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spectrum

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CELEBRATING OUR ELDERS

HAPPY 100TH BIRTHDAY, VELTA!

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founder of
UK teacher
training

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Bright star in

Tribute to Velta Snikere Wilson on the occasion of her 100th birthday

by Gill Hague, Professor Emeritus

I am honoured beyond words to initiate and coordinate this tribute to Velta Snikere Wilson on the occasion of her 100th birthday. Velta is one of our most renowned teachers and a founding member of the Wheel.

She is also an acclaimed and extremely famous Latvian poet, recently awarded a Literary Life-Time Achievement Award by the Latvian government. She contributed hugely to the Latvian Independence Movement.

Velta started her study of yoga in a dedicated way with her teacher at just 13 years old. Her unique and profound teaching is rooted in the classic ancient yoga texts and in deep understandings of them and of yoga more broadly. Overall, she has practised yoga for 87 years, and taught for more than 60 of those years.

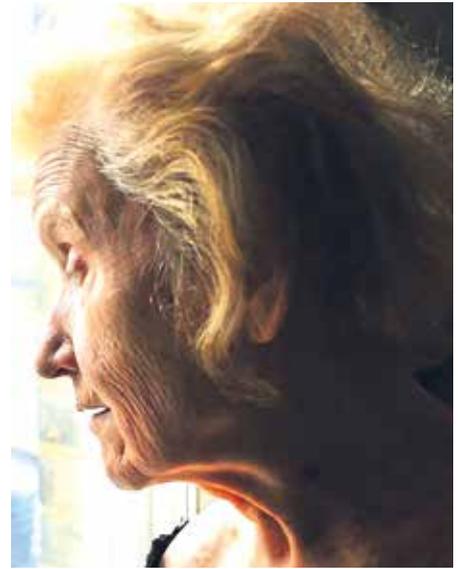
A founder of the Wheel and of UK yoga teaching

Velta began teaching yoga in this country in the late 1950s. John Cain, historian of the British Wheel of Yoga, explains in his following contribution that Velta could be seen as the actual originator of the Wheel. It was her letter more than 50 years ago, suggesting the need for a national coordinating body, that encouraged our much-respected founder, Wilfred Clarke, to initiate such a body. Velta recently found a copy of the original letter in her papers.

She was a leader, with others, in the first wide-scale development of yoga in this country in the 1950s and 1960s, and was a pioneer of yoga being widely available through Adult Education classes – now rarely the case, sadly.

For this article, Velta wanted me to say that she had never intended to become a yoga teacher originally, but she was 'told' to do it. It was later that Wilfred Clarke recognised her unique qualities and personally asked her to initiate actual classes to teach yoga. She was one of the first to do so in London. Many people then came forward to teach and train in the 1960s.

Later, Velta, with fellow pioneers, Ken Thompson and Chris Stevens, developed and ran the first yoga Teacher Training from 1971. Ken, like Velta, was one of the original founders of the Wheel, and we are extremely honoured to have a contribution from him, below. The history of yoga in this country that Ken and John (and Velta, herself) tell is precious and fading from view. It needs to be remembered, preserved and celebrated.



Velta's teaching

Apparently, 100 people applied for Velta's first Teaching Diploma Course back in 1971, some from other countries. She continued to train teachers until recent years, teaching generations of both yoga students and teachers in this country, Latvia and elsewhere. She also taught Autogenic Training for many decades.

Velta has noted that various trainee teachers with her who had lost their religion have re-found it through her teaching, including those of Jewish, Buddhist, Hindu, and Christian faiths. Students have also found psychological and emotional healing from deep-seated difficulties through her teaching (rather than through their therapy, often). Very many yoga practitioners have found themselves and their yoga practice transformed deeply by Velta, with the change experienced organically and almost unconsciously.

A Spectrum article celebrated Velta in 2016 and said: 'She is a great pioneer and ambassador of yoga. Her wisdom has informed the practice and teaching of untold numbers of people. We estimated together that she has probably trained more yoga teachers in the UK than anyone else has.'

I have always loved her contributions to that article: 'People say we need to bring yoga up to date. But I always say that, it's the opposite. We haven't caught up with yoga yet!' And her comment on all the new, modern, fast-paced variations on yoga: 'As long as they do no harm – just let them play!'

An inestimably huge contribution

For myself, I trained with Velta from 1978. I cannot begin to say how much I have learned from her, how honoured I am that she has been my teacher, and how much she has transformed my life. Personally, it has been an immeasurably huge honour to know and learn from her. Velta's contribution to the Wheel and to yoga in this country over 70 years has been inestimable. Thank you deeply, Velta.

the firmament of UK yoga

'The gifts you have given us all are beyond price. Happy 100th birthday. We will never see your like in yoga again.'

Gill's yoga student group wanted to add: 'We have all benefited so much from Velta's wisdom passed on to us by Gill. We have learned from her insights and wisdom. We use Velta's poem about yoga in almost all our classes and have done so for more than twenty years. Happy birthday, Velta, and thank you from all of us.'

Historian of the Wheel and early member, John Cain, contributes these beautiful words: 'Velta is a bright star in the firmament of UK yoga.'

In his contribution to this tribute, he writes: 'I first met Velta around 1969/70 when I attended a lecture on yoga in London and Velta was one of the speakers. She started a yoga class at the request of Haringey Further Education in 1963. I don't think many "Wheel people" realise that it was Velta's letter to Wilfred Clarke in 1965 that made him realise 'we need some sort of organisation to coordinate activities and arrange teacher training.' The rest is history!

'Wilfred got a group of people together and the Wheel was born. Wilfred called this small group that developed the organisation the Founder Devotees. Velta, who was a Member of the Chartered Society of Physiotherapy, later worked with Chris Stevens, who had become the Wheel's



General Secretary, on setting up teacher training (as discussed by Ken Thompson, below). Velta has continued to teach yoga classes and run Teacher Training courses ever since. There was always a waiting list for her classes.

'She was a driving force in the early days of the Wheel, and was also involved in the rewrite of the BWY syllabus in 1997.

'Velta was always a brilliant participant in discussion groups. She had the knack of making an observation or posing a query, which usually simplified or refined the discussion. I always came away from meetings with Velta feeling motivated and energised. A great lady!

We are greatly privileged that Ken Thompson, one of the venerable founders of the Wheel, wrote for this tribute how 'Velta is someone who has really lived a yoga life'.

He says: 'I feel very privileged to belong to that pioneering band of yoga followers in London, like Velta, and in the rest of the country, who, in the 1950s and 1960s, started teaching before it became fashionable to do so.

'Of course, Velta was one of the original yoga teachers operating in the London area. In fact there were so few yoga teachers in London then, that we all knew each other. A few years later when the well-known Richard Hittleman TV programme started, around 1971 – there were suddenly hundreds of yoga teachers!

'Another pioneer was Chris Stevens whom I met through the work of Wilfred Clarke, the original founder of the



British Wheel, who had a vision for bringing like-minded yoga followers together. At his request, and with Velta and myself, Chris put together the very first educationally approved BWY Teacher Training course in 1971 which Velta ran in London. I ran the one at Brentwood. (Chris Stevens had a great influence on my own life, and he later was a pioneer of Alexander Technique teaching, which I also took up, establishing the Essex Alexander School in 1988.)

Ken wrote the important yoga book, *Are you a Natural Hatha Yogi?*

Former students of Velta have contributed many words of tribute and congratulation. This is a selection:

Long-term student, **Pat Baxter**, sends these birthday greetings: 'I met Velta at a yoga teaching training course in the early 1970s. Her method of teaching was such that, from a very quiet and shy person, I became a strong and often articulate person. I was probably that all the time, but Velta brought it out in me. Without her support and vast knowledge, I would not be the person I am today.'

'Velta encouraged us to verify what we have heard or read. Many times, I stepped into the deeper world of yoga meditation to clarify my mind. Velta is a beautiful spirit, and I love her dearly. Happy 100th birthday, Velta!'

Another former student, **Liz Taylor**, speaks of also learning deeply from Velta's wisdom: 'As Velta comes close to her 100th birthday, I have had the privilege of regular contact with her for many years, as my former yoga teacher and a wise friend. Her clear, incisive mind shines through now as much as it has since I first knew her.'

'She has been an exceptional person to undertake a yoga teacher training with, guiding students to think deeply about the practices and philosophy of yoga, and to come to our own conclusions rather than take on the teaching without question.'

I often feel that her knowledge and perception is far

greater than she wants to reveal. She chooses her words carefully and says little that is irrelevant. That requires a certain control of the ego – which of course comes with the practice of yoga. Velta has also taught by example, living a yogic life.

'As she approaches the age of 100, Velta also stands for me as an example of how to face the challenges of age with equanimity and a sense of detachment towards the body. Only by being around our mentors and friends who are ahead of us on the path can we learn how to navigate the ageing process, which each generation treads afresh.'

Liz Till, a student of Velta's from 1982 has written beautiful words at some length, which are précised here: 'Velta says that she learned gentleness, moving without strain, and a deep respect for the human body, from Ram Gopal, her Indian Dance teacher. If practised 100 per cent, Ahimsa, non-harming, non-violence, Patanjali ch 2, v 35, has this outcome: 'By abiding in non-violence – one's presence creates an atmosphere – in which all hostility ceases.'

'Entering the space of Velta's yoga class for the first time in 1982, I experienced this equanimity. She taught us that, in safe yoga practice, there is no 'end-gaining'. Each student has to be responsible for self-awareness, and practise within their own safety zone. As student teachers, we learned deep respect and awe for the subtlety of the human body-mind. She taught us that "The whole body heals any part which is dis-eased: therefore, work with the whole body.'

'Velta invited students first to deepen their personal practice and understanding of yoga – and only then, develop teaching skills. Her courses were a profound journey of personal development. One student told Velta: "I have been in psychotherapy for years, and it hasn't done anything for me. And now this [Teacher's Diploma] course has cured me".'



Some insights from Velta on 'Peeling off' illusion (contributed by Liz).

Velta has given us these understandings of yoga:
*Yoga is not an acquiring of flexibility
 But a discarding of rigidity
 Not an accumulation of information
 But a discarding of ignorance.
 No two leaves are exactly alike
 No two individuals*

*No two yoga paths.
 Yoga is becoming alive to one's own inherent path
 Being guided by universal laws.*

'The purpose of Yoga, Velta says, is restoring harmony of body-mind-breath-spirit. She does not ask us to believe her words: we are to follow the instructions and observe the results of this experience directly in our bodies, physiology and mental processes. As a skilled practitioner of Autogenic Training – a westernised adaptation of Yoga Nidra – Velta offered us this method of self-observation in separate courses. It is an extremely efficient de-stressor and support for the immune system; and also prepares us for the state of meditation.

'Yoga, she says, is the ancient science that underlies spiritual experiences, making the suggestion to us to: *“Arrange your body without forcing or straining, retaining the sense of body dignity – Take your awareness within – Expand your consciousness beyond yourself, aligning yourself with infinity”*.

'Velta taught us to "peel off" layers of illusions, to find opportunities to grow, through thickets of difficulty, disappointments and despair, towards the Light. She has enabled us to meet ourselves, and others, with practical compassion. She has taught us, like the ancient yogis, to be free from time-bound illusions – no longer identifying ourselves with this body, these emotions, these circumstances, these thoughts – to become the SPACE in which all these happen.'

Velta's student, **Marianne Simonin**, adds: 'I became interested in Yoga when I was 16 and, upon arriving in the UK, I searched where I could train to become a teacher. I met Velta in 1985 and told her my goal. I had little experience with asanas but I had strong meditative experiences from childhood, and a developed awareness. Her course was full but she suggested I attend, meanwhile, her weekly hatha sessions and philosophy class, which I did. From this moment, my yogic path opened.

'Her creativity which she expressed through her poetry and dance resonated with me as a painter, and I immediately knew that she was going to be a guiding light. The training was for me psychologically challenging, I was at times frightened of her, she commanded respect – but her energy was also so caring and healing. In the last 10 years I have given her massages and she took a keen interest in the Ayurvedic Master I was studying at University. Three years running, we celebrated New Year together at her home with a friend, her sense of humour and wise talks always entertained us until 3am.

'Velta is a fantastic host and generous in every way. Her energy is timeless and has been present in my teaching ever since. She allowed me to find my own path, she never imposed a style but encouraged each student to access their true nature and potential. Velta was an excellent teacher, focusing on the roots of yoga such as the yamas and niyamas to build our foundation. In my heart, I will always bow down to her. Happy Birthday dear Velta!' Pictured right is an oil painting which Marianne painted of Velta several years ago.

'Having read all the wonderful tributes from so many, I feel a little bit like an interloper! I am not a lifetime student of Velta's unfortunately. However, I wanted to pay my tribute sincerely and humbly. Many, many years ago I was invited to Velta's house for a workshop being given by Maya Tiwari. I was welcomed at the door by the amazingly stylish



presence of Velta and made to feel one of the group. That visit opened my eyes to all the possibilities in yoga, the vast array of choices on offer and set me along my path of yoga, for which I will be forever grateful to Velta. Very happy 100th Birthday Velta, and thank you for opening the door to yoga for me, warmest wishes,' said **Wendy Haring**, BWYT Chair.

To conclude, Gill Hague added:

'Velta is an inspiration to all who know her. Her contribution to yoga and to life itself cannot be measured. Velta, you have transformed the practice of UK yoga and you have transformed all our lives.

From all of us,

From all your students over 60 years,

From all the yoga practitioners and teachers you have inspired,

From fellow poets,

And from everyone at the Wheel, past and present:

Our deepest thanks to you and our sincere congratulations on your centenary.'

The next Spectrum will reprint Velta's incisive article on Autogenic Training (referred to by Liz Till) as a follow-up to this tribute. BWY has established a webpage for the fuller versions of all these contributions and for others who wish to contribute to honouring and remembering Velta. Email your tributes with 'Tribute to Velta' in the subject bar at E: office@bwy.org.uk to preserve a wider record of Velta's life and teaching.

Photography by Geoff Almond

