

dipika



perpetual shoulder and neck problems, was already busy researching Iyengar teachers in his area. Weeks later, a beautifully edited and produced set of DVDs would emerge from their hours and hours of patient filming. As we left through the great arched doorway, the security guards beamed at us and one of them told me she was already practising yoga.

In this ancient place, near where the Great Fire of London began in 1666 and where the great and ancient river Thames still flows, we had practised this most ancient of India's disciplines. And no, Geetaji hadn't minded the ghostly presence of all those dead fish. Apparently she said so much time had passed

since they were there that it no longer mattered. She was pragmatic about it. By the end of the week, with her daily puja, her lessons in chanting, her humility, her authority, her compassion and her reminders that yoga is not simply a series of physical exercises, she called to mind that iron legend over our fishy doorway: 'Domine Dirige Nos'. She is our guru. 'One who takes the seeker from darkness of ignorance to the light of the soul'.

Thank you, Geetaji, for being our guru and our guide.

Note

1. 'Lord, guide us!' This is the motto for the City of London.

Finding Myself, the Iyengar way

We all have our own impressions of our first yoga class. Daniel Simpson, a dedicated member of the Institute, recounts his story with honesty and humour.

by Daniel Simpson

My first ever yoga class was disappointing. I didn't spontaneously levitate; nor were we asked to try, let alone fail, to wrap our knees behind our heads and lie down flat.

Instead, we lined up on strips of what felt like carpet underlay, in a room that resembled the assembly hall of my junior school. The only hints of the East were wafts of incense and a couple of magical realist statues of deities.

Shiva and Ganesh I recognised from India, along with some photos on the walls. They showcased dozens of poses of varying implausibility, performed by a semi-naked man with slicked-back hair. I'd seen them in a book I bought off a street-seller in Delhi years before. It remained in my rucksack throughout my travels, and had since stood unread on my shelves. Though it promised to shed '*Light on Yoga*', I'd have to decipher it first. And since the text was disarmingly dense, I'd filed it away for a time when I would have sufficient patience, and got on with enjoying my holiday.

By 2004, I had more time than I knew what to do with. I was unemployed and depressed, achieving

little more most days than smoking cannabis, which kept me happily unemployed and depressed. Then someone suggested joining his yoga class. That it was Iyengar yoga meant nothing to me, until the photographic *déjà vu*. Had I found Mr Iyengar's teachings at last, I wondered, or had he found me despite myself?

At first, it appeared to be neither. After sitting cross-legged, then standing for bracing arm lifts, we were invited to bend down and touch our toes. I couldn't recall an age at which this was possible. Certainly not as a rugby-playing teenager, and far less as the couch cabbage I'd become. After five years abroad as a journalist, I'd given up on all but feeling sorry for myself and ranting about media corruption. When my employers helped to sell the Iraq war, I'd resigned to run a music festival in Belgrade. Though 150,000 people came, the takings vanished, apparently stolen by the armed men we'd hired as security. I'd retreated to Britain feeling cheated, nursing a bruised ego and planning to blow all my savings. Beyond that, I had few ambitions.

But suddenly my competitiveness was piqued. Could I maybe reach my feet before I died? The question wasn't entirely overblown. I felt like I was dying

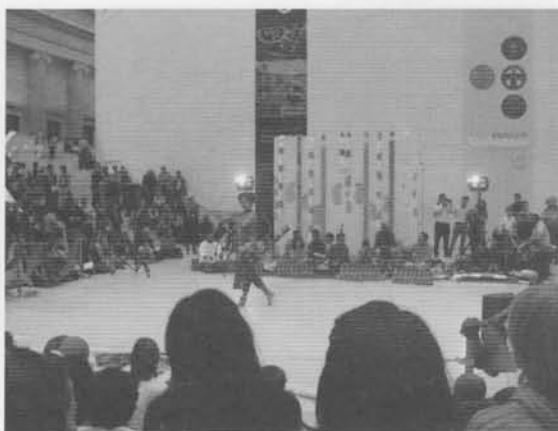
inside, and my hamstrings threatened to snap if my hands passed my knees, never mind trying to rest my chin below them. In fact, if we didn't stand up soon, I'd vomit on the mat. Yet all around me, middle-aged women flipped forward, apparently contented. How could they be better at this than me, a young man straining and sweating, fighting himself? There could only be one answer: yoga stank.

So why didn't I just walk out the room? For all my self-consciousness, I felt welcome. I'd arrived full of worry that I smelled of smoke. And now I was fretting I didn't look suitably yogic, which could only reveal how angst-ridden I was. But the class slowly silenced this chatter. There wasn't a moment of clarity as much as a dawning sense of different possibilities. "No gripping," we were told; "let go" and "breathe" and the hard work of stretching felt more feasible. The knot in my stomach loosened slightly and my spine grew straighter and strong. By the end, I felt warmed from within. The teacher's firm instructions softened as we laid our legs up the wall and reclined, eyes closed. "Relax, but stay alert," he said. "Feel yourself sink into the floor."

It was all so paradoxically confusing that I had to come back. And because the classes were at night, they stopped me smoking all day. Turning up stoned was unthinkable. The teacher seemed able to see through me, referring as he did to such unfamiliar anatomy as the dorsal spine, armpit chest and floating ribs. Besides, yoga was making me face my limits. Accepting what I couldn't do was part of doing what I could, and as both changed from class to class, from moment to moment, I felt awakened.

That was illusory too, as the teacher explained while I drifted. "Yoga is awareness," he said, "not falling asleep." Having so much to learn was unexpectedly appealing. Yoga could teach me commitment, and surrender to something bigger than me, which promised transformation if I fused with it. Within a year, I'd stopped smoking and felt my horizons expanding. Perhaps Mr Iyengar's message had reached me, even though I hadn't read his book. "Stretching of the body is not yoga," he once said. "The self has to penetrate outside, just as the body has to look within."

Six years later, I'm still learning.



Iyengar Yoga Institute Maida Vale at the British Museum

The Institute's outreach programme sponsored two yoga sessions at the British Museum Indian family event on Friday 17th July 2009 in connection with the *Garden and Cosmos* exhibition. Korinna Pilafidis-Williams taught the classes assisted by trainee teachers from the Institute's Introductory Teacher Training Course.