

Riverwest Yogashala: Peggy Hong & Annie Melchior

Interview by Jennifer Kaufman

Nestled in Milwaukee's unique and diverse Riverwest area is Riverwest Yogashala. In Sanskrit, "shala" means school. Riverwest Yogashala wants to act as an instrument to teach the Riverwest community the blessings of yoga. Established in April 2003, Riverwest Yogashala was named "best yoga instruction" in the same year by the readers of *Shepherd Express*.

The heart of Riverwest Yogashala is its devoted instructors, Peggy Hong and Annie Melchior. Both of them have different paths that brought them to yoga. Peggy Hong's interest in yoga was inspired by her dance experience and she began studying in 1996. She wanted to become stronger as a dancer and knew the physical aspects of yoga would help her flexibility. However, she initially thought yoga would only benefit her physically, "I had a mistaken notion for years that yoga was 'flop and feel good,'" Hong jokes. But soon after studying with instructor Maria Basualdo, her practice evolved to something more profound. She began teaching yoga in 2001 after she reached a plateau in her personal practice and desired to make more of her practice. "Yoga is a doorway to my higher self, my best self, my potential self," says Hong.

Annie Melchior began practicing yoga in 1981, but didn't really connect with the practice until 1995 when she began Iyengar yoga with Janet Lilly. Yoga became a way for her to reconnect with a calm center in a world that could be too busy or too fast. Of this Melchior says, "It was like opening a door inside and the door was a huge, vast universe of possibilities while being very still in a pose." She soon had an innate feeling she would teach yoga to others and began her teaching in 2000. Both Hong and Melchior truly believe teaching yoga is not a job; it's a vocation, a calling. They wanted to pass on what they had learned to the community.

Hong and Melchior commented on how yoga is always present whether teaching a class or doing their individual practice. To both of them yoga isn't necessarily mystical; it can be very practical in their daily lives. Hong mentioned curing her daughter's headaches, not with medication, but with some supportive yoga poses.

Hong and Melchior practice and teach Iyengar yoga. Iyengar yoga was developed by BKS Iyengar in Pune, India. Iyengar focuses on

developing proper alignment, stamina, and strength. Standing poses are emphasized as are the use of props like blocks, bolsters, straps, and chairs.

However, Iyengar is more than the physical. As practitioners focus on the poses and concentrate on their breathing, they find themselves in a state of self-exploration and restoration. Whether seasoned yoginis or new to Iyengar yoga, practitioners find a level of self-awareness they never thought possible.

If Hong and Melchior have any advice to someone new to yoga it's, "Come with openness and don't be reluctant." However, they advise new practitioners to be patient with the transformative benefits of yoga. They lamented of students coming to practice boiling over with enthusiasm yet disappearing after a few classes when the benefits were not immediate. In our instantaneous, Google-ized world, people often expect results sooner not later. However, as Hong points out, the benefits do come to students who stick with it.

Before opening Riverwest Yogashala nearly two years ago, Hong and Melchior taught yoga at Milwaukee Yoga Center. They wanted to bring their passion for yoga to Riverwest's Locust Street. They both agree that the best aspect of running Riverwest Yogashala is the community of students. They love how their students come from diverse backgrounds. Riverwest Yogashala distinguishes itself from other studios or health clubs it is neither flashy nor trendy. Whereas, some yoga studios appear to be places of exclusivity like the latest happening club, Riverwest Yogashala remains inclusive to all. Riverwest Yogashala doesn't discourage any student because of age, body type, experience, or economic status from discovering yoga. Melchior says, "I want to get away from this idea that yoga is only for certain kinds of people." They keep their prices reasonable and registration is open to everyone. On every third Sunday of every month, Riverwest Yogashala offers free classes to both current and new students. It is just one of the ways Hong and Melchior thank a community that has been so supportive of them.

Hong and Melchior feel truly blessed to have yoga in their lives and they want to pass the blessing. As Hong summed it up: "There are many different angles and doorways that yoga can penetrate your life and you have to be open to it...yoga is a tool for transformation."

Riverwest Yogashala can be found at 731 East Locust Street, Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Hong and Melchior can be reached at 414-963-9587 or through their website www.riverwestyogashala.com.