

# This patriarch of yoga treats advancing age as an enemy

## BKS Iyengar On Why He Loves The West, And How He Can Still Do A Headstand For 30 Minutes Even At The Age Of 91

Bishwanath Ghosh | TNN

**Chennai:** When a man of 91 walks as if he is barely 60, talks as if he is a 45-year-old CEO of a recession-proof company and smiles with the innocence of a 10-year-old, there ends all debate — if there's still any — about the wonders that regular practice of yoga can do to your mind and body. But then, the man in question is no ordinary practitioner — he is the lord of yoga.

Perhaps more people in the West are familiar with the name of BKS Iyengar than in India, though with the winds of change blowing — from the West, unfortunately — the importance of yoga and Iyengar's stature in the field are being acknowledged back home as well. "When I became a teacher in 1936, one was thought to be half-insane to take up yoga. We did not have more than 10 teachers in the whole of India. Until 1954, we were struggling. I was teaching in schools and colleges of Pune. They would make me wait for hours. At times they would just send me back after the wait. I took all those humiliations but never gave up," said Iyengar, who was in Chennai on Sunday afternoon to give away certificates to students of the prestigious Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram who had completed their teacher's training.

In 1954, salvation arrived in the form of a student called Yehudi Menuhin, the violinist and conductor, who was in India to perform at the invitation of Jawaharlal Nehru. "He had a nervous attack and could not hold the violin. Iyengar cured him and he gave successful performances. He invited me to teach in Switzerland, which turned out to be the gateway of yoga to the West. People never thought someone of Menuhin's calibre could be interested in yoga," reminisced Iyengar. The rest, as they say, is history; though during his initial teaching years in the West, especially in England, he was subjected to insults reserved for the brown-skinned. "I used to be called a slave. But soon I became a slave-driver," he laughed.

Even then, Iyengar's gratitude for the West remains intact. "Their honesty and integrity and sincerity should be an eye-opener for Indians. Indians were always afraid of my discipline. They were not prepared to undertake the hard sadhana," he told the newly-certified teachers, a large majority of them from the West.

Iyengar has a strong emotional bond with the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram. To understand the bond, a bit of history. Way back in the 1920s, T Krishnamacharya, now celebrated as the father of yoga in south India, was teaching in Mysore under the patronage of its Ma-



A Prathap

**WORDS OF WISDOM:** BKS Iyengar interacting with newly-certified yoga teachers of the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram at RK Nagar in Chennai on Sunday

haraja when two extraordinary boys joined him as his disciples. One was his own brother-in-law, BKS Iyengar, then a sickly boy; and the other Pattabhi Jois.

Jois stayed on in Mysore (he died recently at the age of 94) and founded Ashtanga Yoga, which is a rage in the West by the name of power yoga; while Iyengar moved to Pune to start his own school of yoga, which gave utmost importance to

wanted to learn yoga under him, he said, 'Ok, come tomorrow at 3 in the morning.' We used to live in a very small house. Nobody could sleep. Everybody was angry with me," recalled Desikachar, an engineer by qualification who plunged into full-time practice in 1961. "At 3 in the morning he would teach me Hatha Yoga Pradipika, and in the mornings he would teach me to perfect the asanas. He would say, 'If your pulse goes up after an asana, your practice is wrong.'"

Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram is guided by the principle that what works for one person need not necessarily work for another — one's age and body constitution need to be taken into account. In this context, Desikachar was narrating a case where an Army officer, after practising headstand, began to suffer from vertigo. "I told him that because of his age, the muscles of his neck had become stiff and that..." Desikachar had barely finished when Iyengar declared: "Age is your enemy. It restricts you to a certain frame of mind, but the purpose of yoga is to get out of that frame of mind and go beyond. I was practising non-stop right up to the age of 75. At 80 I fell from a scooter and hurt myself so badly that I could not even lift my hands. My students thought my life was over. But I combated it. I told myself that if I stop, I it would mean I have no faith in myself. So I fought. So I combated my fear. Today I am 91, but I can do headstand for 30 minutes, and my feet don't oscillate even for 30 seconds. Sadhana cannot be stopped."

The audience stood up in applause.

### GURUSPEAK

“Until 1954, we were struggling. I was teaching in schools and colleges of Pune. They would make me wait for hours. I took all those humiliations but never gave up”

BKS Iyengar

the alignment of the body during a pose rather than mere achieving of the pose. He is known to have perfected his poses by stretching himself out on road-rollers or by tying a load of bricks to his knees.

Krishnamacharya, on the other hand, relocated to Chennai where his son and disciple TKV Desikachar set up the Yoga Mandiram in 1976 as a way of paying guru dakshina to his father. Desikachar, now 71, also recounted his initial difficult days as a yogi. But his difficulties were of a different nature. "When I told my father I