

# Yogashtha

*One who is firmly and completely established in Yoga*

-- Sameer Kulkarni

[translated by Abhijata Sridhar from the original Marathi article published in *Anubhav*]

---

It has been three weeks since Guruji left. I have not been able to gather myself after this personal loss.

An inner urge to write about this great man takes me towards my computer. His life spans across my mind. I am a direct witness to glimpses of his life for a small part of his lifetime, which is about 17-18 years. The rest of his life is historical and I gather about it from the myriad of interviews and articles in publications ranging from small local magazines to the internationally renowned Time magazine. There are innumerable people who knew him and I am certain that each one will have unique stories revolving around him.

Is there something besides and beyond all this that I deem fit to be authored?

I am certain that I do not want to make a drama out of even a single episode of his life, do not want to amplify any of his deeds in a way that will alienate him by giving him a divine identity, and do not want to blow my own trumpet by publicising my interactions with him. Yet, I want to write about him.

Now what do I write? What is it about him that quietly shouts at me from within to put my pen on paper.

Stephen King, the author of a book, "On writing" says, "If you want to understand any person, look into yourself. Dig into your life that has gone by. Look for deep-rooted essence of him in your life. Clean up the soil around the roots and you will realise that the character you are trying to look for outside is actually a substance within yourself.

I am sitting looking at the blank screen of my computer looking into my bygone days.

\*\*\*\*\*

This is a story of 20 years ago. My formal education of medicine was coming towards its end.

"As a student pursuing medicine, a lot of importance, time and efforts were given to understanding diseases. However if one looks into the period when one is not afflicted by an illness, can one get clues towards fathoming the secrets of health?"

Searching for an answer to this question that troubled me for a long time, I wandered window-shopping from gyms to spiritual programmes. The result of this was only temporary satisfaction which would spurt like soap bubbles, a mistaken belief that something significant has been done and gathering matter that can be discussed in social gatherings. I could comprehend nothing beyond this.

In my tea-time chats at home, I casually remarked, "I am thinking of learning yoga ....". My elder brother immediately got up, brought his copy of Light on Yoga and gave it to me. This book,

authored by B.K.S Iyengar had beautiful photographs, an attractive layout and papers that were beautiful to touch. The book was top-notch. In the first page, my brother wrote, "This is a book for study, not just for reading. If proper study of this book is undertaken, reading any other book becomes redundant."

"Aye! If so, why did you not give this to me before", I asked him.

"Everything needs commensuration with time. Anyway, you start your study. If you follow the instructions given in this book to a tee, it is impossible for you to go wrong." Without any scope to pursue the conversation, he walked away.

I started my study. In due course of time, I felt I got a hang of all the primary instructions pertaining to the body. I also began to have fun while performing the simple asanas.

"All right about the book. But why don't you go to Guruji himself? Why don't you go to the institute? People from all over the world come reverentially to learn from him and you can't go a few kilometres?", he asked with deep concern tinged with exasperation.

He was right. Such confrontations happened 4-5 times and yet I remained lackadaisical. "I should go, but I don't have time, it is not possible". Many reasons would be contrived. My estimate gathered strength as I even gained solace from friends for all those reasons. What was the reality? What was I apprehensive about? What made me weak in my knees to not go there? Only I knew deep inside what the real reason was.

In my college days, there were two luminaries whose lives occupied my mind. I borrowed the opinions of authors of articles and posed those as my own. No need to point fingers at the author, the fault was mine.

The first luminary was Vinoba Bhave.

He was a simpleton who wouldn't understand the questions of the contemporary minds. That he could go into *shoonyavastha* was reason enough to ridicule him. It was fashionable for the cafe-intellectuals to remark absolutely anything about him. I fell a victim to that 'fashion'. By reading not even a single letter of his literary works, I heedlessly passed so called expert retrogressive imaginative comments. Ten years had to pass by before it dawned upon me that I was being foolish and stupid.

The second luminary was BKS Iyengar. If you went to him to learn asanas, he would beat you, sit on you and break your back. This was the notion that I borrowed from articles in newspapers and magazines. (On his 95th birthday, Guruji said on the dais that in the olden days BKS was popularised as an acronym for 'Beat, Kick and Shout Iyengar'). The stark reality was that I was apprehensive about just his impression which I settled to - that of an intense, short-tempered and stern yogi from whom who you could get a kick even if you just looked at him.

However my brother was persistent. Somehow, I finally took admission to the classes in the institute.

When I first went to the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute 17-18 years ago, Guruji was close to 80. By then, Guruji had stopped teaching in the general classes. However one could always see him in the therapy classes. At other times, his tryst with his chosen subject was on. His practice time was fixed and he could be seen in the hall practising in those time slots. He assumed his position of asanas often with the use of sticky mats, bricks and bolsters. I instinctively deferred

from going close to him while he was in practice. Just seeing him was such a magnificent treat. Even if he was silent, even if he did not teach anything, one could somehow sense that he was around a great man. An inexplicable driving force was there by his mere presence.

"Body is my temple and asanas are my prayers." Along with the memory surrounding this statement, Guruji's dedicated practice exemplifying this statement comes to my vision even today.

However back then, I would see him only from a distance. This was so for many years.

\*\*\*\*\*

Actually, I am a student of Prashant Iyengar. While learning from him, the fear of the subject of yoga was put to rest. There is a relationship between the body and yoga, but that is not the end of it. It is a complete Darshana that transcends the body - this realisation came to me because of him. The questions for which I was looking desperately for answers were cleared because of his teachings.

One day in class, he made us do Eka Pada Rajkapotasana. We pulled the leg to the head with awkward faces, holding the breath and biting the teeth and lips. Prashant sir saw our battle for sometime and said unexpectedly sharply, "Release the asana."

"Come here", he led us towards a photo in the hall.

In the main hall in the institute, there is a display of many blown-up photographs from Light on Yoga. Prashant sir stood near the photo of Eka Pada Rajkapotasana. We followed him. He pointed towards that photograph. How Guruji did what we were trying to do was palpable. Beauty and a master-piece that cannot miss one's eye. Whatever Svamimaram has mentioned in Hathayoga Pradipika - angalaghava i.e lightness of the body etc.....all that was crystal clear. Nothing needed to be said.

"Don't look at the pose", Prashant sir posed an impenetrable wall. Naturally I was also bewildered. "Take note of his face. There is not a single freckle on his forehead, eyes are passive and pure. Examine his entire body and its senses, every nook and corner of it. It is all a clear reflection of how relaxed he is. Understand this peaceful condition. Understand the quietude. His sensitivity is alert, aware and total even in this difficult position. Can you realise this? We do the asana, and Guruji actualises yoga - this is the essential difference between Guruji and ourselves. "

In a moment I felt as though someone lit me up with an intensely sharp and bright torch. The darkness was gone.

\*\*\*\*\*

On the next day, I went to the institute hall at a time when none would be there. Believe it or not, I checked each and every photograph in the hall. What Prashant sir said was absolutely glaringly true. The peaceful composure was not disturbed in even a single asana. Not even a single part of the body or not even the skin showed any looseness or stress. (These photographs were taken in 1962 - in the days before Photoshop happened. There was no possibility of any editing or touch-up. Even if the face of any asana was pasted on to the body of any other asana, it would not seem

out of place - such a profound singular serenity. An equanimity of the highest character that Tadasana turned topsy-turvy became Sirsasana and Sirsasana turned, indeed became Tadasana!

"We do the asana, and Guruji actualises yoga". I have rarely heard a statement that gives such a clear understanding.

I still remember how mesmerised I was by Guruji's performance of Padangushtha Dhanurasana in his later years. I felt strange that a man who could do such a mesmerising Padangushtha Dhanurasana lived close-by. It felt queer that he still lived in that house.

Just then I heard Guruji laughing heartily. Just outside the house, he was saying something to someone and was laughing rapturously and earnestly. He wore on his lower body a garment that is called a 'veshti', a silk Kurta covered his trunk, white silken hair was cleanly combed backwards, fierce eyebrows blazed forth and there was a long bright red mark on his forehead called 'Sricharan'. It was not just his face, but his entire being participated in that laugh.

I came down and prostrated.

"Namaskar.....Namaskar", he said hastily, I thought.

It was only after some more years passed by I realised that whenever I touched his feet, he would very lovingly say 'Namaskar' twice consecutively.

"You are practising regularly, aren't you?", he asked while taking his hands off me after blessing me. While we were not acquainted, that was his first question to me. I just nodded my head in a way that would not express a 'no' and stepped aside. He then turned towards the conversation which he was having and again laughed aloud.

Guruji faced life whole-heartedly. Guruji who faced living full of life had cast a spell upon me. I was enchanted. "Guruji knows what yoga is. He knows Patanjali's teachings from within. Even if you follow him blindly, you will reach from wherever you are to such higher **planes**", my brother told me while giving me his copy of 'Light on yoga sutras'

I soon started studying Guruji's other books earnestly. I also saw DVDs of his teachings of many years. I keenly listened to every word that he said. In order to understand that, I tried to implement his teachings in my own practice. When he was practising in the institute I would just spend hours seeing him and taking cognisance of whatever he did.

A realisation dawned upon me. If I had to learn something from Guruji it was his relationship with life and living. This is yoga.

\*\*\*\*\*

The first instance when I saw Guruji teach live was during his 85th birthday. In that course, on a couple of days I sat in the steps during the lesson. Here is what comes in waves of my memory of those lessons:

"We have created the system of 4 castes in our own body - Brahman, warrior, tradesman and slave. We give the status of Brahman to the head because our intellect functions from there. The work of undertaking the functioning or trade of the body is bestowed upon the neck, chest and stomach - to take in something, extract nourishment from it and to discard what is not needed. If

you look at your hands, you will recognise that they belong to the class of warriors. Their purpose is for protection. If there is an attack, the onus is on the hands to respond. The legs are the slaves of the body. They have to bear the whole body throughout one's life, without any objection. However have you ever given a thought that you should break this caste system prevalent in your own body?"

I was not quite sure what he wanted to convey. For a moment I was in jitters whether he was trying to endorse the caste system.

"Why don't you make the head do the job of the legs at some point in time or guide the hands to go hand in hand with the stomach? Do you have those internal connections? When we go to Sirsasana...", he turned towards the student on the platform and said, "Go to Sirsasana". Such a grounded instruction, I had never heard. The force and clarity with which he said that was so significantly special that it was as if Sirsasana would come alive with that coarse voice itself.

"What do you mean when you say, 'I do Sirsasana'? Just stand on your head? Manage balance? On one plane, of course we do so. However the bigger lesson is we make the head to experience what it is to do the job of the legs. Understand what a distinctive feat it is to bear and balance the entire weight of the body and how the legs do so without any hesitation. You have done Sirsasana for so many years. What have you learnt? When you bestow the responsibility of the head upon the legs, what do you convey to them?

You tell them to look into the space all around. Let eyes of sensitivity sprout forth from your skin. With their assistance, can you gauge your position in this time and space? At other times, how instantaneously your brain does this...do you realise that? When roles are interchanged, we understand the value of each role. Just see. We change the context and the entire understanding changes. This is what Patanjali tells you when he says, '*vitarka badhane pratipaksha bhavanam*'.

There were a couple of people from overseas who were sitting next to me in the stairs and they were engrossed in taking notes. Their speed of writing did not match with Guruji's speed of talking. Yet, they did not give up. The race was on. It amused me.

"We fail to understand these intricacies because we are not sensitive. Can you see, feel and perceive? Unless and until every system, every organ and every cell in your body works in co-ordination, everything will be fragmented. Asana does not just pertain to this physical body, but it is something which shapes and moulds our intelligence, mind and thoughts. It is an integral process and the only process which develops good communication skills within the establishment of your own body. It changes the texture of your chitta, cultures your intelligence and sharpens your sensitivity.

Guruji was speaking like a waterfall. He wanted to convey a multitude of things at a single point in time. Finally, the lady sitting next to me gave up her stubborn resoluteness. She closed her notebook and looked at the stage. After some time, she looked towards me and quipped, "Guruji's gestures speak much more than his words, don't they?".

\*\*\*\*\*

Years later when I met Guruji while translating his book, 'Yoga Sutra Parichaya' into Marathi, I was reminded of this incident.

The same energy and the same burning zeal.

"SamK, life is like the river of Amazon", he said gesturing with his hand the flow with such power that the river itself emerged in front of my eyes. "It flows incessantly.

*Jatyantara parinama prakrityaapooraat*. Your translation should vibrantly flow like that."

Translations should be such. Why just translation? It could be anything ranging from any art form to living to any work that one has taken up - each and every thing should be so alive and flowing .....what a clear all-encompassing instruction!

When I came home and told my brother what Gururji said about sensitivity and how amazing that was, my brother immediately cut me short and said, "Never just hear Gururji's words. If you do, you will be trapped. Listen to the intention, intensity and purity of what he is saying. Look at the bigger picture, or else you will miss the bus. His words are so enchanting and precise that it will pull you towards that matter. But you should learn to take in the essence and the substance of his statements. He is beyond words. Many people fail to understand that. Yehudi Menuhin understood it and hence called him his best violin teacher. You try and explore what Menuhin meant when he said so. He has paraphrased it beautifully", he told me.

I felt smaller and retorted, "Eh! If you understand all this, then why don't you come to the class? Why don't you learn yoga?". "Hmm...not in this birth", he put a full-stop to the conversation.

Yehudi Menuhin was a world class violin maestro. He had gifted Gururji a watch in which is encrypted, "To my best violin teacher". I got a chance to see that watch and was reminded of the conversation I had with my brother. I began to wonder why indeed did he say so. Menuhin was one of Gururji's students in his early formative days. He has written a foreword to *Light on Yoga*.

We can be certain that Gururji did not teach Menuhin the technique of playing the instrument. He excelled in that already and it was a gift he was born with. Playing the instrument is a vital part of the art of playing a violin, but it is not the only part. Gururji must have taught him that the violin is just an extended form of his own body, his awareness and his sensitivity. Gururji might have brought to his conscious plane the feeling that the meeting between the violin and himself, and the sound that emanates from that meeting are but acts of yoga. Gururji deepened Menuhin's sensitivity of the art further and further and might have thus made him aware as to how he can express himself wholesomely through his art.

By making him see the relationship between art and the dynamic energy of life through the practice of asanas using the instrument of the body, he must have taught Menuhin to perceive the relationship between that dynamic energy of life and his art using the instrument of violin. Gururji must have showed Menuhin that the expansion in understanding of the art takes one to the exploration of the Self and a splendid grandeur.

As a part of Gururji's 90th birthday celebration, we made a pothi, on the first page of which is printed in Gururji's handwriting, "Yoga is not a religion. It is the science of religion which makes you understand your own religion better". This statement is like Menuhin's - neatly formed and precisely expressed. Though it takes within its realm the entire subject of yoga, each individual, according to one's capacity will still find it pregnant with great potential.

In one of the interviews we had with Gururji, he said, "I had to go in depth to find out what language to use, what words to use while instructing students about yoga. I had to find out which words provided the desired effects. I began to ascertain and fine tune them. Thus came a specific

style of language for teaching. Sometimes to find the correct word for a particular experience, it took me 30-40 years. If you have to dive into any art and understand its core, you have to be ready to face difficulties."

\*\*\*\*\*

The screen on my computer is still blank. I keep moving the mouse so that the machine doesn't go to 'sleep mode'. What to write still doesn't strike me. Rather, I am unable to decide what to select and what to omit. Everything that occurs to me now is valuable, my intelligence however cautions me that this is not the way. I open a folder with photographs. In that folder are photos of Guruji in Bellur. There are photos of Guruji sowing a plant, seeing children of the Bellur school do asanas, performing a pooja, worshipping Patanjali and practising. I go through these photographs again and again. Maybe I am trying to look for a way to bring me out of this quandary. The first thought that comes to my mind is what an unbelievable life this man has lived!

He was born in a poor household in a small village called Bellur which was not even on the map back then. As a child, he was stricken with diseases like TB and while visiting his sister in Mysore, his sister's husband who was none other than the great yogi T Krishnamacharya advised him to do asanas to gain health. As he stayed on with his sister to learn the asanas, two years passed by. T Krishnamacharya at the behest of a Mr Gokhale, sends him to a strange land called Pune to teach yoga. In Pune, Guruji had neither family nor mere acquaintances. He did not even know the local language. His teacher told him to do so and without raising a finger, this boy obeys as though following a Divine doctrine. This boy takes an aluminium box, leaves with a couple of clothes and travels with a ticket bought with borrowed money. On reaching Pune, he begins to teach in a club called Deccan Gymkhana. He stays in a lodge nearby. Who keeps him company there? Huge wrestlers.

Logic cannot explain any of this.

In a few days, his family thinks they should get him married and so he gets married. Marriage brings into his life a girl called Ramamani. Her involvement in Guruji's Yoga sadhana proved vital. She helped him shape the science of asana and pranayama. It is after her that the world renowned Yoga institute is named.

Every story here is fit enough to be cinematised. How did he manage to live such a life which may easily appear to be scripted or tailor-made in hindsight? If someone gives me the freedom to script a character any way I want, a character who can begin anywhere and go anywhere, a character who can do anything, even then, I will not be able to produce a fine character like this boy from Bellur.

Here is a character who I have come in direct contact with, and a life such as this came his way in reality.

Whether I have settled down or not, with the next photo a barrage of questions come upon me.

This man started life with his wife with the help of a few borrowed utensils. With such a meagre income, did a thought to try his hand in something other than yoga never enter him? There were 5 daughters and a son in his life. Out of frustration, did he not feel shattered enough to give up on yoga and take up a salaried job in the Ammunition factory, in order to run the wheel of living? (I say Ammunition factory because I am told that in those days, jobs were easily found in that factory in Khadki.) It might have no doubt been a Herculean task to even make errands meet. Yet,

teaching Yoga to anyone who came by, cycling almost 20-25 miles at a trot to teach someone yoga was an everyday affair. How did this 'madman' as his neighbours used to call him, find the strength and courage to pursue his chosen subject even though survival was at stake? How on earth did a young girl find the maturity to support this unreasonable decision? On what basis did this so-called uneducated couple not give up, because of the so many hurdles that came their way and not fall a prey to worldly desires? How did these two people have a single-minded purpose of taking yoga to the people?

He did travel all over but in the beginning it was not all a bed of roses. Everywhere, his strength was his actions. Through demonstrations which may number in thousands he captured the hearts of people. He showed what would not have made sense by just speaking and he spoke what he showed. Thus he has hoisted the flag of yoga all over. How did he hold all of this as the most supreme aim in life? His work has brought him students from over 70 countries and made millions of people fall in love with yoga. The essential beauty is because thousands have devoted their own lives to this single cause. How can a simple man facilitate so much?

What is the answer to all these questions? Can there be an answer to all these questions? They just render us spellbound.

It is not even like he started teaching and name, fame and prosperity came to him. Battles and fights were always on. Battling for survival and fighting against all odds. Come to think of it and the subject he was teaching was yoga - mystical, deep and spiritual, and all of this branded it as not for common man. So, the people who claimed to be yogis of those days would have vociferously showed their disapproval.

"When I taught, I would demonstrate what I wanted or what I expected them to do, because back then my vocabulary was limited, much limited. I did not have the proper expression. So, my two forked sadhana was on. On one side, I was bent upon mastering the asanas and on the other side I was trying to give birth to appropriate verbal expressions. Otherwise, my teaching would not have had this clarity. I could not have shared what came my way or what I experienced. If what I say is improper, how will my student come to experience what has to be experienced?" On hearing Guruji say so, it may come off as a linear process, but a student of yoga and a teacher of yoga will both have the sensibility and sensitivity to comprehend that it is not so.

Guruji's experience was his testimony and this methodology did not go down well with people back then.

"This is not adhyatma. It is just a circus of body movements. What kind of a spiritual master or student of yoga is he? He is just an acrobat".

All such ridiculing remarks were passed.

Guruji was not affected by these comments. He did not waver and was firmly established in his principles. He only taught what he experienced and he felt was right. He never blindly accepted the words in books. He never posed those as his own teachings. He did not even blindly follow Patanjali assuming that what Patanjali has said must be yogic. What Patanjali has said, he continuously experimented intensely in the lab of his body, chitta and consciousness. Whatever resulted was again tried and tested. He developed from by this process the path of yoga, not just for himself, but for one and all.

Commoners viewed yoga as something for the sages and saints in Himalayas who have left their homes and families and have dedicated themselves to the tapas of yoga in seclusion. Guruji cut asunder this myth and made yoga available you and me. This is his contribution.

In the later phase of Guruji's life, T Krishnamacharya came to Pune and visited Guruji. He also saw one of the classes that Guruji taught. T Krishnamacharya was overwhelmed and asked at the end of the class, "From where did you learn all this, Sundara?" (Guruji's first name was Sudararaja)

Once, his grand-daughter interviewed him, in which Guruji said, "My mother-tongue is Kannada. My formal education was very limited. I used to teach primarily in Pune, Mumbai and overseas. Many a time, those who came to my classes were scholars or pundits. If I erred, the blemish would have come to yoga and my guru. I could never take that. Hence, practice was and is always on. My practised involved awareness of what I am doing and sensitivity to what all is happening. I relied only on my experience and my primary duty was to share that in the form of teaching. So my practice never stopped and never will. I am a yoga sadhaka."

Unrelenting practice, practice, practice. It is now clear that he took this as his mantra back then and since then as the only means for survival. That he accepted this wholeheartedly is clear. Guruji followed Ramdas's template - "**Abhyasoni prakatave** - Let it manifest through practice" as it is. Patanjali speaks of sarvabhauma mahavratam. For Guruji, yoga itself was the mahavratam. It was his own dictate to himself that at any point in time and in any given situation the mahavratam had to be practised and will be. This he followed till his very last breath.

Here is an incident that took place a couple of months before his demise. He was on medication, but his condition did not improve significantly.

He told Abhi, his grand-daughter, "Bring two Viparita Dandasana benches for Savasana.". Two such benches that owe their birth to Guruji himself were brought. They were kept facing each other and cushion in the form of bolsters, blankets and pillows were placed in the space between them in a distinct manner such that a very mild support was created. When Savasana is done on this set-up, because of the support that the back gets, the chest spreads. Breathing happens easier with freedom.

Guruji got into the pose and gradually settled in Savasana. "When I am in an asana, I become the asana" - this statement came alive right there in front of my own eyes. Abhi and a couple of others stayed around so they could be there if he needed something. When he opened his eyes, he saw these youngsters standing there. He gestured to them with his hands to go and closed his eyes again. However these children couldn't get themselves to leave. In spite of Guruji's indication, they stayed on.

After quite some time had elapsed, Guruji opened his eyes and there he saw these children still standing. "Did I not tell you to go and practise? Why are you still standing here? If you stand here like this, I will stop my practice". He said this with quite a strong intensity. Guruji was very disturbed that they were missing their practice by trying to be around.

When I met him a few days after this happened, he said, "Patanjali has said in his own words - abhyasa has to be long, continuous, uninterrupted and with reverence. Only then will it be deep-rooted. First chapter, samadhi pada, 14th sutra".

*sa tu deerghakala nairyantarya satkarasevito drudhabhumi"*

On his face was an expression which said, "Can we not follow this simple instruction? "

The last file in the folder that I am playing with on my computer is that of Guruji doing Kapotasana on a chair. His age is clearly seen, but the way in which his hands are going towards his legs is striking. A gentle curiosity heralding communication is so beautifully evident that I still cannot come to terms with the fact that this man is no more. It occurs to me that it is high time I wrote at least something. So, I begin, "If I had to use minimum words while describing Guruji, only three words will actually suffice - alive, flowing and vibrant."

\*\*\*\*\*

Here is a story when Guruji was 93.

He was helping an old man who was in the therapy classes complaining of a bad back ache. He stood next to the old man and modified his way of standing, sitting and lying down so that he could give the patient some relief. Guruji was adjusting him in a supine pose with different props for quite a while so that the old man could find some ease in breathing. The teacher was at times using his own hands, legs and back to achieve the desired position. A witness to all this was Abhi with her hands entwined behind her back.

"Abhi, you people can never help anybody...", he said after many attempts to help the old man and finally satisfied. Abhi was confused as to what her grandfather meant. "You are all scared of touch", he said passing a checking glance on the old man again. "Without touch how can you understand somebody's pain? Come here. See", he pulled her towards the old man and made her touch his chest. As the patient came out of his pose, Guruji said, "Touch his back. How agitated it was before. It was angry. See how it is now. Can you perceive this transformation?". Moral and ethical principles begin here. Abhi whose concept of sensitivity was at stake now was trying to understand what her grandfather was telling her.

The student's face which was shrivelled due to distress now showed some signs of relief. His rhythm of breathing improved. Guruji kept his hands on the patient's eyes and said softly, "Relax. The minute you touch the patient, you can feel the vibrations in his body. At that moment you have to leave your body and enter the student's body. Nothing mystical. This is not my words. Patanjali says, *bandhakarana shaithilyat pracharasamvedanachha chittasya parashareeraveshah.*"

Ever so gently, Guruji lifted the patient's head and gave a blanked that he himself folded meticulously and the man heaved a sign of relief again. A long exhalation. "You should enter the student's body and understand what is happening to him. Where is the pain? Why is the pain there - you have to trace the problem from within you. You have to feel that pain and then find out how to solve the problem. Only then will a clear solution to the problem come to you. By keeping your hands behind your back, you can never help anybody."

"Guruji, did it never occur to you that you could have patented your props?, I had asked him. "Why?", he retorted instantaneously. "Did God ever file a patent for his creation? Air, space, water is for everybody. So too are the props. If God hasn't done so, what right, do I, a mortal, have to do so? Should not our mind have compassion for the one who suffers? How am I going to help you - should not one have this thought?", Guruji probably did not understand my intention behind the question.

"Body is my first prop", Guruji said so almost 50 years before the aforesaid incident.

Geetaji told me a few hours after his demise, "I feel how did *Anna* survive for so many years? He has used his body so much, you can never fathom. Anyone may come and tell him, 'Guruji, I have this problem', and that was enough for him to get up to go and help. Constant struggle....constant struggle....".

\*\*\*

August 2014. Guruji's house.

Guruji was not keeping very well for some days now. He did not want to go to the hospital. The doctor started medication at home. His health deteriorated more than what was apparently seen. All were distressed with doubts.

"Now, you all decide what is to be done. I am not going to decide to not go to the hospital. You decide what you think is right", he told his children and grandchildren who were around him.

While saying this, there was not a tinge of ego or sense of accomplishment that he had not seen the face of a hospital for himself in the last 95 years. Not a current of adamance that I will decide what is to be done, none of you shall interfere. Neither was there an expression of dependence that whatever you decide will be the correct thing. A straight clear instruction.

On the face of it, this is not a significant story. Or one may feel that anyone in his place would have done so. What hits me is the awareness and carriage of that situation with that awareness even in that difficult time. On one hand is the slowly weakening thread of life and on the other side is a situation that he has never faced before - only a future that one has imagined. Guruji was at that moment which was exactly between these 2 threads. To be alert at that precise moment and introspecting with that awareness. Deciding and executing the decision with detachment is such a difficult thing. Though one may reckon so, it is only with a reference of the individual and limited memory.

Patanjali uses the term 'abhinivesha' for the desire to live and the fear of death that exists in human beings. Abhinivesha is the most rampantly manifest klesha amongst the five klesas, the others being avidya, asmita, raga and dvesha.

*te svarasavahi vidooshopi tatha roodhobhniveshah II.9*

*The subtlest of subtle afflictions is inherent attachment to one's existence and fear of losing it. This fear of death does not leave even the wise men as the instinctive fear which is common to all is also present in them.*

Patanjali thus clearly mentions that even the learned are not spared from the clutches of this klesha.

Being in the profession of medical science, I have encountered death many a time. It is not new to me. My personal experience is instead of studying a person's life, if one examines how a person dies and how he faces death, it will tell us more about his living, his values and his core. Many people falter markedly in this exam.

Those so-called evolved people who throughout their lives, being obsessed with themselves, creating an illusory halo around themselves, beat about their drums thinking that only they have understood the deeper meaning of life and that the rest of the world is completely useless and shallow face death utterly pathetically. At the threshold of death, the assumptions and total facade of philosophy that have gone skin deep just vanish. Their protective shield and the masks worn wither away. At that point, yearning for death to turn her face away, they are ready to do anything, just anything. There is not a 'no' to put anything at stake. They are not even aware that while doing so, their so called intelligence, or accumulated knowledge, apparent wisdom and logical and analytical ability are all put to shame. 'I should be alive and life should hang in there' - this is their ultimate aim in that moment. So, it becomes very clear why Patanjali puts abhinivesha in the first place among klesas.

On the other side of the spectrum are those unnamed people who have struggled in every step of life and still make no noise or show about it, haven't had any acclaim and very naturally receive death. This unspoken grandeur in them makes me bow my hands and head to them with all **humility**. At the light of death, light is thrown on their total living.

"Yoga undoubtedly teaches you how to live; however the superior lesson is it teaches you how to die", Prashant Iyengar has expressed so quite a few times in the class. He seems to be talking about abhinivesha.

Standing valiantly at this step, Guruji was detached from his body and gave it to the others, as though it were theirs. He very easily crossed over this threshold which was abhinivesha.

For medical reasons, it was decided to take him to a hospital.

On reaching the hospital, the doctor examined him and routinely informed the course of action, its intended effects, the duration and the possible consequences. "Anything you may need, please tell us. I have informed the staff here. You can even telephone me, here is my number", the doctor reassuringly told his family.

Even though he was unwell, he listened aptly to everything that the doctor said. He told the doctor with his hands folded in Namaskar, "Oh doctor, you are taking so much trouble for my sake...thank you...thank you." It didn't end here. He added, "One thing is certain. These afflictions are always going to be there for the body. One only has to face them all. There are no shortcuts. But these are all pertaining to this outer body. If the time has come to change the clothes, so be it. I am inside, quiet and peaceful."

What can the doctor, or anyone for that matter say to this?!

Even though it may sound unimaginable, Guruji saying this was not just for the sake of it. That is not him. He would even caution his students, "Teach only what you know. What you have not experienced, don't say a word. This is fooling them. Every single thing that I have taught in my life, I have experienced it. What I have not experienced, I have never taught."

He is a man who is so clear, who relied only on his experience....and was completely honest with and to that experience.

When the same grandfather tells the doctor, "I am inside, quiet and peaceful", he is really 'inside', 'quiet', and 'peaceful'.

\*\*\*\*\*

Hospital. I.C.U

His children and grand-children all took turns to be with him, day and night. There he is, at peace, lying on the bed with eyes closed. Next to him, is Abhi sitting on a chair. Medical reports say that the situation is serious. The response of the body to the treatment is unfortunately only mediocre.

Time passes. Guruji opens his eyes and looks at his grand-daughter. He smiles pleasantly. She leans forward and asks him, "Do you want anything, Tata?" Guruji nods his head and waves his hand gesturing a 'no'. "Abhi...I am thinking.....the last 95 years.....whatever reason God has sent me for, how much of it have I completed?", he tells her wondering ignorantly. Abhi didn't immediately grasp her grand-father's intention. It was just for a moment, but then Abhi recognised that it was the same watchful face from his practice sessions.

While teaching asanas, he has stressed this many many times, ...why he has stressed this every time, "Be watchful. In Janu Sirsasana, watch what your bent knee is doing..how is the straightened knee....how is the stomach turning...is the chest sinking.....where is the pull...and which is the area where there is no action happening.You have to observe. Don't just stop there. In and through Janu Sirsasana, how does the vital energy, the consciousness flow? Take your mind there. That flow of Chaitanya....It should flow like a river. Universal life force which is Chaitanya and the flow of this life force inside the body should be congruent. Yoga is to unite, to yoke, to join. Yoga is to exist in relationship. Feel that. And in that be alert, vigilant and watchful."

Abhi is overwhelmed with the situation. Here is a man who has always told every student and anyone interested in yoga, "Never give up practice. Your practice should always be undertaken with a watchful and alert mind." This man, who is her grandfather did not swerve from the path of yoga, even at this juncture. She holds his hand.

"I am telling God, 'If you have to get any more work done from me, keep me here' ". She has now understood what her grandfather was coming to. She did not have the strength to hear what her grandfather would say next. She did not want to hear him say anything about him dying. She restlessly stays on for what was to follow. A nurse enters and using that, she walks out.

### **August 20. Yet to dawn.**

My mobile which is next to me on my bed rings and lights up. The first thought which comes to me is that it is probably Abhi. If it was her, I knew what I was going to hear. To tell you the truth, every call that I have received from her in the last couple of days has always been with this doubt.

"SamK (a name which my close friends have given me)....", Abhi says. No more words. I hear her controlling her tears. A few seconds of silence and then a shaking voice, "Sam K...Tata....", it was as if she didn't want to say anything else.

Abhi's face comes to my mind. It is not difficult to imagine what she is going through. It is not just her..everybody in the family, students, pupils, people ranging from simple households to royal families, to all those that held his heart, yoga practitioners from all over the world....this is news that will plunge them all into sorrow.

"I am leaving", I tell her after a long pause in which I have gathered myself. As I leave, my wife's voice reaches my ears, "Guruji?". I say, "Yes, just a short while ago."

\*\*\*\*\*

When I recollect this, unknown to me, my hands leave the keyboard of my computer and receive my face which hangs down and wants to hide and my eyes become moist.

One eternal truth about this body that is born is that death is certain. It is spoken about as if one has completely understood that. Each of us has a direct experience of someone's death and so we can make sense of Madgulkar's statement - "Logic ends at the concept of death".

However one cannot predict what it is for a man to die; what is death - this conundrum remains. Death is the disappearance of the life-force. Even if we define so, where have we had an experience of this life-force? Being alive does not amount to experiencing this life-force. It is only its manifested effect.

What is this life-force? 'This' leaves the body with death - what does 'this' mean? Where does 'it' go? Where does 'it' originally come from? We describe death with various attributes that are actually symptoms of death - heart stops functioning or organs like brain and kidneys stop working, breathing does not happen. These are actually details of what happen with death. What is certain is that the addition of all of these does not comprise of death. Like the enigma surrounding 'Om', there is another factor that contributes. What is that?

In Kathopanishad, Nachiketa asks Yama, the Lord of death, a rightful question about death, a quest to understand the truth about death, a question that man has not been able to answer.

*kshanatatkramayoh sayammat vivekajam jnanam || PYS III.53 ||*

What we construe as time is actually a congregation of moments. Without losing the link between the moment and successive moments, if the yogi only maintains attention on the continuous flow of moments, he frees himself from the limitation of time, place or space and acquires exalted wisdom.

The man who has written so in his commentary on Patanjali left the plane of space and time on August 20, 2014 to never ever return. I stare at my computer screen with a strange void.

\*\*\*\*

The truth is Guruji's demise is not untimely. It is not unexpected.

It is in the offing that the body that has endured severe hardship for 95 years is going to get grieved. The hope that nothing should happen was of course there, but there is a thread of underlying inkling that something is about to happen. Though on one hand, the intellect grasps all this, the emotions of the heart speaks a different language.

The famous writer PG Wodehouse saw the death of his daughter. During the burial, he said while laying the soil over the coffin, "I thought she was immortal". It is the same story about Guruji.

If I come to speak of it, I experienced Guruji's death not once, but twice. The first was when his health deteriorated significantly. It was in my mind. The second was when it actually happened.

Being in this field of medical science, I am of the opinion that if you slightly stretch your imagination you can experience anyone's death twice. One is before the incident, in your mind. To a certain extent, we can predict the possible outcome or reaction of a certain occurrence. Amongst these, what has to be done and what has to be avoided can be decided. Thus the chaos of an emergency can be avoided in a limited range, though. The second time is of the incident itself. Unfortunately, what is predicted is what actually happens in reality too. The details may change, the core remains the same.

When a lot of parameters of Guruji's body went in the downward trend, a wave of Guruji's death came to my expectation. At that time, I was however torn apart between being a doctor and being a student of yoga. When insights of science hit me, I was forcing myself to keep them away. I was saddened that I was feeling such an ado in trying to balance these two.

In his commentary on the Gita, Vinoba says, "Between the mind and intellect, the intellect has to take decisions and the mind has to obey the order. But what we do is we make the mind to take the decision and force the intellect to follow that."

With this in mind, I battled against myself to keep my mind separate and drew a clear picture.

There was certainly a mark in my mind as to how sad I will be if Guruji indeed passed away. However my despondency is in a far greater measure than my expectation. When I realised this on introspection, the question that lingered on is "Why so?". I had an idea of all possibilities, I had assessed the situation well. But why is this so? My ego had been stung.

The last file in the folder that I am playing with on my computer is that of Guruji doing Kapotasana on a chair. His age is clearly seen, but the way in which his hands are going towards his legs is striking. A gentle curiosity heralding communication is so beautifully evident that I still cannot come to terms with the fact that this man is no more. It occurs to me that it is high time I wrote at least something. So, I begin, "If I had to use minimum words while describing Guruji, only three words will actually suffice - alive, flowing and vibrant."

I am sure this is not just my story, but the story of the millions of yoga students around the world.

\*\*\*\*\*

I reached the institute. Guruji's body was kept in the same room that he would sit in. His body looked far purer than what I had expected.

"If you balance in the present, you are living in Eternity."

When I saw him for that final time, Guruji's statement came back to me.

I was discerning the subtle difference amongst the following - Guruji in Savasana in the practice hall, the plethora of photographs of him in Savasana, the props that he designed for Savasana and the final surrender of his body which was in the lap of Mother Earth. My friend who was a

designer on seeing photos of Guruji in Savasana which was taken during his 90 birthday had told me, "At the most, I can look at this Savasana for two seconds. It is haunting."

For a moment, I quivered. "This is a dead body, ....not the asana dedicated to the dead body. The awareness of witnessing of oneself by oneself is not there here. The peaceful state of the individualised form of the Universal force and the absence of the force itself is the difference between those two. The Universal force which gives life to the body has left for eternity. This is just the vestment of the body that has digested 95 years, that has lost life from what was alive, that has crossed over from that contact."

The news was still not out in the world.

There was only family and a handful of others. The family was of course shaken that they lost the lion amongst them that was their own blood. Yet, beyond all this, none was disconnected from the fact that they were a part of the final journey of a great yogi of this era. Everybody now understood that ever since the father, the grandfather went to the hospital he was nearing his last days, there was no choice for his body but to move towards that condition from where it could go to death. I am a witness to the fact that each one there took utmost care that nothing awkward should happen from them in that situation. Just a signal and there could have been an assemblage of lakhs of people in all their capacity. But here was a family that on that day put under cover Guruji's speciality and went about the things in a very simple manner.

After a few days of Guruji's demise I had to go to the hospital where Guruji was. I was sitting in the chair waiting for someone when a Bohri lady came up to me. Her relative was admitted there for some time now. So we had begun to recognise each other by face when Guruji was in the hospital.

She told me with a sad expression, "Your patient, ...bad eh....I heard...very sad.I am sorry". I nodded. She asked me compassionately, "He was your grandfather?". "Indeed", I said, "....but more importantly, he was Guruji...yoga's Guruji".

"Ah! Another Yogacharya also expired a couple of days ago...I saw in the papers...saw on the television too".

I realised this lady didn't realise it. "He was the same man", I said.

She was astonished, "What do you mean?".

"Madam, in the room next to your patient was the same man, Yogacharya...BKS Iyengar".

She was shocked, "Don't tell me. That grandfather. He was Yogacharya? He was so simple. His family also. But Yogacharya was so famous. Doesn't he have so many followers?". That lady could not digest that next to her had been Yogacharya Iyengar himself.

"Oh! You should have at least told me. I would have at least had his darshana. Such a great man.....and so simple", she kept murmuring.

A heavy shadow of sorrow loomed over the institute. Everybody was plunged into a heavy sad state and none moved. Like birds in the rains, they sat scattered.

I received a WhatsApp message from my niece in America, "Guruji? What happened?". What am I going to tell her? A friend's text from Mumbai, "Very sorry. Guruji's news is flashing as breaking news on TV. A big man has gone, my friend".

It was now out there. People had begun to gather. A queue was being formed.

\*\*\*\*\*

I had written on the computer initially "alive, flowing and vibrant" Like a schoolboy, I write under it-

"Why do I so strongly feel recurringly that Guruji should have stayed on?  
I feel so because I think men like him, who were full of life, complete and vibrant in being and in everything they did, are very few; can be counted with one's fingers. The passing away of such people is not about their age, but just their presence, just by being seen, one gets comforted, the faith in life stays on. Hence I feel he should have been there. The truth is it is my selfishness which yearns for him."

We should realise that we are in these days cultivating an image about the society that it is concerned only about 'oneself' and 'only oneself' and is completely immersed in only 'oneself'. This attitude misleads us into assuming it is a good trait. The sphere of living does not look beyond 'me, myself and I'. We go about living with a precaution that we neither touch anybody's life nor do we allow the current of anybody else's life to touch us. We live by building a wall - a wall of rejecting. We live without taking in anybody into ourselves. At such a time, the passing away of a rare man like Guruji who going beyond himself touched the lives of so many people, who took other people into his life and who laid his life for the benefit of others makes me realise how much his roots have diffused into our own selves. What a wide range of people have been bereaved!

Everyone of us feels this loss so personally as though he were a part of us. It is unbearable to imagine living without him.

I read this again and again and I feel I should bring this on paper. To write an article, I raise my hand to type. On the screen appears, 'Guruji'. Yet again, I sit staring at it. I feel this will be a public mourning of a very personal loss. I need something which is at the sharp core. I delete that word and write 'yogastha - one who is firmly and completely established in yoga'.

This is my mental image of Guruji. He was prolific and at the same time steady in his awareness - this is the characteristic of a man who in spite of reaching great heights remained simple.

Now, writing will be relatively an easy task

---