

Peace in precision

Sub: Iyengar yoga is known for its meticulous attention to detail—but with that intensity, as this writer discovered, comes life-changing transformation

By Yael H. Ballesteros

“The goal is near for those who are supremely vigorous and intense in practice.”

– Sutra I.21, from *Light on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali* by BKS Iyengar

I’M SWEATING buckets on my mat, every muscle in my body screaming in protest, trying to follow each esoteric instruction. “Bring the lower half of your calf muscle towards the heel! Suck the anal mouth to the brain! Soften your sacro-iliac joint! Roll the trapezius up, and then down to your lower back!” It’s not easy, but somehow, in the intense concentration, I find a semblance of peace. Later, when we’re in *Salamba Sirsasana*, headstand, and my teacher of seven years, Rina Ortiz, tells me that this challenging *asana* (pose) can actually bring me into a state of meditation, I believe her. And it happens—I come down from a five-minute headstand with quadriceps of stone, and a mind that feels like it’s been washed in cool water. And I remember, all over again, why I have chosen to faithfully follow this path of Iyengar yoga.

Iyengar yoga, the style originated by living Indian master B.K.S. Iyengar, bashes a lot of misconceptions about what yoga, this 5,000-year-old belief system of which *asana* are only one part, is supposed to be. First of all, there is no continuous flow or *vinyasa*, as in a dance with specific steps; you go into a pose, hold it for a while, and then get out of it, with each pose usually preparing you for the next. Then, aside from the short moments of silence at the beginning of class, when “om” is chanted and the invocation to the sage Patanjali recited in Sanskrit as thanksgiving for his documentation of yoga, there’s very little literal meditation going on.

Iyengar practitioners believe that the work starts from the outside—in other words, get to know your body first before you can even think of touching your soul. While we never really sit down in *Padmasana* (lotus) to expressly empty our minds, the sheer necessity of staying in the moment to pay attention to your *asana* in order to do it right is enough of a mini-vacation for the most frazzled of brains. In the words of senior Iyengar teacher Faeq

Biria, who was in Manila last May to conduct two days of intense workshops, “Yoga shuts the gate to the past and shuts the gate to the future, so you are fully in the present moment.”

And if there’s anything we want to do, it’s to be completely there for the pose. There’s no end to the details. Before I found Iyengar yoga in 2002, I had tried other styles of yoga, and none of them was as particular, almost reverent, about how you did a pose. No wonder Iyengar devotees have been called everything from “meticulous” and “precise,” to “anal” and downright “OC.” To an Iyengar yogi, bending forward is much more than just a matter of touching your toes (which isn’t even the point—you don’t have to touch your toes if you can’t reach them). It’s about opening your chest, moving your front ribs forward, keeping the spine straight, opening your hamstrings, lifting your knees, turning in your thighs, creating space in your groins—I could go on and on. “It’s the quality of instruction and the depth of knowledge and wisdom that comes with each *asana*,” Rina says. “The connection between mind, body, spirit, and the universe becomes vivid and clearer as one progresses in the practice.”

With such a demand for precision, it’s no wonder that aspirants have to put in a great deal of what Rina calls “donkey work” to qualify to teach Iyengar yoga. And the last word on all matters pertaining to the study and propagation of this rich subject still comes from the man himself, who, at 90, is alive, healthy, clear-headed, and happily doing 10-minute headstands in his home and institute in Pune, southern India.

Bellur Krishnamachar Sundararaja (BKS) Iyengar, who has been named by *Time Magazine* as one of the most influential people in the world, was born a member of the Brahmin caste in Bellur, Karnataka State, India. He was riddled with illnesses as a child, and suffered from malaria, typhoid, and tuberculosis.

In 1934, his brother-in-law, the renowned yoga teacher Krishnamacharya, put his frail ward on a strict yoga regime to improve his health. Despite his weak physical condition, however, the boy was an exceptional and driven student, even later innovating on his own and inventing the props that would become integral to the Iyengar system; thus, aside from yoga mats, Iyengar yoga studios always have shelves stacked high with blankets, blocks, benches, belts, bolsters, and other accoutrements that help students execute a pose—but which have had critics calling Iyengar the “prop yogi.”

“Compassion is the driving force behind the development of props,” Iyengar, or Guruji (“my teacher”) to his students, has said. “I designed props so people can benefit. Thousands are benefiting and continue to benefit from them. Does God file a patent for creation? Then what right do I, a mortal, have to do so?”

In 1937, Guruji was sent to Pune to teach, where he would establish roots, get married, and put up the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute in 1975, named after his wife Ramaa, who died in 1973.

Violinist Yehudi Menuhin, an avid student of Iyengar yoga and eastern philosophy, is credited with convincing his guru to visit the west, thus beginning the spread of Iyengar yoga, now widely practiced all over the world. Two of Guruji’s six children, Geeta and Prashant, are now the directors of the institute, where teachers and serious students still reserve slots a year in advance to make regular pilgrimages and cram themselves into modest facilities—there are only two big classrooms!

One of those students who regularly sit at Guruji’s feet is Rina Ortiz, art patroness, one-time restaurateur, wife to banker Tito Ortiz and mother of two, and the first Filipina to become a certified Iyengar yoga teacher. By her own admission, she had been searching for something for years before finding Iyengar yoga and being certified by Guruji himself in 2003. “I was already on some sort of journey before I got into Iyengar yoga, but the road was fraught with uncertainty and the fear that often accompanies such strong feelings,” Rina muses. “When I encountered Iyengar yoga, those uncertainties did not go away, nor did I learn to ignore them. What it does teach you is to have compassion for yourself. Each step becomes a discovery of your true nature, and you find your own voice, true courage, and real strength to be able to face whatever the present moment has to offer, because this is all we really have for sure. So in reality, the journey is never-ending, which brings me to one of the key points of Iyengar yoga: the learning never ends.”

In June 2003, with Guruji’s blessing, Rina opened the Iyengar Yoga Center Manila (IYCM) at LKG Tower on Ayala Avenue, and trained three teachers to assist her. This year, Rina received her second certification, and has been elected Vice-Chairman of the newly established Iyengar Yoga Association of South East and East Asia. Today, there are four teachers and one teacher-trainee under Rina’s wing at IYCM, and I’m one of them.

Which brings me to my own journey, which was as riddled with potholes and stumbling blocks as Rina's probably was. I had been battling my weight and going to gyms for years, but the mindlessness of the workouts always made me lose interest. I had also been diagnosed with clinical depression, and had completed three rounds of medication under the supervision of my psychiatrist. I decided to try yoga, in search of that mind-body healing that its avid practitioners were always talking about.

I took my first yoga class in 2001, when an Indian teacher would come to my office and teach my friend and me some *asana*. It piqued my interest, but the set-up was not structured enough for me. I tried a succession of teachers, some of them warm and accommodating, others downright flaky, but by then I was beginning to feel the physical benefits—a better body, better sleep, more energy, less mood swings. In early 2002, I texted Rina to inquire when I heard she was teaching Iyengar yoga; I was curious about the style, but had no idea what to expect. She was abroad at the time, and promised to contact me for the next class.

She did, and the attention to detail and ingenious insights into the body's workings immediately got me hooked. I attended classes religiously, and watched my weight drop and my happiness level rise. I found a focus, peace of mind, and an outlet for all kinds of repressed energy; I've lost count of how many times Rina had to guide me through a catharsis, when I'd be bawling after an intense practice, helping me twist until I literally wrung my angst out.

After a year of classes, I texted Rina to thank her: I was completely off Prozac for the first time in years, and I haven't needed it since. A few months later, she invited me to train as an Iyengar yoga teacher, and I knew I was in this for life.

My journey still continues, but a definite high point was in 2006, when I went to Pune for the first time and came face-to-face with the man who, in a manner of speaking, changed my life. Guruji sauntered into the Institute's office when we least expected, and almost literally lit up the room with his big smile, strong voice, warmth, and incredible energy. It was a humbling moment, but it was he who said "Thank you" when we fell to our knees in greeting. In 2008, when my fellow IYCM teachers and I returned, he welcomed us and told us we were doing well—and sent us home with our

own certifications after we were evaluated by the teachers in Pune. I look at my own certification, hanging in a place of honor on my wall, and I am inspired to do my best to show people how yoga can help them, as it has helped me.

One of my favorite quotes by Guruji goes this way: “Freedom is precision, precision is truth, and truth is God.” Through its precise discipline, Iyengar yoga has helped me find freedom from a myriad of internal and external afflictions. It has helped me slowly find my place in this universe—and it’s a place that’s truly blessed.

The Iyengar Yoga Center Manila is at the 21st floor, LKG Tower, 6801 Ayala Avenue, Manila, tel, nos. 753-4495 or 0917-5359711, www.iyengaryogamanila.com.