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Yogi Bearer

Estes Park is a pristine resort in Colorado, wedged between Rocky Mountain National Park and Roosevelt National Forest. Tourists come here for gorgeous mountain scenery, great trails and teeming wildlife. Last week though, hundreds of visitors, mostly Americans, trooped into the hill town for a different purpose: an indoors communion with a man who more than anyone else is credited with popularizing yoga in the United States and across the world.

The legendary BKS Iyengar is in America these days. Estes Park is the first stop in a five-city tour that aides say will be his final visit to this country. He is 87 now. It is 12 years since he last came to the U.S. Although he looks fit and alert and his voice is strong, he says its time he passed on his final lessons to the next generation of yoga teachers. Thousands of instructors in the U.S, where yoga has become a multi-billion dollar industry, are lining up to get their fill. Every Iyengar event is sold out.

Americans love the spiritual side of India. Mahatma Gandhi, who never visited the United States, once said he received more mail and had more followers here than any other country in the world. Paramahansa Yogananda was hosted at the White House (by President Calvin Coolidge) long before any Indian leader got the honor. The Ravi Shankars (both Sri Sri and Pandit), Zubin Mehta, and Mata Amritanandamayi among others will say that they receive more adulation here than any other country. BKS Iyengar is in that category.

The Pune-based Iyengar is a gruff but gung-ho guru. A wizened man with bushy white eyebrows you can plait, a shock of shoulder length white hair, and a vast forehead lined with a single vertical red streak (the Iyengar 'nama'), he looks like an aged Hanuman. He holds audiences in thrall with stentorian commands interspersed with wisecracks.

"People think I am a very strict guru," he told the workshop at Estes Park. "But you should have seen my guru. He had no students except me and maybe three or four others." The audience tittered. He then put a volunteer through such an exacting drill that the poor man, an experienced yoga practitioner himself, was bent out of shape. The audience gasped.

There are all kinds of yoga schools in the U.S. The shastra has been combined with tai chi, pilate, and assorted workouts to arrive at yoga lite, yoga plus and yoga what not. But the traditional Iyengar school of yoga is still the most popular and the attendance at Estes Park attests to that. In this crowd, expressions such as urdhva dhanurasana and bandha sarvangasana pose no problems. "How does one attain santosha?" Iyengar was asked in one session.

Many teachers -- Patricia Walden of Boston, Manauso Manos of San Francisco, and Rodney Yee of Oakland among them -- are famous yoga practitioners who have been in the business for years, even decades, and run popular yoga schools. But before BKS, they consider themselves beginners. One of America's most sainted teachers, Tao Porchon-Lynch, is, like BKS, 87. She is said to be the first foreign woman to study under him.

The American media hasn't caught got on the Iyengar scent yet, but they eventually will, when they spot actress Annette Benning trailing him and fashionista Donna Karan hosting him in New York. For us, in these giddy sensex times, its worth remembering that long before software and services, our first exports were spices and spirituality. Spices brought commerce and conquerors. How much dividend spirituality brought through men like BKS Iyengar we may never know.
