



by Rob Schütze

Gurus reunite

for Pattabhi Jois' 90th birthday

After 40 years of not seeing each other, BKS Iyengar and Pattabhi Jois met in July this year, setting a powerful example of unity for the followers of Iyengar and Ashtanga yoga who have at times focused more on their differences than on their similarities.

The usually quiet upstairs living room was pregnant with anticipation and excitement when a hurried voice exclaimed, “He’s coming! He’s coming!” Moments later yoga history was made as a smiling BKS Iyengar strode through the door to greet his long lost friend, Pattabhi Jois, for his 90th birthday.

Within minutes two of the most celebrated hatha yoga masters of our time, both affectionately called ‘Guruji’ by their students, having not seen each other for more than 40 years, were laughing and hugging as they swapped stories of the past and of their own beloved guru, Shri T Krishnamacharya.

“For anybody that was there on that day it was incredible,” says Alex Medin, who orchestrated the reunion at Pattabhi Jois’s home in Mysore, South India. “There was this vibrant feeling in the air of tremendous healing.”

Jois and Iyengar spoke about the sudden popularity of yoga in the West and the importance of study, or ‘intellectual sweat’, when practising.

“All of us that were present just felt so happy. Guruji (Pattabhi Jois) was so happy, Iyengar was so happy. They were just radiant. They were hugging like brothers, like two brothers who had been away from each other...and suddenly they come together and express their love for each other. It’s a beautiful thing.”

News of the reunion spread quickly and left the Mysore yoga community buzzing with excitement. Many of the Ashtanga students who annually flock to see Jois felt inspired by the example of reconciliation these two Krishnamacharya disciples are now setting. “The feeling I got was, let’s stop this fighting between schools,” says certified Ashtanga teacher Mark Darby, who has been coming to Mysore to study with Jois since 1979. “Yoga is yoga, we’re all practising yoga.”

Pattabhi Jois and BKS Iyengar were both students of Krishnamacharya in the 1930s,

but have quite distinct approaches to practising asana (postures), as anyone who has attended both Iyengar and Ashtanga classes would know. Unfortunately these differences at times fuel a competitive rivalry between practitioners of the two most popular schools of hatha yoga.

Alex Medin emphasises that this rivalry stems from the students of Iyengar and Jois rather than the teachers themselves. He points out that even the most earnest yoga practitioners can suffer bloated egos and deluded thoughts, despite the goal of yoga being to dissolve the ego and reveal the eternal, undivided nature of reality.

“Ideally yoga should be unity in diversity, it should be *sambandha*, coming together,” Medin explains. “The problem is that a lot of *vrittis* – all the modifications of the mind – can also get intensified through yoga practice. When we practise our asanas too hard our egos get swollen, we can become proud. So we need to stay

clear of the six enemies of the heart – desire, anger, greed, delusion, envy and sloth – which imprison us.”

Medin, a certified Ashtanga teacher who hatched the plan to bring Iyengar and Jois back together while separately interviewing both men for his Masters thesis in January, says he is sure this is only the first of many meetings. He hopes to arrange a joint conference where they can both share the different insights into yoga that Krishnamacharya imparted to them.

Joanne Darby, who also witnessed the reunion, says BKS Iyengar highlighted the common lineage that Iyengar and Ashtanga yoga share, rather than their differences. “Iyengar said Krishnamacharya gave a little bit of his knowledge to different people,” she recalls. “[Pattabhi Jois] took a certain part of Krishnamacharya, Iyengar took a little part, Desikachar learnt a different part. He left a different knowledge to

different people because he was such a wealth of knowledge that nobody could gather it all. That’s how Iyengar described it. It was not that friction of, ‘Oh my stuff is better than yours’.”

Besides discussing their time together studying with Krishnamacharya in the 1930s, Jois and Iyengar spoke about the sudden popularity of yoga in the West and the importance of study, or ‘intellectual sweat’, when practising. They joked about coffee being the *soma rasa* (elixir of divinity) of our time and vowed not to forget each other.

One Australian present was Eileen Hall, who has studied extensively with both masters but is now a devoted student of Pattabhi Jois and a certified Ashtanga teacher. She describes the reunion as an inspiring act of bringing the yoga community together. “To see Mr Iyengar here was great, to see him out of his territory,” Hall recalls. “He was really gracious and humble and funny... As he was about to leave, he sat up and looked at us all and his final line was, ‘I ask you all to keep the flame of Patanjali burning bright as our teacher Krishnamacharya did for us’. It was so beautiful.”

Perfect birthday present

It was the perfect end to a week of festivities in Mysore marking the 90th birthday of Shri K Pattabhi Jois. More than 800 students and friends from around the world gathered in their finest Indian regalia to honour their teacher. A packed auditorium echoed with live classical Indian music and excited chatter as old friends were reunited while waiting in line to pay respect to their guru.

Many students showered Jois in gifts and flower garlands, while others set up a charity in his name. In the space of a few days they raised over Rs50,000 (A\$1,500) for the Rotary Artificial Limb Centre – enough for thirty prosthetic limbs – and Rs22,000 (A\$670) for a local school. Stacey Platt, who helped set up the Shri K Pattabhi Jois Charitable Trust, says it was a way of honouring their guru while also supporting the local community. “We wanted to show the community of Mysore how much we appreciate their hospitality,” she says.

Sydney based Eileen Hall says it is testament to the power of Jois’s 68 years of teaching that so many students from

around the world gathered to pay tribute to him and continue to come year after year to study in Mysore. Well-known Australian teachers David and Simi Roche, Graeme Northfield and Dena Kingsberg joined her in celebrating Ashtanga’s living master.

“Guruji was really happy to see his old students come back,” says Hall. “We forget sometimes that if it wasn’t for this guru we wouldn’t have a lifestyle, we wouldn’t have the ability to practise this beautiful yoga and travel the world and earn our living. We forget that, so it’s important just coming back and saying thankyou to him.”

Popular American Ashtanga teacher David Swenson says the real legacy of Jois’s teaching is his ability to inspire so many people to practise Ashtanga yoga so diligently. “He’s inspired thousands of people to practise Ashtanga yoga and that’s the potency of a teacher,” says Swenson, who first came to Mysore in 1977. “Ashtanga yoga is a difficult pathway and he will tell you, ‘Ninety-nine per cent practice, one per cent theory’. He encourages that practice aspect of it and it’s through this that his legacy lives on.”

Humble beginnings

Pattabhi Jois’s fame and fortune seem a long way from his humble beginnings in Kowshika village and his years as a poor Sanskrit student begging for food (*bhiksha anna*) from local brahmins in Mysore. His introduction to yoga came at the age of 12 when he was so transfixed by a yoga demonstration from the great Tirumalai Krishnamacharya that he prostrated himself before him and asked for instruction. It was the start of a 25 year relationship with the man who has been called the founder of modern yoga.

Krishnamacharya is said to have given Jois the Ashtanga yoga practice as his life’s work, handing over an ancient Sanskrit manuscript (*Yoga Korunta*) by Indian sage Vamana Rishi detailing the Ashtanga system. After decades practising and teaching this method, it was only once he retired as a Sanskrit professor in 1973 that Jois became well known in the West and the trickle of Americans coming to study with him eventually filled the modest shala he named the Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute.

This is where the ‘Mysore-style’ Ashtanga yoga practice has its roots. A small room of a



few people would sweat, stretch and balance in silence while Guruji, who had little English, spoke with his hands – through the sometimes excruciating adjustments that have become yoga folklore.

“He worked us really hard,” says David Swenson. “We practised twice a day, and then did *pranayama* (breath control), so three times a day. And he taught us some of the *kriyas* (cleansing practices)... He spent so much time with us during the day. He was 60 years old and like a lion, Pattabhi Jois. You see how energetic he is still but then he was amazing, like a teenager.”

New generation

Pattabhi Jois has in recent years moved to a bigger house, incorporating a much bigger yoga shala to accommodate the growing throng of students. This rising popularity means that his teaching has perhaps become less intimate and personal – something that long time Italian student Lino Miele laments dilutes Pattabhi’s message for the new generation of Ashtangis.

“It’s very difficult, I believe, for the new people to understand his message, because there are bigger classes,” says Miele, who

worked with Jois to publish the first book detailing the Ashtanga primary and intermediate series. “Before, he was addressing you, touching you, it was individual. When he speaks now many of this new generation don’t pick up the message, don’t know what is behind the message.

“He speaks about *drishti* [looking place], for example. He sees people looking around and says, ‘You know *drishti*.’ But *drishti* goes beyond the point where you look. When he used to speak before, it was what you do with your life, not only the *drishti* through the practice but after the practice – how do you act, what do you eat, where are you going, what do you think. That is *drishti* too.”

David Swenson is more confident that the legacy of Ashtanga yoga will outlive its most famous master. “Pattabhi Jois is a figurehead, but the real juice is coming from the practice,” he explains. “There’s always a new generation, and this practice – Ashtanga yoga – is almost a living entity that lives and thrives through people practising it. Through the breath of the practitioner the practice itself grows and flourishes.”

For now this extraordinary yogi, who has inspired thousands to taste the fruits of yoga, shows no signs of slowing down. Still travelling the world, teaching for hours on end each day and with a beaming smile inviting newcomers – ‘Yes, you come!’ – Pattabhi Jois is full of strength and vitality, just like his old friend BKS Iyengar. Both men have devoted their lives to studying this ancient science of liberation, tirelessly sharing that knowledge with rigour and compassion. By the hand of grace they may well continue that mission for another 90 years.

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