RIMYI Visit 28 November 2019 – 1 January 2020

My intention for the scholarship

I visited RIMYI with the intention of exploring methods for breathing practice, in particular, studying Pranayama with Prashant Iyengar. My intention was to evolve my choreographic practice through widening my tool kit to include anatomical knowledge from the yogic systems that could improve performance in dance training, and even as a practice for non-specialised, non-professional dancers.

How I am writing this report

Due to events following the visit, namely the COVID19 pandemic which has put the UK in lockdown and subsequent cancellation or postponement of my work, I am submitting this report five months after the visit, which is four months late. I write on day 88 of lockdown. Like everyone in the UK apart from key workers and Dominic Cummings, I have not been out of my house for more than twelve weeks now, apart from a twice-weekly walk or run. It doesn't sound a lot when written down like that, and Lisa Ullmann future recipients reading this might be bemused at the idea that this lockdown was challenging, but the experience of staying indoors almost completely has been intense; felt similar to walking with feet tied together, circling a never-ending psychedelic roundabout, a domestic vortex of familiar and unfamiliar sweetnesses and contempts, fuelled by an underlying vast gratitude towards the shopworkers, nurses, doctors and ambulance drivers who are out there, handling the illness, risking infection, working through 52,000 deaths and counting.

The way I would have applied things learned in Pune has been denied so far and I mention this context of confinement because the things I was grappling with in the Iyengar centre have become strongly relevant in lockdown. The purpose of my trip to India was to learn methods of teaching people to deepen their breath practice, and I have notebooks full of such gems. But another, more unconscious purpose became clearer as the month unfolded: I was dealing with questions of self-discipline, specifically how to discipline myself to make and create daily, with no extrinsic deadlines or externally-motivated performances as the fuel. The lockdown has been

challenging for everyone; for me it has meant involuntarily coming off the full-time road to destinations outwith, and planted instead into a series of similarly unfocused days with personal discipline as the only method to stay buoyed, practically hopeful and inspired when trapped indoors to keep COVID19 at bay. The methods I learned in Pune, and the practice adopted since has been invaluable, and I am sharing in the genuine hopes it might inspire others.

The reason I didn't write this report immediately upon return

1.30 Sickness, apathy, doubt, carelessness, laziness, hedonism, delusion, lack of progress and inconstancy are all distractions which, by stirring up consciousness, act as barriers to stillness. (Yoga Sutras, Patanjali)

The visit was a very powerful indoctrination into the methods of yoga as discovered, honed and taught by BKS Iyengar. I wrote a report in January 2020 and it read like the writings of an indoctrinated student. "*Prashant says…*" "*The Yoga Sutras say…*" "*Patanjali says…*" I had no method yet of reflection or application. Somewhat dejectedly, I abandoned the essay in February, as I felt it would be more interesting for the reader to just pick up a book and read Mr. Iyengar without the middle man. More honestly, I realised that if all I could was repeat what I had been told, then I wasn't sure I had learned anything.

BKS lyengar was born in 1918 and rose to attention in the 1960s, and his worldwide prominence exploded in the 1980's. Part of this prominence came from the holy devotions of the man, the sheer eighty-year commitment to a subject that took him deeper and deeper, as the world witnessed and expanded from his enquiry. Mr. lyengar came to the UK in the 1970s to teach his method, and my father became his student and a teacher of lyengar yoga himself when I was a kid. My fathers practice of yoga was something he did in the house in a small, quiet room. I am my fathers daughter and Prashant lyengar is his fathers son. Both of us, but especially Prashant have watched our parents pretty meticulously, but Prashants chosen path has seen him live full-time - in one room just off of the administrative foyer - at the Institute of

which he has been co-director since 1984, practice the subject for over 50 years and write more than thirty books.

I began to practice lyengar yoga in my first year at dance school. I was not sailing through the conservatoire in the way I had hoped, and my dream of becoming the next Sylvie Guillem was compromised by the reality that I hadn't started a serious balletic discipline until I was eighteen. My body had obvious limits. So I picked up a book called Light on Yoga and started a daily morning practice in my room before dancing all day at school. I immediately benefitted from this insular practice, and it restored equanimity so that I could do better in the training I had once found overwhelmingly exposing and difficult. I have always had a private relationship with yoga, backed up by teachers and attending Iyengar classes. Due to the nature of dance I have travelled a lot (lockdown being the first time since completing my Masters degree in 1998 that I have slept in one bedroom continually) and this 22 year trip meant my attendance at Iyengar classes was sporadic. I've been a drop instudent wherever; Bristol, Bath, Yorkshire, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Leeds, Manchester, Cheltenham, Birmingham, Miami, Barcelona, Paris, Rome, Hereford, London, New York, San Francisco... and other places I can't remember.

Part of the lyengar method is the complete prostration of the student at the foot of the guru and a wholehearted commitment to doing what you are told. Throughout the India visit I was wrestling with questions of how to integrate someone else's system into my own, how to swallow the medicine whole, how to be a good student, how to concentrate, how to serve instruction, how to find inspiration in the fog of repetition... The last time I had such an experience was at dance school, and as an eighteen-year old, it had taken a long time to work out how I wanted to dance, or have a dance practice, or be able to meet the demands of the practice as myself. I held on to Martha Graham's maxim that it takes ten years to be a dancer, and in my case, it took nine years to begin being a choreographer. I couldn't be a dancer, I didn't have the necessary attention span, but choreography offered a way to serve quests and push towards new territory. Because Contemporary dance, unlike Iyengar yoga, evolves by destroying its past, to find new expressions. This new writing is the thing that excite me.

The Visit

2.20 Yogic action has 3 components - discipline, self-study, and orientation toward ideal of pure awareness. (Yoga Sutras, Patanjali)

Student life at the lyengar Institute is an exacting experience. My timetable from 28 November until 1 January was one two-hour class plus one practice session in the unsupervised studio daily, Monday - Saturday. The classes are busy and the teaching method didactic, self-sufficiently impersonal and whispered, cajoled even shouted at up to 100 students at once. The house style feels very much like a lecture, except the listeners might be upside down supported by Soviet-era type ropes that hang from the ceiling, or in complexly contracted knee-busting sitting positions, and often holding positions for longer than they assumed possible.

As a choreographer, I engineer studio time almost directly oppositional to this teaching style; the relationship between dancers and choreographer is reciprocal and there is an exchange of ideas, a traffic of method and mutual hunt for the unknown. So a big part of my experience of this visit was respect for the teachers and the method mixed with a surprisingly large amount of questions which would be easily dismissed as resistance to surrendering, The complicated part is I did have resistance, because as the teachers rightly point out, the body naturally leans towards inertia, and it takes discipline to do similar exercises again and again. But my choreographic practice was the resistance too. Listening and finding together? Responding to the moment and the possible that is unfolding in the present moment? Moving, swaying, spiralling organically and without a set postural destination? That's what I believe in, that's what I've crafted, a method to conjure dance and being a dancer, what do you expect of me? I need to dance.

Things I learned

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1.2 Yoga is to still the patternings of consciousness. (Yoga Sutras, Patanjali)

Prashant lyengar gave weekly lectures on Sundays. The first one I attended was crowded. Maybe 150 of us sat on the marble floor cross legged and barefoot as he talked for an hour and a half. His attention span and focus are awe-inspiring and the density of what he is saying means you need to take a lot of notes. Some of these notes read strangely even immediately after ("...front of sit bones, not letting the hip float. down down up up up.") The point he wanted to get across in this first lecture was that pranavama and the higher meditative states it attains are strong enough to permanently erode samskaras. Samskaras are memories, sense perceptions one has from past experience or more correctly identified as the residual impressions that the brain absorbs and captures from bodily experience. The yogic techniques of meditation are able to erode samskaras with the intention of putting the meditator more directly here in the present. The point of this meditation is to experience the wholeness of now through a clear vision that is not coloured by distortions which arise from past experiences. In other words, the Western pharmaceutical cures (which are in long-term use by four million adults in England alone) and all the therapy and psychoanalysis are inferior to meditation. "You're all obsessed with Freud." Prashant said. "The 'subliminal mind'. Tell me, what's so sublime about it?"

Breathing

11.49 With effort relaxing, the flow of inhalation and exhalation can be brought to a standstill; this is called breath regulation. (Yoga Sutras, Patanjali)

The meditation comes from breathing. Or the calm and pure state arises from the refined and regulated processes that coalesce under the term pranayama. The intake of air increases, the chest cavity broadens, the brain stills, the feeling of wellbeing - felt as some kind of deep reassurance - is palpable. Pranayama classes are on Friday nights which at first felt the opposite to any weekends I've known and

loved. But completing these two hour breath intensives at 7pm caused me to reflect that Fridays in our culture are usually the active fight to ward off feeling tired.

Through these lectures and daily classes we came to consider in great practical and conceptual detail that *yoga is not the pose* but the dynamic between body mind and breath. That is to say, the liveness of the moment of the action is the object of study, not the pose itself, statically reduced to an external shape by photographs in yoga books. Prashant continually challenged us to think, to consider how it is impossible for the body to be posture-free, and if you identity yoga as body shapes, you are not grasping what yoga is: this interplay between mind, body and breath.

I learned a lot of things I hope to pass on to dancers and peers when the pandemic has ceased being an immediate threat and we are permitted to meet and work together again. There will be much to explore in this enquiry.

I've learned philosophically subtle truths that will help in life; that witnessing is not merely the act of seeing, it is the state of impartiality. That desire is in the mind. And practical things like the four main functions of the skeleton are support, protection, movement and supply/storage.

2: 43 As intense discipline burns up impurities, the body and its senses take on supernatural powers. (Yoga Sutras, Patanjali)

The greatest learning has been the importance of a daily practice, whatever the circumstances. As an artist, daily practice is the point. You have to practice everyday. You have to stay connected to your quest. It can be hard to do with no studio or peers, or as a parent, or working on other necessary schemes, but that daily chain of practice has helped me navigate the vicissitudes of 2020, and I am extremely grateful to the Lisa Ullmann Travel Fund for their significant help in bringing me to this education.

What I'm taking forwards

11.39 Freedom from wanting unlocks the real purpose of existence. (Yoga Sutras, Patanjali)

Like many in my industry, it has been hard to realise that my skills are not essential in a pandemic. However, I have been teaching breathwork online to a small group of doctors who work in COVID19 wards. I have seen, through a Zoom screen, how their bodies decompress in the longer pranayamic exercises and how they settle into a stillness so total I have wondered if the system is glitching. It is possible to be still, if not easy. We finish the sessions in quiet, the body fully released from tensions, and their physical reluctance to leave that space is consistent. As dancers we are perhaps embodied by our training to know what liberation is offered by the body, and it is a gift to be able to explore the application of this knowledge to a wider group. I am thinking about how to do this more.

11.35 Being firmly grounded in non-violence creates an atmosphere in which others can let go of their hostility. (Yoga Sutras, Patanjali)

Since 25 May 2020, it has become urgent that our culture must face the ugly truth that racialised systems of power devalue black lives and that the dismantling of indifference and apathy is essential work. It is clearer than ever that non-action in the face of systemic bias is not enough and imperative that direct and active anti-racism becomes a way of life for all of us. It would be easy to mistake a yogic path of action as the withdrawal of the senses and a shut-down to this worldly problem. This would be over-simplification and a mis-use of these ancient technologies.

I am thinking about how I can respond to the struggle for equality with the skills I have spent time developing. The course of action isn't clear, but non-violence needs a protesting stance. The people active in the movement need personal strength and equanimity. Non-violence is not permitting harm. I am signing petitions and reading and listening to activists who are articulating the questions of our times and offering new ways of seeing. Even if right now the work to be done is practical and public, I am optimistic that this breathwork will of use somehow. The enquiry continues.