

Introduction

Yehudi Menuhin and Yoga

In 2001, when I first began to get serious about practicing yoga, I bought B. K. S. Iyengar's book *Light on Yoga* at the Iyengar yoga studio where I had been taking classes in Atlanta. In 1966, B. K. S. Iyengar was one of the modern world's most important yoga gurus, and he had written a guide for aspiring yoga practitioners, complete with 602 illustrative photos, succinct instructions, and commentary on yoga philosophy. I wanted to dig in and study for myself what the great guru had written. As I dutifully opened the book to the front matter, I gasped in surprise at the heading, "Foreword by Yehudi Menuhin." Wait, Yehudi Menuhin? The world-famous child prodigy and concert violinist? I still had some old LP recordings of his from the 1970s. What did Menuhin have to do with yoga, and why did he write the foreword to this book, considered by many to be the Bible of yoga? I eagerly read on.

It turns out that the great violinist had been practicing yoga and studying with Iyengar for fifteen years by the time he wrote that foreword. I would later find out that Menuhin, in addition to being one of the most famous musical geniuses of the twentieth century, was also one of the earliest and most influential practitioners of yoga in Europe. Menuhin had first discovered yoga in 1952, before it was widely practiced in Europe or the United States, and he was instrumental in bringing yoga and the work of B. K. S. Iyengar to the West. His brief two-page foreword, which includes a discussion of Menuhin's own connection to yoga, gave me insight not only into the practice as taught by Iyengar but also into the practice of one of the world's greatest musicians, something that spoke to me strongly as a musician myself.

And so, curious to learn more about Menuhin's engagement with yoga, I decided to explore more fully the connection between the two seemingly disparate disciplines of music and yoga through the lens of Menuhin's life and work. I began to investigate how and why Menuhin came to yoga and the deep teacher-student relationship he developed with Iyengar. I read Menuhin's published writing, and I studied his unpublished letters and essays housed in archives at the Royal Academy of Music in London and at the Iyengar Institute in Pune, India. I began to understand how forward looking Menuhin was in the way he bridged Eastern and Western thought and by the way he put such thought into musical action. As both a great musician and a benevolent spirit, he became a kind of role model for me as I endeavored to take my own yoga practice into my life and work.

Who Is Yehudi Menuhin?

Born in 1916, Yehudi Menuhin's name may only vaguely resonate today with people born after 1970. As one of the world's most famous twentieth-century child prodigies, however, Menuhin was a household name in the United States and Europe in the 1920s and 1930s. Following his public debut in 1924 in San Francisco, the child prodigy established an international concert career at major halls in New York, Paris, and Berlin. His stellar concert career continued into his adolescent and early adult years as he performed around the world in the United States, Europe, Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, and Latin America.

Unlike many other child prodigies, Menuhin's musical career continued into his adult years and for his entire life right up to his death in 1999. His strong presence as a performing violinist and conductor, a festival organizer, and a teacher impacted the musical world. He continuously maintained an international concert career, playing for audiences at major concert halls, heads of state, and royalty. He even conducted once for the Pope. Numerous biographies and documentary films recount Menuhin's life and work, and in 1996 he published the autobiography *Unfinished Journey: Twenty Years Later* to update his first edition. Most recently the multi-language companion book *Passion Menuhin: The Album of a Life* (2016) accompanies an astounding compilation of Menuhin's landmark recordings and films from 1929 to 1998 in honor of his centennial.¹

Beyond his musical genius, Menuhin possessed an insatiably curious mind. He pondered, lectured, and wrote about a broad array of issues concerning politics, education, and the environment. As a great citizen of the world, he championed many humanitarian causes and zealously worked to promote peace and unity around the globe. He was a visionary and a humanist committed to reaching the public through his music, writing, and teaching, and he believed music had the power to transform people's lives and provide spiritual healing to a broken world. Throughout his life he was awarded many honors to recognize his great contributions, including twenty honorary doctorates from such prestigious institutions as Oxford University, Cambridge University, and the University of St. Andrews. In his adopted country of the UK, Queen Elizabeth II made him an honorary Knight of the British Empire in 1965; he was knighted Sir Yehudi in 1985 and received the Order of Merit in 1987; and he was inducted into the House of Lords as Lord Menuhin of Stoke d'Abernon in 1993. Menuhin was a passionate promoter of music and education, and his legacy lives on today. The Gstaad Menuhin Festival & Academy remains an important standing international music festival. The Yehudi Menuhin School in England, which he founded in 1963, continues to provide a superbly holistic musical education for young people, while the Yehudi Menuhin International Competition for Young Violinists offers one of the most prestigious music prizes in the world.

I first heard about Menuhin in the 1970s when I was an undergraduate music student. I listened to his classical recordings, along with the other great violinists of his era like David Oistrakh, and I heard about his pioneering “world music” record *West Meets East* (1966) with sitarist Ravi Shankar. Although I continued to come across Menuhin in my work as a musician and academic, it was not until I encountered his name in Iyengar's *Light on Yoga* that I began to investigate his life and work in detail. This book is a result of my research into the connection between Menuhin's life as a brilliant musician and as a dedicated yoga practitioner. While Menuhin's musical life and work from his early years as a child prodigy to his adult years as a performer, educator, and humanitarian have been written about, the link between his life, his music, and his yoga practice is wholly unexamined.

Before I started to practice it myself, I thought yoga was for lightweights—people who were not really serious about physical exercise or only did it for stretching. Although a musician and college professor by

training, I have also been very athletic for most of my life. By my early thirties, I was an avid runner, swimmer, and cyclist. I cross-trained. I competed in road races and triathlons. I ran two marathons. But in my early forties, things started to change. I didn't slow down much, but my body did begin to tighten even as my mental awareness deepened. As I approached middle age, I experienced a shift in my perspective about what is really important in life, which often takes root for people around this time, and as my body stiffened, I began to reconsider my earlier judgments about yoga. At age forty-three, I decided to give yoga a chance, and it didn't take long to see that my earlier perspective on it was wrong (like many more things to come). I soon learned that yoga is a physically challenging discipline and is about much more than stretching. I learned that yoga is ultimately about quieting the mind into a state of awareness of the timeless moment. Yoga philosophy turned out to resonate with my own belief system, and I went on to study yoga as a spiritual practice. Today, after practicing yoga for over twenty years, I can say that it has profoundly changed my life physically, mentally, and spiritually.

Scope of the Book

I hope this book will appeal to a wide audience of readers who are drawn to music, yoga, and the intersection between the two topics. It provides music researchers and students with a fresh view of Menuhin's life and work through the lens of his yoga practice, supported by archival evidence from Menuhin's photos, letters, and lectures and by the violinist's autobiographical and pedagogical books and articles. *The Power of Practice* also offers yoga practitioners an inside view of B. K. S. Iyengar, one of the most renowned yoga gurus of the past century, through his teacher-student relationship with Menuhin, again documented by my archival research. For spiritual seekers in general, I hope the book delivers a good read about the two prominent figures in the story, Menuhin and Iyengar, and a compelling story about how the practice and philosophy of yoga may apply to everyday life in general.

I wrote this book because I thought others might need a champion like Menuhin in their lives, especially in our politically polarized and spiritually fragmented world. For millions of yoga practitioners around the world, Menuhin's example reaches beyond just an individual's personal quest for well-being and taps into a greater societal movement of people

pursuing new approaches to physical and spiritual health in their lives. In many yoga studios, teachers weave in statements like “find your own way to apply yoga to life” as they give instructions to “straighten your legs” or “observe your breath.” Finding helpful examples of what this kind of integration can mean for a Westerner is often difficult.² Yehudi Menuhin, however, represents a notable example of someone who embodied many yogic principles in his life and work beginning in the early 1950s, when yoga was hardly known in the West. He sought out ways to integrate yoga not only into his personal approach to well-being but also into his influential work as a musician. In this book, I hold up Menuhin as a relevant case study to show how people can draw on such connections for their own paths of holistic well-being.

I have tried to write this book in accessible language and to avoid deep technical material about both yoga and music, although many yoga terms and concepts are sprinkled through the chapters in Sanskrit with English translations. Chapter 1 of the book, “Soul Connection: Menuhin’s Yoga Practice with B. K. S. Iyengar,” introduces the reader to the lifelong relationship and connection between Menuhin and Iyengar, from the impact of their initial meeting in 1952 until Menuhin’s death in 1999. Chapter 2, “Early Influences and Career: Menuhin’s Path to Embracing Yoga,” recounts Menuhin’s early years with an eye toward what factors may have drawn him to yoga in the first place. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 delve into how Menuhin integrated his musical and yogic disciplines in the dimensions of body, mind, and spirit, respectively, as I analyze and interpret Menuhin’s life and work through the lens of the three paths of yoga—*karmayoga* (Yoga of Action), *jñānayoga* (Yoga of Knowledge), and *bhaktiyoga* (Yoga of Devotion)—as thematic frames that align with Menuhin’s roles as a performing musician, an educator, and a spiritual believer. Chapter 3, “Yoga Path of Action: Menuhin’s Musical Performances,” looks at how Menuhin integrated yoga into his actions and accomplishments as a performer of classical music, organizer of music festivals, promoter of world music, and advocate for his guru. Chapter 4, “Yoga Path of Knowledge: Menuhin’s Teachings and Writings,” recounts how Menuhin applied the knowledge he gained through his yoga practice and study to forge a unique educational mission, including the Yehudi Menuhin School and two books on violin playing. Chapter 5, “Yoga Path of Devotion: Menuhin’s Philosophical and Spiritual Beliefs,” explores how Menuhin’s belief system integrated many yogic concepts of devotion, as reflected through his great humanitarian work and his own writings and lectures.

Finally, a word of explanation about the word “practice” in the title of this book. Anyone who excels on a musical instrument, in a competitive sport, or with any kind of challenging physical discipline knows practice is the key to mastery. But in my use of the term “practice” here I go beyond the meaning of the physical repetition needed for training the body. I use the word to describe how one applies mental disciplines and spiritual principles in their life and actions to embrace a holistic body/mind/spirit meaning. As the power of practice in Menuhin’s two disciplines of music and yoga transformed his life and work, I hope his story will inspire readers to find spiritual intersections in their own lives and work that will empower them to make our world a better place.