

# A lifetime of YOGA



Joan Stonehouse teaches yoga in Norfolk, plus retreats in the UK and abroad. In celebration of her long and continuing yoga career – and the inspiration she has been to so many – Hester Clack interviewed Joan for Spectrum magazine.



Yoga has supported Joan through the inevitable ups and downs of life, and continues to support her in her 70s. Joan, originally from Newcastle, turned 73 in February and has been practising yoga for 48 years and teaching for 45.

In the 1970s Joan moved house and accidentally enrolled in an Iyengar Yoga class in Cheshire. As a trainee teacher in Manchester she feels privileged to have been taught by Mr Iyengar. She also joined the BWY when she moved back to Norfolk.

#### How did you get into Iyengar Yoga?

I started practising Pranayama Yoga in Norfolk in 1970. It was as different to the yoga I do now as it is possible to get but I was hooked almost from the first class, as I felt so relaxed afterwards. Then I found out we were going to move house. So I just signed up again in Cheshire, a Hatha class this time, and I loved it.

Then in 1972 someone told me about a class nearer to me. When I went along to enrol I was told the beginner's class was full but there was room in the intermediate class. I asked what you had to be able to do to join that class, the teacher said, "Stand on your head for five minutes." I'd never been on my head in my life at that point, but I said, "Oh, yes, I can do that!"

It turned out to be Iyengar Yoga, which I found extremely challenging. I had been one of the stars in the Hatha class, where a lot of the emphasis had been on flexibility. The Iyengar class was very demanding, as we built up strength to match flexibility. But by the end of one term I noticed differences in my strength and flexibility and in my understanding of how to do the poses and I've never looked back.

Then my teacher asked me if I had thought about teaching. I hadn't, but I realised I would love to do it, though I wasn't sure I'd have the confidence. She said the first term of the Iyengar Yoga course was just an assessment of your ability to practise and understand yoga postures and if you weren't up to the mark you'd not be able to continue.

#### Can you tell me about being taught by Mr Iyengar?

Every time Mr Iyengar came to the UK he always travelled to Manchester to teach the teachers and to assess if they were maintaining the integrity of the poses, as he called it.

In those early days he was quite a tyrant – harsh if we weren't doing a pose correctly – we were all quite scared of him. However, I came to have great respect for him over the years – in a room of 50 or 60 people he



missed nothing. His observation and focus was one of the things that first intrigued me. I think he mellowed and came to understand western students who were very different to students in India. I realised he was quite unique and absolutely gifted.

#### **You've never formally taught teachers have you?**

When it was suggested to me that I might teach teachers, the closest Iyengar centres were in Cambridge and London. It was a big ask for any working or family person to travel each week, it also coincided with the breakdown of my marriage. A pre-requisite of the course was to attend assessments in London but the train fares were a luxury too far, so I just accepted that I wasn't going to do that.

But I love it when young teachers come to my classes with their curiosity and interest asking "how can I help this student?"

#### **You later also qualified with the BWY**

When I moved to Norwich there were just four qualified Iyengar teachers and we'd practise together. So I'd also go to the BWY days. The yoga teachers were so welcoming and friendly, and I wanted to be part of the community. As far as they were concerned I was a yoga teacher and that was good enough. As I was already qualified to teach, I just had to be re-assessed.

I learnt things through the BWY that hadn't been part of the Iyengar training. For example, about enjoying what I do, relaxation techniques, meditation and visualisation. I felt as though I got a great deal of knowledge from both schools.

#### **Iyengar Yoga emphasises the use of props doesn't it?**

There was a lot of confusion about the use of props: blocks, belts and chairs, etc. I found that Hatha students saw them as something that you used if you weren't very good, admitting to being old, weak or stiff. Whereas in an Iyengar class they're a means to achieve correct alignment. For example, Mr Iyengar would never ask you to sit directly on the floor, as the first requirement is a vertical sacrum and with our stiff western hips you need to sit on a block.

I realised I should also use the props because people copy the teacher. I called a belt an arm extension and it lent some respect from a student's viewpoint. And I started to call it "intelligent yoga", which I got from Peter Blackaby.

#### **What have you learnt from your students?**

Years ago, I was asked to run a yoga class for a group of recovering drug addicts at Norwich Men's Prison. There were 20 of them; a captive audience. Initially sceptical, they grew to love the Iyengar strong practice – two hours of headstand, handstand and standing postures every week. They were so fraught and tense they needed to work very hard to relax. I also taught them the basics of meditation and visualisation, which can be practised anywhere.

Some years later, I was asked to teach at a clinic for eating disorders, which needed a very different sort of practice to that at the prison.

This experience really broadened my horizons and made me realise yoga is for everyone, it just has to be appropriately adapted. Not everyone can attend your regular yoga class but there are gentler forms, chair yoga or 121 remedial sessions. It was a big learning curve for me.

#### **What's kept you motivated and interested for 48 years?**

Initially, it was that every time I'd go to a yoga class, as a student or a teacher, I felt so good afterwards. By doing my yoga practice I could remove a stress rather than letting it accumulate. I believe it's our birthright to experience the inner ease felt after Savasana (relaxation) but unease left untreated becomes dis-ease. It's vital to replenish.

Also, in my life, I have had my own stresses: divorce, bereavement and illness. I had Bell's Palsy years ago. I had been saying to students for years that it's not the image that's important – that's just your packaging – what's important is to get in touch with the contents of the packaging. I had to really believe what I'd been expressing to my students for a long time.

Eight years ago I was also diagnosed with Rheumatoid Arthritis. I have learnt how resilient the body is, that nothing stays the same and that a good attitude can make a big difference. I still do get flare ups but I'm fine today. It's a good job I've done all these years of yoga, as I've given myself such an advantage.

#### **How has yoga supported you as you've grown older?**

It's not a failure to age, it's a natural process. You can age well, mentally and physically, if you're keeping strong and flexible. You can have very good muscle tone but ligaments

and tendons stop being as elastic as they were, so the possibility of injury increases. However, you can adapt your practice and take precautions and over the years you lose the ego.

#### **Does it surprise you that yoga is so popular today?**

How I see it is not good news really. Celebrities have started seeing yoga as a trendy form of exercise, a way to "get fit". I can remember seeing a picture of Madonna with her leg around the back of her neck in fishnet stockings and scarlet high heels. It's trivialising something so excellent. Sports people see yoga just as a means to avoid injury. Yoga is phenomenally good exercise – it's exercising your body from the soles of your feet to the crown of your head – moving your joints in every direction. It's strengthening what's weak, loosening what's tight in your body but it isn't just physical exercise – yoga is a holistic practice.

As so often happens, we've taken something and westernised it, sold fancier mats and headbands to match, taken away from the fact that, initially, you only need your body. It should be a lifetime discovery of yourself. The modern approach to yoga has popularised it in the wrong sort of way.

I also find it hard accepting that there are Heinz 57 varieties of yoga. I've been to classes where I've seen very poor instruction. Nice people, well-intentioned but unaware that they're potentially damaging students.

People say to me, "I used to go to yoga but it hurt my neck, back, knees". Yoga is not a performance on a mat, it is an exploration of the body that you're living in, your vehicle through life and, like your car, it's not about the exterior but what's under the bonnet. It saddens me that a lot of people think they're doing yoga and they're not. Equally some will be put off because they'll have seen Madonna or a young ex-dancer going in and out of very extreme positions. Very off-putting. It would have put me off!

#### **Describe your personal practice?**

I'm semi-retired now with more time on my hands. When my alarm clock goes off, I sit up in bed, chuck the pillow out, sit upright, do Kaphalabhati breathing and then a meditation. It starts my day off perfectly. Every day, depending on how much time I have, I do something on the yoga mat, it might just be ten minutes of dog up and dog down and child pose.



I have always prepared a class for the week and on Sundays I practise that fully, as if I was a student in my own class, for an hour and a half. And I usually do shoulderstand and headstand every day. I feel that the king and mother of all postures should get practised most days.

#### **What are your favourite yoga books?**

Along with Mr Iyengar's Light on Yoga, the book that's dearest to me is his book Light on Life. It's a joy! It's not a 'how to do yoga' book – it's a philosophy – I couldn't recommend it highly enough. It's by my bedside, dog-eared.

Another book is The New Yoga For People Over 50 by Suzã Francina. I take it to all my weekend retreats; I bought it

years ago. Different people from Vanda Scaravelli to Mr Iyengar and regular students are quoted in there – a fabulous book!

#### **And finally, any words of wisdom for Spectrum readers?**

You don't know what life holds for you. Yoga is not something you only do on a mat, it's a way of life. Whatever life hands to you, yoga will always support and help you mentally and physically. It really is the very best form of self-care that you can ever find. I would like everybody to have it. When I was told way back in the 70s that yoga is a lifetime study of yourself, I wasn't quite sure what it meant – but I do now.



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