



## Ashtanga Yoga Ideally, and a little science

As I am traveling and teaching ashtanga workshops all over the world this month I could not choose if this month's topic should be ashtanga yoga for real people or ashtanga yoga for women ... two popular workshops ... instead of basing this topic off either of these workshops I want to share what ashtanga yoga would look like in an ideal situation :) Utopia or Shambala or Hakuna Matata.

The point being ... Ashtanga yoga is really not about all this asana, or getting the bind, or catching your heels. Yoga — even ashtanga yoga is not about attaining the asana and your progress in yoga is not about these markers of whether you can bind in marichyasana D, catch your heels in kapotasana or progress to the intermediate series when you can drop back and stand up. Please do not push your body unnecessarily in the name of yoga.

In utopia ashtanga yoga would look like: you learn slowly preferably in a mysore style class. First just learn the breathing and the opening postures called sun salutes, the three finishing postures and take rest. Let this be your practice for a few days or even a week or maybe even a month. Get comfortable with it, get to know it well, learn how to be aware of your breath, and how to move in rhythm with your breath, and how you are breathing on and off your mat (throughout your day). When you feel confident with this you are ready to learn more. You slowly learn one or two postures each week. You don't look around and compare yourself to anyone else, you don't care where you are in a series or how tight your hips are, or how weak your arms are, or if they are too short ;) You just follow your breath and do your practice. And after some time you have a full series, and you move on to the next series. You just breathe and move and smile in your practice releasing tension, detoxifying toxins, removing stress, getting stronger, more flexible (but you don't care about these "measurements"), feeling better, feeling lighter, feeling energetic, feeling confident. No one tells you how you should look in a posture, or pushes and pulls you somewhere your body is not willing to go.

### Cut to reality

I saw a note hanging on a wall ... The quote read "Honor the teaching, not the student".

Does this bother anyone else? I am here to tell you as a teacher I honor my student, and their unique bodies, and what is going on in their lives, and where they are now. I then take the intelligence of the system and apply it *to the person*. If you want to practice ashtanga yoga and you can not follow the system the way it is being imposed on you — no worries, practice ashtanga yoga anyway. This is the problematic mentality when a "system" is organized.

### Yoga vs. Religion (religion would be honoring the teaching not the student)



This mentality is turning the system of ashtanga yoga into a religion. Mostly how ashtanga is being approached today is more of a religion ... we are honoring the system over a person and following advice against common sense and even science ... What is the definition of religion? Believing something with ardor or faith (against scientific evidence or other evidence).

Much of the advice given today on ashtanga yoga is not backed by any ancient teachings, yogic philosophy, or science — or even a long history of doing it this way. Pattabhi Jois did say this practice is based on science and there is proof. I have spent the last 5 years of my life researching this fact, you can follow some of this research if you choose; follow the link below, beginning May 2013 I started to write about the science I researched as our topics of the month at my studio and also as part of my Ashtanga Yoga Inside Out workshops <https://www.befityoga.com/philosophy-lifestyle/topic-of-the-month/> Any month titled “Inside Out Posturing” is based on this research.

Some of the ways ashtanga is being taught today that science does not support?

- ॐ Markers of progression – Can anyone find in any ancient yogic textbook about dropping back and standing up as a marker of progression? Or binding in a posture before you do the next? Progression is having a steady breath throughout your practice, knowing your body and where it is in a pose, not fidgeting in your practice, not looking around, and not pushing too hard; just steady practice; mostly daily.
- ॐ Ashtanga Yoga as a linear practice. Does the primary series go from easy to hard? no. Is shalabasana harder than dropping back — or even urdhva dhanurasana? no.
  - o Primary series works systematically through the organs and detoxification systems of the body. Why would you not want to learn this complete system because your body may not have the ability to catch a bind, or your joints may be tender in some of the more challenging positions for westerners such as lotus. Second series is not a progression of primary, it is a counter balance. We need both series. Guy Donahaye on his website has many transcripts of interviews with Pattabhi Jois, listen to what he says. The transcripts are on the right side bar: [http://www.aysnyc.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=blogcategory&id=29&Itemid=227](http://www.aysnyc.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=blogcategory&id=29&Itemid=227)
- ॐ Time and intensity – Lets look at Intense practices as akin to workouts. In the fitness world intensity, interval time and frequency all need to be in the right mix to not overtrain, this is looked at as the length of the interval and the intensity of it vs. the frequency of it. When we work intensely it requires we have intervals of “rest”. In an ashtanga practice instead of your entire practice being intense; this may look like working more intensely in sun salutes and standing poses, and resting in seated poses. Seated poses may gradually build up intensity — for example in primary as you reach the Marichyasana series intensity may increase through garbha pindasana; then as you reach baddha konasana intensity lowers



again. And this type of practice would not be done everyday; you would have some days of working intensely and some days of a softer practice to allow the body to grow and adapt. Working hard day after day for long periods of time breaks the body down. **During rest is when the body rebuilds stronger.**

- 36 Phase of life – See below under Daily practice. Most people come to ashtanga in their householder phase and are being taught like they are in their brahmachari stage; then further being made to feel guilty if they can not do an hour and a half practice six days per week. If you have come to ashtanga in your householder phase you can still learn and practice in this stage; you just need to be gentler and more accepting with yourself and how time and progress will wax and wane through this stage of your life. Remember yoga is union; sometimes that union is with your children or family.
- 36 Amount of vinyasas vs. getting stronger – It is a well known fact in physiology of the body that high repetition (greater than 35 reps) will have very little strength gain. Why are so many people now being told to do over 50 vinyasas in primary series? This high repetition training comes with very little return on your effort; and not only that it greatly increases your risk of over-use injuries — especially in the shoulders. To build strength you would do less repetition with a heavier weight. Translating this to ashtanga = less vinyasas picking up more of your body weight. In watching people practice as I teach for over 20 years I notice when people do more vinyasas including between right and left sides most start to lose power and form around the Janu Sirsasana series. The rest of the practice they either push or drag themselves through the vinyasas. I have seen much better success in teaching people how to safely lift up more of their own weight in taking a vinyasa while performing less vinyasas total in their daily practices.
  - o A side note on vinyasa; vinyasa does NOT just refer to the push-up position, upward facing dog, and downward facing dog transitions. Vinyasa refers to moving in synchronicity with your breath. Moving into a pose with your breath is vinyasa — not just steady breathing — breathing with specific movements of your body. The method of vinyasa is an important part of the Ashtanga practice, maybe even the heart of it (vinyasa includes the breath). Pattabhi Jois likes to quote the sage Vamana who says: ‘Oh Yogi don’t do asana without vinyasa’ (in Sanskrit: “Vina vinyasa yogena asanadin na karayet”)
    - A more literal and correct translation of vinyasa breaks down to: **Nyasa which means “to place”, and the prefix Vi translates as “in a special way” or some people translate Vi as Vin to mean wind. Thus vinyasa means to place in a special way or place your body with your wind. Both translations are quite valid in my understandings.** We now have a mental and physical way to approach our practice—with Awareness.
    - All of the ashtanga poses have a vinyasa count into and out of them, for example in trikonasana the vinyasa count is:



- ॐ the first vinyasa is to inhale and step open to the right,
- ॐ the 2nd vinyasa is to exhale and catch the toe and look to your thumb and breath 5 times,
- ॐ the third vinyasa is to inhale and come up and turn your feet,
- ॐ the 4th vinyasa is to exhale into the left side and hold the pose 5 breaths,
- ॐ the 5th vinyasa is inhale come up, exhale samasthitih.

➤ **Vinyasa is to align you with your breath.** In Ashtanga Yoga the entire practice is vinyasa, from the first sun salute to the last hop (or crawl ;) through to rest pose, moving in this way makes the entire practice meditative.

- ॐ Male vs. Female – Women need to practice differently than men. Men have more muscle mass and by design have a greater capacity for work and aerobic endurance and power. Why today are all ashtangis, men and women alike being made to do the practice in the same way? Maybe because it was mostly very advanced men who initially learned and taught ashtanga yoga? Pattabhi Jois realized this difference; he taught Nancy Gilgoff (the first western woman to show up in his classes) differently than he taught the men that were there. If you get a chance to take any of her workshops worldwide, please do. And ask her how Pattabhi Jois taught her the practice.
- ॐ Sedentary Job vs. Active Job – common sense on this one ... People who have desk jobs or sedentary jobs need a yoga practice that has a little more “work” in it. Construction workers, massage therapists, wait staff and other types of active jobs need a more restorative practice. Ashtanga yoga can be taught to be a more restorative practice; if you work an active job you can still practice ashtanga. I was teaching a workshop in Lima at a studio who makes EVERYONE do all the vinyasas including between right and left side ... a person with a wrist injury thought she could not practice at all because she could not do all the vinyasas. What a shame! I showed her some options and her practice helped her wrist heal.
- ॐ Attaining the “posture” – Look at the ancient yogic textbooks and look at the pictures of people in postures. Quite lax, huh? There is no history of people looking exactly the same or trying to attain an ideal form of a posture. In the textbooks there is plenty of room for different bodies to do the postures. Please don’t conform, making your body look like a young thin flexible male may not be in your best interest. Allow your body to be you :) Don’t be afraid to look different!
- ॐ Breathing — we all know the breath is the heart of this system. You hear teachers preach it all throughout their lovely, beautifully cued classes ... while cuing at a pace beyond your breath and not even listening to your breath. I often hear the phrase “work within your breath” but I don’t think many teachers truly understand this. If binding in Marichyasana C makes your breath short and tight — this is going beyond your breath. Back off, don’t bind keep your breath even and steady and see how far you can go without losing that breath. That is working within



your breath. See the two points below for more research on why you want to practice this way.

ॐ Nervous System effects :) – We have a lot of recent research supporting the benefit of Mind Body Medicine and exercises like yoga — woo-hoo! finally! The biggest benefit from all this research is the effect on the nervous system making us Parasympathetic dominant. Meaning not setting off our stress response. See next point for more information on this.

ॐ **Stress –Latest research shows the primary benefit of mind body exercise or medicine is its effect on our nervous systems. We want to move toward being parasympathetic dominant. Under the stress response we do not digest, detox, heal or regenerate our organs and skin. We send all our energy to think quick and run quicker .... If you are practicing with stress hormones you are not detoxing or healing, you are breaking down your body. Ashtanga gives us tools to remain parasympathetic dominant — both the breathing and the bandhas stimulate our parasympathetic nervous system.**

Our body releases hormones and neurotransmitters to give us energy; in our practice we want to encourage the feel good chemicals without the “stress” chemicals:

1. When under stress our body releases Adrenaline to give us the energy to run or fight. If we run and/or fight we used up the adrenaline in our system. if you do not it is stored in our bodies, in our muscle tissues, where it creates toxins and leads to tension and tightness. Adrenaline is created under stressful situations whether or not the threat is real or imagined, so our thoughts alone can create adrenaline! When you feel stress — physically or emotionally, your body creates adrenaline. Pushing in your practice to “succeed” or get a posture or a ‘release’ will create adrenaline. We want to use our practice to feel good, not to create more stress and tension.
2. Endorphins are released with physical exertion. They are capable of lowering stress and causing pleasurable sensations similar to opiates, but in a good way (aka the Yoga high 😊). If your work in yoga is pleasurable you will create endorphins but NOT adrenaline. This is desirable. If your work is stressed you will create endorphins AND adrenaline (studies show that video games create both since they stimulate the fight or flight response . . . but just working out does not — yoga is a work-in by the way, not a work out 😊)
3. Serotonin, melatonin, and GABA (gamma aminobutyric acid — a neurotransmitter) are released into our body with meditation and deep breathing.

Serotonin influences happy mood and behavior; a lack of serotonin leads to depression, obesity, insomnia, headaches, pms, fibromyalgia, among other disorders.



Melatonin is a hormone manufactured by the pineal gland (from the amino acid tryptophan). Levels of melatonin in the blood peak before bedtime to create restful sleep. Melatonin is also a powerful anti-oxidant. Stress lowers melatonin levels.

*The hormone melatonin produces a number of health benefits in terms of your immune system. It's a powerful antioxidant and free radical scavenger that helps combat inflammation. In fact, melatonin is so integral to your immune system that a lack of it causes your thymus gland, a key component of your immune system, to atrophy.(1) Melatonin may even have a role in slowing the aging of your brain. In addition to helping you fall asleep and bestowing a feeling of overall comfort and well being, melatonin has proven to have an impressive array of anti-cancer benefits. (2) Melatonin inhibits the proliferation of a wide range of cancer cell types, as well as triggering cancer cell apoptosis (self destruction). The hormone also interferes with the new blood supply tumors require for their rapid growth (angiogenesis).(3) Melatonin can boost efficacy and decrease the toxicity of cancer chemotherapy.(4)*

GABA is best known for stabilizing mood disorders. Anxiety, tension, insomnia and epilepsy are related to low levels of GABA.

You choose how you want to practice — you can create the joy chemicals, serotonin and endorphins, by breathing deep and relaxing and enjoying your practice. Or you can create adrenaline by pushing too hard for all the fun and fancy “tricks” of the practice . . .

When your practice makes you feel good you WANT to practice 😊 Practicing in a way that makes you feel good also creates positive thoughts and feelings. Positive thoughts attract positivity in your life.

**Pushing in your practice and creating adrenaline is a fear hormone, fear comes with negative thoughts, negative thoughts attract negativity to you.**

If you feel pain or tightness or tension in a posture, don't push through it. Relax and breathe it in, invite it. This stored tension is a stored memory (the issues are in the tissues . . .) Welcome these discoveries of tightness with a mothers nurturing compassion. There is a part of you that has witnessed all these little hurts and sufferings since you were a child. Allow them to release, use your breath as a healing balm relaxing the tensions that are trapping in the tightness so those feelings can release our body and mind from their bondage and negative thoughts.

ॐ DAILY PRACTICE – for a lifetime. Ashtanga yoga is most effective as a daily practice -- a lifestyle. This does not mean you need to spend 1–1/2 to 2 hours each day in yoga and meditation. You want yoga to enhance your life not be your life. Short yoga practices count. I can't under estimate the power of short practices. The Daily practice is where you learn to use ashtanga yoga in all phases of your life. There are three phases of life in Hinduism:

o 3 Stages of Life and how to use our practices

➤ Brahmachari – up to our 20s: This would be our school and college years where we have no spouse or children, or occupation, yet.



Our bodies are young with good blood supply to all our tendons and ligaments still happening.

- Practice = **shristi stage, shristi means creation, practice should create strength**
- Grhasta – mid to late 20s – through 40s: **House holder phase; Now is time to work, make money, raise a family. This time has the MOST OBSTACLES TO PRACTICE.** Our goal is to maintain what we built in our brahmachari stage, pranayama is most important during this phase.
  - practice = **sthiti--means to stay. Yoga practice is to maintain health and fitness**
- Dhyanam – mid to late 60s: **Sanyasi or renunciate=spiritual journeys . . .** Our children are grown, and/or we are retired. We once again have more time in our lives.
  - practice = **samhara means going back to source or antyah = god. practice up to age 75 years, practice = peaceful mind asana, pranayama, and meditation.**
- If you are dealing with an injury, surgery (like bunions, rotator cuff, back surgery, etc.), pregnancy and/or birth, etc. you have a chance to learn how to use ashtanga yoga during transitional times in your life. **MODIFY but practice to support healing. Practices can be short and sweet — just enough to connect you with your breath and bandhas -- your inner strength, then take that with you throughout your day.**
  - It is very important during this time to have a teacher that knows how to help you modify your practice and be well versed in yoga therapy. In these situations you need a teacher with more “tools” in their tool box than just ashtanga. While half primary (the “go-to” advice for ashtangis in need of therapy) may be healing for some injuries and ailments many times pain, injury, or illness needs other solutions.

**To practice for a lifetime, use your practice to BREATHE BETTER. Then take this breath with you through your day and wherever you go. Nice thing about your breath is you can take it with you wherever you go 😊**

To practice for a lifetime you need to practice SMART. Slowly over each practice each day you cleanse your body and mind transforming yourself one cell at a time . . .

DON'T PUSH -- LET IT COME TO YOU -- ashtanga yoga should not be militant Do your practice consistently and the lightness and the flexibility the binds, the inversions, etc. will come to you. They literally just “fall into your lap”. Slip into your yoga like a comfortable pair of jeans :)

**ITS WHAT IS ON THE INSIDE THAT IS MOST IMPORTANT, WHAT YOU CAN'T SEE**



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Breathing and Bandhas are most important part of the physical practice, you can better hear an advanced practice than you can see it.

**In our Practice WE WANT TO LEARN TO BREATHE BETTER**

Enjoy your practice, relax, and see the big picture of your practice.

**MAKE YOUR YOGA PRACTICE A MOVING MEDITATION** – And carry this with you throughout your day.