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PROFILE

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One of the greatest violinists of the 20th century revered an Indian yogi as his best music teacher

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While sitting in the waiting room of an osteopath's office in 1948, Yehudi Menuhin came across a small book on yoga. He was immediately fasinated. Yoga was a subject he knew almost nothing about, yet now, for some reason, it tenaciously gripped his attention. Little did he know then that yoga and the land whence it came would change his life.

Yehudi Menuhin was one of the most lauded violinists of the twentieth century. Yet he was also famous for his affiliation with renowned hatha yoga teacher B.K.S. Iyengar and legendary sitarist Ravi Shankar, with whom he frequently performed. The more Menuhin learned about India and yoga after that revelatory afternoon in the doctor's office, the more he loved it. India was, he said, "the primal source, the mother country."

Born in New York on April 22, 1916, to Russian-Jewish parents who had recently immigrated to America, Menuhin's exceptional musical aptitude was recognized and cultivated almost before he could walk. By the time he was seven, his performance of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto had gained him nationalfame. Before age 20, he was touring the world, gaining an international reputation as a gifted soloist. When Albert Einstein heard him play he said, "Now I know there is God in Heaven."

By the 1950s, he was not only acclaimed as a musician but as a philanthropist as well. He often performed to raise funds for charities, and gave a series of such concerts for Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India. During his first meeting with Nehru, he was challenged by the Prime Minister to stand on his head. He did so, successfully. Nehru responded by showing off his own headstand. This incident made newspaper headlines, and yoga teachers from all over India queued up to offer their wisdom to the American marvel who was so interested in yoga. Menuhin took lessons from many of these teachers, but only one left an indelible impression: B.K.S. Iyengar.

Menuhin's first visit with Iyengar was memorable. Around 1950, a common friend arranged for their meeting during Menuhin's first visit to Mumbai. At the time, Menuhin was very busy and somewhat fatigued. It was supposed to be a quick five-minute session, but five minutes turned into an hour and Menuhin was completely uplifted. That evening, Menuhin and Iyengar forged a friendship that lasted nearly 50 years, until Menuhin's death in 1999.

During his second trip to Mumbai in 1954, Menuhin had already begun to realize the tremendous effect even his casual experimentation with yoga was having on his violin performances. It was at this time that he formally dedicated himself to Iyengar as a commited student. When Menuhin left India during that same year on tour through Europe, he continually extolled Iyengar. Many feel that Menuhin was responsible for introducing Iyengar to the Western world.

Through the years, Menuhin proved himself a devoted yoga student. He corresponded with

Iyengar regularly when he was not with him in person, and never relinquished his diligent and consistent yoga practice. Indeed, yoga became an integral and indispensable part of his life. As Menuhin said a quarter century later, "My guru built lessons upon lessons."

Menuhin acknowledged India, yoga and Iyengar in two books he authored, entitled Life Class; and Violin: Six lessons with Yehudi Menuhin. In Six Lessons, he devoted an entire chapter to specific yogasanas (postures) he had learned from Iyengar. These practices, he asserted, "should form an important part of the practice routine of any aspiring or performing violinist."

Usually more intuitive by nature, most musicians are adverse to intellectual analysis. But not Menuhin. He was intrigued with the science of motion and sound as they related directly to the improvement of his violin performance. This lifelong study was both inspired and enhanced by his practice of yoga. Although his training with Iyengar brought him first into hatha yoga (physical postures and breath control), he later

practiced meditation, for which hatha yoga is generally considered to be a preparation.

From his personal experience in meditation, Menuhin concluded that intuition should be complimented with intellectual analysis for the purpose of arousing "true spontaneity," as he called it. His revelation through meditation was that magic existed in the chemistry of thought coupled with intuition, and that as a result of the application of logic, intuition would flow forth of its own accord. This was meditation as he understood it. He also felt that the ability to meditate was the single most important contribution man brought to civilization.

Menuhin was fearless in putting his meditations on violin playing to the testÃand it paid off. Through meditation, he taught himself to play with less tension and resistance and with a more effective application of energy. He also learned to coordinate multiple motions into one. All of this produced amazing results. Peers were astounded with his improvement and bewildered at the source of his insight, yet he simply considered it

all the natural and expected result of meditation. When asked, Menuhin attributed all accomplishment to Iyengar, whom he referred to as his "best violin teacher."

History tells us that genius often accompanies misery, as exemplified in the lives of Van Gogh, Mozart, Paganini and others. If this is true, Menuhin was a rare exception. He was a genius at peaceÃ□a peace, he said, that came from yoga. And yoga, he observed, came from IndiaÃ□the "primal source" and "mother country."

Reflections...

Yoga touched every dimension of Yehudi Menuhin's life. Here is but a handful of quotations reflecting his thoughts on his guru, on yoga and the spirituality of man.

On Sri Iyengar: There were other gurus and other lessons, but not until I met Iyengar did I take up the study regularly. My first meeting with him was like the casting of a spell. We made each other's acquaintance in Mumbai. He appeared in my rooms one morning and straightaway made it clear that the "audition" to follow was mine as much as his. For all my celebrity, to him I was just another Western body knotted through and through.

On yoga: First and foremost, yoga made its contribution to my quest to understand consciously the mechanics of violin playing, a quest which by 1951 had long been one of the themes

of my life. Just as musical vision had long required justification by conscious analysis of each composition, so it was now essential to trace with equal thoroughness the process which translated thought and feeling into action, vision into countless muscular reactions. Yoga taught me lessons it would have taken me years to learn by other means. Yoga was my compass.

On spirituality: We in the Western world have grown to understand matter as imprisoned light, and light as liberated matter, yet this has had no influence on our spiritual thought. In practical terms it only led to the creation of the atom bomb.

When I was a boy no one seemed to ask where the energies come from. Land, oil, coal, air seemed inexhaustible. Now we are realizing how our very life depends upon restoring not only our balance with nature, but also that balance within ourselves. We are depleting our reserves of spirit, health, courage and faith at an alarming rate. The quiet practice of yoga is, in its humble yet effective way, an antidote.