

## **A FLAVOUR OF SADHANA**

Public Classes in Pune

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The Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute (RIMYI), with its distinctive hexagonal, pyramid-shaped building, sits on a quiet street in the suburban Shivajinagar district of Pune. To describe what it's like to attend classes presents a problem of translation: the street on which it's located, Hari Krishna Mandir Way, practically bucolic by Pune standards, has more traffic of the two- and four-legged and wheeled variety than probably any residential neighborhood in North America. Climate, lifestyle, cultural norms we take for granted, are all so different, that basic adjustment to them is an unspoken part of what it means to attend classes for Westerners.

Like any institution of higher learning, RIMYI provides a weekly schedule of classes at all levels, for all ages, both general and therapeutic; has an extensive library; presents lectures; trains teachers; and hosts special events, such as Teacher Training Intensives and anniversary and puja celebrations, like Guru Purnima. There are two teaching halls, one large and one small, the large main hall being where intensives, ceremonies and all large classes are held. Public classes run all year, seven days per week.

Beginners and children's classes are usually taught by apprentice and long-time staff teachers. Students from abroad mostly attend Public Classes at the intermediate and advanced level –usually taught by Geeta and Prashant Iyengar -- but the bulk of students at all levels are Indian mainly from Pune. Beginner and pranayama classes run for an hour, all other general classes for two hours. The main hall is open two to four hours each day for public practice and students are encouraged to attend to review class lessons and build them into personal practice. Guruji has officially retired from conducting classes but shapes nearly every class by his presence and often participates directly with lucid interjections and observations. When I was there, Geeta was teaching her usual biweekly Women's Class, weekly pranayama and two additional classes for students with eight or more years of experience. Prashant was teaching the weekly advanced class and five additional intermediate classes.

It is the tenor of teaching that distinguishes being in public class at RIMYI. Geeta and Prashant's classes are jam-packed. When I attended class in November, there were at least fifty participants, numbers that demand accomplished teaching. All the Iyengars amplify their voices, confronting, admonishing, enticing, alerting us, to listen and watch, sometimes delivering instructions at a machine-gun-like pace. While this solves the problem of being heard and controlling the attention of large groups, I think it is their unique way of cutting through the fog of intellectual and psychological conditioning to teach asana directly to the body. Western teaching models stress cultivating the student's self-esteem. Along the lines of the Zen tradition of "tough love", the Iyengar way is to confront us with the main obstacle to our learning -- personality issues or "ego" -- to make room for the heart to surrender to sadhana. One tool which Guruji, in particular, uses to shock and open the mind to the connection between body, mind and spirit, is his (in)famous loaded question, thrown down like a gauntlet out of the blue,

right in the middle of general instruction. Loaded because often we are caught in mute ignorance of what we've been practicing and make a frantic effort to figure out what answer he wants. But also effective because it works to teach us what we need to know on multiple levels. Towards the beginning of last November, as we were all bent forward in Uttanasana, he shouted out, "Where is resistance in the pose?" There were a few tentative, inaudible replies, but mostly silence, in light of which he exploded. "Why were we not answering" his question? He could see from our poses most of us did not know the answer, hence the question; but that we did not answer forthrightly betrayed our fear of being found ignorant -- a failure to be honest with ourselves, to apply satya (truth) in our practice. The lesson was not only where resistance should be in Uttanasana (in the sacrum) to get the full extension of the spine out of the waist but also how much our attentiveness had to do with yama. During my visit, in some of her classes Geeta was training an apprentice teacher. While sequencing and clarifying every asana action in simple direct language, she taught him how to teach, concurrently showing as much to us about the art of teaching as the art of asana. As an instructor, it was humbling to recognize the common mistakes she corrected in his teaching: failing to teach from observation, getting carried away with explanation, not simplifying directions, demonstrating from the wrong vantage point. By telling him, "Teach only what you see!", she focused on not losing sight -- literally -- of whether the body receives the instruction. In all her teaching, she hammered home the fundamentals of right action to take us more deeply into understanding our bodies in the poses. Once, during reparation for the invocation to Patañjali, she addressed us from the back of the class as we sat in Swastikasana, and guided us quietly toward dhyana by a long review of all the postural elements for pratyahara and dharana.

Like Guruji, she carried instruction beyond form to its spiritual application. In one class she reminded us that worship is a stage in achieving the more mature phase of devotion—dedication with understanding--to the work. Prashant teaches to the esoteric side of our experience of the poses. He challenges his students to move their concentration and awareness progressively from the disparate elements of the poses--the work (kriya) toward perfect-pose that never ends—toward the psychology of a pose experienced as holistic, as a state of being at ease (sthiti). How he gets this across is by exploring the poetics of Iyengar Yoga. He spent one class on how to move in Viparita Dandasana from strenuous to effortless action: Prashant had us repeat the pose, hold it and take it progressively to the limits of our physical capability. At the same time, he guided us to experience it in stages as its parts, as the assembly of its parts, as integrated action, as a finished state (even, for most of us, in collapse). At the very least, we got a flavour (rasa) of the wholeness of the pose.

This was my second time attending Public Classes. It is necessarily my 'take' on them. It was the same as before, yet altogether different: the fundamentals remain the foundation for everything, but the Iyengars' understanding and their teaching evolve constantly. The teaching is presented on so many levels that everyone can be touched in whatever way they're ready to receive it.