

Stretching For The Truth

By Yael Ballesteros

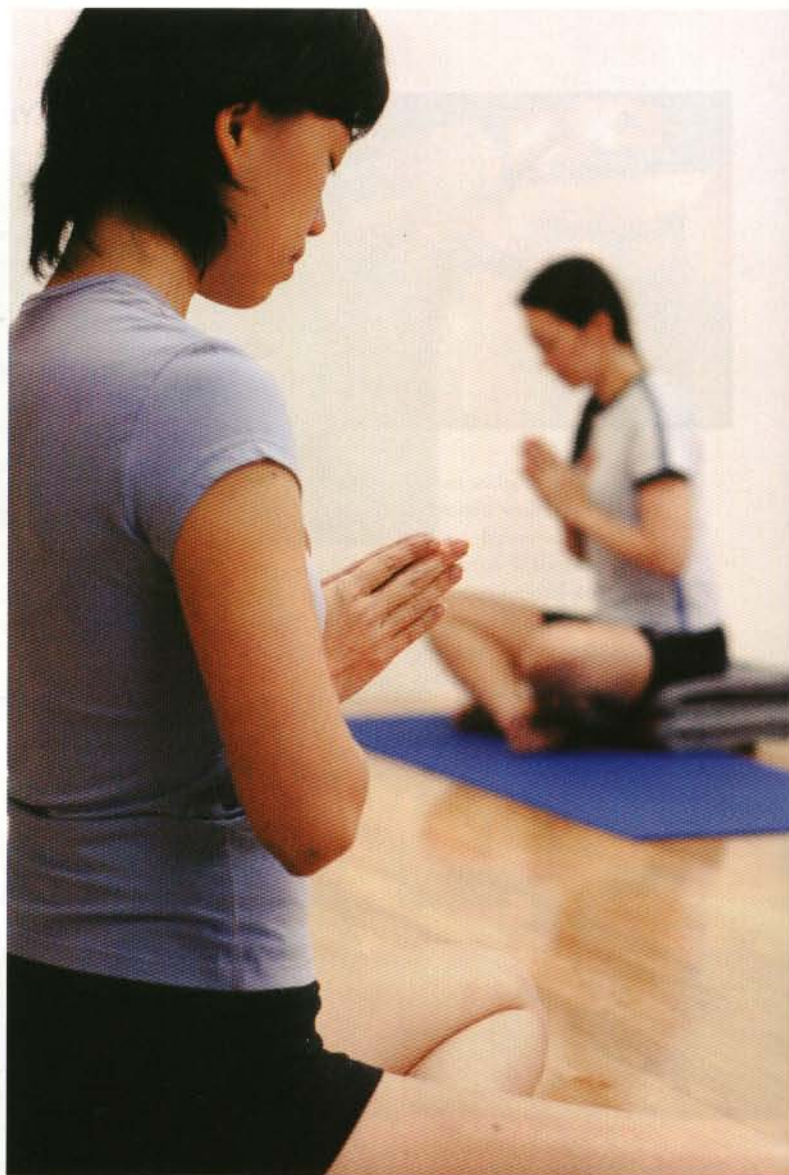
Iyengar yoga, a precise form of the ancient wisdom that develops the body while focusing the mind and spirit, comes to Manila—and Filipinos are feeling the change

“EXTENSION BRINGS SPACE, space brings freedom, freedom brings precision,” said the renowned living yoga master BKS Iyengar. “Precision is truth, and truth is God.”

It may sound like a daunting, abstract premise, but students of this precise and purposeful style of yoga can vouch for its validity. “It’s about precision, alignment and a lot of discipline,” says Rina Ortiz, founder and director of the Iyengar Yoga Center Manila (IYCM), the first center dedicated to this style of yoga in the Philippines, which opened in June 2003. “People are less likely to injure themselves, but they learn how to do a pose correctly, while still getting to know their bodies in the process.”

Indeed, for yoga practitioners familiar only with the stillness of sitting meditation or the aerobic dynamism of ashtanga yoga, an Iyengar class can be a unique experience. The naturally lit, air-conditioned classroom has no mirrors, and there’s no trance or sitar music to accompany you. Props like belts, bolsters, wooden blocks, flannel blankets, chairs and thick ropes hanging on the walls are available to help ease students into a pose. There is no meditation, but poses or asanas are held for a longer time, accompanied only by the soft sound of steady breathing or the teacher’s encouragement. Unlike your average physical activity, an asana demands concentration and awareness of your muscles and bones working, as the teacher exhorts you to lift your kneecaps, turn in your tailbone, or turn in your shoulder blades to open your chest.

While Iyengar yoga greatly benefits the convalescing or the injured, an intense class is no walk in the park; try keeping your leg bent at a right angle in Virabhadrasana (Warrior) II for about a minute, for example, and you feel your heart racing, and the muscles of your thigh seem on fire. The strength and endurance needed to hold a pose are considerable, and the muscle development unlike what one would expect from repetitive weight lifting. “You don’t bulk up,” Ortiz says, “because instead of shortening and protruding away from the bone, muscles lengthen and support your bones.”



If Iyengar yoga sounds very physical, it is—in the beginning, Iyengar espouses mastering the body first before even touching the breath, the mind and the spirit. Still, consistent practice brings a state of meditation in motion that allows one to stay fully aware in the present moment, leaving all other distractions and obstacles behind.

Few people would know more about overcoming obstacles than the founder of Iyengar yoga himself. Bellur Krishnamachar Sundararaja (BKS) Iyengar was the son of a teacher, born in Bellur in the Karnataka state of India in 1918. His brother-in-law was the renowned yoga teacher Krishnamacharya, from whose yogic tradition would come other great yoga teachers of our time like Indra Devi, Pattabhi Jois (father of the ashtanga school of yoga based in Mysore, India), Krishnamacharya’s son Desikachar, and Iyengar. A sickly boy afflicted with malaria, typhoid and tuberculosis, Iyengar would receive stringent yoga training from his brother-in-law, who often left the youngster to figure things out for himself. Eventually, Iyengar was sent to Pune, India, a rather undesirable posting at the time, to teach. Left to innovate on his own, Iyengar formulated a system of teaching that emphasized anatomical alignment and made liberal use of props or teaching aids to perfect an asana.

In 1975, two years after the death of his beloved wife and constant supporter Ramaa, Iyengar opened the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Institute in Pune, what is today the Mecca of Iyengar yoga training and philosophy. At 87, Iyengar, known the world over as "Guruji" or "my teacher" and also the author of numerous books on yoga practice and philosophy, still practices daily, living proof of the long-term benefits of the yoga style he originated. His two children,

Geeta and Prashant, are directors of the institute that welcomes students from all over the world who come to learn at the feet of the master. Recently, Time Magazine included Iyengar on its prestigious list of the most influential people alive in the world today.

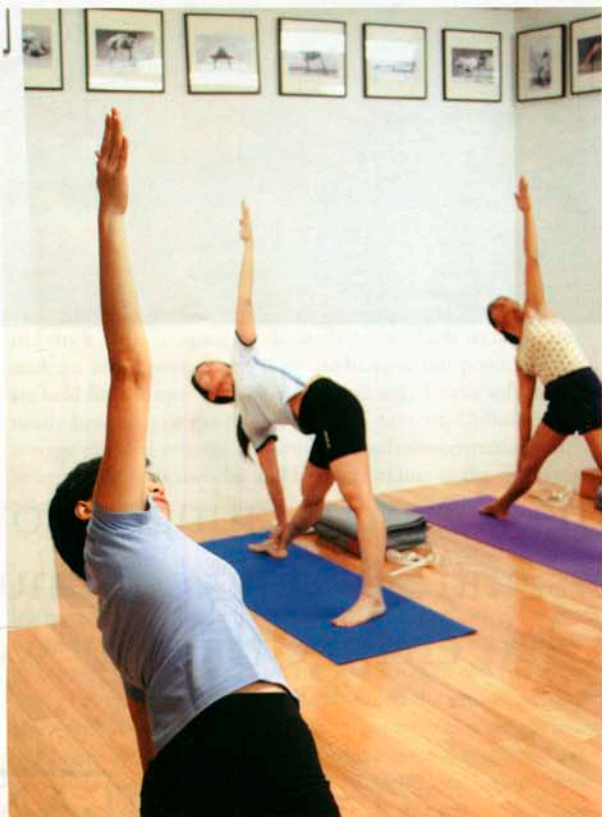
Like many different arrangements of the same song, Iyengar is only one style of yoga, the ancient practice and wisdom that originated in India some 5,000 years ago. Taken from the Sanskrit word for "yoke," and which means to bond or unite, yoga is indeed much more than a physical exercise or, in befuddled modern terms, a "work-out." The asana or poses are just a small part of a universe of beliefs that espouses an entire way of life. Credit



for codifying yoga into a comprehensible and recorded system known as the Yoga Sutras goes to a 5th-century sage named Patanjali, the father of yoga. Yoga was once the territory of mystics and ascetics, before the hippie generation discovered it and took it to the west. Yoga would remain out of the mainstream for years, until modern icons like Madonna and Sting began to credit it for staying in shape. In the '80s, yoga exploded in the west, with the ripples ironically returning full circle to Asia and reaching the Philippines. Now, several yoga classes, notably in the ash-tanga, hatha and Bikram styles, are offered in Manila, and in spas and wellness centers outside the metropolis.

Ortiz herself, a hotelier by training and also a banker's wife and mother of two, went the long route in search of the yoga style that was right for her. It wasn't until she joined an Iyengar workshop in New York some six years ago that this former competitive athlete felt she had "come home." Training under teachers like Faqz Biriya in France and Peter Scott in Australia, Ortiz was eventually led back to the source in Pune, India. In 2003, she became the first Filipina to receive a certification to teach Iyengar yoga, and received Guruji's blessing to open a center that carries his name.

More than just helping one achieve a youthful and flexible body, no matter what your shape, yoga—and Iyengar yoga in particular—inevitably changes one from the inside. Because the mind is fully present, yet passive in an extraordinary way, yoga has been proven to aid with everything from back problems and painful menstruation to mood swings and lack of courage. Students with high blood pressure, sciatica and even migraines and depression have benefited from regular attendance of classes led by Ortiz and her four teacher trainees, who are set to make their own pilgrimage to Pune this year. "Yoga has done a lot for both my mind and my body," says Ortiz. "It's also taught me to become comfortable in my own skin and be always true to myself. You can come to yoga class to have a better body. But if you let it, yoga can transform you." And as the many Filipinos whose lives have been changed by yoga will attest, that's not a far stretch from the truth.



The Iyengar Yoga Center Manila is on the 21st Floor, LKG Tower, 6801 Ayala Avenue, Makati City. For inquiries call 884-1315 or text (0917) 845-0918.