

## A Catholic at Guruji's feet

-- Alya Honasan

“I teach yoga for all regardless of religion”

It was a ladies' class at the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute in Pune, and Yogacharya BKS Iyengar's granddaughter Abhijata was explaining how to open the chest in *Adho Mukha Svanasana*. Then, as he has been known to do, Guruji rose from his practice by the tressler near the props, and instead of merely giving directions from where he stood, walked over to the platform and promptly took over the class. Stating that "I teach yoga for all," regardless of religion, he proceeded to show on Abhijata how the intersection of the solid, horizontal collarbones and the vertically rising spine and trunk in *Adho Mukha Svanasana* took the form of the Holy Cross, the universal symbol of Christianity. Later, in *Sirsasana*, we were told, the intersection of that same cross marks the location of the heart, from which, in essence, one must properly do the pose.

The analogy was something I never expected to hear in my yoga class. But then again, I have come to realize that learning at Guruji's feet is an exercise in the unexpected, in what my fellow Filipino Iyengar Yoga students and I have come to refer to as "light bulb moments." The reference to the Cross was especially Significant for us, as the Philippines is a predominantly Catholic country. Almost all Filipinos are born and raised Catholic, and the Cross is an omnipresent symbol of our faith. The image adorns our homes, hangs around our necks, and is drawn on our foreheads in blessing by priests and elders. On such a cross, we believe, our Lord Jesus Christ was crucified, as he chose to suffer and die to free us from our sins and give all Christians a chance at eternal life. In yogic terms, I like to think of it as the human incarnation of our God taking on the violence of the world upon Himself, so that His followers may have the freedom to live by ahimsa in their own earthly lives.



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For more conventional Catholics, yoga may seem inconsistent with this faith. After all, while we believe in one God, here we are confronted with a polytheistic system that recognizes many gods, answering a variety of needs and prayers. To borrow a term used by early Christians, and which I cringe at using in this day and age, yoga may even be perceived as a mystical, dark subject subscribed to by "pagans." Indeed, in my country, we sometimes find ourselves explaining to students before class that the invocation to Lord Patanjali that begins every Iyengar yoga class is not a purely religious ritual, or a pledging of their unsuspecting souls to some fearsome deity.



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For some Filipinos who have been practicing yoga, however, the dissonance has ceased to exist. I like to think my God – who, I also believe in my heart of hearts, is one with all other gods, from Brahma to Buddha to Allah – is more tolerant and understanding than some strict theologians would want us to believe. I have faith that I will not be struck by a vengeful bolt of lightning if I happen to encounter Him in the clarity of an asana or in the depths of pranayama, just as I would in the middle of the Holy Mass or while praying the Holy Rosary to His mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary. There is so much more universality in our beliefs than we think; love is love in any language or creed, and a good human being is a good human being no matter who or what he or she professes to. When the great Catholic saint Paul writes to the Corinthians in the Holy Bible that “Love is patient, love is kind...it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs,” it guides me in the way I deal with especially my students and fellow teachers. Am I not here to share what little knowledge I have absorbed, and to be of help, just as Guruji to thousands all over the world who have benefited from his work? When St. Paul teaches that “If I have not love, I am like a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal,” it jives perfectly with what Guruji says, that “Love must be incarnated in the smallest pore of the skin, the smallest cell of the body...this love must radiate from you to others.”

The fact is, yoga has filled many of our lives with love-love for the subject, love for our teacher, love for others, and a tempered love of ourselves that has changed us unequivocally and absolutely. It has blessed us with healthier bodies, peaceful minds, and open hearts. And it is a love that does not demand to know where you come from, and who you pray to.

Things get even more complicated when a Catholic is presented with the idea of a Guru. The *Guru/sisya* relationship is not common in my country. We have many mentors in school or at work, an elder guardian, or even a spiritual director who guides us in your study of the teachings of Jesus Christ, but the system is nowhere near as institutionalized as studying with a Guru is in India. When I began studying yoga, family and friends would be intimidated by my pictures of Guruji, whether as a younger man doing incredible asana, or as he is today, with his white mane and piercing gaze. They ask if this exotic looking person levitates, or glows, or can go without food for days on end. The west, which has influenced Filipino culture greatly, has somehow painted for us the picture of a Guru as a mythical being, detached from the realities of life, too distant to touch, whom you can only meet in some fabled realm of advanced consciousness.

Even as I know I have miles and ages to go before I can comprehend the fullness of Guruji's teaching and influence – a fact which, in a way, wraps him in myth -- how do I explain to people

that my Guru is a man, but a truly remarkable one? That he is a father, husband, grandfather, brother, and friend as well as teacher? That he lost his wife, endured illness and injury, and underwent untold suffering to stay true to his work, long before yoga was discovered and celebrated by the world? And that the first time I ever saw him in the flesh in Pune, he just happened to saunter by while we were registering for classes, and even said "Thank you" when we fell in a nervous tizzy at his feet? I have never been a privileged recipient of one of his wondrous whacks of wisdom on my body during a pose (although he has whacked my teacher, and her teachers, as well, of course, lucky them). Still, I have held his hand in greeting, and stood close enough to see the twinkle in his eye. I have seen with delight how Abhijata once put her hand on his stomach to help him down from *Ardha Chandrasana*, and affectionately kept it there while he spoke to her softly. No, I try to tell Filipinos who ask -- my Guru does not float on some higher plane. Rather, he comes down to the earth where we are, takes our hands (and feet and knees and shoulder blades and ribs), and carries us all, stern and compassionate at the same time, to that higher plane along with him.



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"Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace," wrote another great Catholic saint, Francis of Assisi. Catholics believe that God can work His miracles through the people we meet on our life's journeys, all of whom cross our paths for a reason. I believe that God made my Guru, and sent him into this world on a sublime mission. That mission somehow included touching us, a small group of followers in the only Catholic country in Southeast Asia, all of us working hard to remain faithful to his teachings. Through Guruji, we have been blessed and transformed. To paraphrase Guruji once more, in his teachings we have found discipline and precision. This precision has shown us the truth, and that truth has brought us closer to God.