

June 12, 2005

Travels of the Uberyogi

Some years back, I was pulling into a tight parking spot in downtown Washington DC when I was approached by an African-American man, seemingly in dire straits. I began fishing around for loose change when he caught me slack-jawed with a question you don't expect from an American, let alone a vagabond.

"Hey brother," he drawled. "Do you know BKS Iyengar?" I thought I'd misheard him so I asked him to repeat his question, and sure enough, he wanted to know if I knew BKS Iyengar. This time he added "the yoga master." Well, I said, I don't know BKS Iyengar personally, but I know OF him. The black man then proceeded to rave about Iyengar and hatha yoga for the next ten minutes, a disquisition that thanks to his accent and my sketchy knowledge of the subject, was largely lost on me.

It's my belief that Indians are about the most racist people on earth. We disdain blacks. We think only fair-skinned Americans are likely to be smitten with India and we pander to that interest. But on a visit to California last week, I was stopped by a black couple in the San Diego Zoo wanting to know if I could recommend a good Indian restaurant in town. I was a tourist too but having done my research I referred them to Monsoon in the renovated Gaslamp district, a pointer that pleased them no end. A former US Patent Commissioner, a distinguished African American public servant, was so besotted with India that he spent a good part of our interview waxing nostalgic about his travels in Gujarat 20 years ago (US patents on basmati and neem were overturned during his time).

More recently, Ricky Williams, a black athlete with the Miami Dolphins, chucked a multi-million dollar contract to travel to India to learn yoga. The mid-season escapade cost him \$ 8.6 million dollars, awarded to Dolphins after they sued him. But Williams has no regrets. It's mind over money.

That's the sort of devotion spiritual India commands, and no it's not just from the Madonnas.

Anyway, the race issue was just a digression. News is that the celebrated BKS Iyengar will be making a rare visit to the United States in fall this year, indeed in the autumn of his life. Now 86, he is considered to be the world's greatest living yoga teacher and more than any person, responsible for the popularity of yoga in the west. Time magazine recently named him one of 100 most influential people in the world.

Iyengar last visited the U.S 12 years ago, when yoga was already well-known in this country. But I doubt if he is aware of how much it has been commercialized, not to speak of the controversy it has engendered. There are now forms such as Hot Yoga, Yoga Lite, McYoga and what have you.

Bikram Choudhury, an Indian instructor who hit upon the idea of teaching yoga in a hot room with temperatures cranked up, has even sought to patent this form. Some prisons are teaching inmates yoga to help them turn a new leaf. Elsewhere, conservatives in Middle America are protesting teaching yoga in schools because they say it will bring in foreign religious influence. Amid all this, 16 million Americans practice yoga, now described as a multi-billion dollar industry. It's enough to tie Patanjali into knots.

Come September, BKS Iyengar can see all this first hand in what his publicists say will be his last visit to the U.S. Next only to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh's visit here in July, this will probably be the biggest call from India.
