

Sri K. Pattabhi Jois (*Guruji*)

By Rob Schütze

At a sprightly 90 years old, Sri Krishna Pattabhi Jois, or Guruji as his students affectionately call him, has become a beacon of light in a world reawakening to the power of yoga for well over half a century. He has humbly and diligently taught the method he learnt from his own guru, the renowned Sri T. Krishnamacharya, since 1937 non-stop. Guided by an unwavering faith in his guru, in God, and in the healing power of yoga, Pattabhi Jois has dedicated his life to this ancient Indian science of liberation and to bringing the ashtanga method to as many people as possible.

Yet Guruji was not born into the lineage of great yogis which he now represents. In fact, he began the practice of yoga without even telling his family, at a time when it was considered esoteric and unsuitable for householders like himself. So mesmerized was he by the practice when he stumbled across a demonstration by Krishnamacharya in 1927, that he felt compelled to follow the path of yoga at the tender age of twelve. Guruji describes the fateful day when he met Krishnamacharya in Hassan, southern India:

At a young age I saw Krishnamacharya giving a yoga demonstration, and was fascinated by the postures. The next day I went to him, prostrated before him and begged him to take me as his pupil. He spoke rather gruffly to me asking who I was, and he was quite intimidating. He then asked me where I came from and who my father was. I explained that I came from the village of Kaushika five miles away and that my father was an astrologer and priest. Would I be prompt in attending classes, he asked me – I readily nodded yes. The next day I was promptly in class. And on that very day began the beatings!

It was the beginning of a 25-year relationship with the strict but compassionate Krishnamacharya, who had himself studied yoga for many years with Rama Mohan Brahmachari in a cave in Tibet. But after two years of daily practice with his guru, the

young Pattabhi Jois left for Mysore to study Sanskrit, again without telling his family, as Krishnamacharya began teaching elsewhere. It was a tough few years for the penniless 14-year-old, who would beg for food (*bhiksha anna*) from local Brahmin families in the comparatively bustling city of Mysore and sleep at the Sanskrit College at night. It wasn't long, though, before he so impressed the principle of his college with a yoga demonstration that he won a scholarship of five rupees per month and began eating at the college *choultry* (canteen). At around the same time, in 1931, fate reunited him with his guru, who had moved to Mysore to cure the seriously ill Maharaja, Krishna Rejendran Wodeyar. Resuming his studies with Krishnamacharya, Jois fell into favour with the Maharaja too, often performing yoga demonstrations for him and eventually accepting a yoga teaching position he created at the Sanskrit College in March 1937.

In the same year, Guruji married Savitamma, who later became affectionately known as Amma, in a love match. They had three children together – Saraswati, Manju, and Ramesh – and moved into a small house in Laxmipuram, which would later become the Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute. It was from this institute that the ashtanga yoga method took seed and propagated throughout the world. The first Westerner studied with Guruji in 1964 and through a book he later published listing Guruji's address, a steady trickle of Europeans and Americans began arriving. In 1975 Guruji and his son Manju traveled to the United States, bringing ashtanga yoga directly to the Western world. It was the first of many teaching tours which would eventually cross the globe and bring thousands into direct contact with this ancient lineage of yoga.

Today, when Guruji is not traveling the world teaching, he can be found at home in Mysore tirelessly passing on his vast knowledge. For several hours each day he welcomes old students and new into his modest shala, teaching alongside his daughter Saraswati and grandson Sharath. Now co-director of the Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute, Sharath has become his grandfather's most devoted and talented student, describing Guruji as "the best guru in the world..., a walking encyclopedia of yoga".

Buttressed by such a loving and hard-working family, Pattabhi Jois is without doubt the bedrock of the thriving ashtanga yoga community. His infectious grin, endless patience and commanding presence continue to draw hundreds of students back to him year after year. Yet despite his fame and fortune, despite being the figurehead of the now world-famous ashtanga practice, Guruji still holds true to the belief that yoga transcends the individual. As he says, “After my life is all finished, Yoga only will remain”.