

An open letter from the Board of IY(UK)

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"I am sure that after me, my family, my pupils, their children, and the next generation will carry the message of yoga to every nook and corner of the globe, so that all may live as one human race without geographical division of race, religion, colour or gender." B. K. S. Iyengar

It is clear to us that the aspirations expressed above by Guruji have not been met. That is why Iyengar Yoga (UK) Ltd stands actively against racism of all kinds and supports the values and ethos of the anti-racism movement. We believe that no-one should be denied human rights due to the colour of their skin. We believe that Black Lives Matter.

We believe that the lives of People of Colour should matter as much as white lives; however, looking at our major social institutions, we can see that they do not. There is substantial evidence that within the UK, our systems and infrastructure are influenced by systemic, covert and explicit racism. Racism affects all aspects of life for members of UK society who are not white; through the health and welfare system, through the education system, in employment, and in the criminal justice system.

There are many, many examples of the ways in which this is manifest:

- Black women are five times more likely than white women, and Asian women twice as likely, to die in childbirth in the UK¹.
- A Black schoolboy in England is three times more likely than average to be permanently excluded from school².
- Job applicants with white-sounding names are called for interview more often than those with African- or Asian-sounding names³.
- While recent decades have seen a fall in youth offending, the proportion of Black and Minority Ethnic youth prisoners has increased. 41% of those in youth prison identify with this category as opposed to 14% of the general population⁴.
- Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic people in England and Wales die disproportionately as a result of use of force or restraint by the police⁵.

It would be much more comfortable if we could believe that this is due to individuals consciously choosing to discriminate. It is much more challenging for us to accept that these statistics, and others like them, are driven by systemic, structural bias and racism; and that it would be impossible for anyone who participates in our society not to play a part in this.

To stand against racism, it is essential that we look to our own behaviours and actions. This means asking difficult questions, and potentially facing some uncomfortable and challenging truths. What do our member demographics look like? What do our teacher demographics look like? What does our committee representation look like? Who feels like they belong in an Iyengar yoga class in the UK, or that they could train as an Iyengar yoga teacher, or that they would feel able to contribute in one of our committee meetings?

Asking these questions, and answering truthfully, goes right to the heart of Iyengar Yoga. The *yamas* and *niyamas* – the ethical foundations on which our yoga practice is built – challenge us to apply *tapas* (discipline) and the application of *svādhyāya* (self-study) in the spirit of *satya* - that is Truth.

We must not tolerate racist or discriminatory behaviour, or bullying or harassment of any kind, and we have a formal complaints process which is there to conduct a thorough investigation into any incidents that may occur.

The white majority of us (and we have noted that the Board of IY(UK) is all white) must accept that while we are not responsible for centuries of oppression and discrimination, we continue to benefit from it. We are responsible for the present and the future, and it is in our hands to change these. As others have noted – it is not enough to not be racist – to effect change we must be anti-racist, and this requires us to act boldly and decisively.

As a first step, we have asked for volunteers to join a Working Group on Diversity and Inclusivity to consider what we already know, what we need to find out, and what we should do. This group will report back to our Executive Committee with its recommendations for increasing diversity and inclusivity in IY(UK).

We consider this to be a starting point. There is still a lot of work to be done, and we will not have all the answers. We see this as an important opportunity to launch some new initiatives to address the problem of racial inequality in our yoga community and thereby in our society. Progress may be slow, and we may make mistakes on the way, so we ask you to not just bear with us but to actively and enthusiastically support us in this project.

Cathy Alison, Julie Brown, Gerry Chambers, Sarah Delfas, Charlotte Everitt, Philippe Harari, Sheila Haswell, Jill Johnson, Julian Lindars, Velika Krivokapic, Michelle Pendergast, Judi Sweeting

Sources:

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