

Iyengar Yoga News



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Unlocking Memories During Lockdown

Suzanne Gribble writes about the life and experiences of Brenda Carlton at RIMYI in the early 1980s, and returning to Iyengar yoga after more than thirty years.

I have not yet met Brenda in person, though it feels like we have; Brenda lives near Southend in Essex and I am in west London. We have known each other since spring 2020 when Brenda started attending my online classes during lockdown.

It was Brenda's daughter, Jo, who first introduced us and told me that her mother had been an Iyengar yoga teacher – something Brenda is very modest about – and had attended classes at the Ramanani Memorial Iyengar Yoga Institute in Pune.

Brenda kindly agreed to share her memories and photographs with me and subsequently with IY(UK) archives and *Iyengar Yoga News*. In early November, we arranged a chat on Zoom one cosy afternoon, where she told me about her life and early experiences of Iyengar yoga, including her visits to Pune. It was so easy to talk and Brenda was so open, it was as if she was sitting with me in my kitchen (only on a screen instead!).

Brenda (née Cruikshank) was born in Dagenham in 1943 (a year before Geeta Iyengar), the fifth of seven children. Her parents were originally from Manchester where her father was a fist fighter in Moss Side before he transferred to Dagenham Ford working on the assembly line as a permanent night worker.

"He was an absent and very stern father and I can't actually recall having had a conversation with him", recalls Brenda. "We were very poor and lived in a three-bedroom council house and I think I and my brothers and sisters were all quite neglected". Her grandmother and uncle and his family also lived with them, so it was crowded to say the least.

She was the only one of her siblings who passed the eleven-plus exams and so started at the local grammar school. This set her apart from her family, though, and at sixteen she felt ready for change. She left school and moved to a bedsit to live and work independently.

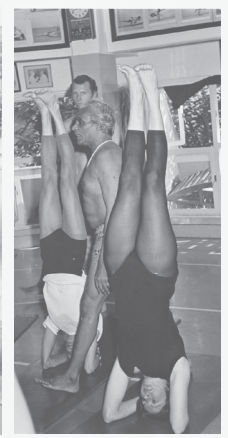
Brenda briefly joined the local church to meet others and find a family she hadn't had, though this didn't work for her. In 1959, she started becoming interested in yoga and began to read on the subject. She can't recall specific books, but remembers she was self-conscious as, at that time, it was considered "a little strange". When travelling to London on the train, she would cover the title on the front cover so that people couldn't see what she was reading. She also became interested in alternative therapies and in her early thirties she started practising yoga and attending different classes.

She discovered Iyengar yoga through her first Iyengar yoga

teacher, Peter Ballard, near Southend in Essex, and it was he who encouraged her to go to India. "Once I discovered Iyengar yoga, nothing else was enough", Brenda recalls. Peter was one of a group of teachers, alongside Genie Hammond, Guri Brett, Silva Mehta and Silvia Prescott, who helped found the London Institute building – at that time called South East England Iyengar Yoga Institute, and now Iyengar Yoga Maida Vale – and raise the necessary funds to make it possible in the late 1970s and early '80s.

It was after a few years of attending Peter's classes that he asked her to cover for him. She didn't feel comfortable with the idea, neither being a trained teacher nor experienced enough, but he reassured her, telling her "No, you'll be alright, you'll be fine". It was this which opened the door to her taking on her training under the guidance of Sylvia Prescott at Maida Vale in London in 1979. She travelled to Pune with Sylvia in January 1981 joined by other students from London, including Silva Mehta and her daughter and son, Mira and Shyam, before qualifying as a teacher.

Her first visit to Pune and to India (and very first time out of Europe) was with Peter in January 1980. It was quite a culture shock and she had felt



happy to be under the guidance of Peter. The dignity of the very poor people she encountered in Pune still strikes her today. She recalls how she stayed directly in the Institute building for four weeks with just four in the dormitory. Student numbers from abroad were very small in those days compared to what she has heard the numbers have been in recent years.

SG: Tell me about your experiences of being taught by Mr Iyengar who would then have been in his early sixties.

BC: *It was amazing to have that hands-on experience. I was quite in awe of Mr Iyengar. When he came into the studio it was like he seemed to become massive... it brings tears to my eyes actually. He wasn't a very big man, was he, but he seemed to expand?*

I remember when he wasn't teaching and just talking to you, just how joyful he was, his whole being just lit up.

He used to spot everything. I was a little bit afraid of him first of all [laughs], I don't know why. He used to pick out people with too much ego. "Too much ego", he would say. I didn't have much ego but I thought, "I hope he doesn't pick on me!" Except sometimes he used me to demonstrate, probably because I was doing it wrong! [laughs again]. He saw everything, all the time, he was just amazing.

SG: What was your yoga like then, it must have been pretty strong at that time?

BC: *I wish I hadn't stopped! I could do most of the poses competently though I was always*

afraid, thinking I could be doing this better, as he was such a taskmaster. He brought it out of you, more than you could possibly do.

Brenda recalled that she attended classes twice a day which were around two hours long; also *prāṇāyāma*, working with the ropes and rope *Śīrṣāsana* hanging from the ceiling (ropes were a novelty in the UK then). She has vivid memories of observing the therapy classes and witnessing some amazing adjustments. Mr Iyengar would get them to do the most challenging poses, considering their limitations, and she recalls the assistant teachers standing on students' backs in *Adho Mukha Vīrāsana*.



SG: Can you share some of your memories of Geeta and Prashant during that time?

BC: *Apart from Geeta and Prashant, there were two or three other regular helpers adjusting and correcting, they were all very strict. I remember Geeta demonstrating a lot and being very authoritative and being very much her father's daughter. Prashant by contrast was very shy.*

Mr Iyengar would put on a big spread, lunches for us, and that was amazing too. As you can see from the photos, Prashant was serving food (that's me pictured), alongside Geeta.



Brenda went on to describe the hospitality and humility of the Iyengar family, coming together to serve food to their student guests.

After her second visit to Pune, she took over Peter's classes in Southend in the early 1980s as he moved away to Ipswich. She also taught a variety of other classes, including in a women's prison in Hockley. She recalls the inmates didn't really want to do yoga, treating the sessions more as therapy.

In 1986 Brenda stopped teaching. She was going through a lengthy divorce and holding down two jobs, as well as teaching eight classes a week and looking after her three children. Unable to pay her mortgage on her teaching income, Brenda secured a job as a civil servant and made the difficult decision to give up teaching altogether.

While she attended classes for herself for a while, it was hard because local classes were mostly taught by her previous students. They still saw Brenda as



their teacher and she wanted to be a student again and do it for herself. She turned to tai chi for many years and pursued active sports such as tennis, skiing, water skiing and also scuba diving (she qualified as a scuba diver at the age of 58!) and had some wonderful holidays.

Brenda firmly believes that it was thanks to Iyengar yoga that she had both the strength and stamina to stay fit, and it gave her the means to do anything. She recalls one of her long-standing friends telling her, "whatever happens, you always appear so serene", which Brenda is certain was due to yoga. Today Brenda feels that "anything that happens in my life, I am able to cope with and that is the yoga".

Thirty years later, in 2016, and in her early seventies, Brenda returned to attending local yoga classes in Essex, though initially not Iyengar as there were none nearby. She struggled that the teaching in these classes wasn't precise, accurate or in line with Iyengar's methodology or teaching which clearly remained so ingrained, even after all these years.

When her daughter moved to Bournemouth, Brenda found there were a lot more Iyengar yoga teachers there, so when she visited she would attend classes and joined Hampshire and Dorset Iyengar Yoga. She met Mary Heath and discovered that she too had been trained by Sylvia Prescott. Since then, Brenda has regularly attended classes in Bournemouth and now in Essex, and since the spring of 2020 on Zoom too, including my online classes.

She says again, "I wish I hadn't stopped. I'm not able to do everything now, it's not because of my age but because I stopped for nearly thirty years."



SG: Can you think back to favourite poses during your time in Pune?

BC: *Backbends were never my favourite, though I could do them – I'm quite tearful now because it's bringing back all these memories. I can remember when doing a lot of backbends and prāṇāyāma too and suddenly crying. I was around 38, 39, and looking around and seeing no one else crying. I wasn't emotional as I am now (nowadays it doesn't take much to make me cry!). It was probably opening the chakras.*

I loved all standing poses, though now I find myself lacking in stamina and my balance has gone, which could be partly due to a bursa and Morton's neuroma on my foot and age-related. I used to love Vīrabhadrāsana I and II because they are such strong poses, but I don't love them now!

In later life, when I used to ski, I used to come back after skiing and lie back in Supta Vīrāsana to relieve my legs and rest, which I loved.

SG: Do you have favourite poses now?

BC: *Chair Sarvāṅgāsana. I practice inversions in the face-to-face classes, though I don't like to practice them on my own at home, as I need corrections from a teacher. I used to love twists and still do, though I don't do them very well. I like the wide-legged poses today: Prasārita Pādottānāsana, Baddha Koṇāsana and Upaviṣṭha Koṇāsana. Ardha Chandrāsana against my wardrobe is a lovely opening pose.*

It has been very special getting to know Brenda and I'm grateful to her for her openness and for sharing all these memories. Her journey of Iyengar yoga continues on (and evidently never really stopped). I also feel honoured to be considered one of her teachers.

I recall my first teacher, Ursula Schoonraad, assuring me, when I told her I was pregnant and would postpone my teacher training, that yoga is always there for you. For Brenda, it was a break of three decades, though it clearly remained within her and it's there still, welcoming her back.

Brenda hasn't maintained contact with Peter Ballard or co-students

visiting Pune in January 1980 and January 1981 and would like to hear from anyone who was there during that time and remembers her. One student who she recalls particularly well, was Cathy from Fiji. Brenda can be contacted directly at brendacarleton@hotmail.com

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This is Brenda today, taken during our chat on Zoom. The black and white photos are at the Institute in 1980 and 1981 and include her mostly centred, wearing a dark leotard and also being adjusted. In those days there was an official photographer so you could buy photos personal to you.

