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In 2001 she began her studies in Ayurveda and Satyananda Yoga with a disciple from the Bihar School of Yoga (BSY) in Northern India. In 2007 she moved to the BSY ashram in Mungher and Rikhia Peeth to study with Swami Satyananda (1923-2009) and Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati directly.

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Every Woman Her Own Healer

Historically, very few women were taught yoga. Women, for the most part, were expected to be householders, caretakers, and nurturers. Few recognize the extent to which Krishnamacharya, Sri K. Pattabhi Jois' teacher, challenged these social norms. He taught his wife, his daughters, and his disciple Indra Devi, who later opened schools in Shanghai and Hollywood, where she taught Greta Garbo and Eva Gabor.

Official records state that Krishnamacharya's yoga shala at the Mysore Palace was designed to "promote the physical well being of Ursu boys." But this doesn't mean that boys were the exclusive recipients of his teachings.¹ In the *Yoga Makaranda* (1934), Krishnamacharya argued that anyone—regardless of caste, age, or gender—can benefit from practicing yoga.² However, thanks to Norman Sjoman's *The Yoga Traditions of the Mysore Palace* (1996), which the writer Anne Cushman covered a few years later for *Yoga Journal*, Ashtanga's origins became commonly known as a rigid physical cultural regime designed exclusively for young boys.³ Before long, yoga studios began to parrot this information in teacher training programs, and the rest, as they say, is history.⁴

It was mostly men who brought Ashtanga to the West in the 1970's. There, some continued to teach the Ashtanga sequence as they learned from Pattabhi Jois, while others modified it into innovative sequences that would later be known as vinyasa yoga. It was here where Ashtanga began to take hold among women in earnest. This has been especially true over the last ten years. During my first trip to Mysore in 2004, I noticed that Third Series, an exceptionally physically and mentally demanding practice also known as "Advanced A," was mostly practiced by men. A decade later, I am finding the opposite to be true. More women are teaching Ashtanga as well. As of 2015, 337 women and 172 men are *authorized* to teach Ashtanga through KPJAYI. This requires two to four years of study in Mysore and completion of Primary Series for Level One and Intermediate Series for Level Two. Yet at the higher level of *certification*, which generally requires a minimum of ten years of study in Mysore as well as completion of Third Series, the ratio flips. Today, thirty men and only seventeen women in the world are certified through KPJAYI. In many regards, it's still a boys club.

This gender imbalance matters. Not only are authorized and certified teachers responsible for transmitting and preserving the lineage, but they are also influential mentors, guiding students through the various physical, mental, and spiritual challenges

¹ The Palace Administration Report, 1933-1934. Mysore Palace Archives, 1933-1934, 24.

² Krishnamacharya, *Yoga Makaranda* (1934) (Chennai: Media Garuda, 2011) 61.

³ Anne Cushman, "New Light on Yoga" *Yoga Journal*, July/August 1999)

⁴ I taught at Yogaworks from 2009-2011 as a mysore teacher, and was also a mentor at their yoga teacher training program.

that the practice inspires. And let's face it: men experience life differently than women do. Women are underrepresented in politics, business, science, and academia, and are often paid less for the same work. As children, we are told that "boys will be boys," while girls grow up in a culture of shame, criticism and victimization. One in five women will be raped at some point in her lifetime, compared to one in seventy-one men.⁵ Whether we like it or not, the ways that women are socialized influence their relationships, both with the practice and with their teachers.

When I started practicing Ashtanga in the late 90's, I suffered from chronic illness and fatigue due to childhood abuse, sexual assault, alcohol and drugs. Those first few years were the most challenging. Not only was my immune system not yet strong enough to support a daily practice, but the practice also exposed past traumas that I thought were behind me. I have learned from amazing male teachers in my life, yet they have not been able to help me understand some aspects of the practice. For me, Ayurveda helped fill in the gaps. It wasn't until I started incorporating Indian medicine into my diet, sleeping habits, and daily routines that I was able to practice every day. Getting the full benefits of the Ashtanga practice, especially for women, comes down to much more than *asana* alone.

Yoga was never intended to be practiced by itself, especially not without regard for the underlying principles that structure our relationship to nature. In India, Yoga and Ayurveda are known as sister sciences, born from the root of the Vedas. Both methods focus on cleansing and purifying the physical body in order to elevate *prana* (life force), thereby facilitating spiritual understanding and awakening. In fact, many practitioners don't realize how deeply Sri K. Pattabhi Jois was influenced by Ayurvedic philosophy; he even held an honorary professorship of Yoga at the Government College of Indian Medicine from 1976-1978. Sharath Jois, his grandson and successor, continues to follow Ayurvedic principles in his teaching today. As yoga and Ayurveda have traveled westward, however, they have become regarded as separate teachings.

In the following paragraphs, I'll discuss how Ayurveda and Ashtanga yoga have become my blueprint for developing strength and self-awareness. I'll discuss how Ayurveda challenged and ultimately changed my views of everything from diet and exercise to the menstrual cycle and birth control. Perhaps some of these topics may seem out of place. Yet managing the relationships between our bodily, mental and spiritual faculties has been a cornerstone of medicine and healing for the vast majority of recorded human history; from Greece, to China, to India.

⁵ National Sexual Violence Resource Center.
http://www.nsvrc.org/sites/default/files/publications_nsvrc_factsheet_media-packet_statistics-about-sexual-violence_0.pdf Given that rape is one of the most underreported crimes, the actual numbers are probably much higher, especially in developing countries.

I. The Ayurvedic Lifestyle

Ayurveda, which translates roughly to the “science of life,” is an ancient medicinal philosophy that originated in South India around 3000 BCE. Like many ancient healing systems, it is grounded in the idea that balancing the relationships between body, mind, and spirit are essential to healthy living. Ayurvedic philosophy holds that all things are made up of a combination of three life forces or energies called doshas. The doshas—*vata*, *pitta*, and *kapha*—are inherited at conception and form your Ayurvedic constitution. They remain in place throughout your entire life. Everything that you eat, digest, and eliminate influences the doshas: keeping them in balance or creating “dis-ease,” eventually leading to disease.

There are dozens of internet surveys purporting to identify your specific doshic constitution, but they won’t be very precise. Only an Ayurvedic practitioner will be able to accurately assess this by reading your pulse and tongue. I recommend seeking out individuals who have studied at reputable schools and have plenty of personal and professional experience. The art of prescribing and preparing Ayurvedic herbs and treatments is deeply intuitive and requires significant expertise.

a. Diet

Much like the Ayurvedic philosophy, the Ayurvedic diet is also highly individualized. The popular proverb—“one man’s medicine is another man’s poison,”—sums up its philosophy: that proper health and nutrition is not one size fits all. For example, those with a strong *vata* constitution do better eating warm and nourishing foods that temper their flighty and anxious tendencies, even though, given their constitutions, they are likely to crave dry, cold, and light *vata* producing foods. When I began to study Ayurveda, one of the first maxims I learned was that “like attracts like, and opposite creates balance.” In other words, novice students of Ayurveda should regard their cravings as red flags.

Because the seat of “dis-ease,” lies in poor digestion and elimination, the Ayurvedic diet seeks to optimize both systems. Instead of prioritizing the nutritional content of foods as we do in the West, Ayurveda *begins* with digestion. Local, organic, and GMO-free fruits and vegetables might be both tasty and nutritious, but if they cannot be assimilated into the body properly, they will cause more harm than help. Highly processed food (e.g. pasteurized milk and velveeta cheese) is considered “dead” food: heavy, impotent and lifeless, and will have similar effects on the mind and body. Leftovers (cooked food over five hours old) share the same toxic qualities. For a long time, I thought I was making the most healthful choices for my body by eating raw foods, salads, juices, and tofu: the

western yogi's typical fare. This diet, Ayurveda soon taught me, was the cause of my illness: adrenal fatigue, excess mucous, inflammation and constipation.

b. Menstruation and “Ladies Holiday”

Ayurvedic approaches to menstruation and birth control differ a great deal from their Western counterparts. Again, the one size fits all approach does not work for everyone. That said, all of our choices affect what our bodies digest and assimilate. This is true not only for physical food, but for emotional and spiritual food as well.

Western attitudes towards menstruation are predominantly negative. We learn at an early age to regard menstruation as a monthly inconvenience. It's dirty. It's gross. It should be kept as invisible as possible. Signs of emotional weakness are often attributed to the hysterical, irrational female mind. As girls, menstruation is an embarrassing secret. As adults, we are taught to ignore menstrual symptoms altogether. It is no wonder we quickly develop an unhealthy relationship to our bodies, making it even more challenging to find harmony and healing later in life.

Ayurvedic practitioners consider a woman's menstrual cycle crucial to monitoring health, fertility, and general well-being. Not only is it an important time for the body to detox, but each monthly cycle also indicates what we should be eating, what activities we should be doing, and how to move forward for optimal health. This more compassionate and constructive approach towards menstruation immediately appealed to me when I began to study Ayurveda. At the time, my cycle was erratic. I didn't have my periods regularly. Through an Ayurvedic diet, prescribed herbs, and better lifestyle choices, I was able to get my menstrual cycle on track, which coincided with having more consistent endurance and energy.

Reading the language of our periods helps us understand the ways in which bodily functions align with larger rhythms of nature. By practicing Ashtanga and following an Ayurvedic lifestyle, your menstrual cycle will gradually begin to synch up with the moon's gravitational pull. In these conditions, menstruation should happen at the new moon, and ovulation at full moon. Female ashtangis also take “ladies holiday”—a minimum of three days off of practice during menstruation—in order to rest and allow the detoxification process to happen fully.

c. Birth Control

America lives by the gospel of convenience. We want to have everything at our fingertips, even though it doesn't necessarily help us take better care of ourselves. Birth control, I believe, is a case in point. It seems that patients often request and doctors



Stop negotiating. *I've been practicing every day, so what's a day off?* I am not referring to injuries or actual reasons for needing to modify or back off. I am referring to the lazy mind.

prescribe what is convenient rather than what is best for the patient's holistic well-being. Yet our decisions about birth control affect us significantly. From an Ayurvedic perspective, synthetic hormones (especially menstrual suppression methods) mask the diagnostic information revealed by our monthly periods, making it difficult to identify doshic imbalances and preventing us from being our own healers.

The monthly "period" one experiences when on the pill, for example, is not an actual period. Doctors refer to it as "withdrawal bleeding" because there has been a drop in hormone levels, causing the uterine lining to weaken just enough for some bleeding to occur. This is sometimes why pills are prescribed: to lessen the amount of bleeding and cramping each month. But because this is not an actual period, women on the pill won't experience the benefits of monthly detoxing that is vital for optimal health.

I have also found challenges working with women who have IUDs. I have noticed a connection between IUDs and abdominal pain, lower back pain, and inability to engage *bandha* properly. Of course, these are personal choices we make with our doctors that often involve more than preventing pregnancy. That said, I recommend entering a gynecologist's office as an *informed* patient, not only from a western perspective but from an eastern one as well.

d. Ayurvedic Cleansing

While food is medicine, sometimes patients require deeper and more intensive kinds of treatments. Pancha Karma (PK), a Sanskrit word meaning "five actions" or "five treatments," are Ayurvedic processes used to clean the body of toxic materials left by disease, poor nutrition, and poor lifestyle choices. Often prescribed to patients in need of deep physical and mental healing, PK can be a useful way to restore balance.

Pancha Karma, however, is hardly a day at the spa. I underwent my first treatment in 2004 in order to help ease the severe asthma, chronic sinusitis and bronchitis that I had suffered since I was 16 years old. Unlike the diets and fasts popular in the yoga community today, Ayurveda treatments are almost always performed under close doctoral supervision. This is especially important because prolonged periods of living out of balance will make it difficult for patients to recognize what constitutes true healing or not. It is also important because Pancha Karma can trigger extremely uncomfortable physical and emotional reactions. My first PK treatment brought to light unresolved traumas that I thought I had overcome through therapy and counseling. Despite these challenges, it did heal the asthma as my doctor had intended and today, I no longer suffer from respiratory problems.

e. Ayurveda and Allopathy

When I became a student of Ayurveda in 2001, I made a commitment to only use natural Ayurvedic remedies. I was strict and regimented in my thinking. This was soon put to the test. I am a two time rape survivor. The first time was at the age of 14; the second at the age of 35. The aftermath of the second rape was severe. I was unable to socialize. I couldn't work. I couldn't sleep more than two hours a night, turning reality into a hallucination. I looked to yoga, pranayama, and meditation in order to manage the symptoms, but nothing provided actual relief.

Eight months later, I was diagnosed with PTSD. When the psychiatrist recommended a course of western pharmaceuticals, I automatically refused. I have always had faith in yoga as a healing modality, but I finally came to the painful realization that I was in crisis mode. My doctor and I devised a one year plan that would incorporate both western and eastern approaches to healing. It wasn't a straightforward process. I experienced terrifying blackouts and severe side effects. It took a couple of months to find the right medication and dosage. Over time I grew to trust the professionals I was working with, and they trusted me in return. In the end, it was the best thing I did for my healing. It helped me find a neutral (albeit synthetic) place of reference from which to put the pieces of my life together again. I'm not suggesting that western meds are always the way to go. Trauma expresses itself differently for everyone, and that in turn requires various approaches. For me, yoga, pranayama, and meditation were part of the solution but not *the whole* solution. It took a village of healers for me to find my way.

II. Ashtanga Yoga - The Practice

“Ashtanga Yoga is the washing machine for the mind,” Guruji used to say. It washes the mental patterns of self-doubt and self-criticism: things that stand in the way of us becoming our best selves. Deeply grounded in history and myth, it is capable of transforming the mind and body on all levels through dedicated study and practice.

The first, or “Primary” Series focuses on detoxifying and cleansing the physical body.⁶ In Sanskrit, it's called *Yoga Chikitsa*, which means “yoga therapy.” For men and women, the Primary Series builds strength and endurance: lengthening the hamstrings, opening the hips, and beginning to open the spine. Its many twists help balance digestion, further removing toxins from the body. I learned the complete Primary Series within a few months. I practiced it mostly on my own for about seven years before meeting Guruji and Sharath. A few teachers I practiced with periodically were anxious to move me forward, but I wasn't comfortable with that. I wanted to learn directly from Patabhi

⁶ Although it's called “primary series,” this is a misnomer. Taught properly, it can take anywhere from three months to a year or more to learn the complete series.

Jois. These years helped me avoid becoming entangled in a desirous relationship with postures. While I've never been accused of being a particularly patient woman, I found a way to practice *asanas* with more intelligence and clarity. Essentially this time allowed me to turn practice into a *sadhana*.

In the Second, or "Intermediate" Series, the student begins to go deeper. This series specifically cleanses the subtle energetic channels needed for spiritual awakening (referred to as *Nadi Shodhana*, or "nerve cleansing"). Yet even after practicing Second Series for eight years, I was hardly prepared for the changes the next series would set in motion.

I began to learn Third Series, *Sthira Bhaga* (divine steadiness) in 2012. Over the course of two and a half years, Sharath guided me through a few chunks at a time. While changes came slowly and steadily, this practice amounted to a huge physical and emotional transformation.

Prior to studying Third Series, I was quite thin and waifish. I was outgoing and fun, yet flaky and irresponsible. Third Series made me more introverted. I also began to set clearer boundaries with my friends, my family, and myself. This didn't go unnoticed. I became much more comfortable with saying no and quite often. This challenged many of my friendships, some of which dissolved completely. While there are aspects of my previous self I miss, I enjoy the strength and calm that this practice has provided. And while I attribute some of these changes with the natural aging process, they became especially swift and strong once I began to work with Third Series directly. I have come to understand that the practice of *sthira bhaga* asks us to tap into the spiritual part of effort; that is, a more devotional and non-material way of moving.

"What will people learn from practicing advanced *asanas*?" one of my teachers once asked Guruji. "I don't know," he said. "Everyone learns what they need to learn."

The slow and progressive way in which I was taught by Guruji and Sharath instilled in me a sense of respect for the process. It allowed me to integrate the effects of the postures into my life and community. Although Sharath is sometimes criticized for teaching the postures slowly (seemingly more slowly than Guruji did), I deeply respect his approach. Sharath grew up alongside the western students. His understanding of western culture has allowed him to refine his teaching prescriptions in a way that seeks to temper the egoism and appetite of the western mind.

Asanas are like medicine in more ways than we realize. They should be prescribed slowly and cautiously, as they have the potential to alter our characters in ways we may not anticipate. Nor are we aware of the challenges that these changes can facilitate on a

social and cultural level. We say we're ready for strong, independent women, but what happens to a family and community when a woman goes through these deep changes in her psyche? Thus, it's always best to move forward with consideration. As my teacher once said, 'You wouldn't open your medicine cabinet and take all the medicine at once!'

The Teacher - Student Relationship

Not only is the guru/disciple relationship one of the most intimate relationships we will ever experience, it is also one of the most misunderstood. Because of this, many guru/disciple relationships are based on projection and transference. I've often heard practitioners use the word "disciple" when they actually mean student, and "guru" when they actually mean teacher. For me, there is a big difference. It's not always easy for an individual to adopt the qualities of an actual disciple: complete surrender and integration of the guru's teaching. We all must go through a "spiritual infancy" before we learn to work beneath weaknesses and insecurities. The more a disciple is working within the parameters set by the guru, the less time and energy there is for posturing about devotion and faithfulness. Once we become painfully aware of our mental patterns, then the passage from student to disciple can commence.

Finding the right teacher requires careful consideration. Teachers who are directly affiliated with the shala in Mysore will be listed on the KPJAYI website and are required to sign a document stating they agree with the terms of the shala. The following are some of the specific guidelines from a 2008 letter sent to all teachers (before Authorized level 2 was introduced):

- Teachers should maintain a yoga room or shala to allow for daily Mysore practice.
- Teachers should honor Saturday and the full/new moon as rest days.
- Authorized teachers should not teach beyond the Primary Series.
- Certified teachers are qualified to teach as the directors of KPJAYI have guided them.
- Authorized teachers are to teach in one location only
- Certified teachers are permitted to travel and teach some workshops
- "Teacher Trainings" (including changing the title of such programs e.g. "Ashtanga Yoga Intensive" or "Ashtanga Yoga for Teachers") are strictly prohibited.

Authorized level 2 was introduced in 2009. Here are the current guidelines as of December 2015, set forth by KPJAYI:

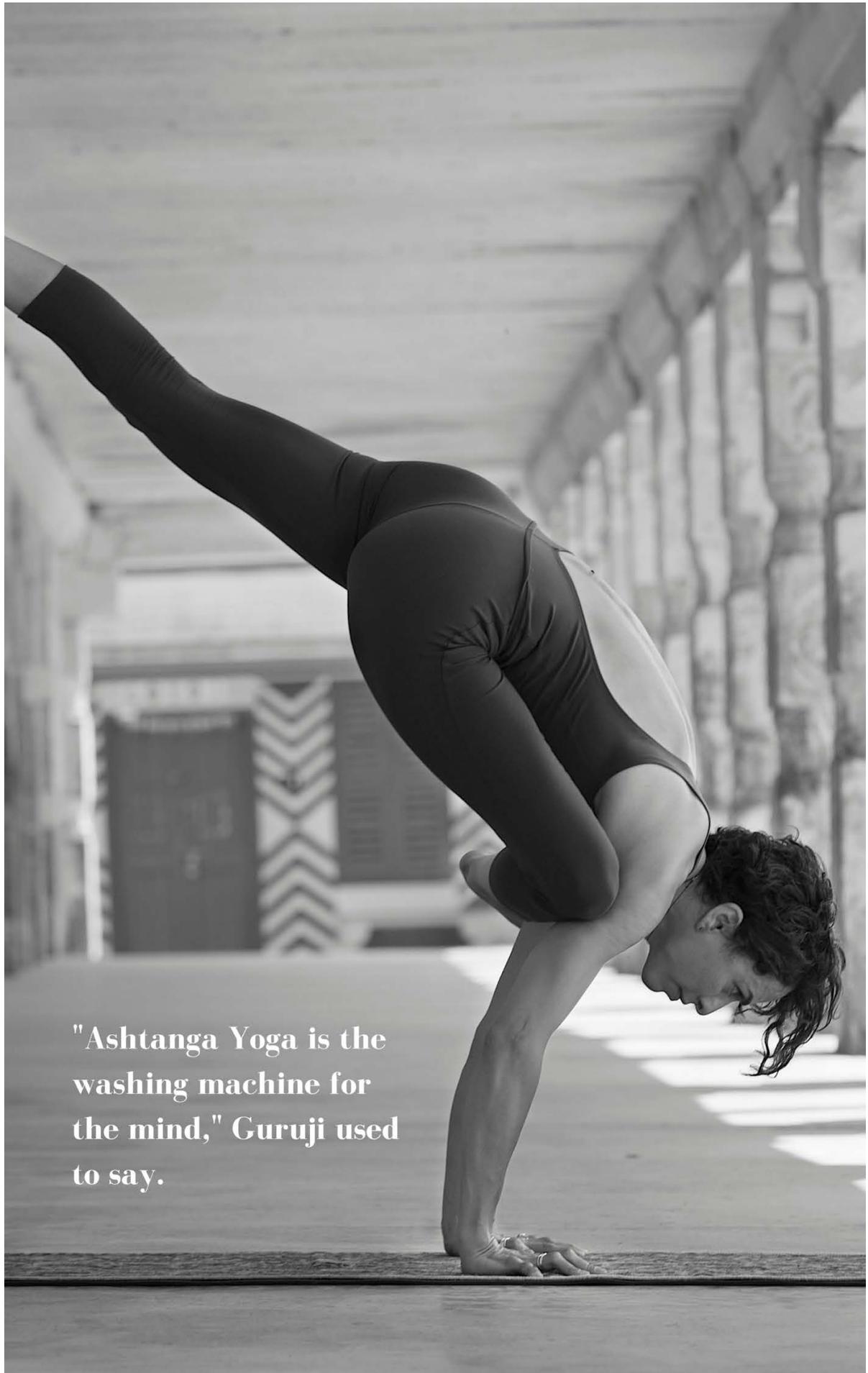
- Teachers should maintain a yoga room or shala to allow for daily, preferably morning, Mysore practice.
- Teachers should honor Sunday and the full/new moon as rest days.
- Authorized level 1 teachers should not teach beyond the Primary Series and should not conduct workshops.
- Teachers are required to teach the Ashtanga method as taught by the directors of KPJAYI.
- Certified teachers should teach as the directors of KPJAYI have guided them.
- There is no teacher-training program approved by this institute and you cannot provide any such program under any name (e.g. Ashtanga Teacher Intensive).

Meeting these guidelines is certainly challenging and we've all bent the rules (myself included) for various reasons. However, this guidance is what contains parampara (knowledge that is passed in succession from teacher to student) and holds us accountable as teachers. In many ways, it is another opportunity for us to deepen our relationships to the lineage and within our communities.

While Ashtanga as a system has not changed, the approaches to teaching have varied from generation to generation. It is important to remember that Pattabhi Jois taught for over seven decades, during which his approach was constantly tested and refined. Many of Pattabhi Jois' early students, who studied with him in Mysore during the 1970's and 1980's, were taught postures at a much faster and more rigorous pace than students are taught today. While it doesn't easily boil down to "old school" versus "new school," every teacher's understanding of the system is influenced by the period in Pattabhi Jois' life in which they studied, and how long he or she studied.

Today yoga seems to offer limitless possibilities. It promises to make us stronger and more flexible, more compassionate and joyful. However, the emerging societal archetype of the calm, worldly, and enlightened yogi/yogini can breed narcissism and an over-inflated sense of self among teachers. On one end of the spectrum lies the charismatic *yogalebrity* and social media superstar. On the other lies the escapist, so caught up in the spiritual experiences of yoga that it obscures the contradictory and sometimes uglier facets of human nature.

Yoga doesn't necessarily make better people; it makes powerful people. The subtle practices of yoga can develop a psychic power in the individual that has the potential to manifest hidden desires and exaggerate latent neuroses. Here is where the gendered power dynamics in the community are most visible. It's not uncommon for influential male teachers to sleep with (and at times even rape) students; in the cases of high profile teachers like Bikram Choudhury and John Friend, this has been thoroughly covered by



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the media. Yet most of these cases—both within and outside of the Ashtanga community—have gone unreported.

Yoga culture's propensity for secrecy and denial became clear to me after the second rape. Some peers and colleagues urged me to keep quiet and move on, fearful of the effect a disclosure would have on the community while others refused to believe me altogether. I decided to pursue legal action. In the process, I lost my community and the PTSD symptoms became more severe. Although the perpetrator in my case was not an Ashtanga practitioner, I've seen this mentality in every yoga community I come in contact with.

I had a great start with two amazing teachers—Noah Williams and Kimberly Flynn—who were deeply devoted to the teachings of Pattabhi Jois. They taught me the Primary Series slowly and one posture at a time. Most importantly they taught me the integrity of the method as Pattabhi Jois intended. I was only with them for approximately one year, and then moved on to self-practice.

It's ok—maybe even better—if you don't live near an authorized or certified teacher. Your devotion will be self-cultivated, without attachment to the physical person. In this case, I recommend researching and spending a week or two with a teacher you're interested in studying with, in a daily Mysore setting, the way it was intended to be learned. I've had students who have studied with me for a short time and then returned home. We remain in contact and continue to discuss the practice via e-mail or Skype. Sometimes they return to San Francisco, sometimes not, but they continue self-practice. While the practice eventually becomes THE teacher I cannot emphasize enough the importance of starting with a qualified teacher whose consistent presence can be crucial to keeping us on track in order to avoid ego-based pitfalls and "spiritual materialism."

I also recommend students do what they can to establish strong and dependable support systems around them. If we're truly and genuinely looking within, we will certainly cross paths with a few personal demons. During these times, our mentors will play a major role in moving us through life's obstacles: physical and spiritual, embodied and perceived. Sometimes they come from our communities, or from conversations with colleagues and teachers. Other times, they come from professionals such as therapists or counselors. (Be discriminating with life coaches, or any service that lacks accountability or accreditation.) Keep in mind that a yoga teacher is not always equipped to play the role of psychologist.

We will not always be in close physical proximity to our teachers. Eventually we need to cultivate our own sense of devotion, gratitude, and love. Many of my teachers are dead and have been for years, but this does not change my understanding of the practice or

our relationship. In fact, their teachings have become more potent over time, and no physical or dimensional distance can change that. Indeed, much in the same way that we are accumulations of our ancestors, our practice will inevitably bear the fingerprints of our teachers.

Yoga and Scholarship

While yoga was once a rarified esoteric discipline, practiced in virtual isolation, this is no longer the case. Over the past decade, yoga has become a legitimate subject of academic scholarship; new historical findings and interpretations are discovered regularly. The history of Ashtanga Yoga, however, eludes this kind of detached, rational interpretation. Indian archival documents tend to be poorly cared for; some have been lost altogether. Gleaning information from human sources has been no less challenging. Both Krishnamacharya and Pattabhi Jois were notoriously cryptic interview subjects, leaving scholars little hard evidence to work with. It is not surprising that the existing scholarship about Ashtanga Yoga has spawned more questions than answers.

Scholarship, in many ways, has been a traditionally masculine discipline, and a refuge for inquisitive Western minds. The one constant is that it's being written (primarily) by men, about men: privileging the triumphs and accomplishments of their lifetimes over the embodied, extant experience of the everyday devotional practitioner. And while women are assuming more leadership roles in the Ashtanga world today - mastering advanced *asanas* once thought impossible for women, becoming entrepreneurs and starting shalas around the globe - scholarly conversations are still predominantly dominated by men. My hope is for more women to step out of today's beauty-obsessed, asana-obsessed, male-oriented gaze and actively participate in academic conversations.

For women, this can be an uphill battle. "Just do your practice," teachers often tell their students. It is a way to keep students focused and to lessen gossip and drama in the community. While this can be very useful and necessary guidance, spoken in the wrong context, in the wrong gender dynamic, it has the potential to censor critical thought and inhibit creativity. In my opinion, this is not yoga either. Yoga is about relationships with others as much as they are about relationships with our bodies and emotions. Thus, scholarship and popular literature matter. In this hyper-connected modern age, it is counterintuitive to do yoga in isolation, with no consideration for what is happening in the world around us.

Ashtanga as Ritual

Although we may shy away from the term, ritual is and has always been an essential part of human society. They are the tools with which we express ourselves, create identities,

organize our lives in time and space, and give meaning to this existence. Ashtanga is no different. Designed to be practiced one and a half hours before sunrise, a special time known in India as *Brahma muhurta*, Ashtanga provides a spatial and temporal frame in which to focus our attention. The sequence of postures coordinate the body with the mind, reorienting the senses in order to cultivate spiritual awareness and growth. “As a social animal, man is also a ritual animal,” the famous anthropologist Mary Douglas once said. Most of our ritual behavior doesn’t happen in the context of religion.

On Self Practice

I have practiced 5-6 days a week, mostly alone, since the late 90’s. It has taught me a great deal. Practicing in a room can be motivating and inspiring, but it can also be a crutch, distracting us from what the practice is truly trying to teach us: independence, self-reliance, and taking responsibility for our practice and our lives. Self-practice is the ultimate test of future teachers.

Students often assume that because I teach, self-practice comes naturally to me. It’s actually quite the opposite. I’ve had to work very hard to develop a system that will work. This is what I’ve learned:

- Stop negotiating. “I’ve been practicing everyday, so what’s a day off?” I am not referring to injuries or actual reasons for needing to modify or back off. I am referring to the lazy mind.
- Technology. If you’re practicing in the early morning, skip the computer or other devices. If this is not possible then set a time for yourself. Resist the urge to dip into “Google-land”. These are time and energy suckers. If you can only practice in the afternoon then take about 30-60 minutes free from the tech world prior to starting practice. Keep technology out of the yoga room. If you need a clock, make sure it is gadget free.
- Shower. In the same way you clean and prepare the space, take the time to clean and prepare your body. Showering cleanses not only the physical but also the mental faculties. It wakes us up and warms up the body for movement.
- Set up a practice space. It doesn’t need to be fancy or even permanent. You don’t need painted OM’s or dancing Shivas, just enough space for a mat (sometimes less than that). I’ve practiced in bathrooms, kitchens, and hallways, on carpets, concrete, and dirt. Use only what you need.

- Include items or images that are sacred to you and will help hold you accountable for your personal and spiritual growth, reflecting the way you wish to express yourself in the world. These items can be small and portable, if you're a traveler. They don't need to be religious items.
- Spend time preparing your space by thoroughly straightening and cleaning as necessary. If time permits a short seated deep breathing meditation may help. Sharath recommends Trataka meditation. I've found that the more care, patience and attention I give to the space, the more likely I am to commit to the practice. The more rushed or hurried I am, the less likely I will practice with any awareness. It's best to do less with full attention.

Traveling is one of the worst things for the body and for the practice. The more time zones we cross, the more stress we experience. From an Ayurvedic perspective, this creates an excess of vata, causing pain, discomfort, and at times, inflammation. It's not the time to push, or to try new and advanced postures, as travel creates dips and disturbances in consistency that will interrupt progression in the practice. It's best to do a light practice on days of and around travel. Then, depending on stress level, gradually ramp up to where your practice was before. This is one reason why yoga retreats and vacations are not entirely compatible with daily practice.

Practicing During Injuries or Stress

"Between life and death, there's only illness and recovery," a teacher of mine once said. Since I've been practicing, I've been in three scooter accidents, one motorcycle accident, and have experienced slipped discs, extreme sciatica (no walking), broken (almost amputated) toes, PTSD, and everything in between. For each of these times, I needed to modify the practice, sometimes redesigning it completely. During these times, it's best to consult with a teacher knowledgeable about the subtle effects of each posture and how the sequence affects the various systems of the body.

Many Ashtangis fall into an all-or-nothing mentality. If we're injured, or can't do the postures completely, then we won't practice at all. But the system requests nothing of the sort. Ideally the practice will take the same amount of time to complete, six days a week. Yet we need to be adaptable during times of stress or injury. Sometimes the practice is ten minutes long. Sometimes it's an hour and a half. Most importantly, the system teaches us to practice in any way we can: with any body and any mental state. It's not about perfection. If we are breathing, we can practice.

Going To Mysore

There is a bewitching and enchanting beauty to India. She is a mysterious creature: maddening, terrifying, comforting, and soothing. She brings me closer to creation and spirit, reminding me of what's real. There's no place like it. In many ways, India is the opposite of the United States. In the States, beauty is on the surface and all the dirt is underneath. In India the dirt is on the surface, in your face, and the beauty is hidden underneath. A concentrated *dristi* helps.

Guruji recommended three months of study in Mysore in order to learn the practice. Sharath continues to suggest this, although one month is minimum. The key is that you spend a few months and then go home to integrate what you have learned. But going to Mysore isn't easy for most people, and I was no exception. Traveling to India the first few trips required personal sacrifice: working two or three jobs, sleeping on friends' couches. I was essentially homeless for years in order to save enough money. During that time, I dabbled in teaching vinyasa. My peers were teaching and branding their own styles of vinyasa yoga, making good money and becoming local celebrities. But my heart wasn't on that path. It felt inauthentic to teach something different from what I practiced. I wanted to learn from the master of Ashtanga Yoga, and no one else would do.

My thoughts on this matter have not changed over the years. When students tell me they're interested in teaching my response is always the same.

“Great, when are you going to Mysore?”

For me, study in Mysore is a requirement if you'd like to teach the Ashtanga method. Now that yoga has become mainstream, the industry is ridden with commercial traps more interested in your money than your education. I caution students to identify these gimmicks for what they are. Here's the deal: every certified and authorized Ashtanga teacher (myself included) is teaching what they have translated from Guruji and/or Sharath. Through our egos, desires, stresses, and neuroses, none of our translations are pure, and no teacher is perfect. I encourage students to develop their own understandings by studying with their teachers' teacher and to remain students for at least ten years before teaching.

Conclusion

We live against a backdrop of information overload, social media, and television/celebrity culture. This has seeped into the modern yoga sphere, adding more complexity to our pre-existing notions of ancient practices. Yet even in these

circumstances, it is possible to live a life of stability and accord. The approaches to daily living set forth by Ashtanga Yoga and Ayurveda offer valuable tools to positively affect our families, communities, and humanity as a whole.

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- Magnolia Zuniga, 2015

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