

"Eastern gurus are not the easiest people to work with — they're not for everybody."

BY SONO MOTOYAMA

In the late '60s, long before one-name celebrities — Madonna, Rachel, Sting — made it a fashionable trend, Joan White discovered yoga in the relative obscurity of a Midwestern college town. Those were the days before Power Yoga and other Americanized forms of this ancient art.

When she injured her back in 1972, White came under the tutelage of B.K.S. Iyengar, a well-known and somewhat idiosyncratic Indian yogi. Iyengar had developed his own system, which uses chairs and bricks and other braces during exercises. Since that time, White has achieved the highest level of certification in the Iyengar system, and is one of only 12 people in the U.S. to attain that rank. White has traveled to Pune, India, 18 times to study with Iyengar and his family.

A resident of Powelton Village, where she has a yoga studio, White has attracted a devoted following in West Philadelphia and at the University, and is particularly known for working with students with injuries.

Q. How did you get interested in yoga?

A. I was just married. It was 1968 and I was married to someone who was a professor at the University of Michigan, and I was kind of looking for something to do that was a little more physical. I thought I would take a dance class. I went down to the Y and someone suggested I take a yoga class. I really didn't know much about yoga at all. I had just heard about it. So I signed up for the two classes, and the yoga class was really fun and the dance class was terrible. So I stayed in the yoga class.

Q. How did you come to study with Iyengar?

A. In 1972 I had a severe back accident, a horseback riding accident. I had just had a baby and I called [my yoga teacher, Mary Palmer]. I was in Massachusetts at the time and she said, "Don't worry, this is the perfect reason to get B.K.S. Iyengar to come over here so he can help you." And he did.

Q. What did the doctors tell you about your back?

A. The doctors said that I'd have a problem the rest of my life. That I would never be able to stand on my head or bend backwards or lift anything. The prognosis wasn't too encouraging when this happened. I think if I hadn't done yoga, probably their prognosis would be true.



JOAN WHITE

Position:

Yoga instructor, Department of Recreation

Length of service:

25 years

Other stuff:

Married to Donald White, a Penn professor of classical archaeology; one son; recently tackled windsurfing with ease

Photo by Candace diCarlo

Once I started studying with Iyengar, I never went back to those people. He just taught me you have to begin from where you are, not to neglect the rest of the body, that when you have an injury in one place it doesn't mean everything else should go to wrack and ruin, which is frequently what happens to people when they're injured. They are told to do bed rest or do nothing at all, and all the other parts of their body go downhill.

Q. And how is your back now?

A. My back is pretty good. I do all the things I was told I could never do. I still have some glitches now and again. And now I'm 56 so there are other things that take place in your body as you get older. But I pretty well know how to work with it and most people that do yoga with me don't have any idea that I have any problems.

Q. What is Iyengar like?

A. He's an interesting man. He has, like anybody, kind of a wild side, although he's tamed down a lot now that he's much older. [Iyengar is 91.] But in his younger years, he was a pretty tough teacher. Eastern gurus are not necessarily the easiest people to work with, and they're not for everybody.

He's very compassionate, but sometimes his compassion can be mistaken for something else. He used to hit a lot. Today he doesn't do that very much; he's an elderly man. But I can tell you something: When he touches, whether he's touching or he would give you these little sharp hits, they would have a tremendous impact on the pose that you were doing. He knew that if he hit you on your thigh, he would hit in such a way that if he wanted your chest to open, your chest opened.

Q. He would hit with his hand?

A. His hand. There are a lot of stories about Iyengar because of that. But for me that was not an issue. I understood that the teaching and the depth of the teaching and the knowledge was so amazing.

Q. Can you describe your own methods?

A. Well, I don't hit students. [laughs] What I do and what I've learned from Iyengar is that most people respond better to simple verbal instructions that don't take them somewhere off into their head. So instead of talking about chakras, I'll talk about sitting up straight, keeping the spine in alignment, lifting the breast bone, spreading the collar bone, things that people have a visual grip on and a tactile grip on. One of the genius parts of Iyengar is the way in which he communicates his teaching. I try to stay as true to his work as I can.

And I try to create a safe space for people, where they can come and work with one another or just be around a group of people where they're not in competition with one another. I think one of the hardest parts for Penn students is to not compete and to be in an environment that's noncompetitive. So I try to use humor in my teaching to help people to learn to laugh at themselves and take the world a little less seriously.