

# yoga news & views



**Newsletter of SADIYA**  
(Sheffield and District Iyengar Yoga Association)  
**Issue 10 - November 2005**





## Editorial November 2005

This is our tenth edition of SADIYA's Yoga News and Views and we welcome readers with two main news items. The first is very sad news: we learned recently of the death of Lilian Biggs, one of the longest standing and most popular Iyengar teachers in the UK. The second item is more hopeful: after many years of searching we now have a Sheffield Yoga Centre dedicated to the practice of Iyengar yoga.

We have two articles about Lilian, one from Helen Clay who knew Lilian from many years of practising yoga in this area, and another very personal tribute from Dave Preston.

Frances Homewood, who is responsible for acquiring the wonderful new yoga centre, shares her thoughts on the centre and yoga in general in an interview in this edition. She puts the recent popular interest in yoga into perspective for us and gives us a fascinating insight into the early introduction of yoga to the West.

The Sheffield Yoga Centre is certainly a huge step forward for yoga practitioners in this area. The centre is owned and run by Frances, and a licence agreement between SADIYA and the centre enables us to use the space for yoga days, meetings, publicity and the storage and sale of equipment.

There are now seven classes at the centre every week and regular workshops and yoga days. It is a wonderful space, fully equipped, warm and light and I would recommend anyone to attend a class or an event there, if you can get in!

In our home practice corner in this issue we have a report by Mandy Bryce-Smith on using the recuperative poses for colds, beautifully illustrated by Gabby Hanlon.

We have another in our series of People Behind the Poses from Karen Smith, this time introducing Bharadvaja, the seer who dedicated three lifetimes to chanting the Vedas in an attempt to learn, but

was then persuaded to use his subsequent lifetimes to spread the word for others' benefit. Thank you Karen, please do keep them coming!

Rajvi Metha graciously agreed to us reproducing an article previously published in Yoga Rahasya. Our thanks go to Karen Smith for suggesting this and to Sharon Dawn Taylor for putting us in touch with Rajvi. The article is about the teaching of yoga in prison, and presents a wonderful and inspiring aspect of yoga that many of us have no doubt never considered.

Yoga Rahasya is a quarterly publication of Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute (RIMYI) and more information can be obtained from [www.bksiyengar.com](http://www.bksiyengar.com).

Our thanks go once again to Gabby Hanlon for providing the cover for this issue. The design was inspired by the Indian Flower Mandala created at the opening ceremony of the Yoga Centre

We hope you enjoy this issue and look forward to feedback and more ideas for future issues.

Namaste

Wendy

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## Frances Homewood

### Interviewed by Wendy Weller-Davies

Frances Homewood did her first yoga class 33 years ago at the age of 18 and has never looked back. She is now an Intermediate Junior Level 3 teacher and has been teaching for 20 years.

Having been to Pune seven times to train with BKS Iyengar his son Prashant and daughter Geetha, plus other senior teachers at the Bangalore and Mumbai Iyengar Yoga Institutes, Frances is an extremely experienced and well qualified practitioner.

Now that she has a yoga centre of her own, we asked her to share with us how that came about and how it is going.....

"The seed of the idea came in 1990 when I left my professional career in Local Government. I went to Pune and travelled in both India and Australia. I was impressed and inspired by the yoga institutes that I saw, and thought - why not have a place like that in Sheffield?

"Time went by, I did lots of yoga and various jobs, and in 2000 I was back in Pune once more for the jubilee celebrations at the Ramamani Iyengar Institute. Here I met people from all over the world, attended lectures, presentations and met other teachers who had their own centres and associations.

"I brought back a video about centres around the world and shared this with the other teachers in Sheffield (Helen Clay, Paul Barkworth and Bev Fox). This was the spark of an idea that resulted in the formation of SADIYA.

"We had an evening meeting at the University of Sheffield and showed the video to around 25 students. It featured centres from all over the world: USA, Australia, South Africa, India and Israel and we could see how they were so well equipped, for instance with ropes and other permanent features.

"I asked if there were people at the meeting who would be willing to help look for a building for us in Sheffield. Mandy Bryce and Helen Clay volunteered so every Friday we toured Sheffield, searching for our centre. We weren't sure what we were looking for, but anything with a To Let sign came under scrutiny!

"Helen had to drop out due to work commitments but Mandy and I continued. Eventually, in 2003, we discovered a former Chapel on Matilda Street and this became the focus of our efforts for some time as we tried to raise the funds to buy it. But finally that project had to be abandoned (as chronicled in previous Newsletters), and we moved on.

"Then came two opportunities, with temporary accommodation first in Campo Lane and then at the Workstation, for six months each. The team was flagging for various reasons, but I never quite gave up, convinced that it was possible for us to have our own centre.



## Frances Homewood Contd.

"Eventually in June 2005 I spotted a chapel for sale, just a 20 minute walk from my home. The layout and location were ideal and I felt this was the place for us. By this time it had become clear that the SADIYA committee was not in a position to manage a project of this scale and therefore it had to be done in a different way. My husband Mike loved the building and we decided to try and get it.

"After lots of detailed calculations and many prayers I found myself at a nerve wracking auction. There was only one other bidder, a bible reading group who also had their hearts set on the building. But my yoga training was invaluable and helped me to stay totally focussed throughout the long bidding. The auction was held in the Crucible Theatre, home to the World Snooker Championships - the tension on the day of the auction was not dissimilar to that at the Snooker finals!

"After the euphoria of getting the building, we had a summer of hard work from many people. Family, friends and students have been so generous. And finally, the miracle happened; the yoga centre was ready to start welcoming practitioners in September 2005."

At this point I asked Frances how the centre is going now that it has been open for two and a half months.....

"I am delighted to say it is going really well. We had hoped to get around 80% of the places taken, but in the first month we had 150 people registered and we are currently running at 90% of capacity. I run seven classes per week; Marios Argiros does one and we now have Karen Smith, a newly qualified teacher, taking one class per week too. There is plenty of potential for growth and as more teachers

become available we will have a bigger programme. Eventually we would aim to have a daytime and evening class every day.

"It feels wonderful to finally have the centre, the realisation of a dream! The potential is amazing, for instance all the equipment for the therapeutic class to enable some really beneficial work. We have a base for all kinds of activities associated with yoga: events, information and so on... a real fulcrum for the yoga community!

"I feel pleased with how we have managed to work together as a group; it has been a heart warming experience! Members, students, there has been help from so many. And there has been a great sense of everyone, including SADIYA, working together in partnership to help make this happen."

I also asked Frances to share with us some more general views about yoga.

These days yoga seems to be more popular than ever before in the UK. Why do you think that is?

"There are the obvious things - people are more stressed these days, the pace of life means it is hard for people to find a sense of quiet and calm in their lives, a place to reflect. I think this is why people turn to yoga.



## Frances Homewood Contd.

"We must thank BKS Iyengar who brought yoga to the West in the 1950's. It is interesting that this event synchronised with a new globalisation of the world.

Philosophically I believe there is great knowledge in the West and great wisdom in the East, and something wonderful happens when they come together. Gururji felt that the 1950's was the right time to introduce yoga to the West. If it had been a different time what he said and taught would not have been well received.

"There had been so many sociological and technological changes that we were left with a spiritual vacuum. Yoga partly filled that vacuum. People now want something more than material achievement. For many people the traditional religions don't fulfil that need. Yoga works on the physical, mental and spiritual level and altogether this is ideal for the West."

Where do you see yoga going now in the UK?

"As people live longer, those who are motivated to look after their own health will use yoga more and more. They recognise that, as they age, they want to maintain the flexibility, faculties, balance and co-ordination that they can get from yoga. It is not therefore a fad or a fashion as some press coverage suggests, it is an important part of our culture.

"Going forward I would like to see institutions such as the NHS support yoga more actively. Currently it is not possible to get NHS funding for yoga, although you can for other forms of exercise. It is up to us in the yoga community to make the case for yoga as a beneficial lifestyle. The NHS should promote yoga as a preventative measure.

"This may not happen in the near future but it is something that should happen in the longer term. Now with more venues and more teachers we will be able to reach a wider audience with the joy of Yoga."



## Tribute to Lilian Biggs

I first met Lilian on one of her many yoga weekends. The event was at Ponden Hall, an atmospheric Bronte manor house, set on the moors of West Yorkshire.

Never having been to a yoga event before I was full of trepidation. Lilian's enthusiasm, humour and warmth soon put me at ease. She was down to earth, direct and eagle-eyed. Her immense experience, knowledge, love and commitment to yoga were immediately apparent and I found myself doing things and making connections that I had never done before.

I had never worked so hard in a yoga class before but it left me inspired and hungry for more. In 1989 I began yoga-teacher-training with Lilian. She demanded the best from all of us in an uncompromising style. Her rigorous approach and depth of knowledge grounded us solidly in the basics of Iyengar yoga and is something I will always be grateful to her for. For several years I made the long trek up from Sheffield to Bradford for her weekly Tuesday teachers' classes.

Lilian was a fantastic raconteur, a skill which she perfected as the years went by. She could tell stories about anything. Her classes were punctuated by stories of trips to India, insights about the Iyengars, anecdotes about her own large family, her childhood memories, her dancing, her children or her husband. At the end of a yoga day with her this summer she confided, with an impish smile, "Well, you know, I always tell stories and that way you all get a break - then you can carry on working hard. If I didn't tell stories you'd never be able to work so intensely!"

Lilian had tremendous energy. The last time I saw her was at her 80th birthday celebration, organised by the Bradford and District Iyengar Yoga Association. This was held in the magnificent ballroom of the Midland Hotel in Bradford; all present had come to pay a personal tribute. There was even a personal message of congratulations from Mr Iyengar; never one for personal show or fuss this brought tears to Lilian's eye. Surrounded by members of her own family and her 'yoga family' Lilian danced the night away; twirling around the floor, so gracefully and happily in the arms of her son, she

was full of life. I am sure all present fully expected her to be teaching for another 10 years at least.

Her sudden death, less than a month after her 80th birthday, has come as a huge shock. Lilian was a shining example of how to live fully and fearlessly with courage, conviction, honesty and commitment. The night before her death Lilian was teaching and there were plans later this year for yet another trip with her daughter to study at the Iyengar Yoga Institute in Pune, India. On her many trips to the Institute Lilian always took copious notes and her teaching was supported by this detail and direct quotes from the Iyengars.

Lilian will be sorely missed. Her legacy includes countless students and teachers of yoga; some of her students have gone on to train other students as yoga teachers. Only a small woman, she was a power-house of energy and a fount of knowledge. To the end she was dancing, teaching, laughing and sharing. Our thoughts go out to her family at this difficult time.

**By Helen Clay**



## Lilian Biggs and Good Habits

Editor's note - the beginning of this article was written before the news of Lilian's death on 21 October.

This year has not been an easy one for me, a messy and inequitable split from a partner and moving to a new city. As you can imagine I haven't found it very easy. Combine this with an abusive father, dyslexia, regular bouts of depression since my early teenage years and drug addiction in my twenties, it is a wonder that I am here writing this piece. Inevitably the cultivation of good habits has been difficult when faced with such problems, but even when I haven't been attending classes (most of this year) I have still found myself on a yoga mat on a daily basis even if it is only for ten minutes.

Now I don't tell you, the reader, all of this so I can gain your sympathy, or so I can wallow in my own self pity (done plenty of that already) but it is to highlight the life of someone very special, who over the last seven years, has shown me how to save myself. This person is a little old lady from Bradford called Lilian Biggs.

To some, you only have to mention the name to put the fear of God into them, to others she is that sadistic old witch or 'she who must be obeyed'. Whatever gets muttered under one's breath whilst doing the 6th Urdva Dhanurasana that evening, anyone who has been taught by her will probably never forget the influence she has had on them.

Recently Lilian turned 80 (more of that later) and she is still one of the foremost

teachers in the country. For those of you who don't know her I shall introduce her....

Lilian was born in the 1920s and was quite sickly as a child, and as a result she had flat feet for the rest of her life. She married her husband Bob and had four children. Just by chance whilst trying to go to a badminton class she found herself in a yoga class and enjoyed it. In the early seventies she met Iyengar on one of his visits to the UK, commenced her teacher training and has not stopped going back to Puna regularly ever since.

Sadly during this period her husband died, but rather than giving up Lilian redoubled her efforts at becoming a good Iyengar teacher, and ever since she has taught regular classes in Bradford and the rest of the UK. What sets her apart from many other good teachers is her depth of knowledge, and her unstinting adherence to Iyengar's methods. Her style is somewhat different to some modern teachers and reflects the fact that she learned her craft when Iyengar was still in his prime, and yoga was taught in a much more energetic fashion than is the modern mode today.

One of Lilian's major missions in life has been to ensure that her students practise correctly and do not fall into bad habits, I think that it is this approach to teaching that left me with



## Lilian Biggs and Good Habits Contd.

the habit of practising regularly.

Recently some of Lillian's students arranged to have a party for her, to mark her 80th birthday. Having left Bradford with many negative feelings, going back up there wasn't something I fancied doing. Too many unanswered questions and too many old ladies asking if I've found myself a new partner. But every time someone asked me if I was going it pulled on my heartstrings, and it was with some trepidation that I agreed to go. So after a very busy day travelling from Sheffield to Huddersfield for teacher training, back to Sheffield to get changed, then to Bradford I arrived, with Helen Clay and Karen Smith, at the Midland Hotel, Bradford to meet everybody.

As soon as we went in I was greeted by many people I had not seen for nearly 12 months but have shared many years of mat-time with and I felt instantly at home. Meeting a whole load of people you have shared much with after having been stuck in Sheffield not really knowing anybody was a relief and much easier than I had anticipated. So many old friends to catch up with I don't think I stopped talking all night. Just knowing that I hadn't been judged on past events and that people remembered me as myself rather than just as part of a couple has been good consolation.

The evening itself went by in a flash. There were tributes to Lilian, food and a slideshow. The highlight was Lilian being given a book of tributes which contained one from Iyengar himself, congratulating her on reaching 1000

lunar cycles and encouragement to reach the supposed life expectancy of a yogi - 100 years. This obviously meant so much to Lilian and showed how much respect others have for her.

For me though going along to this event reminded me of what good habits I myself and everyone else in the room have found through Lilian's teaching and the good it has done for us all. I don't think I have been in the presence of so many contented and well rounded people for a long time.

Sadly since writing this piece, news has arrived of Lilian's death. Lilian died in her sleep on the morning of the 21st October after having been teaching the night before, by all accounts she was in good form. Those of you who knew Lilian will know what tragic news this is.

My heart felt condolences go out to her family particularly Gerrard who has been her constant companion for many years. To her many students new and old Lilian will remain in our hearts for years to come, hopefully amongst the teachers we can perpetuate the true spirit of yoga that she has so clearly demonstrated over the years.

**Dave Preston**

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## Home Practice for Colds

The other morning I woke up with a sore throat and after a couple of days it had developed into a full blown cold with blocked nose, sneezing, coughing and headaches. Looking on the bright side it gave me a chance to rest and to work through the recommended sequence of poses for colds from B.K.S. Iyengar Yoga, The Path to Holistic Health published by Dorling Kindersley.

I was surprised at how much better I felt after each practice and thought it was worth reminding students about this sequence as winter is approaching and a variety of respiratory infections may be about!

I began the practice feeling completely congested in the head and nose, unable to breathe and with heaviness in all my limbs. I felt tired and lethargic and not particularly like doing yoga!

### **The sequence begins with Supported**

This seemed like a gentle way to start the practice and it felt comforting to have my head and arms supported. The pose did the work for me as I relaxed into it and I started to feel some energy moving up the back of my legs as I stretched down.

### **Prasarita Padottanasana is the next pose.**

This followed on well as it felt like a gradual progression, requiring a bit more effort, but I started off with extra blocks under my head to ease myself into the pose. I began to feel the energy move up the inside of my legs and my feet become more alive as I lifted up in my inner ankles. I relaxed with my head supported and after a while my back had extended enough for me to remove the extra block from under my head.

**Then it's Adhomukha Svanasana** with the head supported. I now felt like I had more energy and enjoyed stretching out into the dog pose, opening the 'armpit chest' and back

of my legs.

Having had my head down and supported for the first three poses, my mind felt quiet and rested and I was ready to do the next pose **Sirsasana**. It's not a pose that springs to mind when you are full of cold but it felt surprisingly good! Although my nose was still completely blocked at this stage so I had to breathe through mouth.

When I came down I began to feel the congestion in my nose and chest moving and my head felt lighter and clearer.

If you are menstruating or don't practise head balance then skip Sirsasana out and move onto the next pose in the sequence which is **Viparita Dandasana**. It felt like a strong stretch but just what my body needed to help open up my chest and lungs and get fresh air in.

**Supta Baddhakonasana** resting back over a pranayama pillow comes next and it felt really good to have the whole of my spine supported after the previous back bend. By the time I reached this pose I realised my congestion had eased and finally I could breathe through my nose which was great.

**Supta Virasana** follows and I used extra support under my back to enable me to stay in the pose comfortably without strain on my knees or lower back.

### **Setubandha Sarvangasana**

This feels like another pose that does the work for you as you lie back and relax. My body is supported over the bolster, my thighs held together with a belt and my chest expands as my shoulders and arms rest on the floor. It helps me to continue breathing deeply and open my body which has become so closed down with the coughing and heavy head.



# Home Practice for Colds Contd.

The next three poses in the sequence are to be left out if you have a period. They are: **Supported Halasana**, **Salamba Sarvangasana** followed by **Supported Halasana**.

The support in each of these poses make them relatively effortless and the combined effect is to further reduce the congestion in my head and nose and to ease my sinusitis.

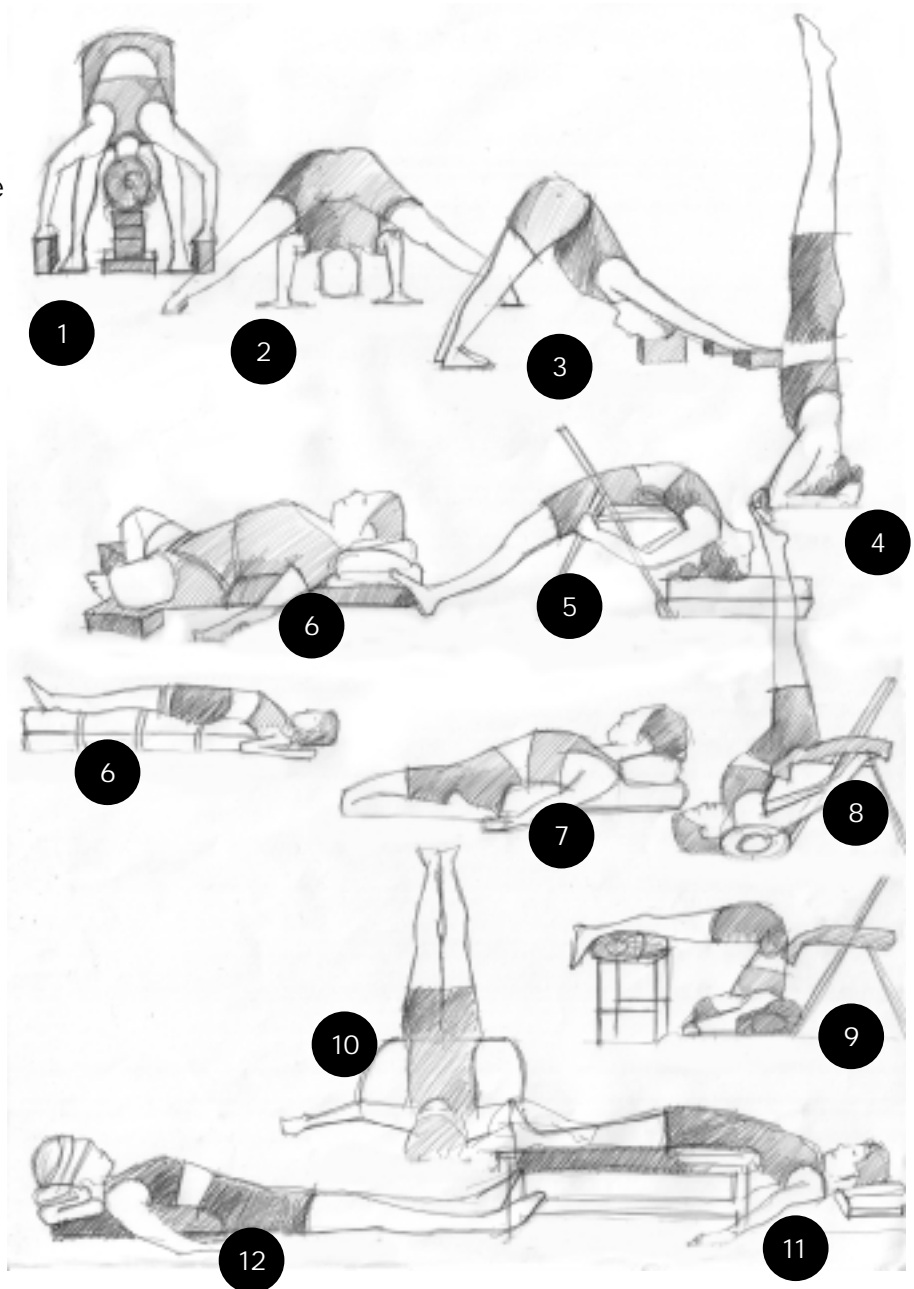
If you've time the last pose before finishing with Savasana is **Viparita Karani**, a delightfully easy and rejuvenating pose.

All the inverted poses in this sequence have a great calming effect on the mind and body and seem to work wonders in relieving my cold symptoms. I am able to get up and face the day with some energy, enthusiasm and a clearer head.

**Mandy Bryce**

### Key to poses:

1. Uttanasana
2. Prasarita Padottanasana
3. Adhomukha Svanasana
4. Sirsasana
5. Viparita Dandasana
6. Supta Baddhakonasana
7. Supta Virasana
8. Setubandha Sarvangasana
9. Supported Halasana
10. Viparita Karani
11. Salamba Sarvangasana
12. Savasana





## The People behind the Poses - Bharadvaja

### The People behind the Poses - Bharadvaja

In this People behind the Poses we take Bharadvajasana, a pose dedicated to the great sage Bharadvaja. Bharadvajasana I and II are seated twists. The first sees you take your feet to one side of the body and then turning towards the other; the second involves having one leg in virasana and the other in padmasana - twisting towards the padmasana leg. These poses stretch the shoulders, back and hips. They massage the abdominal organs. They are good poses to help with arthritis, to relieve lower back ache, and to improve digestion. They should, however, be avoided during menstruation, if you have diarrhoea, or if you have a stress-related headache. As the Sadhana Centre for Yoga and Meditation in New York notes: 'the physical action of the twist implies a balanced view of all sides of a situation, a clear sightedness associated with wisdom and the ajana chakra'.

Bharadvaja is one of the seven seers who is associated with the Vedic hymns (a collection of sacred hymns which form part of Hinduism's sacred texts). The story behind his name is an interesting one. Bharadvaja's mother was pregnant by her husband, Utathya, and at the same time by Brihaspati (the god of magic and prayer). Bharadvaja's half-brother (the son of Utathya) decided to kick the young Bharadvaja out of his mother's womb. On hearing this, Brihaspati told Bharadvaja's mother to: 'bharadwajam' which means 'cherish this child of two fathers'.

Bharadvaja was abandoned as a child and adopted by the Marudwaja gods who were taken by his radiant face. From an early age he showed an interest in learning. He spent much of his time trying to understand the Vedas. It was his passion for the Vedas which has made him particularly well known.

The Marudwaja gods taught the young Bharadvaja everything that they knew about the Vedas, but he wanted to know even more. In his desire to learn more, he dedicated his life to chanting the Vedas. It is said that he was so devoted that he cared little for his own body; the rigorous regime of three lifetimes of chanting left him weak and made it difficult for him to sit. Paramesvra, the supreme god, took pity on him and told him he would be granted a fourth life and asked what Bharadvaja would do during it. Bharadvaja said that he would continue to chant the Vedas for as many lifetimes as he could. Paramesvra wanted to make Bharadvaja change his mind, so he made three mountains appear. He then took three handfuls of soil and told Bharadvaja that the Vedas were like the mountains, and what Bharadvaja had learnt was equivalent to the handfuls of soil. He told Bharadvaja that as well as increasing his own knowledge, it was also important to spread the knowledge he had learnt to other people. From that day forward, Bharadvaja decided to help others: by spreading the Vedic knowledge and freeing society of poverty and disease.



## The People behind the Poses - Bharadvaja Contd.

Like Vedic knowledge, yoga is as vast as those three mountains. Even if we have only a handful of knowledge we should try and increase that knowledge, by learning from our own teachers (as Bharadvaja did), and later spreading our own increased knowledge to others.

**Karen Smith**





## Freedom in Captivity

*The ultimate aim of a yogi is kaivalya, a state of eternal emancipation, freedom and liberation from the cycles of birth and death. But, what does yoga mean to individuals whose basic freedom in life has been curtailed by society because of their own (mis) deeds. How is the response to this art of yoga amongst individuals undergoing a prison term? The problems faced by teachers teaching inmates in a prison are unique and unimaginable. Sharon Dawn Taylor shares her experiences teaching prisoners.*

*- Rajvi H Mehta then narrates her experience of visiting the yoga class in Hull prison, UK*

*Freedom is to be free from the chains of fears and desire.*

*- Yogacharya BKS Iyengar*

*Externally treat your students as students, but internally treat them as God-sent. You are learning by helping them. They make you understand and you must give them respect'*

*- B.K.S. Iyengar and Geeta S. Iyengar Basic Guidelines for the Teachers of Yoga.*

I recently read out these words to a class of students as part of a discussion about mutual respect, not just between student and teacher, but also between all of us in the class. These students were not ordinary students but inmates of a closed prison. I've been fortunate that these students have always behaved respectfully to me and to the discipline of yoga. They have helped to broaden my understanding of the practice of yoga and with their ever-honest feedback helped improve my poses too!

I started teaching yoga in prisons last year; firstly in an open women's prison, which was rewarding but exhausting, and now in a closed men's prison where I teach two classes, one for the staff and one for inmates. I feel energised after teaching at the men's prison - the inmates have SO much enthusiasm. I worked with men and women prisoners for several years before I started teaching yoga. In the early 1980s I taught basic maths to male prisoners and more recently worked for two years as an acupuncturist at a women's open prison. This prior experience was very helpful for me when I started teaching them yoga.



## Freedom in Captivity Contd.

Associating with the inmates and building a rapport

I never enquire what crime the prisoner has been convicted of. Sometimes the inmates want to tell you (to see if you will still work with them), and on other occasions an officer may insist on telling the inmate's crime.

The program at the men's prison is for vulnerable prisoners only - They are classed as vulnerable prisoners as they are convicted sex offenders and are at risk of being attacked by the non-vulnerable inmates. I had said I was prepared to teach the vulnerable prisoners and with my prior experience of prison work the Head of PE had felt I was well prepared for such work. But I 'd been teaching for some weeks before an officer told me all the class were vulnerable prisoners.

At both prisons the inmates were given the choice to come to class. No one was forced to do yoga. In the men's class I give them the choice to study under the Home Office Physical Education Program ('PEP') or simply to attend the class. The Home Office named the PEP course - 'Self-discipline through Yoga and Meditation' and it involves both practical and written work. If the inmates have learning difficulties they are given support.

**The experience of teaching in a prison**

- At the men's prison each student has a copy of Yoga In Action, Preliminary Course (kindly donated by the Iyengar Yoga Institute, Maida Vale, London) and a 50-page photocopy of the Introductory poses and the introduction from Light on Yoga (copyright granted). It took several months for Yoga in Action to be made available to the men as the wire spiral binding was considered a potential weapon. Thread or string couldn't be used either and the first attempts at heat binding didn't work. But the men now have both books and use these books to help them with their weekly homework and their daily 'cell-practice'.
- In both prisons I've followed the class plans in Basic Guidelines for Teachers of Yoga, though much slower than the course plan.
- The Iyengar Yoga Institute, Maida Vale, London and Yoga Matters, London have both kindly donated used equipment, including belts. I always count out the belts before and after EVERY class and personally ensure they are secure at the end of the day. It's vital that nobody takes a belt away, as they could hurt themselves or someone else.
- At the women's prison I always asked permission before adjusting any student. And I asked permission EVERY time, even within the same class. Many had suffered physical abuse and all needed to know that I respected their personal space. I had in fact worked with most of them on a one to one basis giving them acupuncture treatments



## Freedom in Captivity Contd.

prior to teaching yoga, so a trust relationship had already been established. I still kept adjusting to a minimum.

- In the men's class I NEVER adjust or touch the students in anyway. I have a special outfit that the PE staff call my 'Widow Twanky' outfit - it's a little too big for me, so it hides my shape! The men all have clean prison PE kit for every class.
- A member of the PE staff sat with me for the first 2 classes, now I teach without close supervision, but there is always a staff member close by. It is in fact part of the Home Office program for the inmates to learn a different way of interacting with women.
- All the inmates are 'institutionalised' - and will do what you tell them to do even if it hurts, so it's important to keep a running dialogue with them during the class, checking back with them regularly. But also part of my work with them is helping them make choices. For example to choose which inversion pose to do - Setubandha Sarvangasana, Ardha Halasana or instead simply Baddha Konasana with the wall as support for their back. Which pose is right for their body on that day. It's a balance of giving them a structure (the lesson plan) and space within that structure to be themselves.

### The response of the students

At both prisons I could see that the students were practising between classes. At the women's (open) prison some of them got together once a week, this isn't possible at the men's prison as they are locked in their cells, but the men practise more! With both groups I saw their eyes change over the weeks. Many would do the poses looking at the floor at first, but gradually they started looking ahead and their eyes lost some of the dullness.

The men love reading their two Iyengar yoga books and often quote (from memory) from the books to show me that they are reading them. To help them learn the shapes and names of the poses I give them stick men drawings of the class sequences. Sometimes I leave a few of the drawings blank for them to fill in. I find they are very observant - maybe because of being locked in their cells most of the time.

### Yoga practice in a prison

It's not always easy for the men to practise if they are sharing a cell as space is limited, but in such cases they tell me (and I can see) they practise such poses as Paschima Namaskarasana, poses they describe as space efficient!

The officers make regular checks on the inmates as some of them are on suicide



## Freedom in Captivity Contd.

watch. On one occasion an officer found one of my students had moved all the furniture in his cell and was practising Ardha Chandrasana against the wall, a new pose for him in the class that week, a pose that he found difficult but enjoyed.

I had hoped that the men could have their own sticky mat to take away and use for their cell practice, but security at the prison took one mat and sadly showed how it could be ripped into strips and used as a hanging tool.

### **The response of the prison staff**

I've received a great deal of support from prison staff. At the women's prison this was in part because my mother had worked in the education department there for 15 years and I'd worked as an acupuncturist for 2 years along side the medical staff. So a good working relationship had already been established.

At the men's prison I have really great support from the PE staff. They had searched for a teacher for about 6 months, but nobody had wanted to teach at that prison, as 400 of the 1,000 inmates are 'vulnerable prisoners'. So I think they were pleased to find me - they have even given me my own tea mug in the PE kitchen!

The curiosity of the human mind often challenges one to look into areas and realms not routinely accessed. My mind was quite intrigued to know what happens behind the huge walls of a prison. My mind, in a way was sympathetic with the inmates. Life in a prison must indeed be very stressful. Being closed in a world far away from reality; feared or looked down by society; possibly relenting on their deeds, possibly unhappy with the decisions of judiciary; being kept away from their near and dear ones - would be quite a traumatic experience. There would be many I believed who could be within the four walls for the crimes they committed because they had no control over themselves. They needed to learn how to attain control over themselves while they were facing punitive action for their crimes. Guruji's teachings would have a lot to offer these "lost and mis-guided" souls - if they could have ever had an access to it.

Till about a few months ago, I was totally ignorant of the fact that some of the Iyengar Yoga teachers had in fact taught in prisons. So, when Sharon agreed to let me visit her prison class, I immediately jumped at the "opportunity". I actually looked forward to going to a prison!!

- Sharon Dawn Taylor



## Freedom in Captivity Contd.

The high brick walls were intimidating but not as daunting as the couple of security officers sitting behind large glass (possibly bullet proof!) windows in an office in which hundreds of keys were very neatly arranged. I had possibly never seen even one tenth of the number of keys in my whole life! We could see Sharon (who had arranged this visit) on the other side of the glass but she was not permitted to meet us as we were earlier than the scheduled time. I was accompanied by Birjoo and Christina and we joked as to how we were possibly the first people in the world to try so hard "to get into a prison!". When we finally managed to get in, we realised that it was indeed a very secure prison!

We needed to go through several large metal doors each of which was locked. Between these doors, we had to pass through long corridors lined with 12 to 15 feet high, grilled, metal walls, which were laced at the top with barbed wire. Within these enclosures, one could see buildings, which we were told were the gymnasium, hospital, kitchen and dog room. These days, the emphasis in this prison was more on rehabilitation of prisoners rather than a punitive attitude. This explained why the prison had one employee for every two inmates.

We then met the batch of 4 students who were to attend the yoga class that day. They seemed to have the enthusiasm of children. Accustomed to taking instructions, they were very attentive; they expressed great

pleasure when their teacher appreciated them when they performed an asana well or they correctly answered the question she asked them. They were on their best behaviour and gave the best possible demonstration of their asanas in front of us visitors. They knew that these visitors were much more experienced than their own teacher and they felt as if their teacher was to be assessed although that was not our intention. It was nice to see them following each instruction to the core and enjoying what they were doing.

Like one young man who had just joined the class said, "it is like drugs, we are getting addicted to it and we do not want to leave it. Only thing is that it only does us good!"

They expressed their unhappiness on not being able to practice more often. Their cells were too small and most shared it with one more person. There was space for one person to stand at a time so it was impossible to practice asanas in there. They had the time and the will but not the space.

However, they were happy that they were given an opportunity to practice twice a week in the gymnasium. They were all very curious to know about how we practiced yoga in India as it was hot there and they had read in Light on Yoga that yoga should not be done in the sun!!



## Freedom in Captivity Contd.

All of them stated that since they started doing yoga, they felt better. They had no back pain, which some had earlier suffered from and which was aggravated by their cramped cells. They said they felt nice after a class. They did not feel the stressed and always looked forward to a class. As one of them said, "We feel nice and quiet after doing yoga so it must be doing something to us and our minds!

When the class ended, we passed through a group of other inmates awaiting their turn to go back to their cells. Some were jeering possibly at the rarity of seeing women or visitors! However, one could not but notice the great difference between them and the group who had just left the class - extremely well behaved and polite!

It is indeed a pleasure to see the unfortunate members of our society able to live in the present when their past is something most would not want to get back to!

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## Yoga classes in Sheffield

If you wish to join a class please call the teacher first to confirm a place is available.

**Frances Homewood at Sheffield Yoga Centre, Burgoyne Road**

Monday 6.30 to 7.30 Beginners  
Monday 7.45 to 9.30 Intermediate  
Tuesday 6.00 to 7.30 Beginners  
Wednesday 9.30am to 11.00am  
Wednesday 6.30 to 8.00pm  
Call Frances on 0114 2335753 for more information

**Marios Argiros at Sheffield Yoga Centre, Burgoyne Road**

Monday 6.00 to 7.30 All levels  
Call Marios on 01663 751269 for more information

**Karen Smith at Sheffield Yoga Centre, Burgoyne Road**

Thursday 8 to 9pm Beginners  
Call Karen on 0114 2490429 for more information

**Paul Barkworth at Bolsterstone Village Hall**

Tuesday 7.15 to 8.45 Beginners  
Call Paul on 01226 764759 for more information

**Helen Clay at St Mary's Church/Community Centre, Bramall Lane.**

Wednesday 6.15 to 7.15 Beginners  
Wednesday 7.30 to 9.00 Class for those with some experience and who wish to move on with their practice  
Call Helen on 0114 2661237 for more information

**Dominic Batten at The Institute, Hartley Street, Heeley**

Tuesday 6.30 to 7.30pm Beginners  
Tuesday 7.45 to 9.15 More experienced  
Call Dominic on 0114 2649418 for more information

**Padmavasini at the Buddhist Centre, Howard Road, Crookes/Walkley**

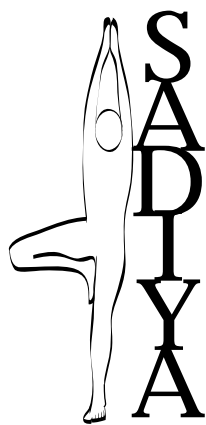
Tuesday 1 to 2 Beginners (drop-in)  
Thursday 1 to 2 Some experience (drop-in)  
Tuesday 6 to 7 Beginners  
Wednesday 6 to 7 Beginners  
Thursday 1 to 2 General  
Thursday 6 to 7 Beginners  
Thursday 7.30 to 9 Some experience  
Call Padmavasini on 0114 2730335 for more information or  
The Buddhist Centre on 0114 2349994 to book onto a class

**Padmavasini at Max Fitness Club**

Tuesday 7.30 to 8.30 Beginners

**Padmavasini at Birley Community College**

Wednesday 5.45 to 7.15 Beginners  
Wednesday 7.15 to 8.45 Beginners



Sheffield and District Iyengar Yoga Association