

Mind and body

Padma's inspirational approach to life

Well into her twilight years – and going blind and deaf – 83-year-old Joyce Stuart, aka Padma, is now planning a trip to India to celebrate the forthcoming 90th birthday of BKS Iyengar – famed master of classical yoga. **Fred Kockott reports**

THE first limb of yoga is "yama" (ethical disciplines or universal moral commandments). "There is a distinct likeness here between the Ten Commandments of the Bible and the yama which include non-violence, truth, not stealing or coveting," says Padma.

"If we just take one of these, non-violence for example, and add to it: 'in thought, word or deed' we realise that even the first of these steps don't just happen."

The next step, "niyama", refers to personal rules of conduct, including good eating, healthy living, austerity and contentment.

"Contentment has to be cultivated," says Padma. "A mind that is not content cannot concentrate."

"Asana (body posture) follows next. The body is placed and held in positions (asanas) in which the muscles, the nerves and the glands are used to maximum, improving the whole of the blood circulation and all its allied systems," explains Padma.

"Asanas bring steadiness, health and lightness of limb," adds Padma. "They reduce fatigue, soothe the nerves, and keep the body free from disease. But their real importance lies in the way they train the mind and discipline the mind."

In their wisdom the sages realised that total physical health brought as its own reward, additional mental awareness, says Padma.

Then comes "pranayama" – the rhythmic control of breath.

"Most people do not know how to breathe properly, but this is essential. The next stage is "pratyahara" – the clearing of the mind, letting go of one's preoccupations, desires or selfish thoughts which often cause stress, anger and fear," says Padma.

The last stages are "dharana" (concentration), "dhyana" (meditation) and finally "samadhi" – a kind of "super-consciousness" which Iyengar defines as communion with the universal spirit".

ALBEIT partly blind and hard of hearing, Padma (which means the flowering lotus) still stands on her head in teaching classical yoga postures.

Her eyes also still sparkle, particularly when she recalls meeting BKS Iyengar, now world renowned as the "Michaelangelo of yoga".

It was this meeting in 1967 and subsequent life-long friendship with the man, that set her and her late husband, Ron on a path to self discovery. Ron, who had suffered a spinal condition since he was 21, died 11 years ago.

Padma remains an inspiration to yoga disciples and teachers keen to learn from the ageing guru.

"She's a master," says Jennifer Thord-Gray, a senior student of the BKS Iyengar Yoga Institute of South Africa in Pietermaritzburg which is run by Padma.

Keen that Padma receive public recognition before her twilight years end, Thord-Gray recently arranged that the *Sunday Tribune* attend one of Padma's classes.

Given the rigorous postures practiced by Iyengar, I was more observer than participant. Nonetheless the experience was inspiring. It also cured an acute backache I had been suffering from for more than three weeks – something a highly recommended Durban physiotherapist had failed to remedy.

But Padma stresses that the benefits of yoga go far beyond the physical. "Even with mild practice, if it is sincere, a change takes place in the individual. But it is gradual, so gradual that only when taking occasional glimpses into the past, one realises the differences in one's approach to life," says Padma.

"I used to fret a lot, particularly about family," says Padma, a former secretary and accountant for a Pietermaritzburg legal firm.

Born in Liverpool, Joyce Stuart moved with her family to South Africa when she was 14.

"After school, I did a secretarial course, and started working for what was then called the Standard Vacuum Oil Company (later to become Mobil) in Vereeniging. That's where I met Ron. He was working for Scottish Cables, now Aberdale Cables."

On how romance blossomed, Padma is shy, like an adolescent, but quick to show treasured photos of Ron. "He was a very normal young man, but interesting and loving, and tending to the arts."

They had three sons, Geoffrey, Ken, and Ross, who each in turn had three children, and now there is growing horde of great-grandchild-



JOYCE Stuart, aka Padma, with one of her treasured photos of her late husband, Ron, who died 11 years ago. Below, she prepares for the start of a yoga lesson in the eight-sided asanama room designed and opened by world famous yoga guru, BKS Iyengar at her Trelawney home in Pietermaritzburg in 1979. Below right, Fred Kockott discovers that yoga alleviates backache

Pictures: FRED KOCKOTT and HEINZ DE BOER



dren, the eldest having recently turned 18, the youngest, one.

"It was after our sons left home that we started learning about Yoga," says Padma. "My father was interested in health and philosophy – and how it interacted with religions. He once brought home a book on breathing and yoga. That's basically how our interest started in the early 60s."

"We started casually teaching yoga using books, hosting evening classes after work. After we had an article published in *The Witness*, I started day classes at the City Hall and left my job."

Then the Stuarts stumbled upon BKS Iyengar's book, *Light on Yoga*. First published in 1965, it outlines timeless traditions of classical yoga and distills these principles into a practical, systematic guide to yoga practice. Today it is still considered the bible of modern yoga. For Padma, reading the book in 1967 served as a catalyst to her making contact with Iyengar Yoga students in Britain and attending a three

week course there, given by the author. Subsequently being tutored by Iyengar, was, says Padma, a revelation, a life-changing experience that resulted in her and Ron inviting him to hold a course in Mauritius for a group of 11 South Africans in 1968.

Back then, Iyengar was forbidden, by the Indian government, to come to South Africa, and South African passport holders, forbidden entry to India.

In 1970, a second course was held in Mauritius for a 25-strong South African group.

Following an increasing number of participants at similar courses hosted by Iyengar in Swaziland over the next few years, the BKS Iyengar Yoga Institute of Southern Africa was established in 1976, with Padma elected chairman.

The following year, Iyengar invested in building an eight-sided yoga studio on the 2ha grounds of Trelawney, the Stuart's home in Pietermaritzburg. The building's eight sides represent the eight limbs

Yoga contacts

With interest in yoga increasing, here are some contact details for people wishing to find out more:

- Iyengar Yoga, Durban: Contact Mabel Higginson, 031 502 3977
- Iyengar Yoga, Pietermaritzburg: Contact Padma 033 3862 572 or Stephanie Alexander at 033 342 4935
- Hatha Yoga, Westville, Pinetown, Kloof and Hillcrest: Contact Helen Neilson, 031 266 8561
- Shradha Yoga School, Durban: Contact Katherine Clegg, 031 709 3301
Cell: 083 450 1303;
E-mail: Durban@yoga.co.za
- Glenwood Yoga School: Contact Brigitta Gaylard, 084 409 7767
- Centre for Well Being, Durban North: Contact Christine or Howard, 031 563 3773

of yoga as taught by Iyengar and as first coded by an ancient Indian sage, Patanjali 2 000 years ago.

Recalling Iyengar's visit to South Africa to open the yoga institute in September 1979, yoga teacher, Stephanie Alexander says, "It was especially precious. Gururji's (Iyengar's) presence and his teachings, and his delight in all he met and everything he saw, reminded us of the oneness of humankind, gave us hope for South Africa's future."

Now 27 years on, Iyengar is a living legend considered by *Time* magazine to be one of the world's top 100 most influential living people alongside the likes of Nelson Mandela and the Dalai Lama – and, believe it or not, Arnold Schwarzenegger!

Padma chuckles at this, but is quick to point out many other international awards that Iyengar has won, and honours conferred upon him.

This includes BBC dubbing him the "Michaelangelo of Yoga"; the International Publishing House voting him as the Best Citizen of India and a Gold Medal from the Indian Board of Alternative Medicine. The Stuart's Trelawney home now serves KwaZulu-Natal headquarters of the Iyengar institute and every Thursday, regional yoga teachers receive instruction and lessons on the eight stages of yoga. (See story on left).