SVADHYAYA

Volume 6, Issue 1 A Newsletter from The Iyengar Yoga Centre of Hong Kong February 2008

Statue of Patanjali

What is On the Altar?

By Linda Shevloff

The American magazine *Yoga Journal* visited our yoga studio earlier in 2007, during the Evolution Conference that took place at the Hong Kong Convention Centre. You can see the article with some photos from our studio in their current issue (Feb.2008). Their senior editor Andrea Ferretti wrote the article called "Yoga Metropolis" as a follow up to her trip to here. She was interested in the way yoga was developing in this city, so she spent time conducting interviews and checking out the local scene.

She took particular note of the feel and the atmosphere of the studios. In her article she was amazed at the scale and facilities provided by the large Hong Kong studios, though there was a note of dismay in her tone because they seemed more like busy upscale gymnasiums or designer spas rather than yoga places. She said that the large Hong Kong studios seemed sanitized and washed of anything too yogic. In contrast, she thought our small centre had the intimate touch of a sacred space. She noted that we have a beautiful altar, the only one she saw in the yoga studios of Hong Kong. In fact, the magazine featured a photo of the little altar near our front window. It also featured a photo of a class of our experienced Iyengar students balancing in headstand. She writes that: "their alignment is awesome".

Underlying the article are some deeper themes. The one that stands out for me is about the question of spirituality and yoga. She wrote a lot about how the large Hong Kong studios have all chosen to remove any spiritual or mystical elements from their centres so that the practice is "palatable for the corporate culture". Yoga in this case becomes only exercise, " a luxurious treat for business people". Owners of the large studios were quoted as saying that they didn't want to offend anyone.

During the interview there were no specific questions about the little altar, or my spiritual beliefs. A *Yoga Journal* photographer at a later date did make a point to ask for permission to photograph the altar. I rarely talk about the statues on the altar and very few people ever ask me about what they are or what they mean to me. I wonder if the presence of an altar makes people uncomfortable. I hope not.

Yoga is a broad subject that has arisen from Indian culture where there is a rich blend of traditions spanning thousands of years. Over time as yoga evolved, the meaning of the practice was explained in poetry, myth, logic, philosophy, literature, art and religion. The figures on the altar are traditional, depicting ideas and knowledge in an artistic form.

What are the messages conveyed in the statues? I am not Indian, nor am I a Hindu or even a Buddhist, but I can say some things about these images. The orange Sanskrit letters on the wall above the altar say "om", and om is said to be the "seed sound" or the first vibration that commenced when the universe first began. It is a sound thought to continue to vibrate in all things throughout time. The chanting of "om" (pronounced "aum") resonates in a deep vibration, and it connects us with each other. It can be a visceral reminder that we are not really separate from each other, for the same vibration echoes in all life.

On the shelf below the Om there are a number of figures. The black stone figure at centre is Patanjali, in representation of a sage who lived about two thousand years ago and wrote the *Yoga Sutras*. These Sutras succinctly present an exposition of the art of yoga and give the methods for practice. It is the basis of the yoga we study.

On Patanjali's right side is a figure of Vishnu, the four-armed Hindu God who is the preserver of life. Whilst we all rationally know that there are no real four-armed individuals preserving life for us, we really do not know the source of life or the reason why we are alive at all. Our lives can be taken away at any moment. The desire to preserve life and to understand life is a basic reason for doing yoga.

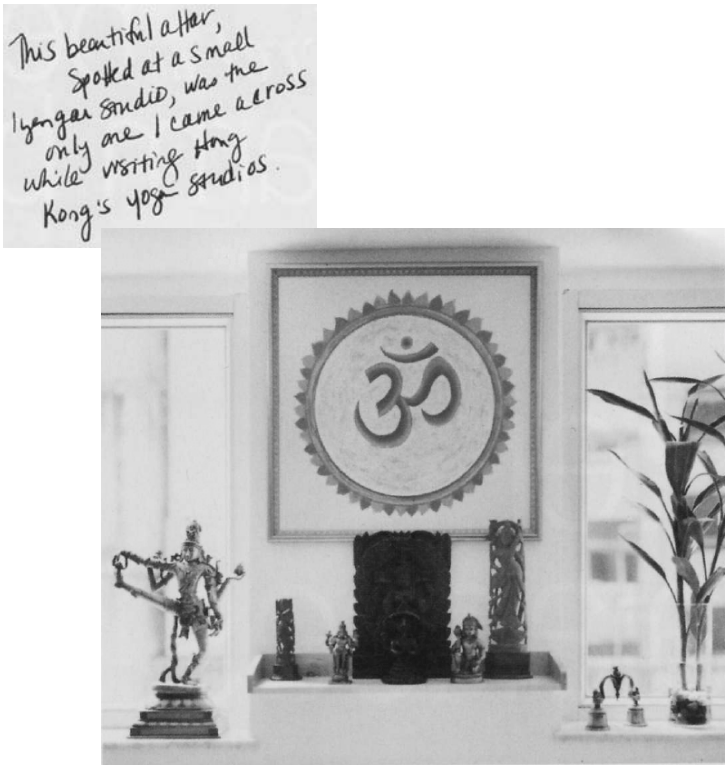
The Monkey God, Hanuman, is at the left of the Patanjali statue. Hanuman is a much-loved character from Indian folk-lore. His story tells of someone who served his master with heart and soul. If we are to make any significant changes within ourselves, we need to put our heart and soul and energy fully into it.

On the far right of Patanjali is a small sandalwood carving of Krishna playing a flute. Krishna is said to be an incarnation of Vishnu. He is the god who told Arjuna in the Bhagavad Gita, to do his duty in life. His legendary flute music calls people to listen to the feelings in their hearts.

On the far left of Patanjali is a large sandalwood carving of Saraswati, the Indian goddess of language, arts and music. She is a muse for artists and musicians and a source of inspiration.

A large wooden carving behind Patanjali is of Lakshmi, a goddess of abundance and good fortune in all things. She offers a kind of blessing on the room and all the activities that go on there.

On the window shelf is a large brass statue of



The altar at The Iyengar Yoga Centre of Hong Kong

Shiva. Shiva is the Hindu god that is most often associated with yoga practice. Often he is depicted standing in a ring of transformational fire. This figure of Shiva is one I was attracted to because of his serene expression and beautifully balanced pose, with one leg outstretched in movement and yet still at the same time. I would like to develop such balance and serenity in myself.

The images at the window are not meant to convert students to a different religion or belief system. They carry some messages and suggestions from ancient times that apply to the practice of yoga and to the development of human abilities and awareness. Every object that they hold and every physical position they show carries meaning. ♥

What are My Obstacles on the Path to Yoga?

By Andrew Horner

I'm grateful that my job and family situation allow me to devote substantial time and energy to yoga – I must have done something right in my past lives! So, my obstacles are my own – I can't blame them on external factors. The good news is that since they're my own, I can do something about them.

In *Light on Yoga*, BKS Iyengar lists 13 categories of obstacles. Scanning the list, I recognize all of them as things that get in my way from time-to-time, but some of them are more frequent and serious than others. In this paper, I will focus on those that I consider the most serious at the moment.

Perhaps the most universal obstacle is duhkha – pain or misery, since probably everyone has a particular sore spot. For me, taking the arms overhead creates excruciating pain in the front-corners of my shoulders, which can quickly make me miserable. The pose "Pinca Myanasana" is well-named, because it definitely "pinches my asana"!

Shoulders are a common problem among musicians, who have to play their instruments for hours each day, as well as people who spend a lot of time on the computer. Being both a musician and a computer person, I was lucky enough to have gotten a double-dose of duhkha! Add to that a separated-shoulder injury from my childhood, and you have a recipe for very stiff shoulders.

Many yoga poses require vertical arms: either standing, sitting, lying down, or upside down in Adho Mukha Vrksasana. So, if the shoulders aren't open, it will show in many poses, including some really basic ones.

Knowing the seriousness of the problem, I'm trying to do something about it by devoting some time each day to shoulder-opening poses. This isn't the first stiff and painful obstacle I've faced in yoga – tight hamstrings and tight hips were previous sources of pain and misery that have since greatly improved. This experience gives me a quiet sense of confidence that patient perseverance will eventually yield progress in the shoulders.

It's interesting that in Mr. Iyengar's list of 13 obstacles, he doesn't list physical obstacles such as tight hamstrings, tight hips, tight shoulders, and longstanding injuries. Instead, he lists a series of mostly mental obstacles. Those few that could be applied to the body imply their connection to the mind as well. For example, when he describes vyadhi – sickness which disturbs the physical equilibrium, he also points out its effect on the mind: "When the body is sick …, the mind becomes restless … and concentration or meditation become impossible."

By this emphasis, Mr. Iyengar seems to be saying that physical problems are not as serious as the mental roadblocks that prevent us from addressing our problems.

I can illustrate this with a personal example. About a year ago, one of my yoga teachers helpfully pointed out that stiff hips and shoulders were hindering my practice, and she suggested repeating some poses more frequently to gradually open these places. I focused mainly on the hips at first, since they were creating noticeable problems in the standing poses. Progress was initially very slow and painful, but gradually they started to give way.

By summer, the hips had improved enough that I was ready to turn my focus to the shoulders. I made this my "homework" during the months when I was traveling a lot. Surprisingly, it didn't

take as long before I felt some new movement in the shoulders. Before long, I could get my arms completely overhead. With further work, I found I could take the arms behind my head. I even started working on a bench and taking the arms behind my head to the floor.

What I didn't realize was that I was cheating – and cheating a lot! My shoulders were still solidly frozen into place. When I took my arms up, without realizing it, I was doing a backbend by arching my back. This neatly avoided moving directly into the stiffness and pain by taking my whole upper body backwards rather than just the arms. And if I needed to take the arms back even further? No problem, my back happily arched into a deeper sideways-smile.

It wasn't until the first weekend of teacher training that I had any idea I was doing this. I thought I had made great progress over the summer, only to find that I could not even do the most basic of poses such as Urdhva Hastasana and Parvatasana correctly. It was a truly humbling experience!

Then it was that I finally understood the connection in comments I'd heard for years: "Tailbone in," "Don't arch the back," "Move the floating ribs back," "Don't pop the ribcage." I had thought that these were just good general instructions, and I didn't have any idea that they applied particularly to me. I certainly didn't realize their connection with vertical arms and stiffness in the shoulders.

Patanjali would class my misunderstanding as viparyaya – a mistaken view which is observed after study. In my particular case, it had to be thrown in my face, because I couldn't see it clearly myself. Mr. Iyengar lists a similar concept specifically for yoga, bhranti darsana – false knowledge or illusion. "False knowledge" is a polite way of saying "ignorance." I prefer an even softer word: "inexperience." In any case, as a cure to mistaken views, Iyengar recommends the guidance of a teacher who can help the aspirant back to the right path.

Indeed, now that I know about my mistake – unconsciously teaching myself to arch the back whenever the arms needed to be straight over the head – I have a much greater appreciation for the sharp eye of an experienced teacher. Practice is good, but it can actually hurt rather than help when you're practicing the wrong thing. My summer efforts for the shoulders were counterproductive – they taught me to do the wrong thing. At best, they only slightly improved my backbend.

I'm grateful to be living in a community where I can get frequent and clear corrections, because I don't have the experience to guide myself completely on my own even with aids such as mirrors. Teacher training should ultimately move me more in this direction, but I'm coming to realize it will take a lot longer than I expected. The body and mind are very good at illusion.

Another example of bhranti darsana – illusion – concerns my reluctance to use props unless I'm absolutely convinced that they're necessary. Part of my reluctance stems from a genuine desire to keep things as simple and elegant as possible. But, sometimes it's a simple case of ego – a little voice in my head will say: "Let's take off the training wheels and go for a ride!" Other times, it's not so clear – the little voice will say: "I probably need a prop for this pose, but unless I challenge myself I won't be progressing toward the final pose. I'll sacrifice form for now for the sake of progress and skip the prop." With this line of reasoning, I nearly always decide against using a prop.

So, what does it take to absolutely convince me that I need a prop? Am I convinced by excruciating pain in Supta Virasana with my back arching like the roof of the Hong Kong Convention Centre? No, probably not. Usually I'm only convinced when the teacher yells in exasperation, "Andrew! Get on some height!" It's no wonder that after decades of teaching students like me that Mr. Iyengar doesn't waste any words and sometimes resorts to a humbling slap.

On the positive side, teacher training is helping me develop an appreciation for the use of props to get the correct feeling of a pose when it wouldn't be possible otherwise. I've adjusted my practice to focus on shoulder-openers using the floor and wall as props to prevent arching of the back. These exercises are helping me to feel when I unconsciously arch the back. There's a long way to go, but it's a start in the right direction. ♥

Andrew Horner is engaged in his first year of yoga teacher training at The Iyengar Yoga Centre of Hong Kong. He is also a professor at The University of Science and Technology in Hong Kong.

Workshop with Father Joe

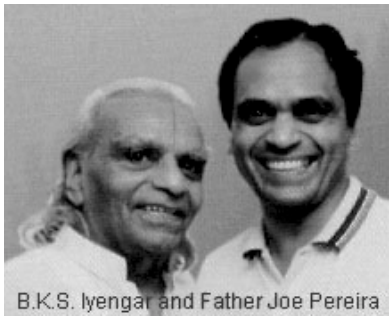
"Yoga -An Inward Journey of Healing"

Father Joe Pereira, a Catholic priest and a senior Iyengar Yoga teacher from Mumbai, India, will be teaching a workshop at The Iyengar Yoga Centre of Hong Kong from 10 – 15 July.

Father Joe is the founder and the archdiocesan consultant for the Kripa Foundation: an organization that uses yoga asana and meditation, in combination with the twelve-step program, to provide support for people with addictions, people who are HIV positive, and those living with AIDS.

Father Joe has worked closely with BKS Iyengar for many years. He also spent many years working with Mother Teresa. Father Joe is respected and loved for the selfless spirit and heart he brings to the practice of yoga.

For more details about this workshop, please check our website for dates and times to be posted soon.



B.K.S. Iyengar and Father Joe Pereira

The Patanjali Invocation

By Geeta S. Iyengar

Excerpt from transcript of talk on audio-cassette "Patanjali Charitam and Vandanam"

Each aspect of the statue of Patanjali carries meaning like the intricately worded sutras. When one gazes at the idol of Sage Patanjali one sees the three and a half coils below the navel. The three coils indicate the Pranava Aum, a mystical symbol conveying the concept of God as generator, organizer and destroyer. It signifies him as omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient. Aum is composed of three syllables, A, U and M with a crescent and a dot on the top.

The three completed coils symbolize the syllables and the half coil, the crescent. It also represents the three gunas of prakrti, namely sattva, rajas and tamas and an aspirant aiming at the trigunatita state, which is a transcendent state. Sage Patanjali invites our attention towards the three types of afflictions, namely adhyatmika, adhibhautika and adhidaivika, which are to be conquered by following the path of yoga. The three coils indicate that he is a master of Yoga, Grammar and Ayurveda. The half coil indicates the reaching of the state of kaivalya. The conch, in the left hand, signifies the state of alertness, attentiveness and readiness to face obstacles, Which are inevitable in the practice of Yoga. In olden days the conch was blown as a warning call to get ready to face disaster or calamities as it is done nowadays with sirens. It is also â symbol of jnana.

The disc, in the right hand, signifies the destruction of ignorance with supreme effort and is a symbol of protection. The sword, tucked in the waist, indicates the cutting of the ego, pride or sense of "I" which is the main obstacle covering pure being. It is a sword of jnana to vanquish âjnana. These three weapons also indicate the restraint of mental fluctuations, removal of obstacles and the eradication of afflictions through the practice of Yoga.

The hood above the head is an assurance of protection from Adisesa, King of serpents. This protection always remains for the practitioner, provided he surrenders to the Lord, which is signified in the atmanjali mudra, hands folded in namaskara. The Bhagavatam narrates the story of the birth of Lord Krsna. Since Vasudeva was alerted by the Gods in heaven, that his eighth child Krsna will be killed by Kamsa, he takes the infant Krsna from Mathura to Gokul to protect him for the demon Kamsa. The river Yamuna was flooded as it was raining cats and dogs. At that juncture Adisesa protected Vasudeva and the infant Krsna by holding the hood over them like an umbrella and made a way, right in the middle of the river, so that Vasudeva could cross the river easily. Lord Patanjali indicates with his hood, that he is our protector, provided we destroy the evils hidden within us by the sword of Yoga, purifying ourselves with yogic Sadhana.

The thousand headed cobra, sahasra sirasam svetam, indicates that the idol of Patanjali shows him as half-man and half-serpent. The human form indicates the individuality of man, since he has been endowed with intelligence to use his own efforts to reach the goal. The form of the serpent suggests the motion and continuity of Sadhana, which cannot end until the goal is reached.

Patanjali guides us to move like a serpent, intensely, silently and fast on the path of Yoga and to be a tivrasamvegin, the ultimate type as a pupil. If you have understood the significance, offer your prayers with a mind of prayerfulness so that you know what Sage Patanjali means by tajjapah tadarthabhavanam, that means - recite the prayers knowingly, repeatedly, devotedly. ♥

Finding Happiness and the Meaning of Happiness in the study of the Yoga

by Angela To

This year one of my New Year's resolutions is to spend quality time studying the Yoga Sutras., yet I think it will not be a difficult task since I have experienced immense interest and satisfaction since I opened this ancient book. My study started in January last year when the Yoga Sutra Study Class was launched for the first time at the Iyengar Yoga Centre.

Like many yoga practitioners, I found not only an improvement in health and flexibility in body but naturally an overall self awareness and well-being as well. As I continued my yoga journey, I felt the need to search for more, the hidden meaning of Yoga, the eight limbs (Chapter II.29), pranayama (Chapter II), meditation (Chapter II.53 & 54 & Chapter III) and some profound knowledge reiterated time and again by the Yoga Masters and renowned instructors in Yoga practices. When I first began my study with George Dovas, the Yoga Sutra Class Instructor at the Centre in Jan 2007, I was lured by the intrinsic knowledge of human psychology and philosophy covered in the early chapters of this ancient book.

The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali was written in the form of aphorisms (or line, rule, formula) in Sanskrit some 2,000 to 3,000 years ago. This ancient book has three chapters with verses of words and phrases compiled in a thin book. The Yoga Sutra is literally 'threads of aphorisms' unveiling secrets of life and the wisdom of yoga. I made use of the commentaries of Yoga Sutra as a doctrine as well as a reference on philosophy. Yoga Sutra reflects great spiritual value, but it is certainly non-religious.

On Saturday afternoons, we (the four ignorant and curious students) gathered in a circle listening attentively to George's recital of the selected sutra verses of the Yoga Sutra by Patanjali in both Sanskrit and its English translation. The study materials illustrate the commentaries and references quoted from renowned Swami, Yoga Masters and yogi. We would discuss the profound meanings, sharing our experience and thoughts. I was enlightened during this valuable time of sharing as it examined the challenges and queries encountered in yoga practice.

Over the past year, the study group has developed a close friendship which words could not explain. In this small group, we talked about the applications of sutras. We shared our sorrows, the unpleasant times in our lives, our love and compassion. We laughed, occasionally we shed a few tears, and by the end of the session, we would become inspired time and again by the mystery of life and wisdom in Yoga found in Yoga Sutra.

With ancient texts (and some snacks) in hand students unravel the meaning of the sutras

Taking this opportunity, I wish to thank George Dovas who shares his knowledge, his research on Yoga Sutra and his precious time with us. We completed Chapter II and parts of Chapter I which covered the eight limbs of yoga, the significance of yamas and niyamas, pratyahara and many more.

With anticipation and determination, we will continue to unfold the secrets of concentration and meditation in Chapter 3, the last chapter. We hope to find insights and wisdom on how to find inner peace, how meditation can control stress and emotion, what brings real happiness in this materialistic and violent world, what are the human values, who we are, how to know God and many more questions with answers securely outlined in this ancient book waiting to be discovered.

With the classmates' consent, I summarized the session on Sutra 1.27 and 1.28 – the subtle meaning of 'OM'

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1.27 tasya vacakh pranavah

tasya = Him
vacakah = connoting, denoting, signifying
pranavah = the sacred syllable Aum

He is represented by the sacred syllable aum, called pranava.

1.28 tajjapah tadarthabhavanam

tat = that (aum)
japah = muttering in undertone, whispering, repeating
tadarthabhavanam = its aim, its purpose, its meaning with feeling, its identification

The mantra aum is to be repeated constantly, with feeling, realizing its full significance.

What do you feel when you chant "OM"?

"..... after a minute or so, I feel at ease with the chant and I feel internalized..... I feel the breath initially is not in sync..... From disconnection I move towards connection.

....I feel the vibration pulsating through my entire body particularly in my head..... very calming and soothing, it's like everything is drawn to a point of stillness."

"....Releasing my tension from the body (a sense of surrender), clear minded. ...the vibration seemed to never end and remained in my body even after I finished chanting."

"....resonance from mouth to throat to the head, down the body to the belly and lower part of the spine...."

"At the beginning, my mind was flying..... my attention and concentration drew back....peaceful and my mind clearer. I enjoy very much the feeling of vibration during chanting.....comfort and peace that cannot be found easily in my real life."

"....After chanting, I felt the calmness in my mind and the energy that flowed through my body."

Next time when you chant OM, please take a moment to join us and feel how OM affects you in that moment. ♥

Students reflect on the meaning of OM

Birjoo Mehta Workshop

Photos by Ulana Switucha and students

The Iyengar Yoga Centre of Hong Kong hosted a workshop with Birjoo Mehta from January 25 - 31. From Mumbai, Birjoo has studied with B.K.S. Iyengar throughout his life.

The week long series of workshops revealed the essence of yoga to many of the practitioners who attended the classes.

From the onset of the workshop, Birjoo taught from a subjective perspective as opposed to an objective perspective. He did not focus on techniques and technicalities. Instead he led practitioners through sequences that revealed the stillness and benevolence that can be found in asana.

The students are deeply grateful to Birjoo for visiting Hong Kong and sharing his knowledge.

Here is what some of the students learnt and had to say about the workshop:

"Adho Mukha Vrksasana: Birjoo taught very clearly how the shoulder blades move away from the wall, head also not to touch the wall, the palms and the fingers should be evenly pressed on the floor, then the whole body is in a straight line. I felt the quietness and calmness of doing this pose that I never felt before."

"What I learned from the workshop was "Ustrasana". This pose often causes my lumbar spine pain. When Birjoo instructed me to "move the upper buttock towards the centre buttock and move the lower buttock towards the centre buttock" my lumber was pain-free and my mind was quite and I felt joy in the pose."

"What probably affects my practice and learning a lot is what Birjoo said about the relationship of stimulos and ego: "when a stimulus draws consciousness (into a part of the body), it becomes awareness; if the ego draws it there, it is attention. and attention always creates tension". Birjoo said, "then, the pose is at-tension". What he emphasized before that was, that the ego does not really exist, but is the sum of memories, relationships, viewpoints etc. So in order to become still in a pose or in life, we need to leave this viewpoint, let go of it, and work with the contact that the stimulus gives us. Then the poses will become quiet."

"When the abdomen goes back the mind becomes quiet. Also, in Dwi Pada Viparita Dandasana; activating the fountain around the armpit chest meant no discomfort in my lumbar (often a problem for me)."

"I knew that the feet are very important in all the asanas, but they way Birjoo explained the touch of the feet with the floor was truly impressive. The instructions for the standing poses: open the feet, spread them like a bed sheet (without wrinkles), press them down, when moving in the pose do not disturb the feet - in the seated poses: move the front ankle forward. The action of the feet changed the whole pose - the knees were straight, the legs were firm, just great!"

"Doing = Attention
Observing = Attentive"
"To protect ourselves when practicing, we must remember that "ligament cannot be stretched, muscle can be stretched". In the workshops, I found it most insight and useful in Birjoo's profound teaching on 'Ego' which Birjoo explained so well. "When ego is directing, the mind cannot be quiet". "To quiet the mind, abdomen stays flat is a condition". My heartfelt thanks to Birjoo Mehta not only for his profound teachings on the fundamentals of Yoga to the most challenging practice, his patience but also some most important principles in yoga practice which he kindly shared with us. I gained so much!"

"I am simply very grateful to Birjoo for teaching me how to dive into myself and taste the nectar there! "

"I found what Birjoo said about the ego most interesting. He said that it's the ego that tells us to do this and do that. However, what we want to experience from yoga is a quietness that comes only when the ego is quiet. Spread consciousness. Let revelation come."

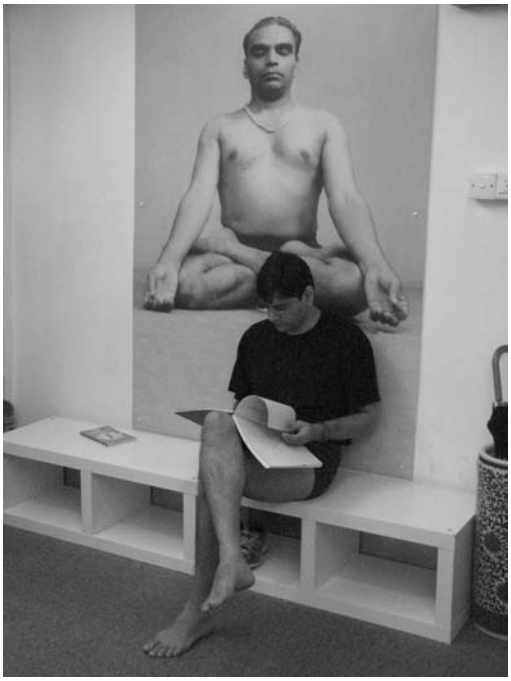
"I remember Birjoo talking about using the props and the sensation of asana.
1. using props is to bring the consciousness to where the body is inactive.
2. sensation of asana is like activity with inactivity, inactivity with activity."

"Birjoo is a master teacher. His unassuming manner and clarity translates into a simple and pure experience. He gives everything he has attempting to share his understanding, feelings and wisdom from his years of working directly with Mr. Iyengar from the age of seventeen He

takes us deep into his heart and the heart of yoga. A point that stood out for me was that once we had set in motion squeezing consciousness into the pose, that we should turn our awareness to optimizing stillness in the mind and let the pose complete itself, rather than fidgeting about deliberately correcting the pose with a bunch of band-aids. Feeling this process at work in Ardha Chandrasana and Sirsasana gave me trust that I could find this stillness in all the poses if I set up the pose well and then looked for the stillness."

"A good example Birjoo used was that you can think of building an asana like you build a business, initially investing a large amount of energy and cash into the business you can reap the rewards and spread into other endeavors with little effort given to the initial set up. Once your hands are spread and opened well in Ahdo Mukha Vrksasana the effort is maintained (as the cells of the palms are then aware for a time, without the egos help) allowing the consciousness to spread from the hands to the wrists, then to the elbows and shoulders and on up to the feet without having to keep going back to the start, or start-up. This allowed for more and more awareness with a minimum of effort or attention. We have all heard teachers say to anchor a part of the pose and move from there, but this description really helped me to understand just how that is done and why. As well as giving us some ideas for running a business."

"The workshop with Birjoo Mehta for me was truly an experience with a difference. Never before did I feel such harmony and quietness in the poses like in the past week. Birjoo's detailed instructions and thorough explanation took us from the outer to the inner body; from the gross to the subtle and using Mr. Iyengar's term "moving the intelligence to the cells" which created "STHIRA SUKHA" stability and firmness - joy and happiness. I think we were all able to savour just a taste of "Citta Prasadanam" as Guruji calls it - spreading the consciousness to and leveling it in all body parts when doing and staying in a pose."



Photos from the workshop with Birjoo Mehta

Teachers and teachers in training are grateful to Birjoo for spending the day together to deepen learning (middle)

During the workshop, Birjoo used the analogy of toothpaste being squeezed out of a tube to help us understand how to move consciousness around our bodies. We presented him with a tube of consciousness! (bottom left)

Students learn to work with awareness created by the stimulus of the strap against the foot in Supta Padangustasana (top right)

Birjoo demonstrates the spreading of consciousness from the sole of his foot to his ankle and then to his knee and then onwards to the rest of his body. (bottom right)

Junior Intermediate Workshop with Shirley

It was with joy and anticipation that George Dovas, Randa Westland and I arrived in Victoria, BC from Hong Kong in early August to attend the Junior Intermediate workshop run by Shirley Daventry French and ably assisted by Anne Kilbertus, Leslie Hogya and Marlene Miller. It was a reunion of two years ago when we had attended the Intro I/II workshop with Ursula Moser. It was a smaller group this time with some familiar Canadian faces; Melissa whom we met in July in Pune last July, Karen from the intro I/II, Nancy from her HK visit with Marlene, Robin and Barbara from our last visit to BC and Chantal whose husband Paul also came to the Intro I/II workshop.

Shirley opened the intensive by directing us to apply the principles and ideas of deep learning to studying, practicing and teaching yoga. What was "deep learning"? It was the desire not just to learn the facts but to dig deeper and understand how those facts arise and fit together. With this in mind we divided into groups to devise a class which we would teach to one group of students, while being observed by another group, assisted by a third group and closely scrutinized by the senior teachers. We were warned that while teaching we might be interrupted and asked questions or asked for clarification. After the class we were invited to assess our own and our group's teaching. We were then given feedback by the students, the observers, the assistants and the senior teachers.

This was not always comfortable. Shirley suggested we notice our reactions to peer teaching-why were we so often nervous? Was this feeling useful? If not, how could it be overcome? Did we wish to remain ignorant, (absolutely not), then what was so intimidating about a process which will root out confusion and remove ignorance? Throughout the week Shirley guided, advised and treated us to many of her wonderful stories and anecdotes. George remembered her referring to Vivekananda's apt advice to "discard what weakens you".

Such thought provoking questions applied not only to teaching yoga but to almost all aspects of our lives.

Towards the end of the week we were asked to offer our thoughts on what we gained from the workshop especially with reference to deeper learning. The insights gained were gifts which would remain with us for a long time. Some of these were; the appreciation of interactive learning in a group rather than being spoon fed and that there was a self-study process within the group. Exploring your personal discomfort within a group and how you handled conflict and personal discomfort.

We realised that being vulnerable helped us learn-to not be afraid of making a mistake or admitting "I don't know". How to "get over yourself"; the ego's strong attachment to its' idea of how we should be seen. We were often unaware of things we do and say when teaching, e.g. habits of speech, pacing around the room, the pitch, tone and volume of the voice.

We came wanting information but were asked to discover it for and by ourselves. To teach from our practice not from a recipe and to look, see and observe. At some time during the week Shirley warned us that if we sought to be invisible she would make sure we became visible and would be asked to contribute actively! We were asked to notice our habits: Did we project

Hong Kong Iyengar Yoga teachers attend the Junior Intermediate intensive in Victoria, Canada led by Shirley Daventry French (front row, 4th from L) and other senior Iyengar teachers.

ourselves when there was silence or conflict, or did we seek to sit back and disappear at these times? What was working in us in these situations? Do we always speak if we know the answer or do we allow someone else who may be reluctant the opportunity to be heard? Do we only come forward when we know we are "right" and therefore can only succeed?

To finish a wonderful week we were all invited to Shirley's lovely home for an Indian meal. After enjoying her hospitality I felt sad we couldn't oblige Derek, her husband, and finish the night with dancing! Next time!

Thank you all for making this such a memorable experience. ♥

Would you like to contribute an article to this newsletter? Please submit your writing and photographs to
Linda@iyengaryogahongkong.com

We look primarily for writing about your Iyengar yoga experiences and any reflections you have about your yoga practice.

Please send as an attachment to an email.

Midas Yoga

by Angela Tam

Consumerism sure has the Midas' touch. Package anything into a consumer product, and all of a sudden what few have taken notice of before becomes a big hit. But, like Midas, who came to detest his golden touch because it deprived him of sustenance (even the food he tried to eat turned into gold), one has to ask whether that's a good thing.

Let's take a look at how consumerism has wrought its Midas' touch on yoga.

Before dedicated teachers brought it to the West, it had become such an obscure philosophy that even the originator of many hatha yoga styles practised today, Krishnamacharya, struggled to make a living teaching yoga. Even when it first arrived in the West, it was only practised – and perceived to be practised – by hippie types seeking some kind of New Age enlightenment.

Then something happened: it became hip, not hippie, to be New Age. As the fitness industry sought to maintain the momentum built up through the aerobics movement of the 1980s, yoga was brought into its fold and, like the pretzel into which people always assume yogis turn themselves, bent and twisted into a consumer product with universal appeal. Want to lose weight? Try yoga. Want fab abs? Try yoga. Want to be trendy? Try yoga.

And it all comes in the right packaging: the smartly designed clubhouse with the, er, Zen kind of minimalist touch; the figure-hugging top and loose pants; the purple foam blocks; and, of course, the beautiful bods.

User-consumerist Hong Kong may make no

apologies whatsoever regarding its take on yoga, and to the extent that it's taught by conscientious and qualified teachers, it can still benefit the practitioners, in terms of better physical health. Curiously, the problem with the consumerist co-opting of this ancient philosophy is not with those who have simply embraced it as the latest incarnation of aerobics class; rather, it's those who are attracted to the spiritual aspect that are worst affected.

Have you noticed how yoga has become a money spinner not only for the fitness industry, but also the resort industry? A mountain retreat here, a sun-and-sand yoga workshop there. Do a few surya namaskar in the morning mist, tour the foreign locale, chant a few oms and immerse yourself in the spa. Get pampered.

In Patanjali's eight limbs of yoga, asana is one of the preparations for pratyahara, or sense withdrawal, and here's where the ancient philosophy comes into conflict with consumerism. For instead of sense withdrawal in preparation for dhyana, or meditation, the five senses are drawn outwards to all the sights, sounds, smells, tactile stimulations and tastes of an exotic environment. The wily ego lets us congratulate ourselves on having merged it with the universal atman, with a grin as big as the Cheshire cat's. Reinforced with this feast of the senses, it convinces us that we have become better persons, when in fact the only thing that's getting better and better is the ego's place in our being.

But aside from bolstering the ego, is Midas' touch doing us any good? Can all this gold provide us with the spiritual sustenance we seek? ♥

Iyengar Yoga in English with Cantonese!

Kitty Leung (left) and Lydia Tsang (right)

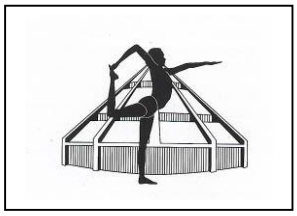
Year 2 teacher-in-training, Kitty Leung and Lydia Tsang will teach a 4-weeks long Level I class every Monday 7:30 p.m. – 9 p.m. between 18 February and 10 March. The class will be conducted mainly in English and supplemented with Cantonese as required.

The Yoga Sutras Unveiled

Do you want to learn more about the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali?

Many people have been asking if they can attend the Yoga Sutras Discussion Class even if they have not come to the class before. Previous attendance is absolutely not necessary for attending. Each week, the class examines a single topic or concept so drop in any time. If the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali are an ocean of wisdom, we bathe in one drop at a time.

Time: Saturdays, 1:45pm – 2:45pm
Cost: 8 classes for $800 (or $120/class)
Instructor: George Dovas



The Iyengar Yoga Centre of Hong Kong operates according to the guidelines set out by BKS Iyengar. We are recognized as an authentic Iyengar teaching centre and are listed internationally as part of that organization. Teachers have Iyengar Certification or are engaged in a three-year program that leads to certification.
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