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Photo by Pete Konerko

BALANCE COURAGE & CAUTION

practicing yoga with MS

A diagnosis of multiple sclerosis might plunge most of us into fear and inactivity. But for former US actor Garth McLean, MS propelled him into an energetic new career as an Iyengar yoga teacher — with remarkably positive impacts on the disease.

In 1996, Garth McLean was living the American dream in Hollywood. In his mid-30s, Garth had graduated from a career as an actor to roles as a producer. After completing a high-stress job for action movie star Steven Seagal, Garth was producing a play when he started losing dexterity in his right hand. Over the following month he progressively lost feeling throughout his body. He ended up in hospital and was diagnosed with the relapsing–remitting form of the auto-immune disease multiple sclerosis (MS). This diagnosis was the catalyst for dramatic career and lifestyle changes, as Linda Apps learned when she interviewed Garth on his recent visit to Australia

LINDA APPS: CAN YOU DESCRIBE WHAT YOUR FIRST SYMPTOMS FELT LIKE?

GARTH MCLEAN: I'd lost feeling in my arms. It started in my right arm and went over to my left arm, through my legs and torso. It kept getting worse but I had a play to produce — the show must go on! I'd seen a few doctors, but when it went into my face and skull and I'd gone numb from head to toe, that's when I went to a neurologist and ended up in hospital. At that point I couldn't walk. I was freaked out. Aside from overwhelming depression, uncertainty and anxiety, I thought I might be dying. Beyond that I thought, if I don't die and I

can't feel my body for the rest of my life, that to me is more frightening.

Fortunately for Garth, his doctors not only delivered the grim diagnosis but also suggested that he take up yoga to help manage his stress levels and to keep his body active. As soon as he left hospital he headed straight for the Iyengar Yoga Institute of Los Angeles (IYILA).

LA: WHAT WAS YOUR EXPERIENCE OF STARTING YOGA, GIVEN YOUR MS?

GM: When I stumbled into the IYILA with the help of a friend, my first teacher was the late Karin O'Bannon. She was very welcoming, strict, disciplined in a compassionate

way, and helped open the door to possibility. Within a couple of weeks, I started to feel my body again and the impact of the yoga practice. I was sold. There was no question.

LA: WHAT ASANAS DID YOU START WITH? WHAT COULD YOU DO AND NOT DO?

GM: I was having difficulty lifting my legs, my right leg especially. I started with supine asanas, some restorative asanas, to give the nerves a break. Once my immune system quietened down, I started to work into supported asanas without pouncing on the nerves. If we can align the body in postures so that it ‘plugs in’ correctly — for example the thigh bone plugging in to the hip socket — then slowly the nerve transmission flows through, the nerves and muscles are nourished, and the body has a chance to heal itself.

LA: IN WHAT WAY WAS THE BODY HEALING ITSELF?

GM: With MS, the immune system is attacking the central nervous system, leaving a scarring on the myelin sheath. Essentially there’s a storm going on inside the body. The nerves are being attacked and the messages don’t get through. Mr Iyengar has given us some insight into what helps with immune function, with nerve function. One of the things that’s helped me immensely is inversions — headstand, shoulderstand, and legs up the wall.

Garth credits the early intervention of yoga with preventing the disease from becoming progressive, as it can at any time. He describes how he was spurred on to keep practicing by seeing early signs that yoga could help him manage both the disease and his anxieties.

GM: Fear is a big motivating factor for many people. It certainly was for me. Being a young guy, I wasn’t ready to just roll over and take the drugs. I’m not saying to anyone to not take the drugs. But I wanted to see if I could maintain my mobility



Photo taken at Namastday Yoga (<http://namastday.com>) in Beverly Hills.

and ability and my body responded. I was very motivated. When I started to see that this could actually work, it offered a glimmer of hope. I’m not saying it’s a cure but I started to feel my body again. The steroids initially helped with that and then after a few weeks of dedicated practice, going to class daily — I took it on. I thought if I’m going to try something, then I really have to commit to give it a go, rather than just going to one or two classes.

Garth found that for the first five years after diagnosis, he was able to manage his symptoms for MS without medication. But MS is characterized by periods of remission, followed by relapses that may or may not lead to permanent loss of function.

LA: HAVE YOU HAD ANY RELAPSES, AND HOW HAVE YOU DEALT WITH THEM?

GM: In 2001, I had two severe exacerbations within six months of each other. In the first part of the year I lost my eyesight — optic neuritis. That lasted about 11 weeks. Once my vision returned I was relieved and happy to go into remission. Two

months later, I lost feeling from the naval down and had a variety of symptoms that also included the MS hug — it’s a spasticity that happens in the abdominal region. It feels like you’re in a vice grip, just keeps getting tighter and it’s hard to breathe. Passive chest openers over a bolster relieve that. I had difficulty walking and lost use of my motor skills for a while.

LA: HOW MUCH USE DID YOU MAKE OF MEDICATION DURING THAT RELAPSE?

GM: My neurologist encouraged me to try an immune modulator. It was an intra-muscular injection and I just didn’t feel well on them, I didn’t feel good, I would get flu-like symptoms. I’m not saying to not do them, because they can be very beneficial, but for myself I thought: I don’t know if this is the course I want to take. Let me see if I can manage this again through the yoga practice for the long run.

LA: HOW HAVE YOU MANAGED SINCE THEN? HAVE YOU HAD OTHER RELAPSES?

GM: With a daily yoga practice and no meds, I was symptom free for



Photo by Cindy Leuty Jones

14 years. In early 2015, I recognised the signs of an impending relapse with my right leg. Drawing on my experience, I immediately recalibrated the practice employing everything I had learned and was able to forego an exacerbation. Another aha moment! Dedicated practice with discriminative intelligence can indeed prevent future pain!

LA: CAN YOU EXPLAIN WHAT YOUR PRACTICE TYPICALLY INVOLVES?

GM: My asana practice continues to evolve and has become much more intuitive depending on my energy levels and what may be going on any particular day. Recognising the impact the inversions have on my health, I invert a minimum of 30 minutes a day, every day, with support as required. The inversions usually include a 10-minute headstand with variations, a 10 to 15 minute shoulderstand with variations, coupled with other inversions, for example Viparita Karani (Bridge Pose) and Setu Bandha Sarvangasana (legs Up Wall Pose) with support. Added to that I often do standing poses three or four times a week, incorporating either forward bends,

twists, back bends or arm balances. If I have very little time, at minimum I will do pranayama and the inversions. I embrace a restorative practice at least once a week.

LA: HOW IS YOGA PRODUCING LONG-TERM IMPACTS ON YOUR MS?

GM: I don't take any drugs and I've had good results. My agreement with my doctor is I'll have an MRI once a year to monitor the lesions on my brain. When we compared 2005 to 2001, the lesions on my brain are still there — the disease is still present — but they've reduced in size and number. When we compared 2012 to 2011, once again the lesions have appeared to reduce in number and size and there's been no abnormal activity. My doctor in Los Angeles and my doctor in Pune, India, have both said these are incredible results, especially for someone who doesn't take any medication. They say keep doing what you're doing! What I do is a minimum of 30 minutes of inversions every day.

Garth's commitment to yoga led him to travel to India to study with BKS Iyengar and family.

His encounters with BKS Iyengar in Pune have had a powerful influence on his practice.

GM: When I met Mr Iyengar and told him about the profound affect the yoga had been having on my body his words to me were "every day you must walk the line between courage and caution" and those words continue to resonate in my practice.

LA: HOW DO YOU INTERPRET THOSE WORDS?

GM: To be courageous enough to take action but cautious enough to respect what's going on in the body. I still experience fatigue and have residual loss of feeling in my right leg and foot. But if you take care of yourself and keep the muscle and nerve fibres working so they don't forget what their job is, with courage and caution you can hopefully overcome the suffering that is to come, as the yoga sutras say.

LA: WHAT OTHER ADVICE FROM MR IYENGAR PARTICULARLY INFLUENCED YOU?

GM: I often talk to people about what BKS Iyengar called the five 'yoga vitamins', as outlined in Patanjali's yoga sutra 1.20: "Practice must be pursued with trust, confidence, vigour, keen memory and power of absorption to break [our] spiritual complacency." These 'vitamins' help overcome our adversaries, our complacencies, so that we can carry on.

Garth is a Senior Intermediate Level III Iyengar Yoga teacher. He travels the world sharing his experience about using yoga to manage MS with other Iyengar teachers, as well as offering workshops to MS sufferers. He also offers regular intensive classes. He is a founding and continuing board member of Iyengar Yoga Therapeutics, a non-profit organisation dedicated to helping people maintain health through Iyengar yoga. He has been to Australia six times and taught at Balmain Iyengar Yoga School in

Sydney and North Shore Yoga in Auckland, New Zealand in March this year.

LA: HOW HAVE YOU MAINTAINED YOUR PRACTICE, GIVEN THE CHALLENGES YOU'VE FACED?

GM: In my case I discovered yoga through a potentially debilitating disease. The fear of an attack is always present. If I occasionally miss my practice, which is rare, I immediately notice the difference. Days that I'm really tired or my legs are not working 100%, I'll modify the practice, adapt it according to what is happening that particular day, rather than just pushing through and doing violence to the body. So the sutras resonate with me and the philosophy behind it keeps me going. Fear keeps me going in a positive way as I don't want fall into

relapse or let the condition overtake what I can do. It's very easy to go "I don't have time to do my practice today", but if I have time to have coffee with a friend or complain about what I don't have time for, then I can at least take 30 minutes to do something to help myself.

LA: IT MUST BE WORKING BECAUSE YOU ARE KEEPING UP WITH A VERY BUSY SCHEDULE, TRAVELING TO MANY COUNTRIES TO TEACH AND MAINTAINING YOUR HEALTH AT THE SAME TIME.

GM: Absolutely. And as Iyengar yoga teachers we have a strong sense of duty or 'dharma'. My duty is, if there's anybody in the world who I can help enhance their own lives, then it's my responsibility to do so. That's what motivates me to get out there and try to help the world in some small way.

Garth McLean can be reached through www.yogarth.com

MS is an auto immune disorder, in which the immune system essentially attacks the central nervous system, leaving sclerosis or scarring, (sclerosis is the Greek word for scar) on the myelin sheath - the protective coating on the nerves. Messages from the brain don't get through to the various parts of the body. There are four general courses of MS, each of which might be mild, moderate, or severe. They are identified as Relapsing - Remitting, Primary - Progressive, Secondary - Progressive and Progressive - Relapsing.

Linda Apps runs The Yoga Nook in Dulwich Hill, Sydney. She's been enjoying Iyengar Yoga for 25 years and is a Junior Intermediate III certified teacher. www.yoganook.com.au

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