

Ashtanga Yoga

By Rob Schütze

From Brussels to Bath, San Francisco to Sydney, *ashtanga yoga* has taken the Western world by storm over the last three decades. With a growing list of celebrity advocates extolling its virtues and the once-skeptical mass media warming to its benefits, ashtanga yoga is now practiced by thousands of people around the globe. But far from being an overnight fad, this now popular spiritual practice has ancient roots that emphasise its power as a path to Self-realisation rather than to the perfect yoga body. As ashtanga yoga's most famous modern proponent – Sri K. Pattabhi Jois – explains, “If we practice yoga without fail, we will then attain physical, mental, and spiritual happiness, and our minds will flood towards the Self”.

Pattabhi Jois, or Guruji as his students affectionately call him, has been refining and teaching this ancient system of yoga in Mysore, India for the past 71 years. The ashtanga yoga method was originally documented by the ancient sage Vamana Rishi in a text called the *Yoga Korunta*. Jois' own *guru* (teacher), the great Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, became aware of the *Yoga Korunta* in the early 1900's and transmitted it to Jois to practice as his life's work. From this ancient text, Jois has distilled six sequences of postures to cleanse and purify the body and nervous system: *Yoga Chikitsa* (Primary Series); *Nadi Shodhana* (Intermediate Series); and *Sthira Bhaga* (Advanced Series A, B, C & D). Under the guidance of a qualified teacher, a student who practices diligently each day over many years works their way incrementally through these sequences, although for most people the Primary Series provides ample challenges and benefits.

Perhaps the most central aspect of the ashtanga method is *vinyasa*, which roughly translates as ‘breathing and movement system’. This is what gives ashtanga yoga its distinctive, graceful flow, as one *asana* (posture) flows into the next, connected by the sacred thread of the breath. Therefore each movement has its own breath - either *puraka* (inhalation) or *rechaka* (exhalation) - and each asana is assigned a certain number of

vinyasas. As Guruji will tell you, practicing asana without vinyasa is not only of little benefit but can also be dangerous.

The purpose of vinyasa is to cleanse and detoxify the body, particularly the internal organs. Pattabhi Jois says breathing and moving together while performing asanas makes the blood hot, or “boils the blood”. Thick blood contains impurities which cause disease. The heat generated by vinyasa thins the blood, allowing it to circulate freely through the joints and internal organs, thereby removing the impurities that cause pain and disease. These impurities are then expelled from the body with the profuse sweat that this dynamic practice generates.

An integral part of the heating vinyasa system is a style of deep, resonant breathing (*ujjayi pranayama*) combined with internal muscular locks (*bandhas*). A steady, even breath is needed to stoke one’s internal fire, or life force, located four inches below the navel. This energy is then sealed in with the anal and lower abdominal locks – *mula bandha* and *uddiyana bandha*. Finally, each asana is assigned one of nine *drishtis*, or ‘looking places’ to focus and subdue the mind. The combination of posture, breathing system and looking place comprises *tristhana*, the three places of attention prescribed in the ashtanga method.

Yet ashtanga yoga is more than just a combination of physical practices and, although it is a form of *hatha yoga* (forceful yoga) which detoxifies the body and balances its subtle energies, ashtanga yoga is essentially a way of disciplining and controlling the mind. Pattabhi Jois is fond of quoting one of the opening lines of Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras*, which spells this out: “*Yoga chitta vritti nirodhaha* [Yoga is the process of ending the fluctuations of the mind]”. As Guruji often says, “Ashtanga yoga method is mind control method”.

It is this mind control, arising from consistent practice of asana with vinyasa over many years, that prepares one for the rest of the ashtanga yoga path. In fact asana is merely one of the ‘eight limbs’ referred to by the term ‘ashtanga’. The full eight steps include: *yama*;

(ethical behaviour); *niyama* (self-discipline); *asana* (posture); *pranayama* (breath cultivation); *pratyahara* (sense withdrawal); *dharana* (concentration); *dhyana* (meditation); and *samadhi* (blissful union with the divine). These eight steps, or limbs, were first outlined by Patanjali in the classic text, the *Yoga Sutras*, a collation of existing ancient yoga techniques written between 200 and 500 C.E. Although *asana* is the third limb of Patanjali's eight-limbed yoga, Pattabhi Jois prescribes it as the starting point of yogic practice since the first two limbs – *yama* and *niyama* – are too difficult for our confused minds and impure hearts.

The ashtanga yoga method that Jois teaches prepares us for these other limbs by purifying the spiritual heart, which is clouded by the six poisons – *kama* (desire); *krodha* (anger); *moha* (delusion); *lobha* (greed); *matsarya* (envy); and *mada* (sloth). Consistent, dedicated practice, with our minds turned towards God, or Ultimate Reality, burns away these poisons and reveals our true enduring nature. In teaching this method of Self-realisation, Pattabhi Jois is adamant that intellectual understanding of yoga is not enough, “just as a good knowledge of culinary science does not satisfy hunger”. He says ashtanga yoga is “ninety-nine percent practice, one percent theory”. From this focus on the practical, experiential side of yoga comes one of Gururji's most well known aphorisms: “Practice, practice, practice and all is coming”.

Thousands of ashtangis around the world today understand the truth of this statement first hand, just as the thousands who will in future take up ashtanga yoga will also discover its potency. While the nature of the “all” that “is coming” may elude description, one thing is for sure – ashtanga yoga is here to stay. In the words of one long-term student of Pattabhi Jois:

This thing has been around for 3,000 years, it's going to be around for another 3,000 years. It's more than just an asana practice, it has a life of its own. It has a breath, it has essence, a philosophy that we apply in our lives. It has the eight limbs. So it will endure for a long time. But what form it takes I don't know... I think it will outlast aerobics, though.