



Many regions are making strides within their boards, local communities, and studios to become more educated on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice (DEIJ) issues and provide spaces where every student may feel safe as they navigate their way to the practice of yoga. From recent DEIJ Leader's Forum meeting notes and other correspondence, the Iyengar Yoga Association of Greater New York (IYAGNY) and the Intermountain Iyengar Yoga Association (IMIYA) are currently making systemic and financial changes towards outreach and inclusion in their regions. The Iyengar Yoga Association Southeast (IYASE) has created a Facebook group with the intent of creating a place for discussion and sharing of information about DEIJ issues for their members, and has recently formed their own regional board DEIJ Committee. The Iyengar Yoga Association Southwest (IYASW) has recently established a Community Service Program to give grants to CIYTs to teach underserved populations.

One region, and really one studio in particular, stands out as a leader and example for DEIJ efforts within our Iyengar Yoga Community - The Iyengar Yoga Detroit Cooperative in the Iyengar Yoga Association Midwest region (IYAMW). In the past

months, IYDC has [provided workshops on a variety of topics](#) to educate our community on the realities of what we face and also ways to look forward to a more inclusive future together. As an attendee of all of their offerings, it has been an amazing opportunity for self growth and understanding of the community around me. I want to thank them for stepping up and being proactive within the Midwest region and beyond, being an example of how yoga may be shared equitably and inclusively for all!

Iyengar Yoga Detroit Collective (IYDC) is a cooperatively owned studio in Hamtramck, Michigan, a small town surrounded by the City of Detroit. Hamtramck is home to many immigrants including Yemeni, Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Polish communities and more. In addition 82% of our surrounding Detroit community identifies as Black. In our early formation in 2013 we realized the racial identities of our students did not reflect the same diversity we were surrounded by. We yearned to be part of the fabric of our community and neighborhood, and we wanted our work to be relevant and useful to Detroit and Hamtramck residents. So we began to center our studio mission around healing justice and racial justice principles.

Healing Justice framework was cultivated by [Cara Page](#) and the [Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective](#) in 2005 through the leadership of Black queer organizers and healers. It outlines the importance of centering and uplifting the voices of people of color and others that have been pushed to the margins of our society as we create collaborative paths for healing. At IYDC we wonder what specifically is our role as Iyengar Yoga practitioners in this healing justice framework. Why center justice in our work rather than remain “apolitical” in our approach? Healing justice reminds us that healing is in fact a political act, because the systems we all live in, work in, and attempt to heal in are stratified by race and class.

Racism manifests in many ways. It shows up individually, or in the internalized beliefs we may or may not be aware we hold. It can show up interpersonally, ranging from violent acts towards people of color and more subtle microaggressions. It can show up in our institutions and organizations and in the dominant cultural norms we adhere to and uphold that prioritize values around whiteness. Something that can be harder to perceive, but is especially important to realize is that racism is a system woven into the fabric of our society. Yoga is not exempt from this system. What does it mean that racism is a system? It means even though some of us may have good intentions, like seeing all people as humans “beyond race”, the system of racism, created and maintained over centuries, does not treat us all equally. And if we do not take the time to understand how racism plays out systematically, we reinforce it.

Patanjali warns us of *avidya* or ignorance, the root of our five *kleśas* or afflictions keeping us from enlightenment. He notes lack of true knowledge becomes the source of all pains and sorrows. Our yoga practice offers us a way to understand what this means on an individual level. If we continue to move unaware through *asana* without understanding what role various parts of our body play, we risk injury. In fact, we spend a lot of time in our practice exploring what we don't know. What if we applied this idea of exploration of *avidya* on a systemic level? Systemic racism, especially for white people, often feels abstract because white people don't know the pain of it in the ways POC peers might. Returning to the example above, seeing others as human rather than acknowledging their racial identity as well as other marginalized identities, ignores the truth that these larger systems are harmful, and even life-threatening.

As a collective we center racial equity and healing justice within our yoga practice. In our individual practice, if there is injury or hurt, we seek to heal it. In our larger cultural body, we recognize an ongoing chronic pain that needs care. We care for this cultural pain in a similar way that we care for our individual pain. Just as we would teach our body to learn new ways of carrying itself to heal and prevent further injury, we seek to understand the source of pain and its larger impact, and we reorganize our structures to alleviate or eliminate the pain.

At IYDC this looks like structuring our business as a cooperative, so no one person has all the power or risk, and more voices and resources can be celebrated and brought into the process. Prior to the pandemic we offered five weekly classes as community gift or sliding scale and since March have transitioned our whole schedule to sliding scale classes. It also looks like incorporating reflection on racism and structural violence into our conversations about yoga philosophy. For example, how do we act out *ahimsa* in systemic ways and not just personally or interpersonally? How do we resist complacency in systems of violence and racism? Our healing process also looks like centering a majority of people of color teaching staff and running an apprenticeship program that stipends our apprentices of color who may face increased barriers to studying Iyengar Yoga. We offer a specific class just for Black and Brown folks so they have a safe place to practice. So many yoga spaces are overwhelmingly white and even when the white folks in those spaces attempt to be welcoming, white culture plays out in subversive ways that can alienate POC. As part of our cooperative structure we have a Yoga in Society committee composed of POC who are students, apprentices, and members of our national Iyengar Yoga community who commit 4-6 hours each month to offer their voice and perspective on decisions made and concerns raised regarding healing and racial justice. We recognize BIPOC labor is often exploited and underappreciated, so we offer an honorarium to committee members who need the financial support. In addition, we hold a bi-monthly white racial affinity group to explore how whiteness impacts yoga practice and how yoga practice can be a way to explore,

dismantle and heal internalized racism. We understand this too as a wound that must be healed in order to dismantle the larger system of white supremacy.

Centering healing and racial justice continues to create more and more space for our community to be engaged in our work and to continue increasing access to yoga. For example, one of our apprentices recently offered to donate his time to make yoga chairs that we have been selling as a fundraiser. Because of his donated labor, we've been able to sell the chairs on a sliding scale, keeping them affordable while also raising money for our apprenticeship program. Another example we've recently offered is our Yoga Minute Clinic we hold every Saturday in collaboration with a local urban farm at their weekly farmer's market. We pop up at the farm with a handful of yoga props, offer brief interviews with members of our community on aches, pains or struggles they may be experiencing and set them up in a few *asanas* to ease ailments. We dispel the stereotype of yoga as a practice for young, fit, white people, who have money, equipment, and cultural/social capital. This also spreads the knowledge of Iyengar Yoga and gives apprentices a broad hands-on experience of therapeutic strategies while building relations with our neighbors and community.

Organizationally we also consider ways our collective may be a microcosm for examining and recreating the patterns we see play out in larger systems. [The Centre for Community Organizations \(CoCo\)](#) defines white supremacy culture as "the idea that white people and the ideas, thoughts, beliefs and actions of white people are superior to POC and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs and actions." This can be acted out intentionally and unintentionally. CoCo and Dismantling Racism Works provided a list of characteristics that can be seen in White Supremacy culture that help protect the status of white folks and harm POC. Many of these concepts are so ingrained in our larger culture that for white folks and others they may not stand out as abnormal or harmful. Remember when you first started yoga? Did you know there was more than one way to stand? Did you know your first *Tadasana* was potentially hurting your knees, lumbar or shoulders? See if you can carry the openness you brought into learning *Tadasana* into understanding this larger framework many of us assume as normal. At IYDC white people seek to understand the ways they may be influenced by white supremacist characteristics like perfectionism, hoarding power, feeling a right to comfort, individualism or assuming progress means bigger or more. We look for signs of these characteristics in how we structure our business, how we interact with each other and our community. For more information on these search for the free document *White Supremacy Culture in Organizations* by CoCo.

At IYDC, white practitioners deliberately make space, and step aside when needed, for POC practitioners. They gladly share resources to support POC communities, and value

opportunities to learn from POC. As we de-center white values, we create a culture and community more reflective of our neighborhood and city. We uphold Iyengar Yoga as a relevant and essential 21st century practice for our place and time.

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