

A return to yoga school—and beyond
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Sub: A Filipino Iyengar yoga teacher ‘comes home’ to the source in Pune, India for more learnings

IT WOULD still be cold and dark outside our hotel room in the fast-growing university city of Pune in Maharashtra, southern India, as my friend and roommate Audrey Shih and I would crawl out of bed at 5 am and prepare for class, five days a week for a month. (On the sixth day, we could sleep in, as class started at 9:30; on Sundays, we rested).

Audrey and I were among four teachers at the Iyengar Yoga Center Manila (IYCM), along with Saree Kaluag and Gigi Bermejo, who were in Pune last July for training at the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute (RIMYI), birthplace of Iyengar yoga, where Guruji (“my teacher”), B.K.S. Iyengar, lives. A few months shy of 90, Guruji, one of yoga’s true living masters, still resides in a humble abode with his family across a courtyard from the institute, where thousands of students of this precise style of yoga come from all over the world every year to drink at the source.

After a quick mini-breakfast—some fruit or a few spoonfuls of oatmeal to sustain us until class was over—we would begin the brisk 25-minute walk to the school from our hotel by 6:15 am, giving us ample time before the 7 am class. India’s famously chaotic streets were still relatively clear, with fat crows flying overhead and friendly stray dogs escorting us part of the way. (One of them, whom we nicknamed Bus Stop, would wait for the treats we brought him every day.) Wrapped in our jackets or *duppatas* (large scarves), we shared the wet, cool morning only with the milk delivery vans, the street sweepers, and the clunking school buses picking up uniformed school children.

Although this was the second journey for Audrey and me—we first came to Pune in 2006—we were again attending the intermediate-level classes; because of Iyengar’s stringent standards, only teachers with at least eight years of Iyengar practice under their belts could attend the advanced class downstairs in the main hall, where the world’s most experienced Iyengar teachers rub elbows and scramble at barked instructions from Guruji’s two children, Prashant and Geeta. Audrey and I will only qualify for the privilege of stepping into the main hall when we return in 2010.

The intermediate level is taught by Guruji’s granddaughter Abhijata and a slew of other teachers of different ages and dispositions, who have been the master’s students for years. We attended class every morning except Sundays, 1 ½-hour sessions where we would bend, stretch, turn our shoulder blades in and lock our knees in a constant barrage of specific instructions in the distinct Iyengar yoga jargon, in sequences that left our bodies sore and battered but tingling with awareness, and our hearts full from the experience. My 43-year-old body felt its age; my sacrum was killing me the entire first week of classes!

Unlike other yoga schools, RIMYI is not an *ashram*, where we must live and participate in daily chores. Outside of school, most students—especially the large Indian population—have a life. The Iyengars don't demand that students change religion, give up meat, or behave in any other way than expected of decent human beings. Most visitors, however, take advantage of being at the Mecca of Iyengar training by living and breathing yoga. We also observed beginners' and other intermediate classes every day, to pick up pointers that could help us in our teaching. Also, the Institute has a list of Iyengar teachers who teach at home or are willing to give private classes for students looking to augment their training.

We found and befriended one such teacher in 2006, a member of a family of long-time teachers and followers of Guruji who hold classes in their home. Yet, when I sought permission, none of them agreed to be named for this article, insisting that they must “remain always in the shadow of the institute,” an attitude of profound respect for the master shared by all teachers of Iyengar yoga.

Attending additional afternoon classes with this, our virtual adopted Pune family—for whom our arrival was celebrated with a hearty dinner—greatly helped our practice. Unlike in other parts of the world, where folks slip into fancy outfits and obsess superficially over their form, yoga here, in the land of its birth, is as much a part of people's lives as cooking *chapati* and sipping that indescribable staple, *masala chai*, tea laced with a garden of spices and topped with the freshest milk on earth. Thus, at our supplementary classes, women in sarees, *salwars* (loose pants) and T-shirts chattered away like it was a barangay meeting. After the momentary, respectful silence at the beginning of class, when an invocation is made to the sage Patanjali, chronicler of yoga, laughter would flow easily, and the Marathi-speaking locals made us feel genuinely welcome, even as we stood out in our prescribed Iyengar yoga uniforms of bloomer-like shorts and fitted T-shirts.

While this was all familiar to Audrey and me, it was Gigi and Saree's first time in Pune, and we did what we could to help them out, showing them what to eat (salty lassi, vegetable *biryani*, *gulab jamun*, among others); clueing them in on the teachers; taking them shopping (our favorite stop: a clothing paradise called Fabindia!); and telling them to have courage as we hopped into our main mode of transport, the kamikaze three-wheeled auto rickshaws that rule India's polluted, pot-holed streets. We arrived along with the monsoon, and had rain for our first few days, along with the accompanying mud, slippery sidewalks, and reckless pedestrians—in many ways, a lot like home.

We also accompanied Gigi and Saree as we tiptoed into the Institute's library to greet Guruji, who holds court at his desk daily from 4 to 6 pm. The memory of June 2006, the first time I met the teacher who changed my life with his revolutionary and enlightening approach to this ancient belief system, will forever stay in my mind. We had come to the Institute, intimidated and nervous, to sign up for classes, when Audrey caught an unexpected glimpse of a man with a white lion's mane of hair and an incredible presence sauntering towards us with a gentle smile. As instructed—and moved by our own awe—

we fell to our knees, as a bemused Guruji greeted us “*Namaste*” (the beautiful Indian greeting—literally, “the divine in me recognizes the divine in you”).

Getting up, I looked into the deepest, wisest pair of smiling eyes I had ever seen, and almost burst into tears. There was little we could say, but I was sure he already understood how we felt. Before we left after that first incredible month, we asked him to sign copies of the books he had written, and Guruji happily obliged and told us that we must return.

This time, Guruji’s eyes lit up with recognition as we identified ourselves as “Rina’s girls from the Philippines.” Rina is Rina Ortiz, founder and director of IYCM, our teacher, the woman who put us all on the path of Iyengar yoga and opened the door for us to Pune. With Guruji’s guidance and blessing, Rina opened IYCM, the first Iyengar yoga studio in the Philippines, in 2004. Rina had no qualms about closing the studio for a month as we all trooped to Pune. (IYCM reopened last August 13.) Every day that we were in Pune, I thanked the high heavens for the training we received at Rina’s hands.

It would only be much later that we would understand why we were being watched like hawks in our classes, with other teachers dropping in and walking around us while we stood on our heads or went through some standing *asana*. Unbeknownst to us, upon Guruji’s instruction, “Rina’s girls” were being officially evaluated on our worthiness to teach Iyengar yoga.

On July 18, we participated in a very special occasion in India, Guru’s Day, known as Guru Purnima. That day, all of Guruji’s students dressed up, trooped to the Institute, listened to the master give an inspirational speech, and made offerings of flowers, gifts, or money for his pet project, building schools, wells, and hospitals for the poor in his hometown of Bellur, Karnataka state. Aside from the locals, there were students from all over—in this batch, from places like Spain, Germany, the US, Japan, Mexico, Macau, and Taiwan. And among them, the four of us, Rina’s giddy girls from the Philippines.

Incidentally, we did manage to pass the evaluation, and after some tearful goodbyes to teachers and friends, all four of us came home certified Iyengar yoga teachers. This also means that, barring any acts of God, we’ll be back in Pune in 2010. Until then, we’re living each day constantly being graced, challenged, and transformed by this marvelous practice of yoga.

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