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TRANSITION

Indra Devi's Legacy

The "First Lady of Yoga," daughter of Russian nobility, teacher of the stars and national treasure of Argentina, passes away at age 102

Adriana Aboy, Argentina

Indra Devi was one of the greatest spiritual propagators in the West. The simplicity of her methods and the charisma she used to transmit yoga were keys for reaching thousands of people. Her life spanned the entire Twentieth Century, and her influence was felt from India to Europe, from Hollywood to South America. Mataji, as she was known, passed away April 25, 2002, in Argentina, her home for the past 17 years, at the age of 102.

In February, 2002, Mataji suffered a stroke which paralyzed her right side. Her health worsened progressively until her heart stopped beating the twenty-fifth day of April. Since she taught that the soul needed three days to detach itself from the body, her devotees performed vigil for exactly that period of time.

Prominent celebrities from the country came to pay their respects. "She was like a national treasure," the New York Times quoted one Argentina writer in its story on her passing. "It wasn't just yoga, she was known by the population at large." In accordance with Hindu tradition, her body was cremated and her ashes scattered in Río de la Plata, the immense "Silver River" that flows through Buenos Aires, the capital of Argentina.

Indra Devi was born in the Russia of the Czars, on May 12, 1899. She was the daughter of Alejandra Labunskaia, a member of the Russian nobility, and Vasili Peterson, of Swedish origin. Her parents baptized her Eugene Peterson according to the rites of the Russian Orthodox Church. She lived through the bloody Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, which brought the communists into power. She and her mother were able to leave the country in 1920. A trained actress and dancer, she became part of a theatrical troupe and toured all over Europe.

In 1927, attracted by India's culture and spirituality, specifically the teachings of J. Krishnamurthi, she decided to relocate on the subcontinent. Under the stage name Indra Devi, she became a rising star in Indian films, marrying the Czechoslovakian diplomat, Jan Strakaty, who was posted to India. In time, due to a

cardiac illness, she started practicing yoga under the tutelage of Sri Krishnamacharya at the palace of the Maharaja of Mysore in South India. Some of the great exponents of yoga today were fellow students, including B. K. S. Iyengar and K. Pattabi Jois. After experiencing a complete recovery, she was urged by her guru to teach yoga the first Western lady to do so in India. She befriended many, including Mahatma Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and Jawaharlal Nehru. After some years, she accompanied her husband to China and there opened Shanghai's first yoga schoolâin the house of Madame Chiang Kaishek, wife of the nationalist leader.

After the end of World War II, Indra came back to India, where she wrote her first book. In 1947, her husband died and she moved to California and became the guide and teacher of several big Hollywood stars. In 1953 she married a renowned doctor and humanitarian from Los Angeles, Sigfrid Knauer, became an American citizen and changed her name legally to Indra Devi. Always wearing her trademark sari, she again set out to teach.

Indra Devi realized it wouldn't be easy to promote yoga in America. Fortuitously, she received the support of Elizabeth Arden, the well-known cosmetology expert who by then already had her famous and fabulously successful line of beauty products and spas. Elizabeth, one of America's wealthiest women, familiar with the virtues of yoga, soon became a follower and advocate of Indra Devi's yoga methods, incorporating them in her upscale health spa programs. This helped Americans learn about Indra Devi's work and open themselves to the ancient Hindu science. Shortly thereafter, noted and troubled actress Jennifer Jones arrived at Mataji's studio in Los Angeles. Recommended by her psychotherapist, she was in search of tranquility and peace. Indra Devi, also once an actress, felt an immediate empathy and through asanas and meditation was able to help her young disciple attain better equilibrium. That success quickly elevated Indra to the teacher of great stars of the day, such as Greta Garbo, Gloria Swanson (one of her best friends), Ramon Novarro, Linda Christian and Robert Ryan.

During a visit to Moscow in 1960, Devi held a conference for Kremlin functionaries which led to

the granting of legal status for the teaching of yoga in Russia. She traveled tirelessly around the world giving multiple conferences, aided by her fluency in five languages English, Spanish, Russian, French and German.

As with most yoga teachers, she did not directly promote Hinduism. She once said, "I do not belong to any religion. Everything is between God and myself." In 1966 she became a devotee of Satya Sai Baba and began calling her teachings "Sai Yoga."

Argentina would be the next chapter in her life. When Doctor Knauer, her second husband, passed away in 1984, Mataji was living in Sri Lanka. Despite being eighty years old, she felt she should continue her same intense teaching. Argentina became her choice, for when she first visited in 1982, in her own words, she "fell in love with the country and its people." According to a New

York Times report, "Her popularity snowballed after a single television appearance." She settled in Buenos Aires.

As soon as she arrived in her new homeland, she was showered with invitations to conduct conferences throughout the country. She hardly grasped the phenomenon that was generated around her. Lecture halls had no room for all the people wanting to hear her words. She soon established a studio that was crowded with visitors, not only to attend classes, but also to see her, seeking comfort, looking for happiness, tenderness and hope.

In 1987, Francesca Baldi, who helped Mataji during her first days in Buenos Aires, could no longer continue as her aide. Indra Devi, who did not enjoy taking care of the organizational phase of her work, found a competent assistant in David Lifar, the husband of a dear disciple, Iana Lifar. With

him by her side, she established the Fundacion Indra Devi (www.fundacion-indra-devi.org/), dedicated to promoting her teachings in the art of living healthy and in full. During the 15 years she lived in Buenos Aires, she continued to travel around the world spreading the wise principles of love, enlightenment and peace.

Indra Devi had the singular gift of reaching people's hearts. Many skeptics of Indra and her message completely changed their view shortly after meeting and listening to her. She respected those who shared her ideas and those who did not. By not imposing, the warmth of her presence and her sense of humor disarmed and convinced even the harshest of critics.

Esther Riskin of Buenos Aires said, "I don't know what would have happened to us without Mataji's yoga teaching. The various

exercises really saved the life of my husband, who suffered from a serious depression and was on the verge of suicide. No one can imagine how lucky I feel after meeting Mataji and discovering yoga through her words."

A devotee from San Pedro said her presence in the city was so intense that he defined time as "before the coming of Mataji and after, at which point it was charged with enlightenment and love." She had the power to soften hardened hearts, as for one student who could never emotionally accept her daughter because she was born out of wedlock. After meditating with Mataji while listening to a tape of her teachings she opened her heart to the little girl.

Atencio Carlos Antonio Comodoro Rivadavia of Chubut said, "Her legacy, which transcended all kinds of frontiers, will always be present through the Indra Devi

Foundation. In six major centers they run yoga courses for adults, children, youth, pregnant women, elderly, executives. They teach anti-stress techniques and they certify teachers. The Foundation helps the community by offering free classes, visiting prisons, and donating clothing and food to disadvantaged families. Thus the legacy of Indra Devi continues into the third century after her birth.

In Her Own Sweet Words

Gems from Mataji's gentle yogic teachings

We women must listen to our inner voice. It is easier for women to do this as they are not afraid to say what they feel. We must keep both our femininity and our strength. Men have to descend from their pedestal and learn how to be more broadminded and spiritual.

"A human being's full freedom is to find himself (i.e., be loyal to himself), with independence of judgment, thinking and being flexible and malleable in order

to reach harmonization and mental peace. Freedom is living without chains. Yoga is a way to freedom. By its constant practice, we can free ourselves from fear, anguish and loneliness.

"Women must not shout back when their husbands come home and shout at them for any reason. They must laugh and say, 'How nice the way you shout.' Laughter drives shouting away. Tell your husbands any bad news when everything is

calm, not just as they come through the door.

"Yoga is an art and science of living. Yoga means union, in all its significances and dimensions. Through a certain amount of physical and mental disciplines we can learn how to stay healthy, alert, receptive and to improve our perception of the external world in order to feel internally harmonized, with a better life condition and spiritual balance.

"Movements in yoga are harmonious, slow, soft, plastic, relaxed, always conscious, and require a permanent and active mental participation. The whole work rests on the dialectic tension-relaxation. It's important to stimulate, turn elastic, tonify, to make oneself conscious of limbs, superficial and deep muscles, joints, and spine, achieving a gradual and progressive limb decontraction, loosening and relaxation.

"Nonviolence is one of the keys

of yoga, and we should begin it by ourselves. Learning to recognize and respect our own peculiar rhythm and working on that base is essential.

"Try this visualization: Look at the sky and at the stars. Choose one, the one you like the most. You want that star to guide you, it's so pretty! Looking at that star, you would like it to get down. Then you think on really getting this star down as much as possible, going more and more down and down, until you

feel it on your chest,
disappearing in your heart, and
your entire being fills with joy
because this is the day in which
a star got into your heart and
stayed to live there. Now you
realize you need to change
many things in your daily life for
it to stay there; otherwise, it will
slowly go away, leaving a huge
empty space. Suddenly you feel
so happy, knowing you've got a
light in your heart which can get
bigger and bigger, shining
through our eyes, deeds, words
and thoughts. We realize we'll
never be alone anymore. We've

got our own daylight to get bad thoughts away, and we talk with that lightâ€”our star in our heart. We take away what's unimportant. If it's the divine will, we ask it to guide us to what we have divine and eternal in this life and in the next one. And let the light in the heart carry us."