

Reflections from the Fishbowl: Teacher Education with Dean and Rebecca Lerner

by Alison Lintal

With a smile and her welcoming demeanor, Rebecca Lerner declared, we are here to “learn in a fishbowl of fun.” The February 13-16, 2020 teacher education weekend with Dean and Rebecca Lerner was filled with camaraderie, support, inspiration and fun. Although the focus was on teaching, we continued our studies as students first and teachers second. What I learned from my own experience as well as observing other teachers is that yoga should be primarily about letting students experience the pose. Conciseness is key and teaching becomes well-established when it comes from the heart not the head. The asanas are the vehicle through which we teach students not just how to stretch their arms and legs, but a means to cultivate self-awareness of the students’ inner and outer experience.

In the days and weeks leading up to the teacher education with Dean and Rebecca Lerner I was feeling anxious, excited and a bit nervous. I had been to teacher education with the Lerner before and had been teaching as a CIYT for five years, so I was familiar with what to expect. This workshop and teacher education felt different to me – mostly because I myself felt changed. I was a relatively new mother with an 11-month old infant. In many ways, this teacher education session officially marked my entry back into post-natal yoga life. I no longer had any major physical restrictions on my practice, and I felt as though many of my emotional weights had been lifted as well.

In some ways, it was an emotional homecoming of sorts. My husband and I had struggled to conceive and maintain a pregnancy for four years. After three losses and two surgeries, we were blessed with giving birth to a son. Rebecca was immensely helpful to me during my infertility journey and subsequent pregnancy. In many ways this journey back to the Lerner for their annual teacher education felt like a pilgrimage home. I mostly felt lighter as we arrived after a two and a half hour car ride, yet in other ways, I felt overwhelmed by the logistics of traveling with my infant son as well as my mother who played the invaluable role of caretaker for my son during the sessions.

During the weekend, I had the opportunity to teach a pose to actual yoga students in the fishbowl – meaning under the watchful eye of the Lerner and other teachers. On this stage, our imperfections, mistakes, struggles and triumphs are visible for all to see which makes it nerve-racking to put yourself through that kind of scrutiny. However, Iyengar yoga as an experiential art demands this kind of dedication from its practitioners and its teachers and I find this is the best way to learn. Dean asked us to “see ourselves in the person teaching” as a means for drawing more from the observation.

In addition to seeing myself in others, I also drew strength from the collective gathering of Iyengar yogis and yoginis during this weekend. Being immersed in and part of the greater Iyengar yoga community can be a lifeline for teachers like me who live in more rural or isolated communities several hours from senior teachers. Weekends such as this not only provide me with knowledge and feedback to integrate into my own practice and teaching, but they also foster that deeper sense of belonging as part of the greater Iyengar yoga community. Exploring and learning together deepens the connection as we share struggles and triumphs.

In addition to dedicating time to teaching and classes, Nick Peters, clinical kinesiologist and licensed massage therapist, gave a lesson in movement education that was quite thought-provoking. His

pronouncement that muscle memory is not just in the muscles, but also the spinal cord, reminded me of B.K.S. Iyengar's approach to access the spine first through the karmendriyas or organs of actions such as the arms and legs. Nick's discussion of habit formation and re-wiring patterns in the body invoked modern neuroscience and left me eager to learn more about the intersections between yoga, pain science, and movement. Changing something is not comfortable and Nick's acronym of T.I.G. (target, isolate, and be gentle) will stick with me as I continue to explore my own patterns and restrictions both on and off the yoga mat.

During our philosophy discussion, Rebecca encouraged us to not be shy about speaking up and sharing our thoughts as we all have something to add to the discussion. She went on to emphasize that talking about the philosophy helps us to begin to incorporate it into our teaching. Linking the yoga philosophy to elements in an asana class is important but using it as a bridge to connect with our daily lives is essential. Yoga is about integration and it doesn't end when the class is over.

Two of the most rewarding challenges in my life have been becoming an Iyengar yoga teacher and becoming a mother. Both required long, sustained effort, dedication, discipline, faith and surrender. As I look back on my journey to become a mother, the memory of the struggle, pain and darkness that clouded so many years greatly diminishes every time I look into my son's eyes. He is my reminder to live in the present, to keep practicing and to continue to dedicate myself to this path. Dean's words from this weekend continue to reverberate with me – "Experience joy in the pose and not just struggle." The days with my son are not all easy, but they are all joyful.