

Ashtanga Yoga - the Strength and Beauty of the East*

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Yoga. This one word can tell so much to those who know how to listen. It carries the strength of an infinite journey and of the experience that was being created for thousands of years. Ancient wisdom and practice that once used to be the characteristics of the East are nowadays spreading across the entire world and reaching the most distant parts of our colourful planet and offering the answers to the eternal questions of humankind.

Yoga is one of the most comprehensive systems of self-improving that is so complex and multifaceted that telling everything about that topic would require thousands of written pages and hours of hard work. Even then, the most valuable part would remain beyond our reach because the essence of yoga lies in the practice and commitment to a specific way of living.

There are numerous styles of yoga and various traditions they are developed from. Although all traditions represent holistic systems that include meditative techniques, physical exercise, spiritual, ethical and philosophical theories, they all share the same goal – reaching Samadhi (enlightenment) and living in harmony, wellbeing, good health and happiness. In today's modern world, attention is given either to physical or to spiritual aspect of our being and it is often overlooked that a whole being should be completely balanced on all its levels. Different types of sports, fitness and aerobic programmes focused on strengthening, losing weight or body shaping emphasize only the physical aspect of a person and neglect individual's spiritual component. At the same time, various kinds of meditations or religious practices accentuate only individual's spiritual part and tend to neglect the physical one.

So, what should a person who wants to have the body of an athlete but at the same time develop his or her meditative and spiritual capacities? The answer is easy – Ashtanga Yoga.

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Ashtanga Yoga represents an old, ancient system, established several thousands of years ago. What makes this style of yoga so special is the fact that it develops a strong muscular athlete-like body along with an incredible level of flexibility of muscles and skeleton. However, this is only the external impression, whereas much more is hidden within the practice itself. Although only observing some of the exercises (asanas) seems incredible (not to mention performing them), they are not ordinary acrobatics, but rather a precise and complex system of perfectly correct breathing and focus.

Ashtanga yoga is attractive for people who like challenges and are ready to sweat a lot during an exercise class. It is not surprising that it is becoming more and more popular and drawing the attention of people who want to shape their body to perfection but also to develop both – mental as well as spiritual aspects of their being.

“Practice, practice and everything is coming.” This is the motto established by a great teacher Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, having in mind the difficultness and the strength of the only type of yoga that can be described as powerful and dynamic. The only person from this region who has had the opportunity to learn from renowned Sri K. Pattabhi Jois and most probably the only authentic yogi in our country is Ashtanga Yoga teacher Ranko Stoiljković. The ease with which Ranko performs the asanas most of us could only dream about, makes us think about the possibilities of our own body and its general condition. A man who is more than fifty years old and has the body of a muscular young man will certainly make you reconsider self-improving. Although he has been practicing karate since his early youth and yoga since the age of nineteen, he got in touch with Ashtanga Yoga after many lessons he learned, various styles of yoga he tried and years of practice. Of course, it was love at first sight.

“Six years ago, while I was living at Swamiji’s Ashram in Greece, I heard of Ashtanga Yoga for the first time. I spent eight years at that Ashram, practicing wonderful Satyananda Yoga. I met Swamiji in 1994 in India and realized I should follow her and that she, in a way, is my teacher. Along with becoming familiar with various systems of yoga, I was beginning to realise that there are some of them that might be more suitable for me, having in mind the fact that I had been practicing karate since my childhood. My good friend, Dragan Lončar once gave me a DVD with Ashtanga Yoga exercises and that is how my practice started. With this video material and a variety of books, I had been practicing for two years, until I finally decided to travel to India and learn at the very source of knowledge – from Sri K. Pattabhi Jois”, says Ranko as he explains his journey towards Ashtanga Yoga.

This type of yoga comprises the synchronisation or unity of mind, body and spirit that leads to self-realization.

“The practice of Ashtanga Yoga developed from Rishi Vamana. It is not known when he actually lived, but it must have been before Patanjali, who was the first to codify yoga sutras and is considered to be the first guru. Rishi Vamana was a family man, but also a great yogi. He is considered to be the first to unify different techniques in order to enable people who have families and less time for exercise to benefit from the practice in the same way as someone who does yoga all day and lives in isolation. In order to achieve this goal, it was necessary to establish a method that would include synchronised performing of pranayama, bandha, asanas and meditative techniques with the purpose to accomplish in a more effective manner the result everybody is trying to achieve - the enlightenment. Ashtanga represents a unique dynamic meditation and people are often surprised by its effects. If they perform a sufficient number of Sun salutations, the beginners get really tired, sweat a lot and feel the life force. So, Ashtanga yoga is very intense, powerful and effective”, says Ranko.

Sri K. Pattabhi Jois (Guruji) became the student of Sri Krishnamacharya, a well-known guru from India, who is said to have lived a hundred and one year. Guruji worked very hard to become one of Krishnamacharya’s students and, finally the successor of his secrets and techniques of Ashtanga Yoga and philosophy. Krishnamacharya and Guruji translated an ancient text of Yoga korunta and simplified the system nowadays known as Ashtanga yoga, which soon became popular in the western world. One of the best known teachers living outside India is John Scott, who lives in New Zealand. Recently, our publisher “Esoteria” has published his book entitled as “Ashtanga Yoga”, and the expert consultant for this edition has been Ranko Stoiljković, who had the opportunity to practice with John Scott in New Zealand.

Among the rest, the following is said in this book:

“What truly makes a difference between Ashtanga yoga and other methods of yoga that are taught today is the vinyasa – the unity between the movement and reathing. An array of movements (asanas) generates warmth that causes sweating, the sweat purifies and deliberates toxins captured within the superficial layer of body fat. The more one practices, a larger amount of toxins is deliberated from the deeper layers of muscle tissue and inner organs, which leads to a healthier, stronger and more flexible body. The power of breathing must not be underestimated, because it represents the key of this yoga system. The breath fills us with energy, calmness and meditateness. The breath is called ujjaji and its sound, fullness and rhythm are powerful. It makes the mind enter itself and become one with the body. That breath, bandha and focal point (three core techniques of the vinyasa) applied together bring corporal and meditative aspects of Ashtanga yoga. Fluid practice (i.e. when the student stops thinking which asana goes next) becomes a powerful meditation. This beauty becomes real only when all aspects are synchronized”.

Ranko states the following about the uniqueness of synchronization of movement, breathing and focus that make difference between Ashtanga yoga and other systems: "What we call vinyasa, or unity between breathing and movement is one important feature of Ashtanga yoga. It generates inner warmth, warms up the blood and causes sweating. The sweating purifies the body. So, this special way of connecting techniques is what makes the difference between Ashtanga and other styles of yoga. In that sense, Ashtanga has made a true revolution since it made people realize that it provides both-physical as well as spiritual benefits. Some asanas are extremely difficult and require years of training. That is the reason why everything should be done gradually and to learn primary series called yoga chikitsa or yoga therapy first. This method is great, but difficult. It is suitable for younger people and is generally not recommended for persons who are more than fifty or sixty years old and who have not been practicing previously. Yoga is for everybody, but it should be emphasized that not every style of yoga is suitable for everyone".

One of the benefits of practicing any style of yoga is a balanced and healthy lifestyle. Energetic flows in the body are regulated and it becomes healthier, more resistant and rejuvenated. Ashtanga yoga has gone very far in this field since the main characteristic of all teachers of this yoga style is the fact that they have all lived very long. Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, a great guru who Ranko Stoilković learned from, died a couple years ago in the age of ninety four, and his teacher Krishnamacharya died at the age of hundred and one. Perhaps the elixir of eternal youth, that holy grail of pharmaceutical industries and modern world should be sought in the ancient practice and wisdom of Ashtanga yoga. In that way, apart from enabling people to live longer and look nicer, it would also cause the flourishing of a new awareness that would make this world a nicer and happier place-