

Yoga at the RIMYI: A first experience

By James Burton

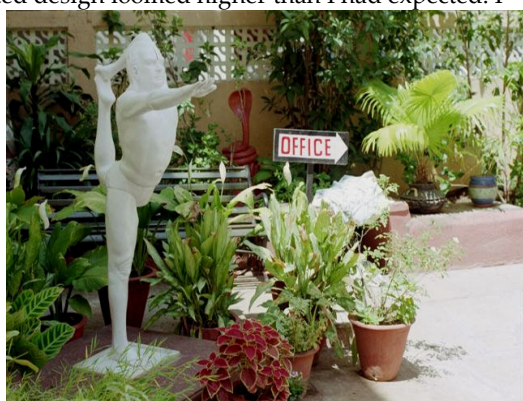
In June of this year I traveled to India to study at the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute in Pune for the first time. I was there for the start of a new Yoga year as the Institute is closed during the hotter month of May

After a very long journey from the US via London and Mumbai I arrived tired and footsore in Pune at 6am and made my way by rickshaw to the flat I was to be sharing with friends. Due to flight availability I had to arrive a few days into the first week but a friend had already registered me for classes.

After settling in and taking a walk, a nap and a cup of chai I was straight off, jet lagged, to my first class with Geeta Iyengar!

The excitement of walking along Hare Krishna Mandir Road towards my first glimpse of the Institute, *and* my first class, the Friday evening class with Geeta, cut through the jet lag. I remember thinking that I might be jumping in the deep end coming to this class so fresh off the plane, but it was standing poses and I knew that they would help to ground me. But I still wasn't sure *exactly* what to expect.

I walked past a guy selling coconuts and through the gates of the RIMYI. I had seen photographs but its familiar faceted design loomed higher than I had expected. I



Gurujī's sculpture in the garden

noticed the statue bust of Ramamani Iyengar (Gurujī's late wife for whom the institute is named) and the plaster relief sculptures of Gurujī in various postures stuck to the walls on each section of the base of the institute - all very life-like and surrounded by the luscious green gardens. I continued on past the Iyengar residence with a beautiful Patanjali statue set into an alcove in the wall and draped with garlands of flowers. Opposite the house is the main entrance of the institute where you kick off your shoes at a big rack with a sign in both English and Sanskrit characters "Please remove your footwear here"!

Inside in main reception room everyone was congregating for the class before going up the stairs to the teaching room. In this area there are photographs and paintings of



James at the shoe rack before class

Gurujī everywhere as well as several large glass cases containing gifts, plaques and statues from all over the world - presented to Gurujī over the years. Here also are the stairs down to the Library, which is open for a few hours in the afternoon and where you can always find Gurujī. There are rooms off the main reception - one for storage of books and supplies, one Prashant's quarters as well as the changing rooms, one female, one male. This is where I go to put on my yoga clothes. There are only Indian men in here at this time and they're all extremely nice and chatty. Introductions are often made in the change room. Once changed it's up the stairs to the main yoga room.



Patanjali

As you walk into the room there is a large statue of Patanjali to the left which the Indians (and a few of the westerners I noticed) bow to or touch. I should say here that the classes get really crowded. I think the average number of students while I was there was around 70 and can be up to 100, so if you want a good spot up near the stage, get there about half an hour early. I was with a friend so we could team up, one to get the mats and props and one to hold the spot, a good system especially since if you leave your mat there's likely to be someone else on it

when you get back! The classes were composed of about 2 thirds Indian students and the rest Westerners, mainly Americans but there were also several Australians, New Zealanders and Europeans as well as a few Japanese.

The yoga room was bigger than it looked in pictures but very familiar just the same. The upper walls are covered with photos of Guruji, most of them from *Light On Yoga*. The room is the same shape as the exterior with the stage in the middle of the flat front wall below a painted Aum symbol on the middle column. From the middle column eight beams radiate out towards the eight outside columns which represent the eight fold path of yoga. The room (apart from the flat back wall) is lined with windows and this is where the wooden props are placed. The rest of the equipment is kept in a room on the far side of teaching space. The marble floor is set so the lines lay parallel to the stage. Some people are setting up while others are doing *Supta Baddha Konasana*, *Supta Virasana* or *Adho Mukha Svanasana*. One of the Indian assistants is setting up a bolster on the stage for Geeta. I get myself on my mat. Geeta walks in, touches Patanjali before shrugging of her white robe and stepping over people to her spot on the stage. The room is immediately quiet as everyone comes to sit in Swastikasana. "Sit straight all of you" Geeta says and then spends a few minutes instructing us to sit, "Alert the spine" and "Let the eyes become humble", before leading a call and response invocation to Patanjali. The class had begun.

The class was a very straightforward standing pose sequence - very bare bones and back to the foundations - concentrating heavily on the leg work with quite long holdings (at least 1 minute per standing pose) until Geeta was satisfied that we were all doing it. She stressed to "be in the present" - so after jumping the feet out for *Trikonasana*, "Don't let the mind move forward to *Trikonasana* but be in *Utthita Hasta Padasana*, are the legs working there, are the femur heads back and the tailbone down?" She had us also doing an *Utkatasana* movement with the hands to the hips bending the knees to draw the buttocks and tailbone down then straightening the legs while keeping that action in the pelvis, repeating this several times between the standing poses as well as in *Utthita Hasta Padasana*. We would do only one side then jump back to *Tadasana* to repeat the *Utkatasana* movement then jump back out to do the other side. She had us maintaining strongly the leg work during going down and coming up from each pose, as we came slowly up she would shout "Femur heads back! Knee caps sharp! Right buttock to left buttock! Hold that!" As for the shouting, Geeta said at one point, "Guruji and I have both noticed that if we don't shout, you don't do it." I remembered her saying at a convention she did in Australia, "I shout at you so you can shout at your shin."

When we came to do the inversions Geeta had us strongly drawing in the shoulder blades, lifting the trapezius and back ribs, keeping the attention there throughout the poses. In *Sarvangasana* in particular Geeta instructed us repeatedly to keep the side chest lifting as we slowly, with legs together, moved in and out of *Halasana*. We then did

an active *Setu Bandha Sarvangasana* with the strap still in place, lifting the side chest and drawing the knees towards each other.

The main thing I noticed about Geeta's teaching is that she never lets up until she's satisfied that everyone is doing whatever specific action she might be teaching. That does become very effortful but as Geeta said in one of the classes, "You have to bear the effort to get something to happen." She wants to make everything very clear, so you get it.

A comparison is often made between Geeta's teaching and Prashant's. While both of their methods stem directly from their father they do have quite different approaches. In my opinion while Geeta is very concerned with particular physical actions and clarity, Prashant's teaching is more about the mental approach. He seems less concerned about the turning of the foot or whether the backs of the knees are spreading or not, but rather that we are practicing mindfully and not in a habitual way. He wants us to look at our practice from a different perspective. Anyone who has done Prashant's classes will be familiar with his "Prashantisms", some amazing words which always seem to make perfect sense at the time, words such as "Inhalately, exhalately". The stop and start rhythm of his classes will also be familiar. You'll do a pose or two then Prashant will say "Come here all of you and listen." then he will talk for fifteen minutes. One of my favorite things he said while I was there was, "Always practice as though Guruji were watching".

In one class Prashant didn't get us to do the standing poses until the very end of the class. He said, "Always the standing poses are done at the start of the class like the soup at a meal, but today we will make the standing poses the pudding!" He told us we were doing it this way because there is a different mental state after all the other poses are done, particularly the inversions. The mind and body are sharper and more focused than at the start of the class. Not that he wants us to practice this way all the time, he just wants us to observe the effects of doing the poses in various different ways. He also had us doing very long timings in the poses, however he did say not to become "Helpless, Hapless, Hopeless" but to come up if the pose became dull and shaky and then go down again.



At Practice in the main teaching hall

The preparation to go, the getting there and the settling in to your home for a month are important considerations for your first time. From what I've heard it's best to arrive a few days early (unlike myself) to acclimatize as well as get the registration out of the way and pay Pandu Rao (the Secretary) who has been organizing the classes for many years and is quite a formable character! He will give you your schedule of classes (6 classes a week) - first timers will usually be given the majority of classes with Prashant, except the Thursday evening *Pranayama* class and (for ladies) the Wednesday and Saturday women's class - all taught by Geeta. I was given 3 classes a week with Geeta and Prashant - a good mix. As well as classes everyone is given a daily practice time (both are 2 hours in duration) either in the morning or afternoon depending on when your classes are scheduled. The Institute is closed on Sundays and sometimes for special days eg Guru Purnima, Diwali, Guruji's birthday etc.

In the time allotted for practice each day (except Sunday) most people tend to practise the poses that were taught in class or just do a restorative session. These sessions felt a little awkward at first and felt a bit like everyone, not *knowing* anyone, was checking each other out. This all passes after a day or two and then it's just a pleasure to be there. At practice just when you're feeling comfortable and getting into your sequence you turn around and there is Guruji! who appeared out of nowhere! and he's looking right at you. Nothing makes you sharpen your *Trikonasana* faster! I found it so inspiring and sometimes moving to watch Mr. Iyengar in his practice and a joy watching him work very closely every day with his Granddaughter Abby.



The main teaching hall "empty"

The experience of doing Yoga at the RIMYI is truly an amazing one. After the initial travel weariness passed and I acclimatized and settled into the institute routine, I really had the sense of being in true yoga mode. You're doing so much Yoga, thinking about the classes, writing notes and doing Yoga reading, total Yoga immersion. I felt that I had discovered as much about my practice and learned as much in a month at the Institute as I would have in a year at home. It's been especially noticeable since I have returned home, my practice feels so much more alive and my teaching clearer. I now know what was meant when I

had heard in the past that you come back from the Institute with "Pune legs". I also know why when my teacher would return from India that we would be worked especially hard in class. The Iyengar's teaching is so precise, so dedicated, that as a teacher you are inspired to bring that dedication and precision to your own students. I'm already planning my next trip.

