

The Beauty of Tradition

Eight Levels

Ashtanga Yoga – the science and practice that has been evolving for thousands of years in the direction of ethical, physical, mental, emotional and spiritual development.

Today, Ashtanga Yoga is considered one of the most important spiritual practices in the world. On the occasion of our visit to one of the most famous Ashtanga Yoga School (Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute) in Mysore, India, we would like to briefly present this practice through the conversation with teachers: Sri R. Sharath Jois, Saraswati Rangaswami and John Scott.

Teacher Sarasvati Rangaswami's Recommendations for female practitioners of Ashtanga Yoga

First of all, when it comes to pregnant women, I would say that it is good for them to practice breathing because it provides your blood and the baby with oxygen. The baby also benefits from the exercise and mothers are very flexible in that period. After the childbirth, the mother should rest for three months, as well as throughout the first three months of pregnancy. You can practice a little bit, but without jumping. The best would be to sit and breathe. It all depends on each individual person. Women should also have a rest and make a three days' pause during their monthly cycle. However, numerous women from the Western countries continue with their practice, which is very bad. Monthly cycle is a period for resting.

What advice would you give to Ashtanga Yoga teachers?

I would advise them not to change the method and to teach what they have learned with us in Mysore. If you follow Guruji's method, everything becomes spiritual. It will change people's minds, everything. Practice the first series of asanas, that's sufficient, but don't stop. It is important to observe people and see what suits them and then choose the practice that is applicable for them. Even corpulent people can do Sun salutations with correct breathing or simple asanas followed by breathing, contractions and appropriate focal points. Moreover, sick people can practice breathing. They might feel pleasant and their bodies will become light. Many people say that, through Ashtanga Yoga, Guruji has changed their lives.

How do you see the future of Ashtanga Yoga?

What is important is that it maintains its original method. Breathing (ujjaji), contractions (bandha) and appropriate focal points (drishti) are very important. Nowadays, people tend to change yoga, but that is not Ashtanga. There are many of those who teach but who have never practiced with

us. That is not correct. It is important to learn the correct method. It is appropriate to practice with the teachers who have practiced with us. They are familiar with the correct method and have asked for our permission to teach. It is very important to show respect for the teachers who have passed this yoga tradition to you. Also, when you find the teacher you think is the best for you, follow him or her. Your heart will tell you whether you have found the right one. As a system of yoga, Ashtanga has become very popular in the West and is considered one of the most common health and fitness practices of contemporary world. John Scott, one of the best known teachers of Ashtanga Yoga, who has his own Ashtanga Yoga School on New Zealand, tells a bit more about this practice from his own experience with Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, the master of Ashtanga Yoga.

What is the key difference between Ashtanga Yoga and other forms of Yoga?

Key difference between Ashtanga Yoga and other forms of yoga that are practiced today is the unique movement/breathing system or vinyasa. A movement accomplished through a series of positions (asanas) creates the heat that causes sweating. Sweating purifies us because it initiates the deliberation of toxins accumulated in superficial fat layers the body. As the students enter deeper in the practice, the toxins accumulated in deeper layers of muscles and inner organs are also deliberated, which creates a healthy, toned and flexible body.

How important is breathing for Ashtanga Yoga Practice?

The power of breathing cannot be overseen because it represents the key characteristic of this system of yoga. Breathing energises, calms and introduces us to a meditative state. The sound, the fullness and the rhythm of breathing are very powerful. Breathing (ujjayi), contractions (bandha) and focal points (drishti) - three essential techniques of vinyasa, can lead to the accomplishment of physical and meditative aspects of Ashtanga yoga when applied in a synchronised manner.

What would you suggest to Ashtanga Yoga practitioners?

Many years of practice are necessary to become capable of understanding Ashtanga Yoga system's true essence. This refers to everyday practice and, at the beginning, one should not worry too much about how our positions look like. It will only distract the mind from breathing. It is important to understand that in this system breathing represents a means to keep your mind focused.

Sri R. Sharath Jois is the son of Sarasvati Rangaswami, the daughter of Ashtanga yoga master, known to his students as Gururji. Sharath has always known that one day he will follow the path of Ashtanga Yoga, previously established by his grandfather. Now, as the assistant of the Director of Ashtanga Yoga Institute in Mysore, India, he practices and still teaches Ashtanga Yoga. This is how he describes Ashtanga Yoga:

Sanskrit word "ashtanga" refers to eight levels that, according to Patanjali's Yoga Sutras correspond to eight different practices - methods to control the mind and purify the inner being: yama (moral rules), niyama (self-purification and personal observances), asana (body postures), pranayama (breathing control), pratyahara (control of the senses), dharana (concentration), dhyana (meditation) and samadhi (contemplation).

In the beginning, the focus is on everyday practice of asanas in order to make the entire body and the senses more flexible, which represents the precondition for the stability of mind. The techniques of Ashtanga Yoga are categorised within six different series and each of them should be learned correctly and in the right order before attempting to learn the next one.

The accent is on the vinyasa, a specific system of breath and movement that creates warmth, causes inner purification and improves blood circulation. Important elements also comprise the position (asana) with contractions (bandha), breathing (ujjayi) and specific focal points (drishti), which should all be synchronised.

Written by: Ranko Stoiljković i Daniela Stefanov