

Ashtanga Yoga in the Eyes of a Beginner

This November, at the time when I will be travelling to India, it will be my fifth year as a student of Ashtanga Yoga. Yes, this indeed is a journey of learning and, actually, the more and the deeper I enter this practice, it seems to me that I am becoming more involved with it. I have a T-shirt with Gurujī's message that perfectly describes this system: "One lifetime is not enough". And this is how it all started...

My girlfriend suggested me to join her at yoga she had just started practicing. Just like most guys would do, I instantly rejected her proposal. Why would I need such thing along with regular swimming and hundreds of kilometres of bike riding? Still, I went there with her just to see how it looks like, so that it does not turn out that I rejected her.

On my first class, teacher Ranko showed me Sun salutations that I was practicing for about an hour. The coordination of movements did not represent a problem for me, but my extra weight did. Today, I am more aware of that than I used to be at that moment. After an hour of rather dynamic Sun salutations, I tried to sit in a lotus position. I say "tried", because at that moment I was convinced that I would never be able to do that and that my legs could never be placed in such position with ease. That evening, I had the most severe muscle pain ever. If you have ever felt muscle pain that is so strong that you do not feel like moving, trust me, this was worse. There was no dilemma – if you want a powerful and difficult thing – there you have it.

My first motive for regular exercise was my vision that I would be able to bring my body in shape. Hours and hours of drawing and overwhelming love I felt for architecture, first as a student and later as a professional, left some consequences. That winter, the scale showed 30 kilos more than it does this morning. While practicing Padangusthasana during these first days I could hardly reach my toes and I would not even dare to consider some more demanding asanas. After a couple of months, Ranko had already showed me the majority of first series' asanas. I practiced most of them as variations, which means in a manner I was capable of at that moment. There were some asanas I had to skip in order to avoid injuring my knees or ankles. This is what pushed me forward since I felt a small, sometimes hardly visible but to me so important, progress every time.

Understanding and support of smiling Ranko did not leave me much choice – I started attending classes regularly. What actually influenced me the most were not only Ranko's immense positive energy and obvious dedication to teaching, but the feeling that I finally managed to find an activity that strengthens and stretches the body, that is in a strange way dynamic and static at the same time and that constantly keeps me filled with calmness and challenge. During these first months, I kept listening to his traditional sentence: "Just pay attention to breathing, it is more important than the correctness and the depth of the position or asana" as well as to the words of Pattabhi Jois he kept repeating to everyone: "Practice, practice and everything is coming".

It appears to me that this necessity to accept the difficulty of the practice and the lack of ability to perform some of the asanas in a correct manner actually initiated changes that are much more radical than the physical ones and that maybe did not seem so obvious to people around me as much as they did to myself. The parts of the puzzle gradually started to come together... After first changes regarding my body, started subtle alterations in my perception of the world, without any exaggeration. After a couple of months of intense practice I managed to accomplish the abovementioned lotus position (padmasana)... When something like that happens, when you accomplish something you have been trying really hard and thought was impossible, Gurujī's words "Practice, practice and everything is coming" have their full meaning. The key was in patience and persistence, without euphoria and potential disappointment at the beginning.

As the time passed, I noticed natural patience in my behaviour outside the shala, calmness I had never felt before, stillness and the feeling of balance that can hardly be disturbed by any situation. That peace and quietness during the class when only breathing and teacher's instructions can be heard while we practice obviously caused the change that was no longer guided by the thoughts but by the awareness and focus on what we do, on the present moment. When describing the joy after my efforts, I do not refer to the rational component that is guided by the goal but to true joy of walking along the road and seeing progress as a guideline and sign that you are going in the right direction, the sign you do not become attached to but rather smile and move forward...

I may say freely and with certainty say that Ashtanga Yoga has become my life practice. Meanwhile, many people came and started practicing yoga with us. Even more of them tried and gave up. All the beginnings are more or less the same although each of us has a different starting point. It actually seems to me that the changes differ only on physical level, while more profound and essential ones that come after some time are common for all of us, no matter how intense and deep they are and regardless of the fact that someone could

only touch the floor or put both of his legs behind his head during the first class. This is my fifth year of regular practice. Out of that, I have been practicing six times a week for more than three years. Today I think I am closer to the beginning than I used to be after only a couple of weeks of practice and that fills me with joy because I love to learn.

Many people ask me what my practice includes. After explaining them briefly what Ashtanga yoga is, I suggest them to come and try it because that is the only way for them to find out whether it is worth learning. I often hear two types of answers, sometimes even from the same person: "I need something more dynamic than yoga" and "I am not suitable for that, I am strong but my ligaments are naturally shortened". Some of the people who gave me similar answers came and started practicing... They are surprised by the progress, dynamics and challenge this practice carries. Just like me, they only needed that first step.

The essence is definitely in the path that we follow and not in the goal that we are trying to accomplish. Therefore, our yearning for the goal is exchanged with the joy of our journey.

Miloš, July, 2013