ASHTANGA YOGA SHALA PRESENTS

ASHTANGA YOGA
ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW BEFORE STARTING A PRACTICE

BY
JOHN FORDE

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1. Origins and Lineage

The ancient practice of ashtanga yoga was delineated by Vamana Rishi in his text the Yoga Korunta. This text was imparted to the great yogi Sri. T. Krishnamacharya by his guru Sri. Rama Mohan Bramachari in the early 1900s and was subsequently passed down to Sri. K. Pattabhi Jois during his studies with Krishnamacharya.

Pattabhi Jois - called Guruji by his many students - single-handedly kept this tradition alive for more than forty years before it began to reach the west. Since the early 1970s it has slowly grown to become a style of yoga practised by thousands of people around the world.
Guruji, who was also a Sanskrit professor, taught continuously for over seventy years before his death in 2009 at the age of 93. His legacy is the thousands of practitioners of ashtanga yoga worldwide who's lives have been transformed through his dedication to yoga.

The Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute in Mysore, India (subsequently renamed the K Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute after Guruji’s death) is now run by Guruji's daughter Saraswati and his grandson Sharath Jois, who is our teacher, and the current lineage holder of the ashtanga tradition.
2. Principles

Ashtanga Yoga is an ancient practice consisting of yoga asanas (postures) combined with a very specific breathing system. It is intended to bring health and vitality, cultivate a light, lean and strong body, and bring a profound clarity to the mind.

There are six series of asanas which make up the entirety of the ashtanga yoga method – Primary, Intermediate, and Advanced A, B, C, and D. Most students will practice the primary series for their whole lives, and a smaller proportion will learn some, or all, of the intermediate series. The advanced series are practised by a very small percentage of practitioners and, indeed, there is only one living master, Sharath Jois, who has practised all six series.

Sharath demonstrating sirsasana from the intermediate series
3. Breath and Bandha

The breath is key to the ashtanga practice and is accompanied by a sighing sound in the back of the throat. This sound draws the attention inwards and can be used as a gauge of how relaxed we are in each of the asanas.

It is difficult to explain, in words, exactly how to practise this breathing technique but it can be demonstrated and learned in a matter of minutes.

In conjunction with the breath there are two bandhas (energetic locks), which are maintained throughout the practice. The first - Uddiyana Bandha - is practised initially by drawing the lower abdomen inwards and upwards. The second - Mula Bandha - is lifting the pelvic floor.

The bandhas, in conjunction with the breath, lock energy inside the body and also stabilise the lower back and pelvis.
4. Asana

The asanas are the poses of classical yoga. There are many thousands of asanas that have been practised for many hundreds, if not thousands, of years. Each asana has a different effect on the body and mind.

5. Drishti

Combined with the series of asanas there are very specific and prescribed gazing points (dhristi).

Each asana has its own dhristi. For example, in pascimattanasana (a seated forward bend) the student looks at the big toes.

The nine drishti are: the tip of the nose, the thumbs, the palm of the hand, the big toe(s), the space between the eyebrows, the navel, left, right, and up.
6. Vinyasa

Vinyasa is the name given to the method of moving and breathing that is the fundamental constituent of the ashtanga practice. Each breath throughout the series is associated with a particular movement. In fact, the system is so clearly and unambiguously laid out that each breath and movement follows a very specific count. For example, the photo below depicts the twelfth vinyasa of the asana called Maricasana C i.e. if you are following the correct system, it takes twelve movements and breaths (vinyasa) to get from standing up straight at the front of your yoga mat to ending up in this position.

The modern phenomenon of “vinyasa flow” yoga, that now appears on the timetable of most yoga studios, has its roots in the ashtanga system.
7. Heat

In ayurveda, the ancient Indian medical system, there is a concept called agni. Agni is a fire which is said to burn in the digestive system (specifically in the stomach). If the breathing and bandhas are practised correctly it is possible to stoke this fire (you can think of the breath like a bellows). Therefore, the practice itself is designed to produce a profuse sweat.

The heat created through the practice is said to “boil the blood” causing all the poisons in the body to be excreted through the sweat. The more pure the internal systems of the body become, the less sweat will be produced through yoga practice.
8. Daily Practice

The ashtanga tradition recommends practice six days a week (we close our shala on Saturdays to facilitate the rest day). Some students start with a six-day-a-week practice from the very beginning but most start with twice or three times per week, building to daily practice over time. The traditional way of learning the practice is to slowly build up the actual time spent practising each day slowly, so that daily practice can be easily assimilated.

There are two further rest days per month; one on the day of the full moon and one on the day of the new moon. We follow this tradition at our shala by having no classes on the “moon-days”. Ladies are further encouraged to take the first three days of their menstrual cycle as rest days. This is to aid in maintaining a healthy and regular cycle.
9. Mysore-style

The traditional way to learn and practise the ashtanga yoga system is in the context of a Mysore-style class. Mysore-style takes its name from the city in South India where Krishnamacharya and Sri K. Pattabhi Jois taught for many years.

In the Mysore-style setting the beginning student is very slowly taught the fundamentals (breath, bandha and drishti) and the series of asanas. The way we teach at AYSD is to give the student very small and easily digestible portions of the series to memorise. We then get them to repeat that short sequence a few times until they feel like they’ve memorised it. In this way the student is never given more than they can easily memorise and their body gets a chance to become more flexible, strong and supple before moving on to more challenging asanas.
As the student progresses through the series they come to the Mysore-style class to practise what they have learned and to learn the next portion of the series (if it is appropriate for them). The teacher also gives hands-on adjustments, guidance, and help to all the students in the class.

When practising in this self-led way, the potential for stilling the mind is much greater than when a teacher is constantly telling you what to do next. It doesn’t take very long before the student memorises the sequence to the point where they don’t have to think about it.

Then the practice becomes like a moving meditation.
If you would like to learn ashtanga yoga in the traditional way, come along to one of our Mysore-style classes in Baggot Street, Dublin 2

Yes, I want to!