

## The LYTTG and the influence of Mary Stewart and Vanda Scaravelli

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(the London Yoga Teacher Training Group)

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*Mary Stewart and Vanda Scaravelli*

We at the LYTTG wish to celebrate Mary Stewart in 2018 now that she has reached the respectable age of 85. Mary is a renowned and beloved Yoga teacher who remains as vital, curious and as perceptive about Yoga and the world as ever. Her energy, vision, and understanding continue to inspire all of us who were fortunate enough to learn from her. Indeed, Mary's Yoga legacy has had far-reaching repercussions on much of the Yoga being practiced in the UK since the late 60s.

She was firstly a leading Iyengar teacher, and then, due to a long friendship and interaction with Vanda Scaravelli, was instrumental in bringing Vanda's very personal yoga approach to the UK.

Mary led a series of teacher-training courses from 1990 until her retirement from active teaching in 2001. Many of the LYTTG's key teachers benefitted from having been taught by Mary or by her students. Her profound influence on our work continues to evolve.

## **Here is a short history of Mary's extraordinary career as a Yoga teacher:**

### **The 1960s:**

Mary began to practice Yoga in London in the mid 1960s. In 1968, having bought a copy of Iyengar's "Light on Yoga", she began to attend Iyengar classes. She learned directly from him during his annual visits to work with his followers in London. These visits were originally arranged by Angela Marris, of the Asian Music Society, a fan of Yehudi Menuhin's, who was one of Iyengar's famous students.

In early 1968 the ILEA decided to introduce Yoga as one of its options for Adult Education, selecting the Iyengar style, with its focus on exercise and relaxation for this purpose. They quickly found that there were not enough trained Iyengar teachers to meet demand, so in early 1969, after a rudimentarily swift training (they were drilled in how to stand in front of a class and give instructions), Mary and some others found themselves Iyengar teachers for the ILEA. By late 1969 she was teaching 5 classes a week.

### **The 1970s:**

Mary continued to be actively involved within the Iyengar world and helped devise their YTT Courses. Initially these were based in Manchester, but from 1972-1984 Mary helped run Iyengar YTTC's in London alongside Sylvia Prescott and Brian Joseph.

It was also in the early 1970s, through Iyengar contacts, that Mary met Dona Holleman, a very influential Dutch Iyengar teacher who had moved to Italy: first to Rome, and then to Florence.

Through Dona she met with a group of her London students, all connected to R.D.Laing, the controversial psychiatrist. After Dona moved to Italy many of this group attended Mary's classes instead, including Janet Balaskas, founder of Active Birth, and Mina Balaskas, now a respected yoga teacher herself.

Mary introduced Maxine Tobias (one of Mary's fellow Iyengar colleagues and a talented teacher) to Dona, and Maxine studied with Dona for a while.

In 1972 Mary suffered an injury caused by a teacher in an Iyengar class. After receiving sympathy and help from Dona, Mary took up her invitation to visit her in Italy and began making regular trips to Florence where they practiced together. When Dona came to London to teach she would stay with Mary.

Through Dona she met Vanda Scaravelli, an Italian concert pianist based just outside Florence in Fiesole. Vanda was to become not only a dear friend but also a fascinating and influential colleague, having learnt Yoga in Europe over many years from both Iyengar and Desikachar. She was also close friends with Krishnamurti.

Subsequently, on each of Mary's visits to Dona she, Dona and Vanda would practice Yoga together, exchanging ideas and discoveries, as friends rather than in a

“teacher/student” relationship.

Vanda very much liked practicing with Mary, who, she always said, had a wonderful touch. She particularly liked her help in backbends.

### **The mid 1970s to the mid 1980s:**

In 1974 Dona set up her own Yoga school in Florence and moved to live in Bacheretto, just outside Florence, where Sandra Sabatini, then one of Dona’s students, lived.

In the same year Mary, Dona, Angela Farmer and Diana Clifton spent a month in Pune, India, together with a small group, being taught every morning by Iyengar, a great honour!

Time passed and after 1980 Vanda and Mary began to see less of Dona, as their interests diverged. Mary’s relationship with Vanda deepened and they continued to see one another regularly until Vanda’s death in 1999 aged 91.

It was not until the early 1980s that Mary began to slowly introduce her London students to some of the changes to her Yoga practice that she had discovered with Vanda.

Vanda’s ‘fusion’ approach stemmed from her exploration of combining the Yoga she had learnt when studying with both Desikachar and Iyengar. It evolved as she experimented within her own practice, especially as she aged, when her inquiring mind and interesting adaptations to Yoga became increasingly fascinating and meaningful to Mary, and to others.

Chloe, who was present at these early classes of Mary’s, remembers how they involved shifting away from the accepted Iyengar approach towards asanas, instead emphasizing how gravity helps anchor us, along with a fuller awareness of the breath, which allowed students to release into asanas instead of holding on in them. It was a true revelation.

Working with the three principals of Grounding, Breathing and Releasing, Mary also introduced us to a comprehensive teaching of classic yogic breathing variations. Her insightful teaching and intelligent personal practice explored these new possibilities, respecting the individuality of each student, allowing each to benefit from a deeper and freer understanding, and this is the approach that still underlines the Yoga we teach today on the LYTTG.

Mary retired from the Iyengar Association in 1985, having diverged from their style of Yoga.

Interestingly Vanda herself was never trained as a Yoga teacher, never taught large groups of students, nor formally trained students to teach. She always told Mary that she did not want a Yoga school named after her.

Her sharing of Yoga with those close to her catered to each individual’s personal needs, strengths and weaknesses.

A very creative soul, Vanda’s music was hugely important to her and Yoga was her own very personal pursuit. She amalgamated other interests within it, including Tai

Chi. She had studied this in London before Mary met her, and probably at other times too. She studied it again in Florence in 1980-82 when Chloe and she both attended the same classes for a term or two.

During the late 1970s Diane Long, Sandra Sabatini and Elisabeth Pauncz became Vanda's regular weekly students at her home in Fiesole. In due course, in the late 1980s, Mary invited both Sandra and Diane to share their Yoga with her students in London. Since then they have both continued to visit the UK regularly, and all three have become highly respected and much valued teachers, sharing Vanda's style of Yoga.

Mary introduced Sophie Hoare to Vanda in London, and Sophie then went on to learn with Vanda in Italy. Indeed many excellent Yoga teachers have been deeply affected and enriched either by working occasionally with Vanda herself, or by following the simple but profound principles of her practice, as outlined in her book, "Awakening the Spine."

### **The Toronto Connection:**

Mary and Maxine Tobias's remarkable book "Stretch and Relax" was published in 1985. This book used illustrations of Maxine doing asanas in an Iyengar style, but the text was hugely influenced by Mary's exchanges with Vanda, and by Vanda's approach to Yoga.

It was a promotional publishing trip that first took Mary to Toronto.

Mary and Vanda had frequently visited each other in London and Italy, but after 1985 Mary would see her annually in Toronto when Vanda visited her daughter Paola and family. Up until 1996 Vanda would spend 5 months a year in Toronto and it was there that "Awakening the Spine" was written.

Mary's own relationship with Toronto had really begun back in 1975, when Esther Myers, a Canadian, attended Mary's London Yoga classes.

Esther was trained to teach by her before returning to Toronto to found her Yoga School there.

Esther, and her student Monica Voss (who is today an inspirational and popular Yoga teacher), learned with Vanda in Toronto.

From 1984 Esther worked with her there three times a week, and Monica once a week from 1986. They would also sometimes visit her in Italy.

Mary taught for Esther in Toronto annually between 1986-2000, usually staying with Paola and her husband Jon.

Monica is the current director of the Esther Myers Yoga School since Esther's sad death in 2004.

### **1990 – 2001**

Mary directed four Yoga Teacher Training Courses with various colleagues until her full time retirement from teaching in 2001. These courses all benefitted from the experience she had gleaned during her Iyengar years. Her profound understanding of what a syllabus should contain ensured that trainees who qualified would be sound, safe, confident and individual teachers, prepared as well as possible from the very start of their careers.

Between 1993 and 2003 Mary published some remarkable and groundbreaking Yoga books:

***The Yoga Book***, by Mary Stewart and Maxine Tobias, (1986): A clear introduction to Classic Yoga with photographs by Sandra Lousada

***Teach yourself Yoga***, (1992, revised 1998 and 2003): as clear and concise an introduction to practicing Yoga as one could hope for, with history, philosophy, asana, breathing, and meditation sections succinctly explained.

***Yoga for Children***, (1993, 3 editions): a very popular book and one of the first yoga books to focus on how useful Yoga can be for the young. Illustrated with beautiful clear and colourful photographs by Sandra Lousada.

***Yoga for Over 50s***, (1994, revised 1995): a clear and encouraging book with examples of people aged from 50 to 80+ showing how helpful Yoga can be for older students. Again beautifully illustrated with photos by Sandra Lousada.

Since Mary's retirement from Yoga teaching, she has been able to focus on her art, with considerable pleasure and success. She is a talented and enthusiastic artist.

Mary's care and discernment, her readiness to analyze and embrace new approaches, has hugely enriched our Yoga as we follow the principles of GROUND, BREATHE AND RELEASE in our asana and breathing variations. Much of this approach stems directly from Mary's relationship with Vanda.

*The aim of the LYTTG and LYTTC today is to offer safe, enquiring and pragmatic workshops and teacher trainings.*

*Our acknowledgement of continuing developments in the world of Yoga, as well as in movement and body awareness, also enriches the content of our courses.*

*The generous spirited, supportive, warm and professional exchanges between our co-teachers, their open rapport with students, are all key ingredients that distinguish the LYTTG as a very unusual group.*

We at the LYTTG are very proud of our heritage.



Mary Stewart at home July 2018

Thank you Mary.

For more information on the current LYTTG faculty, ethos, LYTTCourses and workshops please see <http://lyttg.co.uk>

**Awakening the Spine** by Vanda Scaravelli, first published in 1991 and lovingly revised by Vanda's daughter Paola in 2011. Vanda's text explains her innovative approach to Yoga. The revised version is closely based on extensive notes Vanda left, and is one of Yoga's all-time classics.

**Yoga Practice Handbook** by Chloe Fremantle, first published in 2002, revised in 2012. This invaluable and comprehensive spiral bound handbook for students and teachers. Illustrated by Chloe and her husband Peter Blegvad with over 400 drawings. Published by [www.stillpublishing.co.uk](http://www.stillpublishing.co.uk)

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