



TOPIC OF THE MONTH

May 2016

Space without Separation

There are many differing opinions on the ashtanga practice :) Maybe they are all truths from different perspectives. Or truths for different bodies. While I understand the reasoning behind trying to make the practice “the same” all over the world and not let various flavors get too far away from the main framework; doing this however limits which bodies can enjoy and flourish in the strict guidelines. This severely limits who can do a strict practice.

We all have different needs . . . all the while having some of the same needs! The framework of ashtanga is solid and has stood the test of time, however it has not been the same since it was developed in the 30's! So why try to make it a one model fits all now? There are so many different models (bodies) it seems a one model fits all approach is just not feasible in the real world. We need to navigate a way through the framework honoring the system while being able to make it fit different bodies. Perhaps we need an ashtanga umbrella allowing us all a little space to enjoy and use the framework without separation in the wonderful world of ashtanga.

Pattabhi Jois has said the Ashtanga asana practice is based on science. And I have had a lot of fun researching the science behind the postures and the benefits to our internal organs. The science is there, I have been writing about it. Here are some of the articles: <http://www.befityoga.com/philosophy-lifestyle/topic-of-the-month/> Starting May 2013 any topic beginning with the title 'Inside Out Posturing' is this research.

But there have been many changes made to the ashtanga practice over the years. Not all these changes come from science but seem to come more from the western mindset ... Meaning if something is good for us more is better or to push push push or to make it more masculine and less feminine ...

Or to take an asana and try to make it look the same on many different bodies. Why do we let someone impose these ideas on us?

People sometimes don't like to figure out something for themselves; its hard to figure out the practice for yourself — it takes time and study. This is why we have teachers . . . however a teacher should work with you and ask for your feed back and intuition vs. imposing a demanding set of postures in a very rigid form that is not considering different body types — it's the western mind set of “there is only one perfect way to do this pose”.

We know that all bodies are different, our medical community too is making similar errors (by trying to standardize diagnoses and prescriptions -- like a one size fits all approach). By trying to make ashtanga yoga a "one size fits all approach" we impose a rigid set routine on people instead of a framework for each body to work from. When we do this we are limiting its benefits and preventing many people from accessing its benefits.



The nature of being human is wanting that “magic pill” or “magic pose” or “magic vinyasa” that cures me and makes me perfect no matter my lifestyle. Sometimes in hopes of finding this, we stick our head in the sand and just go along with what “they” say (who is “they” anyway?) in hopes of having that magic happen to us. I don’t go along with what “they” say most of the time . . .

For me; gone are the days when I “just believe” . . . To do what someone says when it is against your intuition or your knowledge (even if its only what you *think* you know) is giving someone too much power over you. In the old time mentality — especially in ancient India and Hindu beliefs; we were taught to respect authority.

And maybe in the old days the “authority” deserved respect — now mostly they don’t. We are in the Kali Yuga -- the dark ages -- and giving someone authority over our own intuition means it could turn into a materialistic gain for the “authority”.

In yoga philosophy there are eras, each era can last thousands to millions of years. We have the Satya Yuga or golden age era, the silver era or treta yuga, dvapara yuga or bronze era, and kali yoga the “demon age” — or dark age — as we are in now. Have you ever seen the dancing Shiva statue? In the circle of flames Shiva is dancing with one foot off the ground . . . when both feet hit the ground . . . boom. its a new era. In the Golden age we all love everyone and there are no hidden agendas. Everyone does what is best for the earth, for the community, for all creatures. In the Kali Yuga or dark age . . . we are materialistic and we have hidden agendas . . .

In Kali Yuga people make recommendations for you based on what is best for them; not you. We have proven over and over again through the ages this is problem— even the teachers who start out good (for example Osho and Bikram) end up abusing their students and causing harm. This is not unique to yoga but really to all professions worldwide. Look at politics, government regulators, to religion, to corporations. It’s all about money, not serving the people who are buying their products or using their services. It’s Kali Yuga.

Ashtanga yoga is more about breath than attaining a posture (attaining a posture would be “materialistic” aka kali yuga . . .)

This really is a breath centered practice and along with the western mindset comes too much attention to attaining as asana -- making an asana of yourself as I’ve heard David Swenson say. My biggest complaint about how I see Ashtanga “growing up” is that it is becoming a lot about attaining the posture.

There is more benefit in the journey than the end result of attaining the posture! It doesn’t matter if you can jump through, bind in Mari D, hold tittibhasana, or land bakasana B . . . its the journey of trying those poses where the most benefit it is.

*In my opinion, the old time ashtanga yoga has a solid understanding of breathing, bandhas, drishti, vinyasa, consistent practice, no fidgets . . . and to keep that we have a looser definition of asana. But we are “strict” in those mentioned areas. Even though most newer schools of ashtanga also place emphasis on vinyasa, breath, drishti, and bandha — they seem to base progress on the asana achievement. **The old way I learned ashtanga relies on factors of breath, bandhas, drishti, vinyasa, and consistent practice for progress more than asana factors** which differs from the way ashtanga and many vinyasa based yogas are currently being taught.*



Changes over the years to the ashtanga system that might be from it 'coming west' vs. research or yoga philosophy:

Vinyasas -- meaning the connecting chaturanga/ up dog / down dog we do between poses (not the vinyasa counts in and out of each pose -- these vinyasa count are beneficial for controlling mind stuff :)

For example; more vinyasa do not make you stronger. We know endurance does not create strength. Endurance exercises break down the body (marathoners actually have a higher risk of heart attack due to scarring of the heart tissue from long distance running).

We build strength with intensity or "more weight and less reps" — this is common exercise knowledge. In the exercise world if you want to build strength you use a weight that does not allow you to lift it more than 8-12 times. Now in ashtanga I hear all over the world people telling me they can not go on in a series unless they do all the vinyasa — including the between right and left side vinyasas in the asymmetrical poses! ? When questioned I am told its to build strength It doesn't, it just makes you tired. And it can be causing overuse issues in the shoulders and lower back.

The magic (or benefit) is not just in the chaturanga/up dogs/down dogs. The magic is in coming to your mat most days and breathing . . . and moving. And honestly you will benefit more from postures toward the end of primary series that you might not be "allowed" to do if you can't make it through all the vinyasas to get there! And even if you can do all the vinyasas in full primary (about 50 total) I don't recommend it. You will get more benefit by doing less vinyasa with better form. In my own practice and 18+ years of teaching and observing, most people start to lose strength and form in their vinyasas somewhere around the janu sirsasana series . . . from here on out I have noticed many people drag themselves through one more vinyasa they have to do. Honestly you would get better benefit from doing less vinyasa stronger — stronger pick ups and jump throughs handling more of your body weight but repeated less often, this a better recipe for building strength.

And if you think you need all the extra vinyasas to build heat . . . try breathing deeper and stronger — use [connected breathing](#) to build heat . . . and keeping your practice rhythm or flow without stopping to adjust your mat, clean fuzz off somewhere, look around at what someone else is doing . . .

Ref: <http://www.acsm.org/docs/current-comments/strengthpowerandbabyboomer.pdf>

If you are tight or injured or can not do a pose — try to replicate the pose as best you can — IT STILL MOVES ENERGY AND GETS YOU BENEFIT.

Even if you can not do a posture or have to modify a pose due to pain — you are moving energy and getting benefit! So the perfect expression of what someone thinks the posture should be is not the only place in the posture you get benefit. Moving toward the "full" posture as best you can will move energy and release tension and cleanse the body.

This past winter in Maui, Nancy was working with someone in class at her studio who could not put their leg behind their head all the way; I heard someone comment "why is she even doing third if she can't put her



leg behind her head?" Nancy responded "because she is still moving energy and getting benefit." And she could do everything else . . . Why not practice a series just because someone can't put their leg behind their head?

Six day per week full series practices are too much for most people.

Yoga should enhance our life, not be our life . . .

Consistent practice does not necessarily mean a full series 6 days per week. Many teachers of ashtanga like to tell you that you have to do practice 6 days per week having off full and new moon days only and menstruation days for women. For those of us that have no family yet, or maybe do not have a demanding job; a full series six days per week might be good for us. For those of us who have a family and/or career, 1-1/2 hours of practice per day is not logical or possible . . . or may be putting us in an overtrained state.

Overtraining?

Most people either exercise too little or too much . . . there is a goldilocks zone with exercise and intense practices like Ashtanga. All exercise creates oxidative stress in our bodies — what makes the difference between oxidative stress that helps us grow vs. breaks us down is if it is acute or chronic. When our body is faced with oxidative stress it has to use the anti-oxidants from the food we eat to correct the imbalances; if our diet is not adequate or we are creating too many free radicals (oxidative stress) by overexercising then the aging process will set in leaving our skin saggy, and our muscles weaker instead of stronger.

So the difference between developing vitality from oxidative stress or getting older from it stems on finding the right amount or practice. Acute oxidative stress can help our body be stronger. Chronic oxidative stress will make us age sooner. The issues that cause chronic oxidative stress are over-exercising, bad diet, and chemical exposures.

ref:

<http://articles.mercola.com/sites/articles/archive/2011/06/19/innovative-revolutionary-program-to-keep-your-body-biologically-young.aspx>

The Yoga Rahasya teaches **Yoga in 3 stages of life**;

1. Brahmachari stage = a young person who seeks knowledge of Brahma. This stage is called the shristi stage, shristi means "creation" — practice should create strength.
2. Grahasta stage = householder — Most obstacles in life to practicing. Pranayama is very important in this stage. This stage is called Sthiti, meaning "to stay". Use your yoga practice to maintain health and fitness in the stage.
3. Dhyanam = sanyasi or renunciate. This stage starts around 75 years of age and is called the Samhara stage, which means "going back to the source" or antyah (end). Practices are about peaceful mind, pranayama and meditation.

If you learn ashtanga in your youth like the old yogic texts teach then the approach is different. It seems Mysore today is like a college whether you are college aged or not. In an academic college; Usually you are young, not tight yet, maybe thin, no family. You can take on a six day per week course that includes studies and a lot of physicality, you have no job. You spend many hours working on this per day just learning and strengthening. You build a fine machine :)



Now you have to go out in the world and work, maybe raise a family. Your yoga practice becomes a memory . . . but if you hold on to bits and pieces you do really well because you built a strong foundation and your body remembers. You may not be able to do what you were doing in college, but you maintain a sound body and mind by making time to breathe and move on your mat each day -- even though it may be short and sweet more days than you would like.

Problem is . . . more people come to yoga already in their householder phase, they didn't get the base of years of practice prior to having other responsibilities. They can not take on a rigid six day per week practice, family, cooking real food and spending many hours “hunting and gathering” (because grocery store food will kill you) without breaking down. And honestly practicing yoga by being present with your children may be more yoga than doing asana on your yoga mat.

Learning yoga later in life, we tend to have more family/work/life stress and our bodies are stiffer, maybe with some aches and pains . . . so we might need the poses to look a little differently than if we learned them in our 20s.

The old time rumors that ashtanga yoga is for teenage boys holds some validity if you want to teach a rigid system that you can only do if you are young, flexible, and strong. However **if you take the frame work of this very intelligently designed system and adapt it for many different bodies in many different stages of life you have a system for a lifetime for many different people.**

For example the Mysore college student who had to grow up and get a job and family, now he may be on the other side of that -- children grown up, less work responsibility..... Practice can once again have more time each day 😊 However it might be different again -- maybe more pranayama, less asana. Or less asana and more time in closing inversions . . . or just sitting by the river . . . But chances are the practice of ashtanga will yet again be best as a framework than a rigid impose-ment.

Even if you had to learn and detoxify and maybe you need to create strength in your householder phase because you did not get to do that in your brahmachari stage . . . you can still use the practice to do that, however the practice should still be different for a person just learning in their householder phase than a person learning the practice in their brahmachari stage.

And remember Pattabhi Jois's quote “Sun salutes and standing poses, no backsliding”. During your busy times do not make your yoga practice one more “thing” you need to do. Or worse yet, feel guilt over missing a practice or doing a short practice. Remember to keep your practice in perspective; the recommendation of daily practice is to connect us to our breathing and meditative mind each day, then take that with you off your mat and into your life. Yes we need some physicality to keep the body healthy however a full series with all the chaturanga vinyasas six days per week is overtraining for people in their householder phase.

Head to knee vs chin to shin . . . depends more on the person than anything.

For starters, I love David Swenson's answer to the question about doing forward bends head to knee or chin to shin His response "which way can you breathe better?". This is a breathing practice.

The more detailed answer ...



If your upper back is tight and you are told to put your chin on your shin then you crank your neck at the base of the skull where both the vagus nerve exits the skull (and the brachial plexus exits the lower cervical vertebrae as well but pass under the clavicle). Pressure at this point in those nerves alerts the stress response in your nervous system — and it just feels uncomfortable when you are tight. If your upper back is flexible enough to allow extension in the upper spine then putting your chin to your shin puts less stress on those nerves at the base of the your skull.

Conversely if you are tight or already have a forward head position — going head to knee may not be your best option either. If you are so far away from getting your head to your knee in forward bends and your head hangs down in each posture, this could be aggravating neck or back pain. Better to practice head retraction as you forward bend keeping your neck in line with your spine.

Personally early in my practice years I could only do head to knee — chin to shin was painful for me. As my body opened up over the years I went from head to knee, to nose to knee, to kissing my knee, to chin to shin. And now I like to mix it up and do a little of each. And really the best of both worlds is to mix them up so you do not have any one overly-repeated movement. I have found an intelligent way to put both head to knee and chin to shin in use:

HEAD TO KNEE vs CHIN TO SHIN

Sharath teaches chin to shin, David Williams teaches head to knee . . . In YOGA MALA Pattabhi Jois told Nancy in Ardha Baddha picture is wrong text is correct, ditto for tirianga mukha eka pada paschimattanasana. Ardha baddha text says chin to shin, tirianga text says head to knee :) With a little research this is what I figured out, when you do a forward bend 'chin to shin' it pushes the heel deeper into your abdomen increasing the internal cleansing, so in the poses where our heel is in our gut best to go chin to shin if you can comfortably.

When you forward bend with your head to your knee it rounds your back, pulls you into your bandhas and makes it easier to move energy in your body -- specifically your spine. Also allowing your head to rest on your knee in forward bending poses is very calming to your nervous system. Keep our nervous system calm is an important part of our health.

So you want to do both; some postures head to knee, some postures chin to shin -- working between moving matter in the body and moving energy in the body. Here is how I practice:

- 🙏 Ardha Baddha Padma Paschimattanasana = chin to shin
- 🙏 Tiriagna Mukha Eka Pada Paschimattanasana = head to knee
- 🙏 Janu Sirsasana A & B = head to knee
- 🙏 Janu Sirsasana C = chin to shin
- 🙏 Marichyasana A & B = chin to shin/floor (Mari A is chin to shin even though your heel is not in your gut because it is preparing you for mari b where your heel is deeply in your gut)

ASHTANGA YOGA IS A COMBINATION OF MOVING MATTER IN OUR BODIES AND MOVING ENERGY IN OUR BODIES.

Time of day and Practice



Practicing later in the morning or day is ok too! As we get stricter with our ashtanga another area of recommendation is when to practice. Early morning practices — starting just before sunrise are recommended — and this may be fine for many, but not all. Individualization is important here again.

While it is important to practice on an empty stomach — before breakfast being preferable, it is still beneficial to practice later in the day — and may be even better for many people. Personally I start practice around 9:30 or 10a and don't eat breakfast until I am done. Many people enjoy evening practice and this is nice too. Its a nice way to release the days stress for an evening of relaxation and good sleep.

A study done by BMJ looked at saliva samples of swimmers tested at 6am and 6pm. The morning swimmers had higher levels of cortisol and therefore stress during the workout and lower levels of immune function. The inverse was found for the evening swimmers. Having less stress in your body and better immune function while exercising are benefits.

Individual Circadian Rhythms have much to do with when is the best time to practice for you. It seems spiritual or meditative practices are best just before sunrise, strenuous exercises (like an ashtanga series) might be better for our stress levels and immune system later in the morning or day.

What is most important is that you practice at a time of day that makes it easy to consistently practice!

ref: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/health/article-130553/Dawn-work-harm.html>

Cross training? How about the same series day after day after day . . .

Many of heard of the benefits of cross training;

- ☪ Reduced risk of injury
- ☪ Better overall health - The body adapts to what we put it through. This has a scientific principal named to it called the SAID principle — Specific Adaption to Imposed Demand. What this means is that if you do chaturanga from the top position, aka plank pose, down to the level of your elbows you will get stronger in that range of motion only. If you try going lower than your elbows you will not be stronger at that depth unless you start practicing it that way. Certain muscle fibers within a group of muscles like the triceps, work in certain motions — other motions are taken up by other muscle fibers. By cross training in our movements we stimulate more muscle fibers to get stronger.
- ☪ Enhanced exercise adherence

Why do we ignore these benefits and listen to a teacher that keeps us in the same series day after day after day? Or why do we avoid learning a new series or doing something different? Preferring to stay in our comfort zone? I know many people that just like to do half primary every practice . . . and this is better than no practice, of course.

And as a beginner we do need repetition to learn the movements in our body, and to let our muscle memory take over (muscles have their own movement memory; if you repeat a movement often you don't need to think about it — your body will just do it. Therefore muscle memory allows us to get to the meditative aspect of the practice, so it is important to develop your muscle memory). In learning phases it is ok to have repetition in your practice for learning but don't let this phase go on too long.



It is a more balanced approach on the body, however, to have different series to work with. Second series is not an advancement of Primary, it is a counter balance to primary. Once you learn primary you can slowly start learning the intermediate series too. This is better for back health and gives our body a variety of poses and movements for our overall health. There is no need to fear second series — even if you think the poses that come later in the series you will never be able to do — if you find a competent teacher they can help you make the poses fit your body and abilities.

Also jumping in and out of postures in different ways will have more benefit as well. It is not necessary every time to cross your legs and pick up the same way — or do the same jump forward to having a seat. Some poses it is beneficial to jump in to in different ways — it makes you more coordinated. And pick up different ways to vary the strengthening. Just don't think about it too much! Remember the meditative side in your practices . . .

Use your breath to cross train too!

LENGTH OF BREATH? Depends on each individual person. Over time you get stronger in your practice and your breath naturally slows down, then you are ready to spend more time in a posture -- that progression will happen naturally.

Somedays though spice it up a bit - sometimes do a slower breath . . . sometimes a faster breath.

If you are having a “bad” practice day use a slow breath and do fewer vinyasa and poses. If you are feeling good and having a good practice day pick up the pace and breathe strong and faster and have a fun practice :)

Nutritious movement is a new term I recently heard (coined by Katy Bowman), it's about moving more of YOU not just moving more. Repetitive movements are a challenge on the body. So instead of sitting down the same way every time, sit differently each time and get up and down in different ways.

Walking barefoot is another good example of this. When you wear shoes your foot is limited in how it moves. When you walk barefoot your foot takes on many different shapes and you engage different muscles in the foot.

You want to try to move all parts of you, when you have one area the moves repeatedly connected to another area that rarely moves, this junction is a high risk area for pain. You want all the parts in the your body to have a certain amount of suppleness and flexibility. This allows for better flow of blood, lymph drainage, nutrients in and out of cells, and moving toxins out to where they can be eliminated.

You don't want to do the same movements day after day after day, you want to target all areas of the body for movement. We don't have time to do this every day for the entire body; so in our householder phase it seems best to rotate working different areas or different movements for the body from one day to the next.

And latest research is showing that it is better to move all day long than to just move intensely for one hour or so each day. Many of us atone by sitting for 8 hours then pushing ourselves in an asthanga practice or



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gym workout to atone for the sitting. It is better to move throughout the 8 hours and have a more nurturing practice or workout.

Remember when you are sitting your body has to work extra hard to move fluids . . . so don't sit like a lady or gentleman . . . sit like a yogi. On a floor, on a ball, sit in different yoga positions, while you sit stretch your calf, stretch your shins, open your hips, lift your heart and take your face to the sky, fidget! Don't sit still! Do your practice up to one hour per day but move the rest of the day.

ref:

<http://www.acefitness.org/acefit/healthy-living-article/59/36/what-is-cross-training-and-why-is-it/>

<https://nutritiousmovement.com>

<http://fitness.mercola.com/sites/fitness/archive/2015/05/08/sitting-too-long.aspx>

<https://www.acsm.org/docs/brochures/reducing-sedentary-behaviors-sitting-less-and-moving-more.pdf>