Studying Abroad in India

While studying at The Evergreen State College, a liberal arts college, I got the chance to apply for a contract class where I could get credit doing educational work of my own vision. This is one of the specialities of The Evergreen State College, and I was lucky enough to land a contract with a professor to go to India to study in a musical academy for six months. It seemed like a dream: doing what I love the most, and all for college credit.

I had been to this academy before for four months a few years back. However, this time I was determined to take this learning experience more seriously. My goal was to become at least semi-professional at tabla by the end of my training.

I was ecstatic when I arrived in Vaitarna—a village about a three-hours drive from Mumbai. There, the Vaitarna Music Academy is situated. I found out about this academy from my meditation group, Sahaja Yoga Meditation. Since it is in a village, the scenery is picturesque: rolling hills next to a river, with a multitude of wildlife, like snakes, buffaloes, geese, rabbits, and more. The Academy itself is not fancy, but it is cozy and has all the amenities you would need. I was not so concerned about comforts, though. I was there to learn the art of a percussion instrument named the tabla.

Since I had been there before, it did not take long for me to adjust to the environment and schedule of the Academy. At around 7:30 a.m., I would practice tabla for about 30 minutes to get a warm up—most of it was repetitive practice of phrases. This was followed by a collective meditation on the main stage by all the students and teachers. The Academy was
founded by the spiritual teacher Shri Mataji Nirmala Devi, so meditation is in integral part of the curriculum.

After an hour meditation, we would head off to breakfast. The breakfast lasted one hour, and after that, we went to our classes at 10 a.m. I came at a time during the year where there were hardly any tabla students, and for most of the time of my stay, I was the only tabla student in the class. This meant more intensive learning and more absorption of information.

The first lesson of the day went on for two hours. Commonly, each day, I would learn a new composition or variation of a rhythm cycle. I was expected to know the new rhythm well enough by the next day that I could play it competently without mistake. That was the challenge.

After the two-hour class, we would have an hour lunch, and then a rest period to nap or just chill out together. At 4 p.m., another two-hour class would resume. These later classes were more relaxed, and focused on working on what we had learned in the morning and reviewing what we knew already.

After the second class of the day, there was some time before dinner to relax. Dinner also ran for about an hour. Around 8 p.m., the evening collective meditation happened. Sometimes there were musical performances at night by students, teachers, or for the village people. After this, our time was spent being in each other’s company, playing games, chatting, talking about music, and just getting to know each other better. The camaraderie between the students was palpable.

This is an outline of what happened on the weekdays, with Saturday being a day with only one class, and Sunday being free. Now, I want to get more into the details of the six-month stay and the style of teaching that was used at the Academy.
Each day was hot, and the fans above did not help much. The teaching rooms were almost empty, save a few mats and cushions, and some hanging art. It was mostly an open space with a few instruments. The classes were intensive, with continuous playing for two hours. Often my teacher would want me to follow him on the tabla, matching his beats as he flowed from one variation to the next. He would slowly increase the difficulty and speed, until I felt like my fingers were breaking. Sometimes I would tell my teacher that I could not play any longer, as my fingers could not move anymore. However, most of the time, he said to keep pushing myself, and to keep playing. This was a test of endurance, stamina, confidence, and mental capacity. In a sense, when you are trying to go beyond your supposed limit, you need to remain calm in the mind—at least that is what I learned from those types of sessions.

In other sessions, my teacher, a strict but lovable Muslim man, would recite a tabla composition and I had to recite it back to him.Tabla has its own language for the notes it makes, and we speak this language in order to convey a composition. I was never good at remembering compositions and learning them by heart, as per the tradition in India. I wrote notes and took videos of my lessons in order to remember them. Though this was not traditional, it was acceptable for a westerner.

My teacher would shout at me and correct me if anything I played was wrong, immediately. Sometimes he would get so fed up with me that he would push my hands away from the tabla and play what needed to be played, glaring into my eyes. This type of intimidation worked, as I feared making a mistake. This made my attention stronger and more dedicated to listening. His teaching demonstrated to me that there should be no compromise in quality and exactness. One should strive for perfection, or as close to it as possible.

The food we were fed there was simple: mostly rice and dal with vegetables every day. The village was excluded from modern conveniences. Each day
was scheduled the same. Each day was hot, with the nights giving little rest from the heat. There was not much to do besides practice and learn music. This atmosphere taught me that to be fully concentrated on learning, one needs to create a minimalist environment so that distractions cannot bother you.

After six months at the Academy, I could play exponentially better and felt at home in India—especially in the nature. However, it was the life lessons and building of character that I will cherish the most from this experience: how to push yourself to your limits, how to create the best learning environment, how to respect and act around a teacher, how to be disciplined, and how to succeed in the face of your shortcomings.