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Peace sign

There's a quiet retreat in the heart of the city, says Saumya Ancheri.



The silence is punctuated only by the muted crash of waves and the call of the birds perched on the coconut trees. There's a wide, untrammelled view of the sea. The only sign that Yogacara Healing Arts Centre is located in Mahalaxmi is the sight of the gleaming white edifice of Haji Ali at the far right when you look out from the patio. "I wanted to create a wellness space that was not about the luxury and pampering of a spa but where people came to heal and be rejuvenated," said founder Radhika Vachani. In addition to yoga, pranayama and meditation classes, Yogacara offers massage therapies that complement its focus on releasing distress while strengthening the body.

The cream-walled room of the small studio is bare except for two lines of silver rings that dominate one wall – not a torture device as a first-timer might deduce, but a prop for Iyengar yoga. BKS Iyengar's form of yoga employs belts, blankets, bolsters and blocks. The props help neophytes to perform complex asanas with only a few lessons, instead of waiting for the body to achieve the flexibility necessary to perform demanding poses, said Vachani, an instructor certified by the Bihar School of Yoga.

New students usually start with an individual session that helps Vachani to "know their ailments and where their body is at, and to help them understand the meaning behind asanas". She asked about my health, and realised I have a weak retina, so she picked asanas that would strengthen the body while relaxing the eyes. After some gentle stretching, Vachani started with the core poses of the sitting and standing asanas, telling me about body alignment and the benefits of the postures. "You decide how long to hold the stretch," said Vachani as I stood on tip-toe with my arms pulling ropes fastened to the wall, or balanced upside-down with my head on a bolster and my feet against the back of a chair. I felt exuberant, as the poses cushioned the body while testing my fears of losing control and falling over.

Through the hour-long class of elaborate but effortless contortions, Vachani subtly observed my movements to ensure that my head was always supported and my body wasn't about to collapse. She had insights that had eluded me all my life: my spine was too curved, my shoulders too scrunched up, and my body weight didn't rest equally on each sole. "Iyengar had a crooked spine which he corrected through asanas," she said, before winding down class with a few restorative asanas.

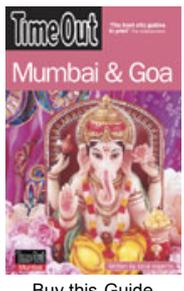


Vachani first attended Iyengar yoga classes in San Francisco in 1997. She continued to take lessons after she returned to Mumbai in 2006. She met massage therapist Ibrahim Shareef at the same time, and the two quit their jobs to focus on Yogacara, modelling it after a similar healing centre in Vachani's San Francisco neighbourhood.

Shareef's training in Kerala and Thailand includes Ayurvedic nursing and aromatherapy, and he now administers Balinese, shiatsu and Thai body massages, and foot reflexology at the centre. He blended oils of peppermint and bergamot for my experience of the Yogacara signature massage. The yoga props were cleared, the blinds pulled down, and candles lit around a white bed. Shareef has the ability to intuit your knots and ease out the tension with just the right amount of pressure. A hot towel around each foot preceded the hour-long blend of abhiyangam, shiatsu, Balinese and Swedish techniques. Back on the streets after a quick shower and a cup of green tea, I felt sunny and relaxed, and suddenly aware each time my body tensed up through the day.

Vachani teaches yoga in batches of 10, while Raksha Vaidhya (who also teaches at the University of Mumbai) takes the weekly class in pranayama and meditation. The self-exploration isn't cheap, but Vachani is hoping to form a community of like-minded individuals who will extend their wellness practices into daily living. She is currently working on the construction of a sister retreat in Alibaug.

Rewa House Bungalow, Bhulabhai Desai Road, opposite National Garage (98331-98371). Yoga on Mon, Wed & Fri, 7.15am-8.45pm; Sat, 8-9.15am. Meditation on Sat, 9.30-10.30am. Massage on Tue, Thur & Sun, 8am-9.30pm; Sat, 11.30am-9.30pm. Three-month membership package available till Sat July 31: Rs 6,800 per month for 12 sessions of yoga and two massage therapy sessions or Rs 4,800 per month for eight yoga sessions and four pranayama and meditation sessions. Pranayama and meditation, Rs 1,600



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