

## Ashtanga Yoga 1-1

Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga is a beautiful, graceful, meditative and flowing practice. Postures and sequences of asanas are threaded on a deep and powerful Ujjayi breath. The core strength of the body is maintained through bandha control and the mind focused on specific gaze points, or drishtis, in every posture.

When learned from an experienced teacher, this dynamic approach to yoga can be practiced safely, with postures modified where appropriate to meet the needs of each individual student. The trouble is that Ashtanga Yoga has become so popular that there are some very large classes taking place in Yoga studios, gyms and church halls around the UK. In such an environment, and with such a strong physical practice, it is impossible for teachers to keep a close eye on all their students all of the time. So in large classes there is always the risk of injury if students push themselves too far into postures, and ignore the need to work with awareness and show respect for the body.

If we delve back into the origins of Yoga as it was originally taught in India, we find that there was no problem of large classes. That's because yoga was taught one-on-one; one teacher (the Guru) and one student. Even now, the current Guru of Ashtanga Yoga, Shri K Pattabhi Jois, teaches his grandson Sharath Rangaswamy, one-to-one. That way there can be no question of the student straying away from the path of correct practice.

In the West yoga is mostly taught in classes, although here in the UK there are quite a few Ashtanga Yoga teachers, like myself, who will see students one-to-one. It comes at a price, of course, costing anything from £25 per hour upwards. But this approach offers a unique way of learning the practice safely and in a way that allows rapid progress.

It is particularly appropriate to learn Ashtanga Yoga one-to-one because great emphasis is placed on the physical adjustments by the teacher on the student. These are seen as crucial in helping the student to understand how each posture should feel.

When you receive one-to-one tuition you are in the luxurious position of being adjusted by your teacher in every pose – something you could never experience in a class environment. Indeed, to have your teacher work with you in this way is like a moving meditation, as you flow from posture to posture with your teacher guiding your body and helping you to move deeper into each asana. This can be a very rewarding experience for the student, as they feel like the centre of the universe, with their teacher orbiting around them and giving them complete attention – something that is in short supply in the busy world we live in.

The intention of adjustments is not take the practice away from the student, but to nurture and develop it. A good teacher will help their student to find his or her therapeutic edge. This is the point where the student is working at their maximum in every posture, exploring the outer limits of their flexibility and

suppleness, and finding new freedom in the body. The therapeutic edge is not within our comfort zone, where some students like to reside during their practice! Neither is it pushing beyond the therapeutic limit into the danger zone where injury may occur. A sensitive teacher will adjust their student in a way that leads to a deep and challenging practice which bears fruit physically, mentally and spiritually.

Doing the “Ashtanga dance” one-to-one with your teacher requires a relationship of trust. The time may come when your teacher decides you are ready to put your leg behind your head in *supta kurmasana* (the tortoise). At this point, total faith is needed. You just breathe and ignore the feeling that your leg is about to detach from your body and fly across the room!

Of course, one-to-one sessions are not a substitute for self-practice. In the Ashtanga system students ideally build towards a six-day a week practice schedule. So one-on-one sessions could be weekly, fortnightly or monthly, with self practice in between. Some students book a block of one-to-ones and then take time, perhaps months, to integrate what they have learned into their self practice or into the posture work they do in a regular class.

Having a direct relationship with your yoga teacher can be an expensive way to learn, although one session a month combined with self practice does compare favourably with the cost of weekly classes. Certainly, one-to-one yoga offers the opportunity for a student to go further and faster than they could ever hope to achieve in a regular class. For many who have gone down this route, and benefited greatly from it, one-to-one study has proved to be money well spent.