

Ashtanga Yoga – Origins, theory and Patanjali

By Paul Fox

No one knows exactly how old Ashtanga Yoga really is. Some claim that it is an ancient form of yoga dating back thousands of years. What we do know for certain is that this dynamic and physically challenging approach to yoga has been practiced in India for well over 100 years.

The system of Ashtanga Yoga was first set out by Vamana Rishi in the Yoga Korunta. The knowledge of this text was passed on to Shri T Krishnamacharya in the early 1900s by his Guru, Rama Mohan Brahmachari. Krishnamacharya was a great yogi who taught yoga to BKS Iyengar (leading to Iyengar yoga), to his son Desikachar (leading to what became known as Viniyoga) and to Shri K Pattabhi Jois (the Guru of Ashtanga Yoga). Unfortunately no copies of the Yoga Korunta have survived the ravages of time.

From the teachings of Krishnamacharya, Pattabhi Jois (known affectionately as Guruji) has developed the system of Ashtanga Yoga. Pattabhi Jois reached the age of 90 in 2005. He has been teaching yoga for nearly 70 years and still undertakes a punishing teaching schedule six days a week at the Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute in Mysore, southern India (AYRE 2005). He also undertakes teaching tours in Britain, Europe and the United States. His grandson, Sharath Rangaswamy, is Assistant Director of the Institute and the most advanced Ashtanga Yoga practitioner in the world. He is expected to take over from Guruji one day.

The first westerners did not discover Ashtanga Yoga until they visited Pattabhi Jois in Mysore in the 1960s and 1970s. Ashtanga Yoga really took off in the 1990s when it gained popularity, partly because it was adopted by numerous celebrities, including Sting and Madonna.

Ashtanga Yoga teachers accept the methods and teachings of Pattabhi Jois. Each posture is taught in a set sequence because each pose prepares the practitioner for the next one (Scott 2000). Teachers who have taken the vigorous elements of Ashtanga Yoga and changed the techniques or the order of postures usually describe their classes as Power Yoga.

The word Ashtanga means “eight limbs” and comes from the writings of Patanjali (Jois 1997). He wrote the oldest and most authoritative explanation of yoga more than two thousand years ago. He set out his eight-fold path of yoga in just under 200 short verses (known as sutras) which could be memorised and passed down in an oral tradition.

It is worth considering the eight limbs in more detail, as they are the basis for all yoga practice, whether Ashtanga, hatha, raja yoga or any of the other many approaches to yoga (Satchidananda 1992). The eight limbs are:-

1. YAMA

This first limb deals with ethical standards and integrity. It provides guidance on how to behave while following a yogic lifestyle. There are five elements to Yama:-

Ahimsa - This means non-violence in our actions. As with all moral codes, how far you take this is an individual choice. Most people would agree that you should avoid physically attacking or hurting anyone else. But this issue becomes a little less clear when considering ideas like vegetarianism to avoid causing violence towards animals. Many yogis and most people in India – the home of yoga – are vegetarian for this reason. Some people interpret Ahimsa as a call to pacifism. In the Ashtanga yoga system, ahimsa is often interpreted as avoiding violence towards our own bodies, and instead showing care and compassion for the body. In such a physically demanding approach to yoga there is a danger of people pushing themselves too hard and forgetting the non-violence that should underlie an Ashtanga Yoga practice.

Satya – This means truthfulness. It is considered important in yoga for us to be who we really are by speaking the truth. If we delude ourselves and others we are much less likely to achieve the self-knowledge that yoga can bring. In our yoga practice we also need to be truthful about what our bodies are capable of and our motives for practicing yoga. If a student is practicing Ashtanga Yoga merely for the cosmetic benefits of a beautiful body, or because one of their favourite celebrities is an Ashtanga practitioner, then it is important for them to realise that fact. Facing the truth helps us to learn about ourselves and to choose the correct path in the future.

Asteya - This Yama means non-stealing. Again there are clear implications about how we conduct our lives in terms of not taking from others what does not belong to us. On a more subtle level, we should not steal other people's time, space or peace of mind in the way we interact with them.

Brahmacharya – This Yama is usually interpreted as sexual continence and is a difficult concept for western minds. In the Indian yoga tradition sexual abstinence was expected until a student reached marrying age and was ready to become a householder. The reason for this is that sexual energy is considered to be a powerful force and should be re-directed and used for spiritual development. Nowadays in the West, brahmacharya is more widely interpreted as avoiding the unnecessary dissipation of sexual energies. This doesn't mean no sex, but it does mean avoiding casual sexual encounters and being obsessed by sexual desire and allowing your life to be ruled by it. In the Ashtanga tradition some people consider that sexual activity with their partners is only appropriate on particular days of the month, depending on the phases of the moon (Jois 1999).

Aparigraha - This Yama means non-covetousness. It is very tempting for yoga practitioners to become strongly attached to the fruits of the practice because it makes them feel so healthy and happy. Instead we should enjoy the fruits of the practice without expectation. Aparigraha also teaches us not to look jealously at people in our yoga class and covet their forward bend or back bend. People we practice with should provide inspiration and not negative thoughts or judgements.

2. NIYAMA

Patanjali's second limb is concerned with self-discipline and spiritual observances. The five Niyamas provide guidance on how we should bring about purification of the body and mind to help advance our yoga practice. The five niyamas are:

Saucha - This means cleanliness. Yogis should keep themselves clean by washing regularly and keeping their environment clean and tidy. The mind should also be "cleaned" by controlling the input of information. There will be less benefit from doing yoga if you then go to the pub, drink large quantities of alcohol and spend time with people who put no value on spiritual development.

Samtosa - This Niyama means contentment. We will never find true peace within ourselves through yoga if we feel constantly lacking in terms of our physical bodies or our material goods. Samtosa should lead us to a feeling of acceptance of ourselves and others and a letting go of the consumer values that are so prevalent in western society.

Tapas - This refers to the creation of heat and to spiritual austerities. This Niyama is particularly relevant to the practice of Ashtanga Yoga, where a lot of heat and sweat is generated. The idea of austerities refers to the fact that it may be a difficult and challenging path to develop a regular Ashtanga Yoga practice, but out of this dedication and self-discipline comes many benefits. Yoga is like an alchemy for the body, where the heat and austerities bring about a transformation in our minds and in our bodies. So Tapas is something we have to go through to make changes happen.

Svadyaya - This refers to the importance of studying the classic yoga texts and to the need for us to look deeply at ourselves. In order to transform our minds we need to train ourselves to think in a different way. Many wise yogis and sages have gone before us down a similar path, so looking at their work and reflecting upon its meaning for our own lives is an important part of yoga.

Ishwarapranidhana – This Niyama, which means surrender to God or to cosmic consciousness, can be difficult for westerners to accept. In a society where many people are agnostic or atheistic, this concept seems a little uncomfortable. But yoga is not a religion, and does not require any beliefs. So it is possible to interpret Ishwarapranidhana as having the state of mind where the motive for your actions and your yoga practice is to find your higher self, rather than satisfy some passing desire or want.

3. ASANA

Asana, or yoga postures, is what most people in the West associate with going to a yoga class. Asana is the third limb of Patanjali's eight limbs, but in the Ashtanga Yoga tradition (and in most other hatha yoga traditions) Asana is the starting point. It would be difficult to teach people about Yama and

Niyama first of all, because they would be unlikely to be receptive to the ideas or understand why they should lead their lives according to yoga's moral codes and observances. By contrast, the practice of asana leads students to develop body awareness, to treat their bodies with love and kindness and to relate to others with honesty and love. In other words, asana cultivates many of the qualities that are codified in the Yamas and Niyamas.

4. PRANAYAMA

Pranayama is usually translated to mean breathing exercises, of which there are many in yoga. A more accurate and deeper translation of the word Pranayama is the control of "prana" or subtle energy in the body. According to the teachings of yoga, the physical body is sustained by an energy body known as the Pranamaya Kosha (Sivananda Vedant Centre 1997?). This includes different types of Prana which help the body function in different ways. Prana flows around the body via a network of 72,000 nadis (or energy channels) that have parallels to the nervous system but exist on a subtle level. The most important elements of this energy system are the seven Chakras, or energy centres, which run from the base of the spine to the crown of the head. Linking these energy centres and running along the entire length of the spine in the subtle energy body are the three most important nadis – **Sushumna** Nadi, which runs straight up the middle of the spine, and **Ida** and **Pingala** nadis which also run the length of the spine and which criss-cross the chakras. Ida nadi is the energy channel for Moon energy which is soft, cool and intuitive, while Pingala nadi is the channel for Sun energy, which is energetic, hot and extrovert. When we talk of Hatha Yoga, "Ha" means Sun and "Tha" means Moon. So the purpose of all hatha yoga (Ashtanga included) is to balance these two main energies in the body – the sun and moon – to being about balance. One of the main tools for doing this is the breath, because the subtle energy, prana, can be controlled and moved with the breath. In Ashtanga Yoga the main breathing technique used is Ujjayi Pranayama, which will be covered in detail in lesson two.

5. PRATYAHARA

When we reach Patanjali's 5th limb, Pratyahara, the focus shifts towards developing techniques concerned with inner awareness and meditation. Pratyahara means withdrawal of the senses. The less sensory input going into the brain, the more likely it is that we will remain in tune with our yoga practice. In the Ashtanga Yoga system, students are discouraged from looking around or being distracted, and are instead encouraged to keep their minds focused on their breath and what is happening inside their bodies.

6. DHARANA

Dharana means concentration. With less sensory input because of Pratyahara, students are more able to concentrate on their yoga practice.

The Ashtanga Yoga system provides concentration points, or drishtis, on which the mind can focus to avoid distractions outside the practice.

7. DHYANA

The last two limbs are largely concerned with meditation and are therefore beyond the experience of most Ashtanga Yoga students, unless they have a separate meditation practice. Dhyana means the uninterrupted flow of concentration so that you are absorbed completely in whatever the mind is focused on. At this point the mind is very still and undisturbed. Dhyana is an advanced practice.

8. SAMADHI

The eighth and final limb of Patanjali is Samadhi. This is a state of being that has been achieved by very few people apart from the great spiritual leaders down the ages. It is a state of oneness with the universe and with all beings. The person in Samadhi loses all sense of self and of ego and instead reaches a deep and profound state of peace and stillness. This is the ultimate freedom, the liberation of the Self and means that the person is a Jiva Mukti – a liberated soul no longer subject to the normal rules of life, death and (in the Indian tradition) rebirth.

Although Ashtanga Yoga takes its name from Patanjali's eight limbs, there are many other yoga teachers who do not do a strong asana practice or follow the teachings of Pattabhi Jois but still call themselves followers of Ashtanga Yoga. These are people who are dedicated to studying and practicing directly from Patanjali's sutras, but they are not Ashtanga Yoga practitioners in the contemporary sense of the word.

There are six series of postures in the Ashtanga Yoga system, but most people and most classes concentrate on the Primary Series (First Series). The Primary Series is also known as Yoga Chikitsa, or Yoga Therapy, because its main purpose is to make the body healthy and strong by detoxifying and aligning it (Miele 2001).

The Primary Series comprises Surya Namaskara A & B (sun salutations) and then around 50 postures including standing poses, seated postures and a closing sequence.

What sets apart Ashtanga Yoga from other approaches to yoga is the way that the demanding physical work of the Primary Series is all joined together by means of Vinyasa. The word Vinyasa means breath and movement system. For every posture in the Primary Series there is a fixed number of breaths and movement in and out of postures. Most inhalations take place when the body is "opening" (reaching up or back) and most exhalations take place when the body is folding forward or "closing" (such as forward bends).

Postures tend to be held for 5, 10 or 25 breaths. For each movement there is also a drishti or looking place so that the mind is focused and concentrated and awareness is drawn within the body. Internal muscles are also engaged by using bandhas (or energy seals). The theory of bandhas is covered in lesson two.

This combination of Breath/Movement, Drishti (or looking place) and Bandha is called Tristana because it works on three levels – the body, the mind and the nervous system. Tristana is a coming together of elements which create the foundations for a correct Ashtanga Yoga practice.

When you move in and out of the Primary Series postures with a controlled breath and bandha a lot of heat is created in the body and it is usual to sweat. This heat is seen as purifying for the body and the heat also helps muscles to lengthen and joints to become more mobile. The result is a feeling of freedom and lightness in the body.

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