

Mysore Style

By Rob Schütze

Mysore is a city in southern India famous for its temples, maharajas' palace, silks and sandalwood. Yet 'Mysore style' doesn't refer so much to its particular brand of painting, sari-wearing or moustache trimming, although each certainly has its charm. Rather, the term 'Mysore style' has become famous the world over for its reference to the traditional mode of practicing ashtanga yoga, a potent method of Self-realisation propagated by the renowned Sanskrit professor and yoga master Sri K. Pattabhi Jois.

Mysore style has its roots in a small, sweaty room in the suburb of Laxmipuram, where Jois, or Guruji as his students affectionately call him, set up the Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute nearly 60 years ago. Slowly at first, local people and later foreigners who had heard about this remarkable yogi, began arriving on the doorstep of his modest yoga shala seeking instruction. Guruji would graciously welcome them inside and begin their training in the traditional way. With minimal talking, he personally instructed his eager adepts in the basics of the ashtanga method, beginning with *Surya Namaskara* (sun salutations). As a student perfected each *asana* (pose), Guruji would introduce the next in the series. Gradually his students developed a practice which they remembered by heart and performed in silence, following the rhythm of their own breathing according to the *vinyasa* system.

As more students arrived during the 1970s and 80s, this method of learning and practicing the ashtanga yoga method became known as 'Mysore style'. One of the key aspects of it continues to be the focus on an individual relationship between student and teacher involving physical 'adjustments' rather than dialogue and demonstration. So during a typical Mysore style class the teacher moves around the room from student to student, adjusting them in whichever poses they need help. In the early days of Jois' teaching these adjustments were famously frequent and intense.

Mark Darby, who first came to Mysore in 1979, says it was “like being in a torture chamber”, yet fondly remembers that first trip of four years, when he also met his wife Joanne. Like many of Guruji’s students, Darby regularly returns to Mysore to study with his guru and recently came to celebrate Jois’ 90th birthday. Explaining why he keeps returning to Mysore, he says:

I don’t come for instruction and learning postures anymore. I come for that transmission of energy - not through words or anything - just by being in Guruji’s presence. His knowledge just kind of oozes out of his body as he walks past.

Those who studied with Pattabhi Jois in the 1970s and 80s had the privilege of constant contact throughout the day with their guru. David Swenson, who first met Guruji in 1975 in America and then followed him India two years later, recalls the early days before Guruji was famous:

There were only three people here practicing when I first came. We practiced twice a day - and then did pranayama - so three times a day. He worked us really hard. And he taught us some of the kriyas, like neti, he put the string up our nose and out our mouths, showed us nauli... 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.

Today, many more students have the opportunity to meet and study with Pattabhi Jois, who recently moved into a new house with a bigger yoga *shala* to accommodate the growing influx of students. While the practice hasn’t changed much, the city certainly has, becoming a lot more hospitable for foreigners in the process. As David Swenson explains:

Simple things like to make a telephone call you used to have to choose the day of the week and book the call, get into a little booth and you’d scream into the phone and noone

could hear you on the other end. Of course now everyone – even rickshaw drivers – have cell phones... It's very easy to be here now.

Partly because of this convenience, Mysore has become a bustling site of pilgrimage for people from all over the world, with up to 150 students at a time spending several months here, or perhaps even settling for a few years. In a way, 'Mysore style' has come to describe not just a way of practicing asana, but a way of life. For many of Jois' students, a trip to Mysore is an annual affair and the highlight of their year. It is a time to take a break from working life, to deepen their yoga practice and delve into what Guruji describes as the brothers of yoga – Ayurveda and Sanskrit. As his student Lino Miele says, "Here you have the ideal life. Everyone should come."

For many, coming to Mysore is also a time to meet old friends who share the same passion for ashtanga yoga, finding support and inspiration in a community of like-minded souls. Swenson describes it as "a kind of class reunion" and says it is through this ongoing return to the source that ashtanga yoga is propagated: "This practice is almost a living entity that lives and thrives through people coming here and practicing it. Through the breath of the practitioner the practice itself grows and flourishes."

Mysore, of course, means different things to different people. But for those who have made the journey to Pattabhi Jois' doorstep and practiced his vinyasa method in the traditional way for however long, something subtle, or sometimes dramatic, happens. A seed is planted and, more often than not, they find themselves returning to water that seed until 'Mysore style' becomes a nurturing and transformative lifestyle.