



“And do thy duty, even if it be humble, rather than another’s, even if it be great.

To die in one’s duty is life: to live in another’s is death.”

– *Bhagavad Gita, chapter 3, verse 35; translation by Juan Mascaro*

At the Iyengar Yoga Centre of Victoria, we were recently the host community for a national assessment; the second one we have organized over the past year. During an assessment the centre is closed from Friday afternoon until Sunday evening; all our regular weekend programs are cancelled. This costs us money and, although the national Iyengar association pays a fee for our space and reimburses us for many of the direct expenses, it does not come close to covering our costs. The centre always ends up not only supporting but also financially subsidizing this event.

We endeavour to spread out assessments across the country, not only in consideration of the centres which host them, but also the candidates, so that as few as possible have to undergo the expense and disruption of a long journey. For candidates and assessors alike, as well as the environment, it would be simpler and less stressful to hold an assessment in or near their local community. However, for a variety of reasons this is rarely possible.

It is unusual for any community to have two assessments in such close proximity, but these were at levels requiring experienced students. Canada’s thirty three million people are spread out across the second biggest country in the world. The largest concentrations of Iyengar Yoga teachers and students are in Ontario and

British Columbia: consequently Toronto, Vancouver and Victoria are frequent venues.

The problem of distribution is further compounded by the fact that few centres are large enough to host an assessment. A solid student base strong enough to practise at the level being assessed is a fundamental requirement, as is a well-equipped studio large enough for practice and teaching. Assessments also require private space for candidates to wait while preparing to teach, space for assessors to hold private discussions and do their marking, space to prepare and serve the assessors lunch during the mid-day break, administrative support and more. Then there is a question of the availability of qualified assessors, a majority of whom come from the west coast.

Assessments are a lot of work for a lot of people involving considerable time and expense. Is it worth it? *Definitely*, I would say! I have seen the standard of teaching and consequently the level of students improve enormously throughout our country since we implemented certification.

When B.K.S. Iyengar insisted that Canada join in the assessment process instituted by him and already well established in the United Kingdom, United States and many other countries, there was a lot of resistance. Canadians had been travelling to Pune since the mid 1970’s, and he had previously spoken to us and sent the documentation. We were aware of the levels of syllabus he had established and many of his requirements.

Guruji advised us to “come together annually”⁸ advice we began to follow as early as 1988 when our first national meeting took place in a rustic lodge on a small lake outside of Montreal. Previously

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teachers from different regions of Canada had met each other in Pune or at conventions organized in the United States. In fact it was during the 1987 convention at Harvard University that Canadian teachers from coast to coast had their first meeting with Guruji and committed to coming together at least once a year. Since then annual meetings have taken place in Canada from Atlantic to Pacific, in most major cities and nine of our ten provinces:

St. John's, *Newfoundland*

Halifax, *Nova Scotia*

Fredericton, *New Brunswick*

Montréal, *Québec*

Ottawa & Toronto *in Ontario*

Winnipeg, *Manitoba*

Saskatoon, *Saskatchewan*

Edmonton, *Alberta,*

Vancouver, Victoria, Abbotsford and Penticton, *British Columbia*

Through yoga and with Guruji's encouragement we have come to know our own country at the same time as following the yogic process of knowing our self.

It was during a convention in Toronto in 1993 that Guruji insisted we implement certification, and the process was begun at a meeting held on the day after his departure from Canada. Four years of hard work resulted in the implementation of what we came to call "Guruji's directive" to form a national association, establish a curriculum and put in place a process of certification and assessment. He issued certificates to eleven Canadian teachers during an intensive in Pune in 1997. The first assessment in Canada took place the following year in Vancouver. Now we have one hundred and seventy two certified teachers, many of whom have upgraded beyond the introductory level.

The first certificates were issued by Guruji on the understanding that those receiving them would serve as assessors and carry on the work of certifying others. For various reasons including ill health, and dissatisfaction with the process, some have left. It could not be otherwise. Others have been trained but we still need more of our younger teachers to begin preparing themselves to take over when others retire as they must, one way or another.

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Given the work involved, why would anyone bother?

Students attending the Canadian intensive in Pune in 1997 learned why from Geetaji. Daily she spoke of the importance of fulfilling our duty, and she speaks from experience as an exemplary example herself of a dutiful disciple and dutiful daughter. During our classes, constant demands were being made of us to open our minds along with our bodies, to change our perceptions, to make an extraordinary effort to penetrate deeper, to awaken awareness, to expand our consciousness. If she were addressing an individual student, having given the appropriate instruction but seeing little action, Geeta would look her or him straight in the eye and enquire: "*Is it not your duty?*" Then, after a perfectly timed pause giving the perplexed student time to absorb this idea, she would follow up by enquiring: "*Then whose duty is it?*" Having accepted Guruji's certificate, it seemed clear to me that it was my duty to make the effort to implement certification in Canada in accordance with Guruji's wishes.

To establish and maintain the standards Guruji set for us we had to look at our teacher training programs, which became more focused. Within certain parameters we had flexibility to train in formal courses or through an apprenticeship system. Exactly how we followed the curriculum was up to us in our local communities, but the expectation was that at the end of the training, student teachers would be able to meet certain standards in yoga practice, teaching, anatomy, physiology, psychology and philosophy.

In Victoria we follow the apprenticeship method and have learned by trial and error not to take all who want to become teachers, but to be selective. In the yogic tradition training is a privilege not handed out freely but earned.

This is a difficult concept to convey sometimes in the climate of entitlement which is prevalent these days, and particularly in today's yoga world where teacher training has become a money making venture, widely advertised and freely given to those who have not yet gained proficiency as students.

In the Iyengar world, students need a minimum of three years training with a certified Iyengar teacher before they can apply for teacher training. In Victoria our program takes three years and is very thorough, meeting all the requirements of the Iyengar Yoga Association of Canada. It is also small. With six of us acting as teacher trainers, we accept only a few apprentices so we can give them the time we consider essential to become a skilled teacher of Iyengar Yoga. We believe that this follows more closely the tradition of yoga where students were not given any training until they showed themselves ready, and not given more until their master considered they had absorbed what they had already been given.

Guruji, in the tradition of the great Tibetan Yogi Milarepa, was not welcomed by his guru. It was some time before Krishnamacharya accepted him other than as someone to perform chores around his *Yogashala*. Like the fearsome Marpa who eventually became Milarepa's guru, did Krishnamacharya see the potential greatness in Guruji? I can only speculate about this, but clearly the privations and harsh treatment Guruji received, served only to intensify his practice (*abhyasa*) and renunciation (*vairagya*), the two pillars of yoga.

How to faithfully transmit the work of this great living Master, a Hindu Brahmin from India, to contemporary Canada? This is a dilemma we face as we go about our work within our own culture adhering to Canadian customs. Guruji is traditional and at the same time the most creative and innovative person I have ever met. *He* is a great man, a great Guru. *We* are teachers not gurus. There is a significant difference.

Good teachers will demand a great deal from their students, but we do not have the right to intervene as directly, as forcefully and as pointedly as Guruji. However, we do have a duty to Guruji to represent him and present his work as clearly, cleanly and unadulterated as possible. We have to convey that yoga is a spiritual practice. We too have to assault those defenses which obscure the light of yoga. We have to keep *abhyasa* and *vairagya* at the forefront of our lives and the heart of our teaching.

In Canada the senior assessors who pioneered Guruji's work, who were trained by him, are senior not only in experience but in age. Who will carry on the tradition? This is a question I ponder frequently. Who is going to volunteer their time to help other teachers advance?

Sometimes I am pessimistic about the feasibility of transferring ancient eastern teachings to the Canada of today. Yoga involves learning to look at oneself critically and taking incisive action to remove the ignorance which obscures knowledge of our true or higher self. We have to develop the ability to see what is rather than what we want to see. We have to be self-critical and self-analytical. Yet these days criticism itself is suspect with more energy going into self-justification rather than looking at the factors which are preventing growth. I once heard a university student arguing with her professor because she was given an A rather than the A+ which she felt she deserved. How can you teach such people? This goes against the grain of yoga which says that we are all unique individuals whose evolution depends on looking at where *we* need to change and getting on with it without blaming or complaining. What others are receiving, what others are dealing with really has nothing to do with us. We are here to mitigate the adverse effects of our own karma created, so a Hindu would say, from past lives; but even if

you believe that this life is your one and only, you still have to deal with your heredity and what you have created for yourself. For all of us the question: "*Who am I?*" lingers even as we endeavour to push it aside.

My senior colleagues in the Iyengar Yoga community do their work not as a penance but from gratitude at learning from such a great teacher and awareness of the necessity to pass on this jewel which has been given to us. Sometimes though, through fatigue and overload, we forget this. There were certainly moments during this last assessment when joy and devotion were not my predominant states of mind. Now, a week afterwards, as I reflect on the process which led up to this assessment and the procedure we followed during its course, I see it as a valuable opportunity for the practice of yoga by candidates, assessors, workers in the host community, officers of our national association^{al} who were involved before and during the actual days of the assessment, and those who afterwards will tidy up all the loose ends generated by the event itself. The work is ongoing!

These days, I am constantly dismayed by the commercial climate abroad in yoga and the trivialization I see all around me. The two assessments we hosted this 2008/9 season, along with the vibrant celebration of Guruji's 90th birthday in December, have reassured me that locally at the Iyengar Yoga Centre of Victoria and nationally within the Iyengar Yoga Association of Canada, the tradition of service and gratitude is well understood.

This column is written in gratitude to all those whose work contributed to the success of the two assessments: assessors, candidates, students and volunteer workers. Now, it's time to practise vairagya and move on to the next task!

Om namah Sivaya. ॐ