

A Brief History of Ashtanga Yoga

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Sri K. Pattabhi Jois is acknowledged as the founder of Ashtanga yoga. He was a student, starting in the late 1920s, of the famed instructor, Krishnamacharya, who had other famous students such as B. K. S. Iyengar and T. K. V. Desikachar. It is felt that Krishnamacharya taught Pattabhi Jois the raw material of vinyasa, or yoga flow with linking of the breath as well as the tradition of adjusting students. From these elements Pattabhi Jois created the Ashtanga yoga sequence.

Ashtanga yoga, as it is commonly taught today, is prescribed as a strict set of postures practiced in a specific manner. While many believe the practice has remained unchanged for decades, in fact it has evolved quite a bit.

Early Western Practitioners

In 1973 David Williams and Nancy Gilgoff made an overland trek to India and ended up in the tiny eight-person yoga studio of Pattabhi Jois. They studied with him for four months, learning the full (or at least as full as it was at the time) primary and intermediate series.

In all there are six series. At the time, Pattabhi Jois had about 90 students and had to keep them moving through the small studio quickly.

Series Basics

Ashtanga yoga includes four segments: sun salutations, the standing sequence, a seated series (Primary, Intermediate, 3rd, 4th, 5th, or 6th), and a closing sequence. The Primary series and the closing sequence include a vinyasa (a jumpback and jumpthrough) between each pose, as well as between sides. Poses are repeated on left and right sides throughout most of the six series. The right side is always done first with the exception of Warrior II (Virabhadrasana II). The poses are intended to build upon one another.

Motivation

We practice yoga for a variety of reasons, some physical, others spiritual, meditative, or to enhance the flow of energy in the body. Western Ashtanga yogis frequently practice for the physical benefits of strength, flexibility, and balance. David Williams has said he chooses to practice Ashtanga yoga to enhance the energy flow in his body. He has said he believes adjustments do not enhance the flow of energy, or prana, and therefore does not do them. David feels that Ashtanga yoga is really about mula bandha (root lock, binding at the perineum) to squeeze energy up through the shushumna nadi (central energy channel). Tipping the chin down toward the chest (jalandhara bandha) in all forward folding postures and downward-facing dog pose opens the cervical spine to further promote energy flow. In the early days Ashtanga practitioners practiced Samasthiti (Mountain, or Equal Standing) in a military fashion, with hands down by the sides.

Clarifying a Misunderstanding

At some point Pattabhi Jois began stopping students when they couldn't move into a pose fully, told them to do the closing sequence, Savasana, and then to leave. Popular mythology has pointed to this as a therapeutic measure, when in fact, this was to move more students through the studio. Mistakenly believing this to be an important part of the Ashtanga learning process, many instructors continue to follow this policy today. An unintended consequence is that

students sometimes end up working so hard to move more deeply into poses it can become unhealthy and they may be injured.

Class Styles

Classes are generally taught one of two ways:—led or “Mysore-style.” Mysore is a city in India where Pattabhi Jois first taught. In a led class the instructor calls out each pose and frequently counts the five breaths to hold the pose. He or she will generally demonstrate the poses and walk around the room providing as much individual instruction as possible while keeping the class on track. In a Mysore-style class the students arrive within a specified time period, begin on their own, and practice at their own pace. The instructor typically walks around the room and provides adjustments and individual instruction as necessary. One advantage of a Mysore class is the opportunity for more individual instruction. Keep in mind, however, that for a Mysore-style class you should either have the series memorized or have available a set of “cheat sheets” that list the sequence of poses. While the practice can be physically challenging, in the Mysore-style class in particular, it can become quite meditative since you must stay in the present moment to count your five breaths in each pose.

Sequence Evolution Over the Years

The original Ashtanga yoga series as David and Nancy learned it in India had the following differences from what is typically taught today:

Original Sequence	Today
Surya Namaskara A: 3x	Surya Namaskara A: 5x
Urdhva Muka Svanasana with knees on the floor, no “toe-rolling”	Urdhva Muka Svanasana with knees off the floor, rolling over the toes
Prasarita Padottanasana: move directly from variation to variation	Prasarita Padottanasana: extend arms between variations A, B, and C
Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana D	Not included
Jumpback between poses, but not sides of bilateral poses (half-vinyasa) or between poses in the same group	Jumpback between all poses and sides of bilateral poses (full-vinyasa)
Not included	Parivritta Trikonasana
Not included	Parivritta Parsvakonasana
Not included	Utkatasana
Not included	Virabhadrasana I
Not included	Virabhadrasana II
Bhujapidasana with head one inch off the floor	Bhujapidasana with head on the floor
Not included	Salamba Sarvangasana

Not included	Halasana
Not included	Karnapidasana
Not included	Urdhva Padmasana
Not included	Pindasana
Not included	Matsyasana
Not included	Uttana Padasana
Not included	Sirsasana

Today Manju Jois (the son of Pattabhi Jois) and David Williams promote a fluid and gentle practice of Ashtanga yoga. They both travel extensively to promote Ashtanga yoga. Since the death of Pattabhi Jois in 2009, his grandson, Sharath took over the Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute (now the K. Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute) in Mysore, India. Sharath continues to teach the more strict series and policies of his grandfather, creating somewhat of a bifurcation in the Ashtanga yoga teaching community. More recently, controversy has swirled as reports of sexual misconduct by Pattabhi Jois have surfaced.

Constructive Criticism from Practitioners

One criticism of Ashtanga yoga is that its Primary series has too many forward folds. This concern is exacerbated by the fact that our sedentary lifestyles promote unhealthy lower spines. When we sit all day the discs between our vertebrae may begin squeezing out the back, causing impingement on the sciatic nerve. Forward folding poses can aggravate this condition. To ameliorate this problem, spine lengthening and backbends can be useful. Fortunately, the Ashtanga Intermediate series has many back-bending poses. A reasonably balanced practice, promoted by Manju, is to practice the Primary series up to and including Navasana, then begin the Intermediate series, practicing it up to and including Ardha Matsyendrasana, and, as always, concluding with the closing sequence.

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For More Information

J. Brown Yoga Podcast: <https://www.jbrownnyoga.com/yoga-talks-podcast/>

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