

Reflecting on Iyengar - sadhaka newsletter article

I've walked down this road many times over more than 30 years. The trees are a little taller and the roads have improved with gutters and the piles of rubbish that were worked by small families who lived under plastic sheeting beside the storm water have gone along with the family of pigs who shared the takings. On the sidewalk are a few barrows that sell fruit and veg to local households as they wheel along shouting their wares. Mangy dogs sleep nearby.

There is a park that opens its gates for people to come and walk amongst the trees, to run or for children to play on the equipment. Beyond the park is a stall selling chai and upma where students gather after class to chat and exchange their observations and experiences. By Indian standards this is an affluent well-kept suburb named Model Colony and this is where BKS Iyengar opened his Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute in the city of Pune in 1975 after his wife's death in 1973, built with the support of his students from throughout the world. After decades of teaching, he had arrived.



The institute is a pyramid in shape and covers 4 levels including the Library in the basement, the entrance hall and change rooms. Above this sits the hall where classes are conducted and then the pranayama room. At the pinnacle is a shrine to Hanuman the monkey god. It's a unique building. Much has changed from my first trip in 1983. In those early visits one would drop off the map on entering India. Calling home was not really an option, changing travellers cheques could take half the day and an aerogram would often arrive after you had returned home.

We would often go to morning class or practice then stay to assist the 930am class before going for breakfast and to take notes before returning to practice in the afternoon at 4pm then assisting or observing the 6pm class. The days were full and intense but this was why we came. It was a chance to step out of our own world and immerse ourselves in the practice and be taught by the Iyengar family- Guruji, his daughter Geeta and son Prashant. The otherworldliness of a month of study surrounded by the culture of India and the dislocation supported the study.

There was always an air of translation. The need to make sense of what was being said because the Indian English was unfamiliar and at times words were used in ways that conveyed meaning differently or made you reassess the actions. The language was bought into the service of communicating an experience rather than simply to describe an action. It was something I had never experienced before. The language made me go inwards. You might be asked to *churn the abdomen* rather than *turn the abdomen* within a twist and this took me into myself to examine what I felt and what was happening in my abdomen. He was inventing language, just as he invented so much else, in his search to understand, and through this, his teaching. We as his students, were recording the asanas in our bodies through the experience of his teaching rather than recording what he taught. As he had done, we were learning to study ourselves through a practice.

One of the things I gained from these many trips was that the learning was not always where you would expect. If you came with expectations these were often upturned, or illness could lay you up for a week or more. So it was best to come without conditions, to adapt to the challenges, to meet the demands of the class and to study yourself and your reactions so as not to blame others or the circumstances for your own difficulties when they arose.

The Iyengar family were endlessly giving and selfless in the teaching. Guruji was demanding and unending in his quest to delve, examine and confront the slightest hint of conditional practice or the whiff of fears and desires informing the actions in his students. He was creative and uncompromising. Central to Iyengar's method is an acknowledgement that what we see in our actions is a visible expression of the underlying thoughts and feelings. By studying our actions in asana we can observe the expression of the vrttis and klesas. The development of timings arose from this inward looking study. The ethics of the practice were always in the fore too and you were asked to sift yourself as to your motivation, your intention, within each asana. Through his own self-study (swadhyaya) he concluded that the yamas and niyamas (2 of the 8 astanga limbs) existed within the practice as distinct from practices in themselves. He demanded that his students scrutinise themselves for acquisition, covetousness and so on.

Strongest for me however was always the Yoga hall where Guruji would often practice early in the morning together with those who came to join. In the early light he would be seen doing the asanas and this was such an inspiring message- the way to understanding was through the practice. It was more potent than anything he said and yet backed up what he said and made it all the more significant because he was communicating his practice understanding. What was being communicated is reflected in this quote from svatmarama in the Hatha Yoga Pradipika



'1: 64 Any person who is not lethargic can obtain yoga, be he young, old, very old, sick or weak.

1: 65 One who is intent on practice will obtain yoga, not one who is idle.

1: 66 Yoga is not obtained by reading scriptures, nor by wearing the dress of a yogini, nor by talking about it. Practice alone is the course of success'

He has gone now, having died this last week, and we, his students have gathered from across the globe to acknowledge this man and his effects on us, as individuals, and collectively. This possibly, is the thing that conveys the most. For many of us making our way these last days since news came, his influence was profound. Something in what he communicated made us want to make this practice the centre of our lives. We re-directed ourselves to make practice and teaching yoga our purpose. He communicated his experience and through his teaching we were made to delve deep within ourselves too. We gave up jobs and careers, we worked alone on our mats and lived simple lives that put practice based learning as our priority. He had this effect upon so many is also significant. Of that generation throughout the 1970-1980s many have now become his *senior teachers*.

Whilst there is sadness and loss there is also for me a recognition that this is timely.

I'll walk to the institute today to pay my respects and say goodbye to him and then return to my home to continue. This was his key message and what he taught me. The only knowledge that was relevant was knowledge gained from one's own practice experience; *practice based learning*. In this I don't feel lost nor in need of him. His message was clearly based in the lineage of Patanjali's Yoga. Through a

practice (tapas) we learn to study ourselves (svadhyaya) and this provided the means to transcend the veneer of personality (isvara pranidhana) in order to develop a deeper understanding of who we are ...

*'It is not speech we should want to know; We should know the speaker.
It is not seen which we should want to know; We should know the seer.
It is not sounds we should want to know; We should know the hearer.
It is not mind which we should want to know; We should know the thinker.'*

BKS Iyengar 1918-2014