



Profile on...

Lisa Walford

Reflecting the Iyengar way



By Wendy Jacob

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Spectrum writer Wendy Jacob talked to Lisa Walford at Triyoga in London about her commitment to Iyengar yoga.

Lisa Walford holds an Intermediate Senior Iyengar teaching certificate and has been teaching yoga in Los Angeles since 1982. Through yoga, she continues to explore the introspective process of balancing the physical with the energetic body while deepening her appreciation for the creative spirit. Lisa is on the Board of the not-for-profit organisation Iyengar Yoga Therapeutics and the Iyengar Yoga Association of Los Angeles. She is on the advisory board of the International Association of Yoga Therapists and the Yoga Studies program at Loyola Marymount University. Lisa has a BA from UCLA and is co-author of The Longevity Diet, now in its second edition, and The Anti-Aging Plan.

For more information on Lisa Walford see her website: www.lisa.walford.com

Arriving at Triyoga in London's Soho is an experience in itself. If anyone has any preconceived ideas of the ideal environment for yoga – this would not be it. The crowded streets, shops that open on Sunday late into the evening and the clatter and chatter from the courtyard restaurants beneath the studio make the establishment of a successful yoga studio an unlikely proposition.

Inside the purple doors, there is a different vibe – wooden floors, a calming welcome and a feeling of peace and solace from the stresses and strains of the busy city.

Lisa Walford is presenting her final workshop in a series of three days of structured asana practice: 'through the lens of sacred texts'. She is in London with her husband and will spend time in Europe before returning to her home in California.

Entering the studio, Lisa has presence; but when she stands alongside one of her students, you realise she is minute – a tiny frame beneath a defined, strong face and walnut tanned skin. Few will have faced the

challenges or chosen the journey that has preceded Lisa's invitation to teach at Triyoga. Author of *The Longevity Diet* and daughter of Dr Roy Walford - who pioneered research into a diet of calorie restriction - she was diagnosed HIV positive in 1985. By strengthening her immune system through the diet, practising yoga and adopting a positive outlook, Lisa continues to live a long, full life, inspiring others to nurture their minds and bodies.

She says she has been gratified with her reception in London and has felt a deep connection with the students who have mostly attended the entire course. Talking to students as they leave the building, the feeling is reciprocated; praising her ability to communicate with each individual and encourage them to engage more deeply with their practice.

Lengthy rigorous training

The teachings of B.K.S. Iyengar are largely credited for the popularity of yoga in the West - technique and rigorous training emphasising precision and alignment and using props such as straps and blocks, to improve the quality of the pose. Poses may be held for longer than in other styles, encouraging lengthening of muscles, stability and focus. Teachers undergo a rigorous training, lasting several years and producing teachers committed to teaching Iyengar yoga throughout the world. BKS Iyengar said: "The practice of yogasana for the sake of health, to keep fit, or to maintain flexibility is the external practice of yoga. While this is a legitimate place to begin, it is not the end. Even in simple asanas, one is experiencing the three levels of quest: the external quest, which brings firmness of the body; the internal quest, which brings steadiness of intelligence; and the innermost quest, which brings benevolence of spirit."

Lisa has been following this quest and teaching for 30 years. She has a BA in dance, but a professional career

was thwarted when she tore an abductor muscle. Luckily, this led her to yoga and Iyengar, who gave a demonstration at a yoga convention in 1982. "His presence formidable – a sense of authenticity from practice and experience, which is contagious", says Lisa. "Since then, I was fortunate to watch him practise, develop and learn how to modify the mind."

Cultivating the language

In the 1980s very few people knew about Iyengar yoga, but Lisa was hooked. Asked why she was attracted, Lisa says there are a number of reasons and these remain true today. "There is a consistency of language between teachers and, as I always loved poetry and the mystical, I found that this cultivation of language helps with the movement. Teachers are well trained and this makes it the safest, most consistent form of teaching, developing quality amongst the students."

Lisa is highly articulate, emphasising muscular skeletal rhythm, coordinating with the breath and creating freedom in movement. Communication is not her only tool, as she explains that the power of observation is a skill that takes many years to cultivate. "It is important to observe what a person can do physically – their practice and how they approach themselves. I give a lot of physical instruction, but practice is not so much applying yourself to the pose. It is about discovering your capacity through the pose - the pose becomes one of action and reflection. We often don't consider the emotional underpinning of the practice. If we are competitive and approach it in the wrong way it will affect our practice" she explains.

Throughout the workshop, Lisa encourages enquiry and reflection. "Where is there congestion? Where is there volume? Where is there stability?" she asks. "Use the breath to help you move more eloquently. Incorporate an intimate relationship with your breath," she encourages.

Students respond by moving deeper into increasingly complex and demanding twists. After each pose she leaves time for enquiry: "What is the sensory impression (shadow) of the pose? Was it energetic/emotional/muscular? What does this mean?" A line of enquiry, which takes students beyond the physical challenge, into a deeper feeling of integration and reflection.

"My sequences are very progressive," she explains. "We are not interested in 'getting' the pose but in finding mobility, stability and space. The sequences are progressive creating a sensed memory - an imprint – aimed at developing a discriminative, reflective capacity in the students."

Resolve, reflect, relax

The workshop demonstrates not only Lisa's commitment to Iyengar and her own teaching skills, but also her personal compassion, which shines through the detailed physical instructions, encouraging students to develop a sense of enquiry and to bring 'compassion' into their yoga practice and the rest of their lives. "With all the sensations that come to us from the physical body - such as walking into a new environment – it is important to consider how this evolves into our sensory system. Watch the process and the sequence of letting go and cultivate a quality of joy and honour." For those who have completed the full workshop, her final advice would have been welcome. "Find equanimity to practise, or not practise and welcome these qualities." Wise advice from a committed teacher.

Following the death of BKS Iyengar, Lisa Walford wrote the following poem to her teacher:

To Guruji

The sky is great, vast
The sea is deep, and mighty
Guruji, your Sadhana was life itself
The thorns and roses
The fragile knees and sibilant exhalations
The cry of painful release and sighs of relief
Students leaving medical class
Playful and joyous with your great granddaughter
Amidst peals of laughter, gently taking her upside down
Sitting at your desk in the library, coffee in the
afternoon
Dictating your advice and instructions to teachers
worldwide
Politely receiving guests, graciously greeting friends
Accepting salutations and flowers in the lobby
So many coming from France, Israel, China ...
everywhere
And the moments of complete rapture
Listening to you explain the finer points of Tadasana
Your white dhoti, golden trim sweeping the asana floor
Preparing for practice, timer in place, Sirsasana
Wherever I positioned my mat, whether I could see you
or not
You knew. The days to be kind, the days to be firm
Fearless in the face of my illness
You steered me through the fading of my health
To a practice that became my resurrection
Pranams Guruji. Once I found myself flat on my
stomach
Outstretched with my hands touching your feet
Not sure how I got there, but it was tender
Your eyes (and eyebrows)!
Your feet!