

Setting The Record Straight



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Manju Jois

by Richard Clark

When Manju Jois, son of Sri K Pattabhi Jois, recently visited Australia, Ashtanga yoga teacher Richard Clark was lucky enough to catch up with him. In this discussion Manju gives us some insights into his experience of yoga and its teachings – and puts to rest some misconceptions about Ashtanga yoga.

Richard: Manju, you were born into the family of a yogi. How and when did you get started with yoga practice?

Manju: Well, I started when I was 7 years old. I was curious, you know, I would see my father doing all sorts of postures. I didn't understand what it was that he was doing, but I'd watch him, and try to imitate him, and that's how it started for me...So, my father saw how curious I was and he started teaching me, but not

forcing me into it, just sharing little bits slowly. It built up and I really got into it. And the way my father taught, he taught all of the things that go with Ashtanga yoga. It wasn't just learning asana, it was learning yoga. The chanting, pranayama, meditation and lifestyle; all of these things go with Ashtanga yoga.

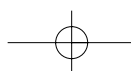
R: Well that's one of my questions. How were you taught? What was the 'subject matter' as you learnt it...because there are

those commentators in the West, and in India, who criticise this Ashtanga method for placing insufficient emphasis on meditation, *yama* and *niyama*, chanting and other traditionally regarded, essential elements of yoga.

M: Actually, they don't understand the teaching method. So yes, we'll start with asana and improve the health of the body. If you're not physically fit, have no energy, what are you going to do? The idea is to try and get your body in good shape so you can sit still and comfortable for the experience of *dhyana* – meditation. Asanas can help build a strong mind and body.

R: It's a basic principle in yoga that body affects mind and mind affects body.

M: Right, right! So start with the asanas, purify yourself, and it will lead you to the next state. We (as teachers of Ashtanga yoga) will definitely approach yoga



through asana and *pranayama* and *dhyana* and chanting. Then internal changes will come about...now it will be easier to practise yama and niyama, you won't even know you're doing it. Yama and niyama will come to you: you can't force them.

And for meditation, you will need to sit well, with a straight back, make sure your posture is right, your breathing is right, your *bandhas* and *drishti* are correct.

You need these things for the *kundalini chhalana*. Kundalini is a power that every human being has. Through yoga you can activate this power. So, you see, you're putting yourself in the 'right place' so everything flows perfectly. You need to create the right path so kundalini can move toward *sahasrara* (chakra). So when you concentrate on the third eye and do the chanting it's like putting all the right pieces of the puzzle together. Then, in the state of what's called *Brahmasakshatkarā*, the mind opens up and wisdom arises.

R: Then meditation has, clearly, always been and should remain an essential part of every practice.

M: Absolutely! It is very necessary. These four parts, asana, pranayama, chanting and meditation will take care of the other limbs of Ashtanga yoga.

R: It seems that many Westerners are vigorously pursuing the asana aspect of hatha yoga and neglecting these other rich facets, integral aspects of yoga, in their practice. What's more, with all the books and DVDs about, it's assumed that if you're reasonably flexible and strong and can follow a set of postures in order from A-Z, from Samasthiti through to Sirshasana, you're 'doing' Ashtanga yoga.

M: Yes. What's happening in the West is that yoga is being totally misunderstood. Everybody wants to be a teacher...and I don't know what they're teaching! They don't have any base...and then they start their own styles. It's very confusing to the people who really want to understand yoga, because there's no real base to what some of these teachers are offering. It's true even in Ashtanga.

R: You think there are cracks beginning to appear in the transmission of yoga teaching in Ashtanga, that there are a lot of teachers overestimating where they're really at?

M: Well, if you go back to ancient times, the transfer of teachings was from *guru* to

You see, my father doesn't speak a lot of English. People ask him questions, then misunderstand what he is saying, then they go out and make up their own rules. I just want to share what I know. I can say this is the way they taught in ancient India. This is the way my father taught. And this is the way I want to teach. I don't want to put any of my ego into it.

shishya, from teacher to student. The teacher will tell you when you're ready. You can't rush this.

My question is: "Okay, so now you're qualified to be a yoga teacher, please say something from the *Vedas*." This is part of yoga practice. "Can I hear some *shanti mantras*?" They don't know that. "So what is this meditation all about?" They don't know that. But they say, "Oh, I can stand on my hands!" I'll say, "Well, in Circus Soleil they can do even better!" (Manju laughs) But you see, they're honest about what they're doing – it's a circus. So, we go to Circus Soleil because they're honest and do such a good job of it. They can stand on their fingers, but they're not saying that they're yogis. "But you, claiming to be a yogi this way, you're dishonest."

R: Then it's a bit like the children's party game of 'pass the message', where it doesn't take long for distortions of ridiculous proportion to occur. People are defining yoga around asana. The confusion is evident in the way students often label themselves as Ashtangis, Iyengar or Viniyoga practitioners in a way that's really quite divisive. They fail to see that these are just methods, simply that. They all head in one direction through a plurality of approaches. Because we're all different, we each need to find a method that suits.

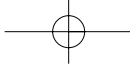
M: I'll tell you a story. When I went travelling in North India in 1962 and '63, I learnt with sadhus. Remember, these guys are practising every day, on the banks of the Ganges. Serious practice!

They asked me what I did. They asked me to show them some of the things I'd learnt. So I showed them Sun Salutations and postures I had learnt from my father. They watched me and then said, "Oh, you're ready for more pranayamas." Even though I had only recently met this sadhu, he showed me the pranayamas. The point is, there was no ego involved. He never asked me what school or style I was from. He could tell I was ready for more and he shared openly.

And later on, when I went home, I was so excited and I wanted to clarify these techniques with my father. I felt my Dad might be a bit angry, because I had actually run away from home at the time, but I couldn't help myself. I said "Oh, Dad look at what I've learnt! Look at what this sadhu taught me!" My father was really impressed and said, "Yes, they are all correct."

R: You had spent some years developing your practice and these sadhus could see that. People today want the short cuts, to get some place without the hard work and effort...and it's part of the teacher's role to assess when a student is ready to take another step. It's not just about physical capability in asana, but the cultivation of mindfulness, right understanding, consistent practice, quality of the breath and attitude that will determine what is given to a student. But everyone's in a hurry to get to the next posture. Nowadays the student is more likely to try and tell the teacher what they should be doing.

M: Right. Everybody's a teacher these days, you can see that. But it's not for the



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student to ask me “Can I do advanced posture number six?” Unfortunately Ashtanga yoga is becoming like a circus; it’s like a competition. It’s like “Oh, I can do this.” “Can you do that?” Hatha yoga is *not* for competition. It’s not a competition. It’s something you do for yourself. Look, asana is asana! You can put your leg anywhere you want. The whole point is to stay supple, healthy and strong, to let the *prana* flow...to prepare for meditation.

And if I can put my leg behind my head and you can’t, it doesn’t mean you’re inferior to me. Actually the person who is very limber, looking so flexible in their asanas may not be doing yoga at all. The person who is trying, who is putting in the effort, may be closer to yoga practice.

R: It’s how we use the practice, which comes back to right understanding, right intent...

You say that each asana should become a meditation, that the breathing should be long, slow...well, that places this next comment amongst the absurd and ridiculous, but I’d like to ask you what you make of it. Lately, I’ve heard statements to the effect that Ashtanga yoga seems to favour and even emphasise hyperventilation. Hyperventilation is something I’ve never instructed a student to perform whilst practising asana, nor have I heard such an instruction come from reliable Ashtanga teachers here or in India. Can we lay this one to rest?

M: The breathing we use is called ‘*dirgha rechaka puraka*’, meaning it is long, deep, slow exhales and inhales. It should be *dirgha*...long, and like music. The sound is very important. You have to do the *ujjayi* pranayama. You have to take the breath all the way in and let it go all the way out. It’s

R: You’ve made the point before in your workshops that your father helped you in the early stages of your practice by modifying some traditional postures until your body opened up more. Yet there are some so-called Ashtanga teachers, modern teachers, who state that in Ashtanga yoga, you don’t modify or change a posture. Then students feel they have to strain and force themselves to get into the pose.

M: Oh, these rumours are all made up, of course you can modify a pose. A lot of teachers are just making up their own rules. And they’re giving a bad name to Ashtanga yoga, or any kind of yoga. A lot of what’s going on is because of tremendous ego.

If you’re a yoga teacher you have to be more humble and loving to your students. They are there to learn something from you. Be careful what you put into their head. If a student is having difficulty, tell them “That’s ok, don’t worry about it.” That’s what the teacher will do. That’s the kind of thing I pick in my teachers, doing serious teacher training with me. I’m watching the way these teachers adjust, teach, do things. Some of them have great touch. They may not be able to do all the postures, but they have that touch, that love, and they’ll be great teachers.

R: So, regarding some of the difficult asanas in the Ashtanga series, how do you recommend working with these challenging postures?

M: Well, they can put more time into that one...

R: Repeating it several times?

M: Yes, repeating, and trying to sit a little longer in the posture. If you’re taking 10 deep breaths, slowly increase to 15 or 20 breaths. Then what we’ll do is to go around it to the next posture and see what happens. Because some of the postures further along in the series will help you open up better for the one you’re having trouble with.

R: Well that answers another rumour that suggests that postures in the Ashtanga series are only held for five breaths.

M: You see, there are a lot of people running around like headless chickens, making a lot of noise, claiming to be so advanced in yoga.

R: Looking back at the spirit of practice in those days when you were growing up and

A lot of teachers are just making up their own rules. And they’re giving a bad name to Ashtanga yoga, or any kind of yoga. A lot of what’s going on is because of tremendous ego.

M: Right, right. Yoga is a traditional spiritual practice. That’s what a lot of people in the West don’t understand. People are more attracted to asana. That creates a lot of confusion, because asana gets you nowhere if you don’t practice all the other limbs of yoga.

R: At the same time, asana seems to play a central role in the Ashtanga method. It seems like a paradox, unless it’s understood, that asana doesn’t equal ashtanga; that the process, as you’ve said, involves asana, pranayama, chanting, and dhyana.

M: And, you know, every asana is a meditation, actually. You need to let the *prana* flow. That’s why in Ashtanga we emphasise a long, slow inhalation and a long, slow exhalation.

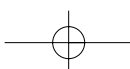
R: I’d like to ask you more questions, to help set the record straight, to clarify some issues and put an end to some rumours - if that’s what’s needed. I mean, you’re from the Jois family, and you grew up with these teachings. So you have clarity about this method.

like blowing into clogged up pipes to remove obstructions. In this way, even diseases can be brought out. That’s why *dirgha rechaka puraka* is so important.

Hyperventilation? Like you said, they’re not doing it right, because they’ve not had the right teacher to tell them how to practise the asana. Then they go and start their own style!

R: I suppose the way that some teachers teach, students feel like they have to strain and force themselves to ‘get into’ an asana. Then their breathing will sound rough, it might sound like hyperventilating, but it’s not asana practice.

M: I’ve heard a lot of complaints from students who are having difficulty with a certain posture (in the Ashtanga series) and aren’t being taken further beyond that point, are not being given any modification of that posture to practise. This isn’t the way to teach because there’s always a different avenue to approach it from.



what's happening today, what sort of changes would you like to see?

M: I think people are paying too much attention to the physical side of practice.

The *Vedas* state *Aham Brahmasmi* – I am Brahman (Brahman is cosmic consciousness). So our body is like our temple. So we have to ask, “What are we doing with it?” That's where we have to go! Then everything that comes out of us will have a glow.

You can't just scratch the surface of this culture. You have to go deep in order to understand.

R: Do you feel that coming to the West was a good move for you? What's it been like moving to California, setting up a new life and family there?

M: Oh, it's been wonderful. I'm not caught up with just one culture. I like to experience things. I'm a free spirit kind of guy. Slowly, I got used to the culture, started meeting people, and I taught there up until about 1997, when my Mum passed away.

R: That's when you started travelling more, leading more yoga workshops?

The idea is to try and get your body in good shape so you can sit still and comfortable for the experience of dhyana – meditation. Asanas can help build a strong mind and body.

M: Well, what's happening to yoga is unbelievable. One of my friends and private students encouraged me to go and do more workshops. She said, “People should know all this.” So I agreed. Slowly I'm trying to get across what true Ashtanga is really about. You see, my father doesn't speak a lot of English. People ask him questions, then misunderstand what he is saying, then they go out and make up their own rules. I just want to share what I know. I can say this is the way they taught in ancient India. This is the way my father taught. And this is the way I want to teach. I don't want to put any of my ego into it. This is the flow. I'm trying to continue the flow, so people can understand what this yoga is all about.

For a complete transcript of this discussion go to www.ayl.com.au

Richard Clark has studied Ashtanga yoga extensively in Australia and India. He teaches at Ashtanga Yoga Shala in Brisbane, and is a member of the Yoga Teacher's Association of Australia, The Australasian Ayurvedic Practitioners Association and the Australian Traditional Medicine Society.