

# LA YOGA

AYURVEDIC HEALTH

*Garth McLean  
Embracing  
Yoga with Courage  
and Caution*

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# GARTH MCLEAN

WALKING THE FINE  
LINE BETWEEN COURAGE  
AND CAUTION.

BY AMY GARTENBERG PHOTOS BY TAI KERBS

**“WHAT DO I DO NOW?” GARTH MCLEAN ASKED HIS DOCTOR.**

On May 23, 1996, Garth lay in a hospital bed at UCLA Medical Center, basically unable to walk. What felt like a pinched nerve had quickly progressed into the loss of feeling from head to toe. His mind, however, remained as sharp as a tack. Garth remembers everything about that day. More specifically, the time – 3 p.m. – when he received the diagnosis from his doctor that included the words: Multiple Sclerosis. He felt his life change in an instant. “What do I do now, you know, for my physical discipline?” Garth asked again, first feeling relieved and hopeful, given the diagnosis wasn’t worse, then progressively fearful, anxious, and very much alone.

Up until this point, Garth had been the guy constantly on the move. He lived an active life: he’d relocated from the Canadian prairies to New York City to study acting with the legendary Sandy Meisner, then moved to Hollywood in the 90s to pursue a career in film and television. He was a self-proclaimed workout fiend with a love of spinning; he was also a keen student of the martial arts, having trained in Aikido style under the guidance of Haruo Matsuoka Sensei, which consequently led to a work opportunity with action movie star Steven Seagal.

But that was before. Now, things were off-kilter; he couldn’t even balance on a bike. Garth’s doctor suggested yoga and swimming – swimming would keep his body cool (MS doesn’t necessarily fare well with heat), and yoga would help manage his stress. Garth longed for high-intensity exercise, but given his diagnosis, he decided to give yoga a try. >

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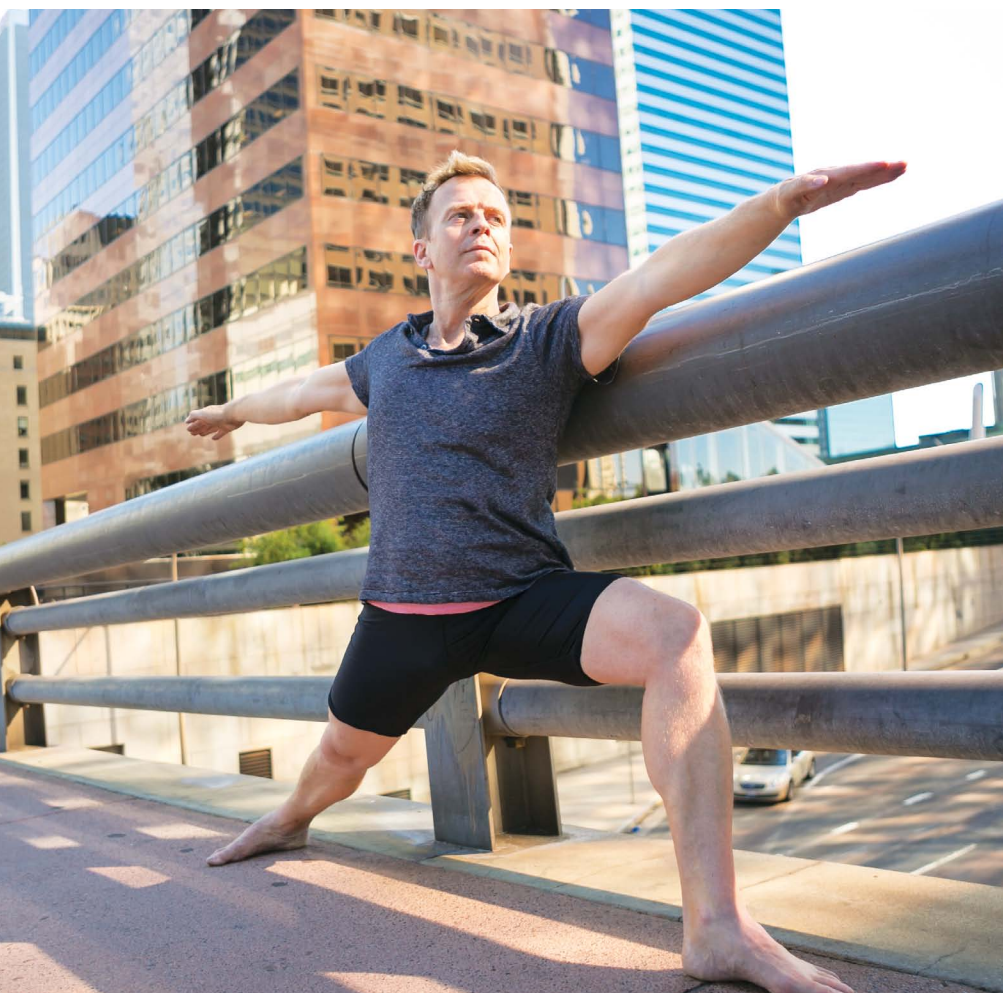
**TEACHER PROFILE** [garth mclean]

“I was blessed because that evening, some friends who were visiting me in the hospital recommended Iyengar Yoga,” recalls Garth. “The Iyengar tradition uses props to access proper alignment so the body is given the opportunity to realize its potential,” he explains. The following week, he headed to the Iyengar Yoga Institute of Los Angeles (IYILA).

Within two weeks of practicing under the guidance of the late Iyengar teacher Karin O’Bannon, Garth remembers the numbness in his body slowly giving way to a buzzing feeling. “It felt like my pager was going off in my calf and in my back,” he says. “It was a pinching and then a buzzing sensation... like something was reawakening there.” Excited, he courageously decided to test how his body would stand up to his old routine of spinning. A sweaty class at the gym left him feeling good, but by the end of the day, he couldn’t feel his body again and ended up back in the hospital. It was a lesson waiting in the wings – he understood he needed to cultivate patience and respect for his body in order to heal. He returned to IYILA, began a daily practice, and progressively welcomed the feeling back into his body. Since that day, he’s kept at it.

A couple of years into his practice, relieved for the transformative effects yoga was having on his body, Garth began to feel inspired by his journey with MS. He wanted to give back to the yoga community and share his experience with others. Though he never gave up acting, he desired to become a yoga teacher. “I wanted to help others deal with the nightmare of MS,” says Garth. He enrolled in a three-year teacher training program through the Iyengar Yoga Association of Southern California (IYASC) and became certified in 2001.

Garth’s biggest joy of teaching lies in his students. “What I love seeing is when it lands,” he says. “They get it. They get how yoga can actually transform their lives in a positive way. I love seeing when that happens...” By way of analogy, he explains, “I sometimes use the image of the metal silver. It is already a perfect, wonderful element. But if we don’t polish the silver, it tarnishes. If we continue



“THEY GET IT. THEY GET HOW YOGA CAN ACTUALLY TRANSFORM THEIR LIVES IN A POSITIVE WAY. I LOVE SEEING WHEN THAT HAPPENS...”



to polish our practice, whether we are faced with a challenge or not, we continue to uncover that light within. We sparkle and shine.”

One of the highlights of his yoga journey was the first trip he took to India where he met with BKS Iyengar. “I was excited, hopeful, and a bit apprehensive to meet this legendary icon of yoga,” Garth recalls. “I told him what I’d been dealing with, and how the yoga practice had been having such a profoundly positive effect on my course of MS under the guidance of the teachers I’d studied with in LA.” Iyengar looked him straight in the eye and said, “Every day you must walk that fine line between courage and caution.”

“I let those words guide me to this day,” says Garth.

Allowing his wound to be his message, Garth shares the gift of Iyengar Yoga around the world. He offers regular workshops and therapeutic workshops for people living with MS and their teachers; he works with individuals facing such conditions as Parkinson’s, Epilepsy, and Muscular Dystrophy. The work can also be embraced by those who may be recovering from an accident or who have difficulty moving. As well as working with people with diagnoses, he teaches workshops including intermediate level practices. Additionally, he teaches regular classes at YogaWorks Westwood and Tarzana, and at the Iyengar Yoga Institute of Los Angeles. In 2011, Garth and some fellow Iyengar teachers established Iyengar Yoga Therapeutics, a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping people manage diseases and conditions through the practice of Iyengar yoga. Additionally, they take part in research dedicated to the therapeutic benefits of yoga.

Thanks to his practice and a relentless drive, Garth has managed his MS and has been in remission since 2001 (he still has residual loss of feeling in his right leg and foot from an episode in 2001). He has even been medication-free since 2003 on the proviso given by his doctor that the lesions on his brain are monitored annually through an MRI (Magnetic Resonance Imaging) scan. His most recent scan showed that the lesions on the left side of his brain have reduced in both number and size. Now a Senior Iyengar Yoga Teacher, Garth commented on his own practice, “Out of necessity, I initially learned asana and got back on my feet through yoga by using props. To this day, I am constantly inspired to practice in the environment around me and encourage others to do the same, whether it’s on the mat, on the street, or in the heart of LA!”

These days, Garth can not only balance on his bike, but he’s back to cycling. He travels the world, maintains a strong yoga practice, and is currently working on his one-man play, Looking for Lightning, about his journey with MS. His life and teaching demonstrates what it really means to live the balance between courage and caution.

For information on upcoming workshop dates, check Garth McLean’s website at [Yogarth.com](http://Yogarth.com), or follow him on Twitter @yogarth.

**Amy Gartenberg** is an elementary school teacher and a recent graduate of the 200-hour teacher training program at Yogis Anonymous in Santa Monica. She is also the founder of the blog, [CestCaliforniaVie.com](http://CestCaliforniaVie.com) where you can find healthy recipes, workouts, and daily musings.