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Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga

Intro to Ashtanga Workshop
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Nelson, New Zealand

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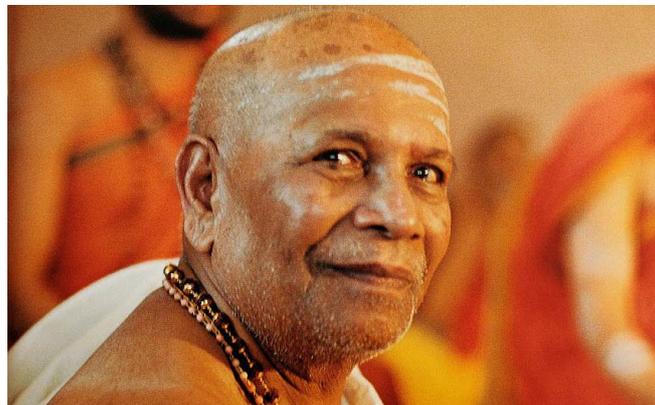


1. Introduction

1.1 Origins

Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga (AKA *Ashtanga*) is a yoga method popularised by the late *Shri K. Pattabhi Jois* (*Guruji*) in Mysore, India.

Pattabhi Jois (1915-2009) was a direct student of *Tirumalai Krishnamacharya* (1888-1989), who is widely regarded as 'the Father of Modern Yoga': *Krishnamacharya* was also a teacher to many other well know teachers including *T. K. V. Desikachar*, *Indra Devi*, *B. K. S. Iyengar* and *A. G. Mohan*.



Ashtanga is a transformative practice for realising physical, mental, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. There are many dimensions to this practice, which progressively unfold over months and years of committed practice.

1.2 The Outer

On the outer level, *Ashtanga* is a dynamic physical practice in which the body flows through a set series of postures or *asana*, each movement synchronised the breath (*vinyasa*). Typically, *asana* are held for a relatively short duration - five breaths.

It is an extremely effective and well balanced physical workout which leaves you feeling both energised and deeply relaxed. It develops both strength and flexibility and has a deeply cleansing action which promotes a healthy, resilient body. Many people practice *Ashtanga* purely for the physical benefits and find it very rewarding.



1.3 The Inner

On a deeper level, *Ashtanga* is a practice for harnessing the potential of the mind. The rhythmic flow of body and breath helps reign in a restless mind, naturally directing the attention inward. With practice and familiarity, continuous awareness of the quality of one's inner experience is developed - in particular the breath, energy / sensations and qualities of mind.

When practiced intelligently, it leads to a deeper understanding of our own nature, and how we relate to the world. It can help us to transcend personal limitations, and develop the right character and attitude to unite with the flow of life rather than resist it.



2. Meaning

2.1 Yoga

Yoga literally means to 'yoke' and is often translated as 'union'. In essence, Yoga is the state when all activities (of body, speech and mind) come into alignment with the flow of life and the laws of nature or 'universal truth'.

As defined in the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, an ancient Indian text which is believed to have been composed around 400 BC:

1.2: *Yogash citta vritti nirodha*

Yoga is the cessation of fluctuations of mind

1.3: *tada drashtuh svarupe avasthanam*

Then the seer abides in its own true nature

2.2 Ashtanga

Ashtanga literally means 'eight limbs' (*ashto* = eight).

Ashtanga Yoga derives its name from *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. This text sets out a systematic methodology for achieving complete liberation, emancipation, transcendent freedom – referred to as *Kaivalya Samadhi*.

The Eight Limbs of *Ashtanga* are summarised in the table on the following page.

Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga approaches *Patanjali's Ashtanga Yoga* through the 3rd limb: *Asana*, which means physical posture or seat. It is, on the surface, a physical practice. However, through working with the practice, we naturally begin an exploration of the other limbs.

It is interesting to note that the *Yoga Sutras* were composed around 150 years after the time of the historical Buddha. There is some significant commonality in the teachings of *Patanjali* and *Buddhism*, although the yoga sutras are framed more in a *Samkhya* school of Hindu philosophy.



The 8 Limbs of Ashtanga Yoga (Patanjali Yoga Sutras)						
Outer	1	Yama	Ethical-Discipline	1.1	Ahimsa	Non-violence
				1.2	Satya	Truthfulness
				1.3	Asteya	Non-stealing
				1.4	Brahmacharya	Preserving vitality
				1.5	Aparigraha	Non-possessiveness
	2	Niyama	Self-Discipline	2.1	Saucha	Purity
				2.2	Santosha	Contentment
				2.3	Tapas	Discipline
				2.4	Swadhyaya	Self-study
				2.5	Ishwarapranidhana	Commitment to Divine
3	Asana		Posture, seat			
4	Pranayama		Breath / vital energy control			
Inner	5	Pratyahara		Sense control, inward focus		
	6	Dharana		Concentration		
	7	Dhyana		Meditation		
	8	Samadhi		Absorption		

According to Patanjali's Yoga Sutras:

2.46: *sthira sukham asanam*

Asana (posture) should be steady and comfortable.

2.47: *prayatna shaithilya ananta samapattibhyam*

Posture is perfected by releasing all effort and allowing awareness to merge with the infinite.

2.48: *tatah dvandva anabhighata*

By perfecting posture, we achieve unimpeded freedom from the suffering caused by dualities.



2.3 *Vinyasa*

Vinyasa is the coordinated flow of breath and movement (between postures). Like meditating with the support of a mala (beads on a thread), *vinyasa* is in essence a dynamic mediation. *Asana* are the beads and the continuum of breath-awareness is the thread. *Vinyasa* teaches us to experience life as a series of transitions, to let go of fixation, the cause of all suffering.





3. The Method

3.1 The Ashtanga Series

One of the defining characteristics of the Ashtanga method is the set sequence of postures. The overall practice follows the order shown in the table below. Usually only one of the ‘main series’ will be practiced in a given session. According to tradition, a new pose is introduced only when a student develops a degree of proficiency with the preceding one. The Primary Series comes first, then the Intermediate, and so on. There are a total of six ‘main series’ – only the first three are shown in the table (this will be more than enough for most!)

Ashtanga Yoga Practice Sequence				
Sun Salutes			<i>Surya Namaskar</i>	A & B
Standing Sequence				6 <i>asana</i>
Main Series	1	Primary series: Yoga Therapy	<i>Yoga-Cikitsā</i>	41 <i>asana</i>
	2	Intermediate Series: Clearing the energetic channels	<i>Nadi-Shodhana</i>	40 <i>asana</i>
	3	Advanced Series (A): Strength and Grace	<i>Sthira Bhaga</i>	35 <i>asana</i>
Finishing Sequence				16 <i>asana</i>

There are several reasons for the set sequence:

1. It systematically and comprehensively awakens the energy system of the body / mind. *Systematically* - because it works the body and energies in a balanced way, progressively moving deeper, from outer to inner. *Comprehensively* - because it leaves nothing out.
2. Consequently, it brings us face to face to our limitations and encourages us to work through them with an attitude of self-respect and inquiry. Avoidance isn't an option!
3. Once we're familiar with the sequence, we are able to move beyond the outer form of the practice and discover the inner essence, which is meditation. Breath-awareness is king! With a concentrated mind, we begin to see beyond the limits of the physical form and directly experience more subtle aspects of our being.



4. When a group of people practice it together, the collective energy that is created is highly beneficial and supportive to each individual in the group. This is particularly so if people practice together regularly - a supportive energetic bond develops which is beyond words!
5. There are *Ashtanga* communities all over the world practicing the traditional sequence. Once you know the sequence you become part of an international community with a wide network of highly experienced teachers who each have unique insights to share.

It's important to acknowledge that the postures of the traditional sequence may not be immediately accessible for everyone – we are all unique! Because of this it is common to introduce variations to individual postures that achieve the structural and energetic intent of the traditional form. Supplementary practices (eg: restorative practices, or other practices to focus on particular anatomical structures) can also be a great complement a regular *Ashtanga* practice. In the same way, the *Ashtanga* practice can be a great complement to any other activities we enjoy, from purely physical pursuits, to mentally challenging work, through to spiritual practices including meditation.

3.2 Moving Deeper

Once familiarity with the sequence of postures is established, it is possible to deepen our conscious connection to internal aspects of the practice. Known collectively as *tristana*, these are:

<i>Tristana</i>: Components of the Practice		
Component	Meaning	Description
<i>Ujjayi Pranayama</i>	Free / 'Victorious' Breath	A smooth, full, natural breath, characterised by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Balanced inhale and exhale - Soft sibilant sound (caused by subtle contraction of the glottis) - Even expansion of the rib cage, rather than the abdomen.
<i>Bandha</i>	Lock / Seal	A series of internal, dynamic 'holds' applied on the physical, energetic and awareness levels. There are 3 primary <i>bandha</i> : <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - <i>Mula Bandha</i>, located at the pelvic floor - <i>Uddīyana Bandha</i>, located at the abdomen - <i>Jalandhara Bandha</i>, located at the throat
<i>Dristi</i>	Looking Place	A soft but alert gaze with the eyes directed toward a prescribed focal point which varies for each <i>asana</i> .



The purpose of *bandha* is to give stability and integrity to the spine, ensure correct alignment of the joints, and support the development of a free and natural *ujjayi* breath.

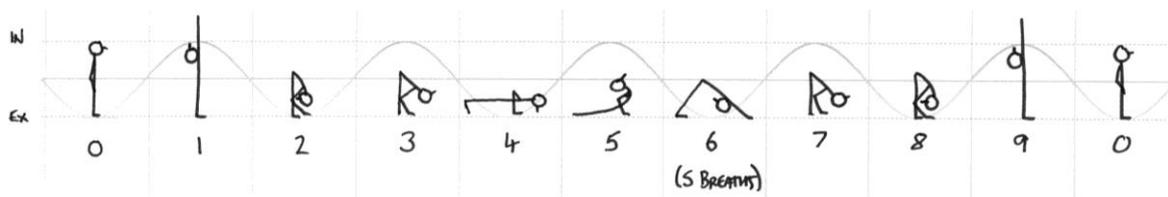
Working together, *ujjayi* breath and *bandha* lead to the generation of an internal heat and provide a gentle massage of the internal tissues and organs. These serve to deeply purify the body-mind complex of all manner of dis-ease, from accumulated physical tension through to built-up toxins and energetic blockages, through to the subtle habit patterns which obscure the natural freedom of the mind.

The coming together of *dristi*, *ujjayi* breath and *bandha* as an uninterrupted continuum of mental focus directs the purifying action of the practice to the more subtle levels of experience, like gently polishing the mirror of our mind.

In addition to these aspects, a fourth aspect - the (Sanskrit) Count - can be used both as an aide for initial focus of the mind and as a discipline for deepening and sustaining mental focus. It can also encapsulate a transmission of the quality of mind of the teacher. When we practice the Count, we keep track of every single breath / *vinyasa* in the practice. This leads to a high degree of mental focus and a deepening appreciation of causality.

3.3 Brining it Together

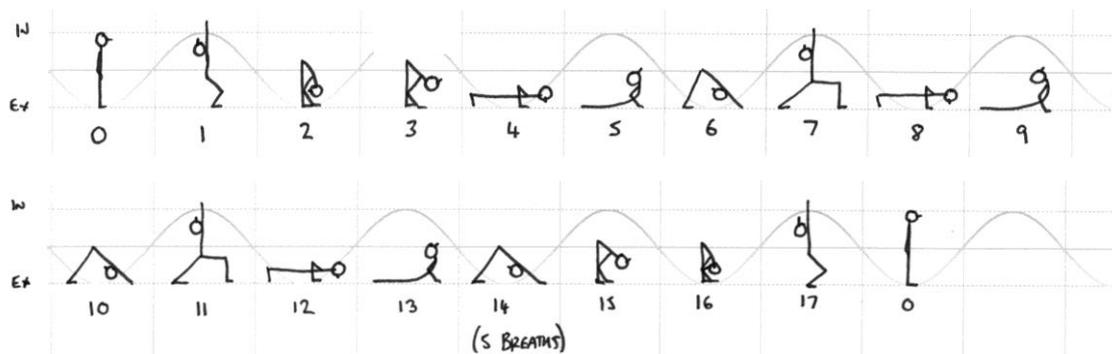
Surya Namaskara A – Sun Salute A – 9 Vinyasa



Count / Vinyasa	Breath	Action	Dristi	
Samasthitih	(0)	(Exhaling)	Equal Standing	Nose
Ekam	1	Inhaling	Reaching up	Thumbs
Dve	2	Exhaling	Bending forward	Nose
Trini	3	Inhaling	Looking up	Third eye
Chatvari	4	Exhaling	Jumping back	Nose
Panca	5	Inhaling	Upward dog	Third eye
Shat	6	Exhaling	Downward dog	Naval
Free breathing – 5 breaths				
Sapta	7	Inhaling	Jumping forward	Third eye
Ashto	8	Exhaling	Bending forward	Nose
Nava	9	Inhaling	Reaching up	Thumbs
Samasthitih	(0)	Exhaling	Equal standing	Nose



Surya Namaskara B – Sun Salute B – 17 Vinyasa



Count / Vinyasa	Breath	Action	Dristi
Samasthitih (0)	(Exhaling)	Sitting low	Earth
Ekam 1	Inhaling	Reaching up	Thumbs
Dve 2	Exhaling	Bending forward	Nose
Trini 3	Inhaling	Looking up	Third eye
Chatvari 4	Exhaling	Jumping back	Nose
Panca 5	Inhaling	Upward dog	Third eye
Shat 6	Exhaling	Downward dog Right foot forward	Earth
Sapta 7	Inhaling	Warrior	Behind thumbs
Ashto 8	Exhaling	Jumping back	Nose
Nava 9	Inhaling	Up dog	Third eye
Dasa 10	Exhaling	Downward dog Left foot forward	Earth
Ekadasa 11	Inhaling	Warrior	Behind thumbs
Dvadasa 12	Exhaling	Jumping back	Nose
Trayodasa 13	Inhaling	Upward dog	Third eye
Caturdasa 14	Exhaling	Downward dog	Naval
Free breathing – 5 breaths			
Pancadasa 15	Inhaling	Jumping forward	Third eye
Sodasa 16	Exhaling	Bending forward	Nose
Saptadasa 17	Inhaling	Reaching up	Thumbs
Samasthitih (0)	(Exhaling)	Equal standing	Nose



4. Secrets to Success

4.1 Daily Practice

The Ashtanga practice has the potential to deeply transform a life. The more regularly you practice, the greater the benefits. Ideally, we work through a complete practice every morning (actually 6 days per week) before we get on with the rest of the day. It is traditional to take a break on Saturdays as well as full and new moon days.

If a daily practice seems unachievable, try starting with just the Sun Salutes, but do your best to roll out your mat and start each day by consciously connecting movement and breath. Be realistic about what your life circumstance will allow but hold onto the aspiration and whenever you do foresee an opportunity to commit to a daily practice – be it for a week, a month, a year, or the ‘long haul’ - do it, and stick to it!

4.2 The Magic of Self-Practice

Why is self-practice so important? Simply put, if it's not self-practice, it isn't Yoga!

Led classes are a great way to learn the outer form of an *asana*-based yoga practice. With the support of a teacher and a group of students, we can certainly begin to gain a feel for what yoga is about, and receive some degree of benefit. But it isn't until we take the plunge into self-practice that we become empowered to connect with the real magic of the yoga process.

Yoga is meant to be a process of discovery - the physical practice is a framework for investigating and gaining insight into the nature of self-experience. It is through this insight that we are progressively set free from the limitations - in both body and mind - which prevent us from having a deep, unshakable joy for life, regardless of circumstance.