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Yoga's Great Teacher Draws Crowds on Final U.S. Tour

By HILARY DE VRIES

LOS ANGELES, Oct. 12 - Like any adoring fan, [Ali MacGraw](#) went to some lengths to meet her idol. Last week, the actress left her home in Santa Fe, N.M., and flew to Los Angeles, where she dressed in a flowing white tunic and leggings and painted a tiny gold dot on her forehead, all in preparation for meeting the man she has admired for more than a decade: the Indian yogi B. K. S. Iyengar. Mr. Iyengar, 86, the author of 14 books, including the groundbreaking 1966 manual "Light on Yoga," is widely regarded as the greatest living yoga teacher.

Mr. Iyengar was making his first visit to the United States in 12 years, including a stop in New York this Friday, traveling from his home in Pune, India, to promote his new book, "Light on Life" (Rodale Books).

"I've studied yoga for 15 years but I've never met him, so this is a very big deal," Ms. MacGraw said during a reception for Mr. Iyengar last Wednesday at the University of California at Los Angeles. Earlier in the evening, she had introduced the man she affectionately calls "guruji" (a Sanskrit term of endearment) to a capacity crowd at U.C.L.A.'s Royce Hall that had gathered to hear him speak about his book with the actress [Annette Bening](#), another longtime yoga student.

Ms. MacGraw and Ms. Bening are only two of the thousands who have turned out to pay their respects to Mr. Iyengar, a white-haired but incredibly supple grandfather who is credited with transforming a centuries-old Eastern mystical discipline into a global phenomenon practiced by nearly 16 million Americans, according to the latest Yoga Journal survey.

Mr. Iyengar was one of the first yogis to leave India and teach in the West, starting in the 1950's. He is also one of the most prolific and penetrating writers on the subject. "Light on Yoga" remains the best-selling yoga book ever published, translated into 17 languages.

This month, Mr. Iyengar embarked on a six-city author tour that he has said will be his last visit to the United States. At sold-out speaking engagements in Los Angeles, Boston and Colorado, he has been received with the kind of adulation reserved for the Dalai Lama or [J. K. Rowling](#). On Friday, Mr. Iyengar is scheduled to appear at a sold-out event at City Center in New York, sign books at Borders Books at Columbus Circle and dine at the home of the designer Donna Karan.

The outpouring of attention has proved almost overwhelming at times for Mr. Iyengar, who retired from active teaching two years ago. He leads a relatively quiet life at home in India, where he lives with two of his six children at the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute, which he founded in 1975 in honor of his late wife, Ramamani.

His devotees' affection "is beyond my expectation," Mr. Iyengar said last week over a vegetarian lunch at the private home in Beverly Hills where he was staying during his visit to Los Angeles. "It has moved me a great deal."

That kind of devoted fan base does not go unnoticed by publishers. Two years ago, when word began circulating that Mr. Iyengar planned to write his fourth major book, the final installment of the four-volume "Light" series that began with "Light on Yoga," Rodale Books made a pre-emptive seven-figure bid.

Like his other books, "Light on Life" is rich in yoga philosophy and methodology. But unlike his previous writings, this new book is full of rich in autobiographical anecdotes, chronicling his life from his illness-plagued childhood to the racism he encountered in Britain and the United States in the early 1950's as a struggling young yogi and the challenges he faced when his wife died in 1973 after 30 years of marriage.

"Yogis should be examples," he said. "I struggled hard, and many people may be having the same feelings I was undergoing. So why should I not give out so they know the truth, so they also get the courage?"

Mr. Iyengar was barefoot indoors, as is his custom, but was otherwise elegantly dressed in a white cotton tunic and a yellow silk dhoti, the skirtlike garment he favors. His long white hair was brushed back, and the red stripe signifying the completion of his morning prayers was drawn on his forehead. Although he can appear fierce, even forbidding, he has an impish, ready laugh and a quick wit that befits a man who can still perform a full backbend and stand on his head unsupported by a wall for more than an hour.

"My friend, if the body collapses, the mind cannot hold on," he said, smiling broadly, when asked about his daily five-hour yoga practice. "I am doing with sheer willpower to maintain both body and mind."

That formidable will percolates through "Light on Life." The 11th of 13 children born to a poor rural family, Mr. Iyengar was afflicted with many illnesses as a child, including [typhoid](#), [malaria](#) and [tuberculosis](#). Three of his siblings died, and when he was 9 he saw his father die of [appendicitis](#). "Yoga," he said, "saved my life. I took it for my health, and then I took it as a mission."

He brought a similar sense of purpose when it came to writing. He decided to write "Light on Yoga" because he felt all the yoga books at the time "were cheating," as he said. "I saw a lot of those books, and they would write one thing about the positions and show another in the photos," he said, adding that he spent years writing and working closely with a photographer to shoot almost 4,000 photographs of himself in various poses.

In writing "Light on Life," he chose to use certain events from his life rather than photographs to illustrate the lifelong struggle one undergoes in the study and practice of yoga.

Mr. Iyengar plans to donate all the profits from "Light on Life" to continuing his support of his native village of Bellur, near Bangalore. Through a trust he started with royalties from "Light on Yoga," Mr. Iyengar has paid for the construction of schools, a water and sewage system, a community hall and a yoga center. A junior college, an outpatient hospital and a program for local cottage industries are in the works.

That trust, along with his books, will be his legacy, he says. At 86 - he will turn 87 in December - he is not unmindful of his own death. "I am leaving

everything for posterity, as a guide for generations to come," he said. "If they read my books, their confidence will grow so that none can shake them."