When Manju Jois, son of Sri K Pattabhi Jois, recently visited Australia, Ashtanga yoga teacher Richard Clark was lucky enough to catch up with him. In this discussion Manju gives us some insights into his experience of yoga and its teachings – and puts to rest some misconceptions about Ashtanga yoga.

**Richard:** Manju, you were born into the family of a yogi. How and when did you get started with yoga practice?

**Manju:** Well, I started when I was 7 years old. I was curious, you know, I would see my father doing all sorts of postures. I didn’t understand what it was that he was doing, but I’d watch him, and try to imitate him, and that’s how it started for me…So, my father saw how curious I was and he started teaching me, but not forcing me into it, just sharing little bits slowly. It built up and I really got into it. And the way my father taught, he taught all of the things that go with Ashtanga yoga. It wasn’t just learning asana, it was learning yoga. The chanting, pranayama, meditation and lifestyle; all of these things go with Ashtanga yoga.

**Richard:** Well that’s one of my questions. How were you taught? What was the ‘subject matter’ as you learnt it…because there are those commentators in the West, and in India, who criticise this Ashtanga method for placing insufficient emphasis on meditation, yama and niyama, chanting and other traditionally regarded, essential elements of yoga.

**Manju:** Actually, they don’t understand the teaching method. So yes, we’ll start with asana and improve the health of the body. If you’re not physically fit, have no energy, what are you going to do? The idea is to try and get your body in good shape so you can sit still and comfortable for the experience of dhyana – meditation. Asanas can help build a strong mind and body.

**Richard:** It’s a basic principle in yoga that body affects mind and mind affects body.

**Manju:** Right, right! So start with the asanas, purify yourself, and it will lead you to the next state. We (as teachers of Ashtanga yoga) will definitely approach yoga by Richard Clark

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Manju Jois

by Richard Clark

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through asana and pranayama and chanting. Then internal changes will come about...now it will be easier to practise yama and niyama, you won’t even know you’re doing it. Yama and niyama will come to you: you can’t force them. And for meditation, you will need to sit well, with a straight back, make sure your posture is right, your breathing is right, your bandhas and drishti are correct.

You need these things for the kundalini chakran. Kundalini is a power that every human being has. Through yoga you can activate this power. So, you see, you’re putting yourself in the ‘right place’ so everything flows perfectly. You need to create the right path so kundalini can move toward sahasrara (chakra). So when you concentrate on the third eye and do the chanting it’s like putting all the right pieces of the puzzle together. Then, in the state of what’s called Brahmavasishthakara, the mind opens up and wisdom arises.

R: Then meditation has, clearly, always been and should remain an essential part of every practice.

M: Absolutely! It is very necessary. These four parts, asana, pranayama, chanting and meditation will take care of the other limbs of Ashtanga yoga.

R: It seems that many Westerners are vigorously pursuing the asana aspect of hatha yoga and neglecting these other rich facets, integral aspects of yoga, in their practice. What’s more, with all the books and DVDs about, it’s assumed that if you’re reasonably flexible and strong and can follow a set of postures in order from A-Z, from Samasthiti through to Sirshasana, you’re ‘doing’ Ashtanga yoga.

M: Yes. What’s happening in the West is that yoga is being totally misunderstood. Everybody wants to be a teacher...and I don’t know what they’re teaching! They don’t have any base...and then they start their own styles. It’s very confusing to the people who really want to understand yoga, because there’s no real base to what some of these teachers are offering. It’s true even in Ashtanga.

R: You think there are cracks beginning to appear in the transmission of yoga teaching in Ashtanga, that there are a lot of teachers overestimating where they’re really at?

M: Well, if you go back to ancient times, the transfer of teachings was from guru to shishya, from teacher to student. The teacher will tell you when you’re ready. You can’t rush this.

My question is: “Okay, so now you’re qualified to be a yoga teacher, please say something from the Vedas.” This is part of yoga practice. “Can I hear some shanti mantras?” They don’t know that. “So what is this meditation all about?” They don’t know that. But they say, “Oh, I can stand on my hands!” I’ll say, “Well, in Circus Soleil they can do even better!” (Manju laughs) But you see, they’re honest about what they’re doing – it’s a circus. So, we go to Circus Soleil because they’re honest and do such a good job of it. They can stand on their fingers, but they’re not saying that they’re yogis. “But you, claiming to be a yogi this way, you’re dishonest.”

R: Then it’s a bit like the children’s party game of ‘pass the message’, where it doesn’t take long for distortions of ridiculous proportion to occur. People are defining yoga around asana. The confusion is evident in the way students often label themselves as Ashtangi, Iyengar or Viniyoga practitioners in a way that’s really quite divisive. They fail to see that these are just methods, simply that. They all head in one direction through a plurality of approaches. Because we’re all different, we each need to find a method that suits.

M: I’ll tell you a story. When I went travelling in North India in 1962 and ’63, I learnt with sadhus. Remember, these guys are practising every day, on the banks of the Ganges. Serious practice!

They asked me what I did. They asked me to show them some of the things I’d learnt. So I showed them Sun Salutations and postures I had learnt from my father. They watched me and they said, “Oh, you’re ready for more pranayamas.” Even though I had only recently met this sadhu, he showed me the pranayamas. The point is, there was no ego involved. He never asked me what school or style I was from. He could tell I was ready for more and he shared openly.

And later on, when I went home, I was so excited and I wanted to clarify these techniques with my father. I felt my Dad might be a bit angry, because I had actually run away from home at the time, but I couldn’t help myself. I said “Oh, Dad look at what I’ve learnt! Look at what this sadhu taught me!” My father was really impressed and said, “Yes, they are all correct.”

R: You had spent some years developing your practice and these sadhus could see that. People today want the short cuts, to get some place without the hard work and effort...and it’s part of the teacher’s role to assess when a student is ready to take another step. It’s not just about physical capability in asana, but the cultivation of mindfulness, right understanding, consistent practice, quality of the breath and attitude that will determine what is given to a student. But everyone’s in a hurry to get to the next posture. Nowadays the student is more likely to try and tell the teacher what they should be doing.

M: Right. Everybody’s a teacher these days, you can see that. But it’s not for the
A lot of teachers are just making up their own rules. And they’re giving a bad name to Ashtanga yoga, or any kind of yoga. A lot of what’s going on is because of tremendous ego.

You say that each asana should become a meditation, that the breathing should be long, slow…well, that places this next comment amongst the absurd and ridiculous, but I’d like to ask you what you make of it. Lately, I’ve heard statements to the effect that Ashtanga yoga seems to favour and even emphasise hyperventilation. Hyperventilation is something I’ve never instructed a student to perform whilst practising asana, nor have I heard such an instruction come from reliable Ashtanga teachers here or in India. Can we lay this one to rest?

M: The breathing we use is called ‘dirgha rechaka puraka’, meaning it is long, deep, slow exhales and inhales. It should be dirgha…long, and like music. The sound is very important. You have to do the ujjayi pranayama. You have to take the breath all the way in and let it go all the way out. It’s like blowing into clogged up pipes to remove obstructions. In this way, even diseases can be brought out. That’s why dirgha rechaka puraka is so important.

Hyperventilation? Like you said, they’re not doing it right, because they’ve not had the right teacher to tell them how to practise the asana. Then they go and start their own style!

R: I suppose the way that some teachers teach, students feel like they have to strain and force themselves to ‘get into’ an asana. Then their breathing will sound rough, it doesn’t mean you’re doing it right, because they’ve not had the right teacher to tell them how to programme.

M: I’ve heard a lot of complaints from students who are having difficulty with a certain posture (in the Ashtanga series) and aren’t being taken further beyond that point, are not being given any modification of that posture to practise. This isn’t the way to teach because there’s always a different avenue to approach it from.
what’s happening today, what sort of changes would you like to see?

M: I think people are paying too much attention to the physical side of practice. The Vedas state *Aham Brahmasmi* – I am Brahman (Brahman is cosmic consciousness). So our body is like our temple. So we have to ask, “What are we doing with it?” That’s where we have to go! Then everything that comes out of us will have a glow.

You can’t just scratch the surface of this culture. You have to go deep in order to understand.

R: Do you feel that coming to the West was a good move for you? What’s it been like moving to California, setting up a new life and family there?

M: Oh, it’s been wonderful. I’m not caught up with just one culture. I like to experience things. I’m a free spirit kind of guy. Slowly, I got used to the culture, started meeting people, and I taught there up until about 1997, when my Mum passed away.

R: That’s when you started travelling more, leading more yoga workshops?

M: Well, what’s happening to yoga is unbelievable. One of my friends and private students encouraged me to go and do more workshops. She said, “People should know all this.” So I agreed. Slowly I’m trying to get across what true Ashtanga is really about. You see, my father doesn’t speak a lot of English. People ask him questions, then misunderstand what he is saying, then they go out and make up their own rules. I just want to share what I know. I can say this is the way they taught in ancient India. This is the way my father taught. And this is the way I want to teach. I don’t want to put any of my ego into it. This is the flow. I’m trying to continue the flow, so people can understand what this yoga is all about.

The idea is to try and get your body in good shape so you can sit still and comfortable for the experience of dhyana – meditation. Asanas can help build a strong mind and body.

For a complete transcript of this discussion go to www.ayl.com.au

Richard Clark has studied Ashtanga yoga extensively in Australia and India. He teaches at Ashtanga Yoga Shala in Brisbane, and is a member of the Yoga Teacher’s Association of Australia, The Australasian Ayurvedic Practitioners Association and the Australian Traditional Medicine Society.