

Reaping the sweet rewards of yoga

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Sub: For Iyengar Yoga Center Manila founder and director Rina Ortiz, running a yoga school has been both a challenge and a blessing—but she wouldn't have it any other way

By Alya B. Honasan

Photograph by Romy Homillada

IT'S become a joke of sorts among students at the Iyengar Yoga Center Manila (IYCM) that when studio director and founder Rina Ortiz is teaching, and she decides to straighten you out, you're in for some surprises. "I don't know where that hand came from," says student Ricky Villabona with a laugh after Ortiz circles his arms behind him into *Gomukasana*, making them meet painlessly behind his back, something he can't quite do on his own because of stiff shoulders. "*Parang* it wasn't my hand!"

In fact, the classes are sometimes punctuated with shrieks and gasps of "Oh my God, I did it," when students comes up into a headstand or handstand, with the slim, waif-like Ortiz sometimes literally lifting them off the floor. "Don't worry, I'm stronger than I look," she says.

It's this strength, both physical and internal, that Iyengar yoga has given this 38-year-old former restaurateur, interior designer, and formidable art collector. It is also the strength that allowed her to persevere and open IYCM in September of 2004, with the blessings of BKS Iyengar himself, revered yoga master and founder of this school of yoga. Ortiz discovered this precise and extremely detail-oriented style about 10 years ago, and hasn't looked back since.

"It feeds my soul," says this mother of two (Katarina, 14, and Antonio, 11) and wife to banker Tito Ortiz. "I tried about six different kinds, and I found this to be the most solid. You do have guidelines, but you make your own recipe, so you have to listen to yourself, you become involved and also independent. After all, if yoga means 'union,' it's about *your* union, not your union with someone else. And it's very uplifting to be able to help yourself."

Ortiz has indeed helped quite a few practitioners learn to help themselves, easing everything from scoliosis and sciatica to depression and asthma through diligent practice. The four years of existence of the center, which is

wholly dedicated to the practice of Iyengar yoga, have been “turbulent,” Ortiz says with a laugh. “There are patches where it’s good, then things become unpredictable, as they do when you’re running a school, training teachers, and dealing with the students who come.” There have been “sweet rewards,” however. “You develop relationships, and other than the subject itself, that’s what keeps you going. You realize you’ve actually managed to create a small community, and relationships are born on a deep level that goes beyond the mat.”

What would be the main problems that come with running a yoga studio in Manila, where a recent yoga boom has had studios offering different styles sprouting all over the city? “People can be fickle, but maybe that’s cultural,” she notes. Ortiz admits that, being intensely passionate about the subject, she initially had to grapple with the idea of students who came, learned, and then dropped out unexpectedly. “When you invest time and concern, and they disappear anyway, you wonder if the problem is you. I’m the type who’s fastidious to a fault. But dealing with that has taught me so much about the practice, and not being attached. When Guruji (“my teacher,” which is what students call Iyengar) wanted me to open this school, I have a feeling he knew this was what I needed.”

Having worked since she was 17—she studied Hotel and Restaurant Management in Switzerland and worked in Geneva for a while—Ortiz does understand the need to be financially viable. “But I have learned to accept that maybe, for some people, this is not their thing. I’ve learned to respect their take on it, and it’s been humbling.”

Luckily, Ortiz admits, she doesn’t quite need to worry about finances, since the studio manages to sustain itself and she has the full support of her husband. “I guess that’s why our intentions are pure, and there’s no adulterated mix of anything else, so that works for me.” In fact, the studio will be closed for over a month from the end of June to early August, as four teachers Ortiz trained are headed for Pune, India, to train with the Iyengar family, in the birthplace of Iyengar yoga.

That may seem like a bad business decision, but it’s one that will greatly benefit the teachers and the students in the long run, she believes. It’s also why Ortiz, who received her Junior Intermediate Level II certification from Pune last February—she got her first certification in 2004, and remains the only certified Iyengar yoga teacher in the Philippines—never really

aggressively advertised her studio. “I believe the subject can attract you and advertise itself, because it works.”

By and large, Ortiz is happy about the yoga boom and the proliferation of options. “It’s good, generally speaking. I can’t claim that Iyengar yoga will do for others what it did for me, so whatever floats your boat—as long as you get to do yoga.”

In the light of worldwide reports on yoga injuries due to bad instruction, Ortiz adds a caveat. “If you do it recreationally, I don’t think you can really hurt yourself. It’s when you become serious that you should know what you’re doing. We have to be aware of certain considerations, like whether older people or people with scoliosis can handle anything too vigorous. Have all teachers been trained to deal with what could happen? In every field, there are people who are serious and dedicated—and there’s everybody else.” The best news is, it’s not just a fad anymore, she says. “All roads lead to yoga, and eventually you’ll find your thing.”

As to finding your “thing,” Ortiz advises someone looking for the “right” yoga to “keep trying different kinds. It takes a while to find where you want to be. Try to find out what you need, not what you want. And what you may need could be anything from a simple workout, to discipline, or even humility.”

*The Iyengar Yoga Center Manila is at the 21<sup>st</sup> floor, LKG Tower, 6801 Ayala Avenue, Manila, tel, nos. 753-4495 or 0917-5359711. Studio will be temporarily closed until August 10, so please refer to the website, [www.iyengaryogamanila.com](http://www.iyengaryogamanila.com) for inquiries.*

Box:

A good yoga practice

Sub: Rina Ortiz shares some advice for getting started—and staying—on the yogic path

- Start with a commitment, like going to class at least twice a week.
- Other than that, develop a home practice, starting with even just 15-20 minutes a day, twice a week. Before you know it, you’ll realize that your body wants to do more.

- Set reasonable goals, like practicing 20 minutes today and maybe 30 on Saturdays, when you're not too busy. Or maybe, increase practice time to 25 minutes after one month.
- If practicing from an “accomplishment” point of view—as in, “I have to be able to stand on my head in a month”—keeps you going, that's fine. But do remember that poses are organic and are never completely “conquered.” Also, yogic philosophy teaches you to wait and see. Ambition is a very western thing, and there's so much more to yoga than that. See how the practice changes you.
- Find a teacher you can connect with.
- Don't be discouraged. Remember that anything new is a challenge.