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Following In The Footsteps Of The Master

By Peentz Dubble

Arriving in Mumbai in February, 2011, I was greeted at the airport by the familiar blanket of warmth mixed with the pungent smell of flowering plants and cooking spices. I have traveled to India to study at the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute (RIMYI) in Pune regularly since my first trip in 1987. India has seen immense changes since then, as evidenced by Mumbai's newly renovated international airport replete with many "Western" amenities. As I exited the airport, there were no hoards of people crushing in upon the doors. Instead I was greeted by security guards, barriers, newly

planted gardens, and modern outdoor cafes. The city of Pune has also changed dramatically since my first visit. Gone are the beautiful banyan trees that lined Ferguson College Road. In their place are coffee cafes and modern stores, and pedestrians take their lives in their hands trying to cross the street amidst the tangle of traffic. Across from the Institute, a six-floor shopping mall has sprouted. Yet these changes toward modernization share the space with vestiges from an earlier era: graceful women walking unhurriedly in their colorful saris; a cobbler sitting along the road in

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his makeshift workplace, consisting of a rug and an umbrella; street vendors selling coconuts, tropical fruits, and vegetables; and the beautiful colors and smells of a traditional outdoor market.

At the outset of this journey to study at RIMYI for a month, I wondered what changes I would find there, especially since Geetaji stopped teaching in June, 2010. I had heard that her classes were being taught by a new crop of Indian teachers, as well as by Abhijata Sridhar, Geeta's and Prashant's niece and Guruji's granddaughter. The first morning, as Linda DiCarlo, Jill Johnson (my "roomies"), and I walked over to the Institute, we paused to take a photo next to the RIMYI sign, which has become a tradition on each trip. A large pile of sandbags appeared between the sign and the gate of the Institute, and outside the gate sat several security officers. Inside the gate were more security officers who asked us to sign a ledger each time we entered. This was indeed new to us, perhaps a response to the bombing at the German Bakery in Pune a year ago and a sad sign of the times. Yet once past the security, we continued on the familiar path into the courtyard, passing the beauty of the well-tended gardens, the inspiring artwork, and sculpture of Guruji in yoga poses. I felt at home as I placed my shoes neatly on the shoe rack, alongside those of my fellow yoga travelers from countries around the world. We had in common the desire and commitment to make this journey, not only to study with the Iyengar family at the Institute, but to embark on the most challenging inward journey to the Self, through yoga. As I crossed the threshold into the Institute, I recognized Guruji's sandals at the doorway. Seeing them, I felt humbled and reverent as I entered the sacred space inside and grateful to have this opportunity to study here.

Whenever I entered the main yoga room during open-practice time I was always amazed by the large number of students simultaneously

working on individual practices with intense concentration. There is a low hum of activity with the occasional interruption of Guruji giving instructions to Abhijata as he personally guides her in her practice, while practicing himself! He is the guru, she the sisya (disciple). He is exacting, demanding, and relentless. She is obedient, earnest, and devoted, and perseveres even when her body and mind are being challenged to their utmost. There is tenderness in their exchange. One can observe a twinkle in his eye and a smile or laugh that comes at just the right moment. There is a joy that is palpable, as the master is passing on his knowledge and love of the subject to a younger

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member of his family and next generation of teacher. We are witnessing guru parampara (the process of handing down knowledge, art, and culture from one generation to another) in action! These are golden opportunities to gather around our beloved guru, to listen and observe, and to partake in a "mini-lesson," and then return to our own mats to practice and to try to integrate the lesson Guruji had just given Abhijata.

During my prior visits to RIMYI, Geetaji taught the evening classes in the main asana room, except for the Tuesday night advanced class, which Prashant taught. She also taught the Women's Class on Wednesday and Saturday mornings. She had been my main teacher for many years. But this time it would be different. As the first evening class of February was about to begin, I wondered who would appear to teach. Over the course of the month Raya, Gulnaz, Chandra, Abhijata, and Rajlakshmi taught the classes, and each one did so brilliantly. They have been part of the family at the Institute for many years. They often teach the beginning classes in the upstairs studio and assist both in the main classes downstairs and in the medical classes. They also take classes and practice daily alongside all of us. They are familiar and beloved faces. Yet I had never been taught by

them before so I welcomed the opportunity to receive their instructions in my body and mind, and to observe how they sequenced and organized their classes. Their classes were flavored by their unique voices obviously guided by their studies with Guruji, Prashantji, and Geetaji. On Wednesday and Saturday mornings while the Women's Class is being conducted, Guruji does his morning practice as usual on one side of the room. In February the women's continued on next page



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classes often began with the teacher leading us in the invocation then teaching poses, usually Adho Mukha Virasana and Adho Mukha Svanasana. Suddenly the voice instructing us would change. As we looked up we could see that Abhijata had appeared and had taken over the teaching of the class. Later I came to realize that Abhijata was doing the given asana right in front of Guruji. He would observe Abhijata doing the pose and observe all of us doing the pose. Based on his observations, he would instruct her as to what we were missing

in our understanding and watch her find in her own body the desired action. She would then teach us from her immediate experience, first by demonstrating and then by instructing us in her own words.

Abhi would continue to go back and forth between Guruji and the class, showing Guruji her own pose and receiving his instructions. If we were holding an asana for a very long time while Abhijata was engaged with Guruji, one of the other teachers would jump in and teach us until Guruji was finished working with her. Sometimes Abhijata would be instructing us while Guruji was observing us; he would pass

on his comments about what we were not getting, and they would be relayed to Abhijata by the other teachers. She would then pass on these new instructions to us, but always in her own words. Although this may sound as though it could be a slow or halting process, my own experience of it was neither. I found it to be a very fresh and deep learning experience. I felt that I was on the cusp of deep excavation in my body/mind. I was impressed by Abhijata's



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BACKBEND SEQUENCE TAUGHT BY GEETAJI, February 18, 2011

• **Adho Mukha Virasana:**

1. lift outer upper arms away from floor to bring triceps to the bone,
2. turn thumb side of hands down (palms facing out) toward the floor;
3. bring outer edges of torso in (compact).

• **Adho Mukha Svanasana:**

1. lift fingers up (be on palms),
2. then press inner hands down and lift outer hands up, feel the effects on the inner and outer shoulder blades and arms;
3. bring triceps and biceps in toward the bone, feel compactness and equal length.

• **Tadasana:**

1. turn palms away from legs, thumbs back,
2. bring hands closer to hips to compact shoulders;
3. resist outer hips back even while turning inner thighs back and lift pubis up;
4. now roll blanket and place blanket horizontally (parallel to floor) between inner, upper thighs: observe what happens to inner legs when you hold blanket roll with legs.
5. now place blanket vertically (perpendicular to floor) along inner thighs: notice how the outer thighs move in to hold blanket (compactness).

• **Adho Mukha Vrksasana (don't stay long):**

1. bring the outer thighs in and lift the pelvic floor up, as in *Tadasana*.

• **Adho Mukha Svanasana**

• **Sirsasana:**

1. clasp hands with right finger down, observe inner armpit and bring it forward;
2. lift inner and outer armpits equally; to come out, move outer hips up and back, don't let them fall forward, but keep them in line with shoulders;
3. change the interlock of fingers and repeat with second side of the interlock.

• **Urdhva Dhanurasana (repeat 10x):**

1. don't let elbows splay out as you come up, don't rely on props to keep elbows in;
2. straighten elbows by lifting and lengthening triceps so flesh of arms hugs bones;
3. keep deltoids, biceps, and triceps firm so the arms will stay in sockets;
4. do the pose with feet and legs together: what happens?
5. do the pose with feet and legs apart: what happens?
6. come up by resisting outer legs to inner legs.
7. use a rolled blanket, hold blanket between legs to feel the resistance of outer legs and outer buttocks.

• **Adho Mukha Svanasana:**

1. feet wide apart, feel the spreading in back body.

• **Uttanasana**, with the feet apart

• **Parivrtta**

Trikonasana: be in the present, ask yourself what are you getting from this.

use this pose as a counter pose to the backbends, compact the hips.

• **Marichyasana III** (long timings on each side):

1. lift up from the stability of the hips;
2. turn the abdomen completely and open the chest fully.

• **Halasana** (roll into with bolster under shoulders):

Geeta told us to observe ourselves and to choose whatever variations of *Halasana* (*Parsva Halasana*, *Supta Konasana*, *Karna Pidasana*, etc.) we needed to do in order to quiet the brain and move the mind inward. Then she left the room.

• **Savasana**, with bolster under knees.

Geeta at the IYNAUS national convention in Portland, Ore., May 2010

composure under such circumstances (simultaneously being student and teacher). The teaching was very immediate and penetrating. It seemed to me that I was witnessing a historic, memorable moment as I watched and experienced the passing of Guruji's immense knowledge and understanding of yoga to Abhijata and to us.

Pranayama is taught on Thursday evenings. On the first Thursday evening in February we all waited quietly, sitting on our blankets, watching the doorway to see who would enter and begin to teach us that night. A hush fell over the room as the familiar and beloved form in white appeared at the doorway. Geetaji had returned to teach us! We could not contain our joy and applauded thunderously as she made her way to the platform, where she smiled back at us. No more was said, as she took her place and began with her familiar words, "Sit straight, all of you." After years of being in the presence of Geetaji, I felt as though our revered mother had returned. Once again, she guided us into a

very deep, heartfelt practice of Pranayama, integrating all the limbs of yoga and various Yoga Sutras into her teaching. It was exhilarating to be in the presence of such a master once again and to experience the depth and breadth of her teaching.

In the past I have always been amused by observing the new fad sweeping through the practice hall when I first arrive at the Institute. This time was no different. I saw that students were practicing Adho Mukha Svanasana with less distance between hands and feet with the heels absolutely down. I saw many with belts on each leg, at the groins. Then, in the classes we were instructed over and over again to take the outer thighs back

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and to move the outer hips back and the buttock skin down to the heels. I began to understand the use of the belts on the thighs and felt a different understanding of how to "stand on the legs" by practicing in this way. What became obvious to me during the course of the month was the progressive nature of the teaching that was taking place at the Institute. It felt seamless and integrated. Each class became part of a whole; each a special thread woven into a beautiful tapestry of teaching. Perhaps this was due to the fact that all the teachers are studying from the masters, and all partake in the practices and classes together. They learn from and build on from what is taught in each other's classes. I felt as though Guruji, Geetaji, and Prashantji were "backstage" writing and rewriting the script and directing the play. Themes emerged from class

to class and were carried forward from week to week. Certain themes were continued throughout the month. Stability in the legs and compactness in the hips became a major focus and theme during the month I was there.

During the third week of the month, when backbends are taught, I felt my practice deepen tremendously by this approach of building each class upon the ones that came before. It was fascinating to observe the development and integration of themes. For instance, Prashant began on Tuesday evening exploring the concept "What is maturity in practice?" We practiced groups of backbend asanas, using the ropes, chairs, and blocks, repeating the asanas over and over again. He told us to study ourselves, our efforts, our results, and to ask as the practice continued over time, "Is there a higher quality or 'resolution' with less effort that comes with each repetition?" "Is there more integration?" The next morning in the Women's Class, Abhijata and Guruji began an excavation into backbends from awareness of our outer shoulder blades and outer knees. We were asked to remain steady on our legs and not "swing" from feet to hands. We were encouraged to go beyond our habit of doing, to use the instructions in order to pierce through avidya (lack of spiritual wisdom), and to penetrate into our dull, unknowing places. As the class progressed, Abhijata and Guruji systematically linked one action to another and another, until integration came, not only within the physical body but mind to body and breath. We could feel an inner "ripening," a kind of maturing within ourselves in the practice.

On Friday, Geeta continued with the theme of balancing compactness and spaciousness as we continued to practice backbends and inversions. We repeated Urdhva Dhanurasana many times, refining the actions of the inner and outer legs, the inner and outer arms. With each repetition, she asked us to refine ourselves. She challenged us with these questions: "What are you doing this for?" "Are you practicing for atmadarsana (reflection of the soul)?" Geeta emphasized

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that our practice should develop viveka (discriminative understanding) and with maturity bring prajna (wisdom). Discipline of the karmendriyas (organs of action) is absolutely necessary. But she said not to stop there. Geeta wanted us to bring the mind in and to stabilize the mind. Then she wanted us to refine the Niyamas (ethical observances) in our practice, but not to practice just for outer beauty, outer cleanliness, or increased power. Geeta wanted us to practice for inner purification and quietness. She said beginners often practice quickly since some degree of rajas (vibrancy, action) is necessary in order to move away from tamas (inertia, dullness). But then as our practice matures, we should refine and consolidate our understanding and move with more discrimination. She didn't want us to

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repeat poses just for power alone (as an example of this she mentioned performing 108 drop backs). Instead, Geeta encouraged us to observe ourselves with each repetition of a pose and to ask "What intelligence and awareness is coming?" "What isn't coming?" "Why is there pain?" "How can the pain be lessened?" "Can the pose be repeated with less effort and more discernment?" She asked us to move slowly in the last Urdhva Dhanurasana and to consolidate all that we had learned. (See Geeta's complete backbend sequence) The bottom line for Geeta is this:

nothing should be dull so one can move closer and closer toward a sattvic state of being.

On Saturday, Chandra taught backbends in the Women's Class and continued the theme of exploring the inner and outer shoulder blades. She reinforced and integrated many of the actions for Sirsasana and Urdhva Dhanurasana that had been presented during the week and then continued to teach them in Viparita Dandasana. Backbends concluded on Monday evening in Raya's class. He beautifully integrated the earlier themes of being on the legs, plugging the arms into the socket, moving the buttocks away from the waist, observing the balance of inner and outer knees and inner and outer armpits. But beyond these actions within the physical body, he asked us to observe what was light, what was heavy. He echoed Geeta's teachings by asking us to be firm, but not rigid, to find a balance between stability and mobility. And he echoed Prashant's teachings, saying that each asana should become a "high resolution" asana as it becomes full of light and consciousness.

Every teacher in every class I took during my month at RIMYI guided me systematically and progressively to a deeper and more integrated experience within Asana and

ultimately within myself. Everyone challenged me to take responsibility for my study, my practice, and inevitably for the fruits of my practice. Guideposts that helped structure and direct my seeing were offered along the way. Yet it was made clear that the learning and application of the knowledge gained ultimately had to be done by me, practice after practice, day after day, pursued with dedication, devotion, and faith (Yoga Sutra 1.14). Your life span is your canvas. It is up to you what picture you paint upon that canvas, what art you make with this one precious life that you have been given.

Peentz Dubble, Intermediate Junior III Certified Iyengar Yoga Teacher, lives and teaches in Newton, Massachusetts, and runs summer retreats in Vermont. She is also the co-director of the B.K.S. Iyengar Yogamala of Cambridge's teacher training program.

Voice Lessons:

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rehearsed us. This whole business of learning to teach has been so much more comprehensive than I imagined, not just discovering the what, how, and why but the more complicated and sometimes messy business of "who." We are learning how to observe, to experience, to think, to describe, and to explain. We are learning how to treat others and ourselves. Maya Angelou's motto is "Live your teaching." Both Patricia and Peentz teach us best by example. I'm grateful to them and to their assistants (Greg Anton, Carol Faulkner, and Lynnae LeBlanc) and to our Sansrit teacher, Leslie Freyberg,

for helping us through this complicated and sometimes messy business of finding ourselves. Even though this process has turned out to be much more complicated and uncertain than "Learn these instructions! Speak in a loud voice!" ultimately it has been more rewarding.

Karen MacPhadyen lives in Southington, Connecticut. She will complete the B.K.S. Iyengar Yogamala of Cambridge's two-year teacher training program conducted by Patricia Walden and Peentz Dubble on June 26, 2011.