

RIMYI Visit 28 November 2019 – 1 January 2020My 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

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 Iyengar 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 in-student 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 Iyengar 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.

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.

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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.