observe and perceive the beauty of each asana. Probably I am the first and foremost person to present yoga artfully combining with verbal explanations to attract people towards yoga.

Though I brought the change, even today we see the same old methodologies going on. I have brought this subject of conceptual meditation into a perceptual meditation. How can an average individual meditate? There should be something objective for them to hold on to. So when there is nothing to hold on to, just keeping quiet, the mind sinks and drifts becoming passive and negative. This is not a great achievement. This only means that you are quiet within the frame of your old mind. But my frame of mind was to go beyond the limitations of the mind and make it fully active everywhere in the body. If I am intelligent at one part (points at his head) why should I not make the same intelligence to spread from here to there (points at his finger and toes).

So qualitatively, I developed and made the mind to be present throughout the body while practising for it to function everywhere evenly, like a river which flows uninterruptedly. So I thought that I should develop this art of unifying the movements of the body to mingle with the mind, so that the mind and the body mingle together, charging the intelligence to discriminate whether the action and the union of the mind is correct or not.

I worked and in my practice began to observe, where is the mind seeing? How is it seeing? In what direction is it seeing? So if it is seeing in one direction, that means I have lost all the other directions! From there I thought I ought to cultivate, I have

to feel that oneness, that singleness, from the surface of the skin of the fingers to the brain. Even in all the angles, in the joints, in the muscles, in the fibres and to feel the existence of every cell. Therefore I developed this presentation of making the mind to co-ordinate, abundantly the various parts of the human system that could be perceived by the audience. And that attracted the people to take to yoga more and more.

Then of course the second part was how to impart? The presentation is cultivated, but how to attract people to go into the subject themselves? That was another thing. So, by the grace of God, I developed this character to motivate the student, to hook them so that they may not leave yoga. I went according to their minds, and I used to win their minds by my presentation of yoga. That is how it became popular.

**BW-** Do you think that people need pain too, like you, to develop their selves?

**BKS Iyengar-** No, circumstances will always be there as the cause for pains. Yoga was not a respected subject at all. The public was repelled by it. In my own country, people hated yoga. It was only credible to them from the philosophical aspect not the other aspects of yoga as art and science.

Naturally, certain inner emotional pain, social pain was there. People have said. “What is the reason for making so many adjustments?” Our body is the raw material. God provided us with discriminative intelligence to use the discipline of yoga judiciously so that the raw material- the body- could be utilised for better living through perfect understanding of the usage of this raw material. Then one will be free from physical sufferings and mental pains.

Physical pain was there because the asanas were not coming. Nobody was able to teach in a way to avoid pain but the Gurus, like mine, demanded the position to be presented in the shortest time, at their will and command. Just imagine how much I

had to suffer pain when a method was not shown. Guruji gave me few directions but they were not enough for a student to present without creating any injury. Up to now I have not created any injury to anyone in my teaching.

However, life is full of pain. Strain may be already existing. I discovered how to progress in yoga without undergoing strain and pain and this made it to become very popular. Still I faced many circumstantial pains. Society was making me a laughing stock. All these goaded me to develop and to decide, “I will bring respect and reverence to the subject they are laughing on today.” I made that determination in 1936 and I have proven it successfully.

Today millions of people are practising. So how did it become so popular? It has been one man show. Many have copied this method afterwards. I have spoken to people who were against yoga. I have spoken to those who were loving yoga, yet still criticising it as physical yoga. But I have learned through practice that the body is the temple of the Self, the body is the prop for the soul. If the prop is not judiciously used how can it maintain the soul. The soul might get disgusted and fade out of reach.

Vinyasa (Flow yoga) allows the intelligence to get rusted. Sharpness does not get created by movement. You can call this the yoga of motion and not the yoga of action. I practised yoga with ‘Vinyasa Krama’ for decades. But I started changing the practical language. The traditional way became clear without breaking the tradition, the art of adjusting and adapting according to the situation was how I brought it to the public. Then I started using the language that better suited the mental frame of those days worldwide.

**BW-** And today there are many different yoga styles around the world: you see “yoga flow” and “asthanga” and things like that. Do you think that is real yoga? Or is it more like fitness workout?

**BKS Iyengar-** We have to accept there are different styles because the public is accepting all these things. Yoga itself remains pure. But there are many names given now. You can say yoga as it is taught by Mr. Iyengar and yoga as it is taught by Pattabhi Jois is quite different. Pattabhi Jois's yoga, I give as an example, is called power yoga by his followers.

Have you read the Yoga magazines of 1960's? Yoga and Health Magazine of the UK? Not Yoga Journal, Yoga Journal came later. Westerners were attacking me for teaching jumpings (Vinyasa form) as a pure physical callisthenic method. And today, the same jumpings in yoga is called power yoga. Why? Because these methods are always moving. In power yoga there's a motion, because of the motion there is vibration and because of the vibration they call it power yoga. But in motion there is literally less understanding of action. Mine is less motion more action, or I say motion and action go with mathematical calculations with rhythm, melody and union. It is like salt dissolving in water. You have to make the self and the intelligence to dissolve in the body. That is my method. I told you before that I have seen my Guruji's presentations in the field of movement from Tadasana, Uttanasana, Chaturanga Dandasana, Urdhva Mukha Svanasana, Adho Mukha Svanasana to Paschimottanasana and back to Chaturanga, Urdhva Mukha, Adho Mukha Svanasana, Uttanasana to Tadasana as Vinyasa Yoga whereas when he practised alone, he was doing without jumping. He was number one in those days. But still something was missing in his presentation. From what was missing in his presentation, I started connecting. This connection gave me a link to the early ancient presentation.

For example see some of the oldest books. You see only drawings they are only representative. They are not subjective presentation, not one percent appears as practical yoga. Nobody questions. It is a drawing. Whether the drawing was done by a yogi or a non yogi we do not know. That is a question mark. So if you see

those poses, some people's legs are long, some people's arms are long, legs short, trunk short etc. I would say the artist has drawn according to his own imagination.

So I brought the subject practically. Good and bad have been experimented by me in my body. I stuck to the good and gave it to the public. So a sequential method is an Iyengar method. Time wise method is an Iyengar method. You can say for example that if you stay too long in a posture your breath becomes hard. I started readjusting the position at once to remove the hardness for monitoring and treating the body. I have done all this. I studied all the good and the bad of each asana. I created from disorganised sadhana to an orderly practice so that each one experiences the goodness of yoga.

In my experiments, if I do this what happens, if I do that what happens. This way I used to study to get the feedback, which balances pitta, kapha and vata without strain. In my practice I studied the strain and the pain through trial and error and through adjustment, how they transformed into a painless state.

**BW-** Very early you started to teach women. Was that a special thing of the time?

**BKS Iyengar-** My friend, I am the first Indian to teach women in India, in 1936. My Guru used to teach elderly ladies but only in private classes. But I am the only one who conducted classes for ladies in large groups and in Girl's schools in Pune.

**BW-** Do you think that women need yoga... more than men?

**BKS Iyengar-** Women have the same circulatory, digestive and nervous systems like men. But the responsibility of running the family is more on a woman than on men. Man is literally aggressive whereas women are not as aggressive as men. Women are not only compassionate, but bear the family load with ease. Man thinks that he is intellectually stable. This builds pride and their physical strength makes them to be arrogant and intoxicated. So a man thinks that he is intellectually well

developed to decide things. But the women's intelligence is in the stability of their emotions. Family life survives on emotional intelligence and not on intellectual intelligence. So I started teaching women to be emotionally strong to face the world as well as to maintain the family. And that is why I started teaching girls and women and later attracted thousands and thousands of women in the world. It is said in the early days that women were not doing yoga at all in India. But this is all untrue. Kausalya, the mother of Rama, the seventh incarnation of God accordingly to Hindu Mythology was also a practising yogini. She said let me do pranayama before I bless you, as Rama had to go and live in the forest for 14 years. This is the history.

The problems came when the Moghuls started invading India. The women were raped. In order to keep women safe a lot of restrictions were brought in to protect them. This protection brought the division between men and women. Otherwise Indian men were respecting women highly. By their protection women were not allowed to go in the streets and show their faces. We forget that. So if you go to the background you understand how yoga started dying due to the Moghul's invasion. Then the British arrived. They brought and took over with their own culture making India poor. They said love the English language and we will give you a job. So they made the local heritage disappear, brought their own heritage "to culture" the Indians. So English became important. Out of poverty people had to know English to get a job. So English became the identity.

I have said often in public that the British people were saying, "The sun never sets in the British Empire"- such was their arrogance, but see what has happened? Not only did the sun set in the British Empire but also it caused the downfall of the Indian heritage. Thank God after Independence many of the past things like dance, music and yoga were regenerated and rejuvenated.



**BW** Do you think that women need more regeneration, relaxation, rather than these very strong physical dynamic asanas?

**BKS Iyengar-** No, still a certain amount of physical strength is needed. Women are considered almost everywhere, whether in East or West, North or South, as soft and weak.

Men are considered to be very strong and very powerful. But unfortunately it is not recognised that women are stronger than men in their willpower. Inside, women are stronger than men. That is my experience, and I have taught so many people all over the world. People say in India women are not respected. But it is true also in many countries that women are not given the same respect as men. As I have travelled much I came to know this. For example: In 1982 when I went to Japan I saw how women were treated there. You would be surprised to know that if you meet my students from different cultures of 1982 they will tell you, if Iyengar had not come to teach we would not have the courage to face our men.

So what I am saying is yoga builds up that quality in women to face any type of circumstance with ease, calm and quietness. Man cannot. He sees everything intellectually whereas a woman thinks not only intellectually but also emotionally. With my experience I say a woman has both, intellectual intelligence which grows vertically like a coconut tree and emotional intelligence like a banyan tree spreading sideways. So spreading sideways is going to vastness.

### **Banyan Tree**

*(ficus benghalensis – considered sacred)*

Going vertically who knows? It may not stand too long if there are problems. So a woman's core is emotionally very strong. That is why their suffering is family suffering; husband's behaving, misbehaving or whatever it may be. But if you study women, they are more quiet than men. A man is more restless than a woman. The woman is restless only when the family life gets imbalances. So yoga helps the woman how to balance family duties, as well as occupational duties. And that is why I say yoga is valuable to women.

**BW-** Are there special asanas only for women?

**BKS Iyengar-** There are no special asanas for women. Only what to do and what not do according to circumstances is important. (*menstruation, pregnancy, post-partum, menopause*)

**BW-** what are the best asanas for women?

**BKS Iyengar-** My friend, you know, if I give that, that means I show disrespect to some part of yoga and respect to some other part of yoga. So all I can say is what one has to practice daily to keep oneself cool in head and heart. How to keep the brain in a state of quietness, calmness and how to make the mind function more actively than the brain. This is what yoga teaches. Subconscious mind becomes conscious mind in the field of yoga. And conscious mind becomes subconscious. For example you know Setu Bandha Sarvangasana, in this asana the conscious brain is down, the subconscious brain is above, so gravitation of pressure and the conscious brain being down, we get the subconscious mind to become more conscious due to the gravitational force. Sirsasana too affects the mind. The brain is down, and due to the ascending quality of the pose the mind is above, so the mind supersedes the brain. But when you do a backbend, the brain supersedes the mind. As such we have to know the bio-chemical changes of each and every asana, what changes take place, and what transformation takes place.

**BW-** Ok, I read something you wrote---- in a German book... “Yoga taught me only to think of... and to work on the aspect in my life that I lead a fertile life helping for the wellbeing of people, of mankind”?

**BKS Iyengar-** I say the same thing in a different language. I say to the first question alone you asked me, I am completely mature so I have a fertile mind. For example I have taught people like Krishnamurthy, I have taught people like Aldous Huxley and Dilip Kumar Roy, politicians, administrators, lawyers and so forth . How is it that not one could attract me towards their ways of thinking?

How is it that they were attracted to my subject? This shows that my practice was thoroughly mature, thoroughly fertile and hence I did not oscillate or vacillate my mind. And they saw the good in my presentation. People like Krishnamurthy never would have accepted it, if it had not been as mature as it was.

**Rita Keller-** May I interrupt, the question was also, that you sacrificed your life for the wellbeing of mankind.

**BKS Iyengar-** I say it is not a sacrifice. I ‘gave’ my life not only to myself to improve my own life, but the moment I improved, I thought about how I could give the society a joyful life like I have. I have not sacrificed my life to anything. I used my life for the betterment of life. So it is not a sacrifice.

**BW-** Ok. But what was the important experience for you in your life.

**BKS Iyengar-** To you, I said freedom.

I am completely free. On one hand God gifted me. If I am alone I am 100 percent free. No force touches me. No future attracts me nor do I get attracted to the past. I live in the present. Even now as I am talking my words belong to the present without the taint of the past or the future. I do not calculate and speak or write. The

moment I calculate I am in the past or the future. I am not a dual person, because I am not thinking of the past or the future. Whatever you are asking me and I respond I am speaking what comes directly from my heart. I say this means that I am in the present. Therefore I live in the present.

**BW-** If you could start your life again, what would you change or would you have changed nothing?

**BKS Iyengar-** If God calls me and gives me another life I would wish for a life that builds up on the previous one. In case I have not fulfilled or I have not understood, that he will grace me with the occasion to learn what is left in what I have done in this life. So I am very happy, and I will be very happy and my biggest problem is, though I live in freedom, I am slave to my students. Though people say Iyengar gets angry, they cannot measure my love and affection. I go out of my way to build them up. So if at all, I expect another life, it is because of my pupils whom I love. Because they love and practise yoga, there is something missing still in their sadhana though I try to correct them. My heart feels how to fulfil them so that they can also get that freedom like me. This makes me to get attached to my students. As I am attached I am bound to have a life. As I am bound to have a life, that means my pupils too have to have their lives, that means I will be a preceptor for them to guide them in the next life also.

**BW-** Do you think you were a good father. And you are a grandfather now?

**BKS Iyengar-** Yes

**Rita Keller-** and a great grand father

**BKS Iyengar-** Yes, great grand father

**BW-** Do you learn something from your children?

**BKS Iyengar-** I always learn. You want to know? Abhi can you tell what I told about your daughter?

**Abhijata-** This is the natural condition which God makes. So when the baby is born what is the natural condition and how we have to learn from the natural condition because we unlearn that in our lives. For example the anatomy he was explaining, that the spinal cord and the pelvic girdle of my daughter have the natural form what God has given her. Through life, practices and habits we will change that. So we have to learn from this natural state how to maintain it.

**BKS Iyengar-** Just imagine that, so I learn even from new born children.

**BW-** Is there anything left yet that you want to do?

**BKS Iyengar-** I cannot say what is left because I do not know!

If I knew then I say that is it. But as I cross beyond my limitations in my practice I experience things which are even new to me. Who knows, it might take me somewhere, and I might think: oh, what a pity it did not come to me all these years. So I am happy. I thank God, as new things have touched me now.

**BW-**Could you describe your life only in one sentence

**BKS Iyengar-** One sentence?

**BW-** One sentence. One sentence (laughter) One sentence.

**BKS Iyengar-** My friend, life is fire. Life is, you know, spreading so that is why it is called fire. To elaborate, fire purifies, so life is a purifying fire. I have to keep that light of fire burning. In order to keep that light burning there is no other system in the world except yoga. Very few people know. And that is why I use the word. It is a basic art. The basic art for living. It is the foundation art for all arts. Because from yogika, all other sciences come. Yogic discipline leads towards

perfection in its art which then leads to scientific study or discovery. Even how to speak comes from yoga. Therefore I consider yogic art as a basic art and the finest art. It has no end. For me it is God. So each asana, when I am performing, I consider as a God and I have to get the best out of it. So the asanas are to grace me fully to experience this effect. So life being fire, so too my practice should be like a fire.

**BW-** What is important for beginners? When I want to start with yoga what is important for me? And for other women?

**BKS Iyengar-** You have to follow the teacher. You have to follow the master. Then once you have followed.... You know like cooking, how do you learn cooking?

**BW-** Oh, at school, I learned cooking at school.

**BKS Iyengar-** But that took long time, is it not?

**BW-** Yes and now I cook for my family..everyday.

**BKS Iyengar-** So yoga, is to be learned with someone so that you understand how to bake the body. When you have learnt how to bake and cook then you do not need a teacher. Then you learn from your own self and you build up varieties, tastefully, is it not? So yoga is like that.

**BW-** OK

**Rita Keller-** Cook your own life!

**BW-** I bake my life (All laughing)

**BKS Iyengar-** Yoga is like that.

**Rita Keller-** Do you have a last message for women?

**BW-** Yes, the last message for women and perhaps quintessence of your rich experience?

**BKS Iyengar-** You know when the mother is not there in the house, have you seen any joy and happiness in that house? So the main property in the yogic field, which will be interesting for all of us to know, is that nature is mother, father is called God. So (parental) nature is the one which is protecting us. The nature is the one which generates food for us to eat. It is nature which generates energy for us to survive. So the mother is mother earth. So if the mother is not there can you stand on the ground, on the floor? So when the universe is dependent on mother earth, how important is the mother in the house? Just think of it! Therefore I say yoga is very essential for mothers to practise so that the dormant energies which do not surface, surfaces and supports her keeping the family in a balanced and happy state.

**BW-** And so it keeps the world in a happy state.

**BKS Iyengar-** And Patanjali also used that. He says yoga brings the joy (bhoga) in the family, joy in your own self (apavarga). It is called Bhoga and Apavarga. So yoga teaches us to balance these two together, then one is a perfected whole being, not otherwise.

**BW-** Thank you very much.