

## Ashtanga Yoga: A Brief History and Overview

Don't miss this excellent contribution by certified teacher **Philippa Asher** "*Ashtanga Yoga: A Brief History and Overview*" is a great resource for teachers, students and anyone interested in understanding what the Ashtanga yoga method is all about ...



Pattabhi Jois teaching Led Intermediate class at KPJAYI, in Mysore. Philippa is in blue. Photos by Itay Dollinger

Said to have been first described in an ancient text called *Yoga Korunta*, Ashtanga yoga is a disciplined practice of the body and mind, whose aim is to discover our True Self and thus live in harmony with the Universe. It's about manifesting a rhythmic flow of energy and awareness, that enables us to feel connected, whilst promoting good health and heightened spiritual, physical and emotional well-being.

Around two thousand years ago, the Indian sage Patañjali composed a work called *Yoga Sutras*, which attempts to outline and standardise Classical Yoga. Expounding upon *Raja Yoga* (how to redefine the mind to serve our needs), Patañjali's underlying principle is the Eight Limbs of Classical Yoga, which can lead to liberation.

These eight limbs are: *Yamas* (ethical behavioural codes: non-violence; truth; not stealing; appropriate sexual conduct; non-greed); *Niyamas* (personal behavioural observances: cleanliness of body and mind; contentment with what one has; austerities and disciplines; self study; surrender and acceptance, without expectation); *Asana* (postural practice, to detoxify and open the body and mind); *Pranayama* (life force, or breath control and expansion); *Pratyahara* (withdrawal of the senses from external stimulation); *Dharana*

(concentration of the mind); *Dhyana* (meditation: focusing the mind on a single entity) and *Samadhi* (a higher state of conscious awareness, where the mind goes beyond the object of meditation and the individual self). Ashtanga means eight limbs, thus each of these external and internal disciplines make up the Ashtanga yoga practice.

We know from evidence of stone carvings depicting people in meditative yoga postures (from the Indus Valley period), that the practise of yoga is around five thousand years old. Ancient Hindu scriptures such as the Vedas, Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita talk about aspects of Raja, Mantra, Prana, Dhyana, Dharma, Karma, Jnana and Bhakti yoga, but indication of a disciplined postural yoga practice, does not seem to appear until the Medieval period (eg: *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* circa 1350).

Yogis lived a modest and ascetic life as monks, saddhus and sannyasins and the practice of yoga was handed down from guru to student (*paramapara*). Not being undertaken by householders, yoga asanas were seen as contortions that farkers and holy beggars would perform, in order to make money.

The mid 1800s saw the explosion of body building, physical culture and Scandinavian gymnastics across Europe and this was brought to India during British Rule. The British military in India was trained using physical culture and gymnastic techniques and by the early 1900s, there were gymnasiums in India's major cities, that trained people in gymnastics and body building.

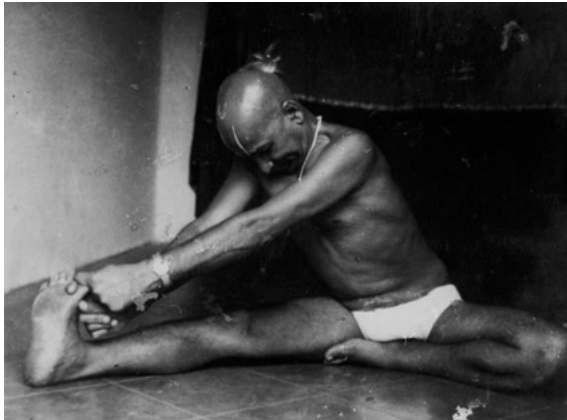
### **Krishnamacharya**

At this time, the Maharaja of Mysore (Krishna Raja Wadiyar), was an avid patron of the arts and culture. He owned a copy of '*Sritattvanidhi*', a nineteenth century book of yoga asana illustrations and set up a gymnasium for body building, in his palace grounds. After hearing about an exceptional yogi in Karnataka named Krishnamacharya (who had been studying for eight years in Tibet with guru Ramamohana Brahmachari), the Maharaja sent for him and asked Krishnamacharya to teach yoga at the Sanskrit College, before giving him a shala at the Jaganmohan Palace. His remit was to 'dazzle audiences and popularise yoga'.

Many of his students were energetic young men and boys from the palace. Krishnamacharya combined his extensive knowledge of yoga asanas, with the already popular sun salutations that were being performed by the physical culturalists and others, all over India. It is believed that he was also influenced by the elegant gymnastics, that was also being taught at the Jaganmohan Palace.

He did dazzle audiences and by 1940 (in his book *Yogasanagalu*), Krishnamacharya had systemised the order of the asanas (postures), drishti (gaze points) and vinyasas (synchronised movement and breathing sequences, based on the sun salutation, that link the asanas together).

He had formalised a powerful yoga asana system that would truly popularise yoga. Several of his students have since become internationally renowned and have played an enormous role in the explosion of today's modern yoga scene (BKS Iyengar, Sri K Pattabhi Jois, Indra Devi and TKV Desikarchar to name a few). It is important to note, that whilst Krishnamacharya was a very strict disciplinarian during the Mysore Palace years, his later teaching softened and a more bespoke asana practice to suit the individual's needs, was adopted. It is evident from the stylistic differences in method that these most famous of his students have taken, that Krishnamacharya's teaching constantly evolved.



"Dedication, commitment, having a one-pointed focus and a strong mind are essential. Daily practise before sunrise (with an uncluttered mind and an empty belly) is optimal, as is leading a sattvic (simple, pure, calm and clean) lifestyle." ~ Philippa Asher

left: Krishnamacharya practising in his eighties

## Asana

The Ashtanga asana system that is practised today (in the tradition of Sri K Pattabhi Jois), is characterised by three places of attention (*tristhana*). These are the breathing system, the looking place and the postures. Slow, deep and even inhalations and exhalations through the nose, are maintained throughout the practice. This heats the body, thins the blood, removes toxins, steadies the mind and may remove ailments. Internal energy locks (*bandhas*) control prana (*vital life force*) as it moves around the subtle body, managing the flow of pranic energy. This creates power and strength in the body. Specific gaze points aid stillness in the body and facilitate deep concentration of the mind. The asanas are performed in a specific order and are linked together with *vinyasas* (synchronised breathing and movement sequences that give a powerful and graceful flow to the practice).

The mind and body do not work as not separate entities: the gross form of the mind is the body and the subtle form of the body, is the mind. The practise of yoga asana is to integrate and harmonise the two. Both the body and the mind harbour tensions and each mental knot has a corresponding physical, muscular, or energetic knot (*granthi*). The asana practice therefore, aims to release these knots, facilitating the steady flow of prana and calmness of body and mind.

Today, there are six series of Ashtanga asanas: Primary (*Yoga Chikitsa*) which detoxes and aligns the body; Intermediate (*Nadi Sodhana*) which purifies the nervous system and Advanced A, B, C, D (*Sthira Bhagah Samapta*) which demonstrate high levels of strength, flexibility, grace, control and humility.

When one asana is mastered with correct breathing, gaze point, vinyasa and peace of mind, then the next is learned until a whole series is practised daily and balance, calmness, strength, grace and modesty are attained. Memorising the exact sequence, allows the practice to become a moving meditation. Sweating, focus, increased stamina, strength, flexibility and humility are key features.

Each series begins with the Standing Sequence. This comprises five Suryanamaskar A, five Suryanamaskar B and eleven challenging standing postures, which are elegantly linked, to create a flowing sequence. Then the asanas of whichever 'series' the practitioner is working on will be practised on each side, with a vinyasa to link them.

There are around thirty asanas in each of the 'series' and these progressively work on opening-up the body and mind, to make them strong. It is vital that the asanas are performed in the correct order, as the aim is to create balance in the body and mind, preparing them for the later meditative limbs of the Ashtanga practice.

Back-bending and the twelve postures of the Finishing Sequence, follow the asanas of the 'series'. After opening the back and heart, the Finishing Sequence focuses on inversions and slow breathing. Subsequently a deep meditation stills the practitioner, before taking rest and enjoying an immense feeling of euphoria.

Practising a full series (including the Standing and Finishing sequences), can last up to two hours and it takes most people several years to master the Primary Series, perfecting one asana before attempting the next. The most authentic and effective way of learning is through 'guided self-practice', where an experienced teacher (who has been given permission to share the practice that they have learned directly from Pattabhi Jois or his grandson Sharath), works individually with each student in class. As well as creating a peaceful environment for a moving meditation, this also honours the concept of *parampara*. Practitioners of all levels work side by side on their own practice, at their own pace, being guided, adjusted and taught new postures by the teacher, when appropriate. Today, weekly Sanskrit-counted led classes, help all practitioners master the exact counts and correct vinyasas for each asana.

Dedication, commitment, having a one-pointed focus and a strong mind are essential. Daily practise before sunrise (with an uncluttered mind and an empty belly) is optimal, as is leading a sattvic (simple, pure, calm and clean) lifestyle.

With mastery of the aforementioned, the other limbs of the Ashtanga practice transpire organically.

## **Guruji**

It is Krishnamacharya's devoted student Sri K Pattabhi Jois, who made it his mission to share Ashtanga yoga with the world. After watching Krishnamacharya give a demonstration in his hometown of Hassan in 1927, Pattabhi Jois went on to become

Krishnamacharya's student for over twenty five years. In 1937, by request of the Maharaja of Mysore, Jois opened the yoga department at the Sanskrit College in Mysore and twenty years later, became Professor. He set up the Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute at his home in 1948 and sixteen years later, the first European student came to study. A few Americans arrived to learn from Jois in the early Seventies and some believe, that this is when he started using the term 'Ashtanga Vinyasa' to describe the asana practice. The word was out, more students arrived and Jois began teaching internationally. He continued to share the Ashtanga asana practice with hundreds of students from all over the world, until he departed this life in 2009. The school has since been renamed Krishna Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute.

It was only after the worldwide explosion of technological developments, that the power of yoga could truly begin to spread. Photography was born in the mid 1800s, with film arriving towards the end of the century. 1896 saw the first yoga philosophy book (*Raja Yoga* by Vivekananda), to be published in English. National and international travel was made easy, plus developments in printing led to worldwide distribution of books and magazines; later to be followed by DVDs, the internet, websites and Youtube.

From its humble beginnings in the 1930s, only being practised by a few palace boys and young men around Mysore, the power of today's Ashtanga yoga has reached thousands of people worldwide, who now have the opportunity to learn from Jois' direct students (who have been Certified by him, or authorised to teach the traditional Ashtanga yoga method). When time permits they make a pilgrimage to Mysore, to learn at the source with Jois' grandson Sharath and daughter Saraswathi, at the Krishna Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute.



photos of Philippa above, by Mahesh Nandeesh

Philippa has been gradually learning and practising the first four series (as taught by her gurus at KPJAYI), since the late nineties. Certified to teach the Primary, Intermediate and Advanced A and B series, she has been sharing the traditional method in London, India and on retreats worldwide since 2006. [www.ashtangaphilippa.com](http://www.ashtangaphilippa.com)