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A Teachers Tale.

Mira Mehta has a Master's degree in Sanskrit and Indian philosophy from Oxford University, a Diploma in Ayurveda and has enjoyed many years of individual tuition in Yoga philosophy, Sanskrit and Ayurveda from traditional scholars in India. She began yoga as a child with B.K.S. Iyengar and annually returns to India for further study. She has a large following across Europe and America and her own school in London,The Yogic Path (www.yogicpath.com). Mira is also the author of several books on yoga including the bestselling standard textbook, Yoga: The Iyengar Way (Dorling Kindersley, 1990), Health Through Yoga (Thorsons, 2002), which explains yoga through Ayurveda, and Yoga Explained (Kyle Cathie, 2004).

As a child Mira Mheta studied yoga under the expert guidance of B.K.S. Lyengar and has since gone on to become one of the foremost international yoga teachers and experts in her own right. Vivienne Du Bourdieu speaks in depth with the the acclaimed author and practitioner.

Mira has a formidable background. It takes several good breaths to briefly cover just some of her accomplishments. Academically, she holds a Master's in Sanskrit and Indian Philosophy from the prestigious Oxford University. As an author, she has published five books, the most recent being Yoga Explained. She is a longstanding student of Krishna Arjunwadkar, and well known in India, North America, Europe, and the UK for her interpretations of BKS Iyengar. She also runs her own school, The Yogic Path, in London.

I ask her what types of people she attracts, novices, teachers or both? Mira replies, "What type of student a teacher attracts depends partly on what the teacher offers. At an obvious level, by advertising a class for beginners one attracts beginners, and so on; this stage is important because it lays the foundation for all further study. But apart from that, it's not really possible to classify students externally. It is their own aptitude and inner urge that drives them." She quotes a Sanskrit proverb: "A quarter of learning comes from the teacher, a quarter from the student's own intelligence, a quarter from fellow-students and a quarter from time." So it's not just the teacher who acts as a catalyst for learning, "it is mainly other forces that shape a student's progress. Speaking for myself, I encourage students to ask questions, and in turn I question them to find out what they have assimilated in the way of method and principles."

Mira then explains the positive experiences students talk about. "Presumably people find the whole of their yoga practice a positive experience; otherwise they would not continue it. Some of the benefits students report are improved health, better concentration and equability ~ they say they do not get so angry and upset by life situations as they used to before they took up yoga practice."

With respect to difficulties students encounter, Mira notes that each individual is different. "Within a range of asanas, it might be a particular asana or group of asanas that challenge them: here the heartening thing to note is that everybody shines at something. Pranayama is likely to be difficult mainly if someone suffers from a respiratory

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problem or is unable to relax. Otherwise, with careful and consistent practice the experience it brings should be positive.''

I then ask her whether she prefers her pupils to commit themselves to a spiritual path before they begin studying yoga. ''Certainly not," replies Mira, ''A person's spiritual life is his or her own affair. People come to yoga for all sorts of reasons. High on the list is health and the desire to become de-stressed."

Before Mira became a student of Krishna Ajunwadkar she was already on an academic path. She tells me, ''I have spent many years associated with University studies of one kind or another. You could call me a 'fringe academic' or a 'Jill-of-alltrades'. My formal studies have been in Anthropology, Linguistics, Sanskrit and Indian Religion and Ayurveda (the principles, not the practice – I am not a physician). Informally, that is, not attached to a university qualification, I have studied yoga philosophy and Poetics. Both these subjects have been with Krishna Arjunwadkar who is a polymathic scholar versed in traditional Sanskrit learning as well as contemporary academic discipline.

''On my visits to India I have tutorials with him that consist of reading the relevant works in the original Sanskrit, with him explaining the meaning based on the major commentaries. It's a luxury to be taught in this way – an unforgettable experience. I am currently reading a classical work on Poetics – the art of literary composition – with him, as poetry is my other hat. In fact, I am combining two of my intellectual passions: I am using poems from my book Cascade of Stars to illustrate themes in yoga philosophy. This gives a light-hearted and picturesque entry into what many would find a difficult, dry subject. I have used this method both in talks and in my writings and people seem to enjoy it."

Mira's latest book is the most comprehensive preparation I have seen on yoga, encompassing its roots, branches, and the tree itself. I am finding it very helpful, as a newcomer to yoga, but with some background in Indian philosophy. I wish it had been available in 1976! Mira provides some background. ''We tried very hard to make it accessible to the ordinary reader while at the same time being faithful to the ancient sources – Patanjali's Yoga Aphorisms and the commentary on them by Vyasa.'' ''My approach in all subjects is to recognise the need to be methodical and to explore different angles. There is no doubt that writing books and articles has helped me to clarify my understanding. It's a bit like writing an exam paper – you learn the subject in its various aspects, then have to distil your knowledge into a coherent summary. Teaching and writing go together, as do teaching and learning. ''My first book, Yoga: The Iyengar Way, which I wrote with my mother and brother, encapsulated the techniques of some 100 postures. Moving on from there, I wished to answer the question: What is the rationale behind yoga practice? This led me to study the principles of Ayurveda and to write Health Through Yoga. ''Philosophy has always been an interest of mine – it was kindled in my school days when my Latin teacher chose Lucretius' On the Nature of the Universe as a set text rather than Caesar's history. So it was natural for me to think of writing a book that brought together practice and philosophy – Yoga Explained, which I wrote with the collaboration of Krishna Arjunwadkar. In the current popular view asana and pranayama are the main focus of yoga; this is not at all the classical soul-enriching teaching.

'Yoga philosophy holds that whatever happens to us affects our outer identities but does not touch our inner core of being.This is a beautiful philosophy'.

''Yoga Explained is a pioneering work in the sense that we emphasise the philosophy of yoga, which is its heart and

soul, together with the practices, which are merely the limbs. This has needed our combined skills: Krishna Arjunwadkar's decades of study of Sanskrit philosophical works, and my understanding both of the subject and of present day students' needs.

"This book itself is intended to have a sequel. Two years ago I wished to explore the esoteric aspects of yoga, energy centres and channels (chakras and nadis), the subtle body and so on. People seem to use these concepts quite cavalierly, and I wanted to find out what the source texts actually said about them. My next book will be the fruit of these studies; again, I plan to write it in collaboration with Krishna Arjunwadkar.'' In Yoga Explained, Mira refers to BKS Iyengar and to Patanjali's Yoga Sutras as the major source book for writers on yoga. She tells me, ''Patanjali's Yoga Sutras – compiled some 2,000 years ago – are still to this day regarded as the ultimate authority on yoga philosophy. They summarize the whole subject in concise statements. Because of its comprehensiveness and the quality of its definitions this work must have been recognized as outstanding from early on. BKS Iyengar's strength is in his systematisation of the practice of asana and pranayama elaborated in works on Hatha Yoga.''

"Yoga is the restraining of the modes of the mind"..... Patanjali

The Sage Patanjali defines yoga as 'chitta vritti nirodha', and ascribes to yoga a method of silencing the vibrations of the chitta, i.e. intellect, mind, ego. In this context, is it correct that yoga is a method of silencing the vibrations of the chitta? She explains this concept eloquently to me, ''Citta vrtti nirodhah is the definition of yoga given by Patanjali. It means: 'Yoga is the restraining of the modes of the mind.' The modes (vrttis) of the mind do not refer to vibrations but to specific states or modes of being of the mind, of which there are said to be five. ''The first of these is correct cognition or knowledge based on perception, inference and the reliable authority of a person or system developed through a teaching tradition. The second is wrong cognition or knowledge which can be rectified by correct cognition. The third is the faculty of conceptualization, which is based on the phenomenon of language rather than on objective reality.

''The remaining two are deep sleep and memory. These five mental modes form in varying proportions the experience of everyday life. The Yoga Sutras go on to say that when they are suppressed the mundane mind is transcended, giving room for the experience of the soul.'' And what about the vibrations of Sanskrit itself? She answers, "I can only speak of the vibrations of Sanskrit from my own knowledge of phonetics. Phonetics classifies sounds according to their place of articulation in the mouth, the parts used to make them, and whether they are voiced or not, that is, whether they use the vibrations of the vocal cords. "Remarkably, Sanskrit linguists arrived at a similar scheme millennia ago, and consequently arranged the sounds of Sanskrit in logical groups. Vowels come first, with simple vowels before diphthongs, and then groups of consonants arranged according to place and method of articulation. Sanskrit chanting is mellifluous and even people who do not know the language find it beautiful to listen to." The role of teacher has occupied countless generations in the world of yoga. Mira believes the duty of a teacher is to make the student independent. ''To achieve this, the teacher needs not just to impart facts but to build up the students' ability to explore the subject on their own, with the confidence to recognise whether they are progressing in the right direction, and to trace the steps back if they go wrong so that they can understand their mistakes. ''To do this the teacher needs to understand the theoretical framework of the practice and to develop the skills of analysis and synthesis. Yoga practice improves physical health and emotional well-being, and

brings the mind under conscious control. "Yoga philosophy adds a crucial dimension: a perspective on the world that promotes mental peace even amidst conditions of turmoil. It holds that whatever happens to us affects our outer identities but does not touch our inner core of being. This is a beautiful philosophy: whether or not it is true, it is helpful in facing life's difficulties. "Understanding and reflection deepen both the practice of yoga and the study of its teachings. If we do not know why we are doing something, or where we are going, how can we achieve our goals? yoga is not different in this respect from any other activity in life."

Yoga Explained.... Mira Mehta & Krishna S.Arjunwadkar.

A step-by-step approach to understanding and practising yoga. We all know that yoga is great for keeping fit and supple, but how many of us in the West fully understand the rich philosophy behind the ancient practice? So much more than a mere set of stretches; yoga is an entire life-path, in which practise and theory are inextricably entwined. In yoga, as with all subjects, the foundation is crucial, so Yoga Explained takes us back to the physical and theoretical beginnings, showing how we can build our discipline on the core strengths and guard against bad habits and injuries in the future. Using modern teaching skills, based on the popular Iyengar method, Mira introduces over 100 foundation postures in the course of 12 units, carefully designed to progress hand in hand with the insightful, yet simple philosophy that supports the practice.

Yoga Explained by Mira Mehta is published by Kyle Cathie Ltd, priced £14.99. Readers can order the book at the special price of £12.99 with free p&p. To order your copy, call 01903 828503, quoting ref. YOGA/YE Or email: mailorders@lbsltd.co.uk

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