



Ashtanga Yoga Background

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<http://ashtanga.com/html/background.html>

Ashtanga Yoga is a system of Yoga recorded by the sage Vamana Rishi in the *Yoga Korunta*, an ancient manuscript "said to contain lists of many different groupings of *asanas*, as well as highly original teachings on *vinyasa*, *drishti*, *bandhas*, *mudras*, and philosophy" (Jois 2002 xv). The text of the *Yoga Korunta* "was imparted to Sri T. Krishnamacharya in the early 1900's by his Guru Rama Mohan Brahmachari, and was later passed down to Pattabhi Jois during the duration of his studies with Krishnamacharya, beginning in 1927" ("Ashtanga Yoga"). Since 1948, Pattabhi Jois has been teaching *Ashtanga Yoga* from his yoga *shala*, the [Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute](#) (Jois 2002 xvi), according to the sacred tradition of *Guru Parampara* [disciplic succession] (Jois 2003 12).

Ashtanga Yoga literally means "eight-limbed yoga," as outlined by the sage Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras*. According to Patanjali, the path of internal purification for revealing the Universal Self consists of the following eight spiritual practices:

Yama [moral codes]

Niyama [self-purification and study]

Asana [posture]

Pranayama [breath control]

Pratyahara [sense control]

Dharana [concentration]

Dhyana [meditation]

Samadhi [contemplation] (Scott 14-17)

The first four limbs—*yama*, *niyama*, *asana*, *pranayama*—are considered external cleansing practices. According to Pattabhi Jois, defects in the external practices are correctable. However, defects in the internal cleansing practices—*pratyahara*, *dharana*, *dhyana*—are not correctable and can be dangerous to the mind unless the correct *Ashtanga Yoga* method is followed (Stern and Summerbell 35). For this reason, Pattabhi Jois emphasizes that the "Ashtanga Yoga method is Patanjali Yoga" (Flynn).

The definition of Yoga is "the controlling of the mind" [*citta vrtti nirodhah*] (Jois 2003 10). The first two steps toward controlling the mind are the perfection of *yama* and *niyama* (Jois 2003 10). However, it is "not possible to practice the limbs and sub-limbs of *yama* and *niyama* when the body and sense organs are weak and haunted by obstacles" (Jois 2002 17). A person must first take up daily *asana* practice to make the body strong and healthy (Jois 2003 10). With the body and sense organs thus stabilized, the mind can be steady and controlled (Jois 2002 16). With mind control, one is able to pursue and grasp these first two limbs (Flynn).

To perform *asana* correctly in *Ashtanga Yoga*, one must incorporate the use of *vinyasa* and *tristhana*. "*Vinyasa* means breathing and movement system. For each movement, there is one breath. For example, in *Surya Namskar* there are nine *vinyasas*. The first *vinyasa* is inhaling while raising your arms over your head, and putting your hands together; the second is exhaling while bending forward, placing your hands next to your feet, etc. In this way all *asanas* are assigned a certain number of *vinyasas*" ("Ashtanga Yoga").

"The purpose of *vinyasa* is for internal cleansing" ("Ashtanga Yoga"). Synchronizing breathing and movement in the *asanas* heats the blood, cleaning and thinning it so that it may circulate more freely. Improved blood circulation relieves joint pain and removes toxins and disease from the internal organs. The sweat generated from the heat of *vinyasa* then carries the impurities out of the body. Through the use of *vinyasa*, the body becomes healthy, light and strong ("Ashtanga Yoga").

Tristhana refers to the union of "three places of attention or action: posture, breathing system and looking place. These three are very important for yoga practice, and cover three levels of purification: the body, nervous system and mind. They are always performed in conjunction with each other" ("Ashtanga Yoga").

Posture: "The method for purifying and strengthening the body is called *asana*" (Jois 2002 22). In *Ashtanga Yoga*, *asana* is grouped into six series. "The Primary Series [*Yoga Chikitsa*] detoxifies and aligns the body. The Intermediate Series [*Nadi Shodhana*] purifies the nervous system by opening and clearing the energy channels. The Advanced Series A, B, C, and D [*Sthira Bhaga*] integrate the strength and grace of the practice, requiring higher levels of flexibility and humility. Each level is to be fully developed before proceeding to the next, and the sequential order of *asanas* is to be meticulously followed. Each posture is a preparation for the next, developing the

strength and balance required to move further" (Pace). Without an earnest effort and reverence towards the practice of *yama* and *niyama*, however, the practice of *asana* is of little benefit (Flynn).

Breathing: The breathing technique performed with *vinyasa* is called *ujjayi* [victorious breath] (Scott 20), which consists of *puraka* [inhalation] and *rechaka* [exhalation] ("Ashtanga Yoga"). "Both the inhale and exhale should be steady and even, the length of the inhale should be the same length as the exhale" ("Ashtanga Yoga"). Over time, the length and intensity of the inhalation and exhalation should increase, such that the increased stretching of the breath initiates the increased stretching of the body (Scott 21). Long, even breathing also increases the internal fire and strengthens and purifies the nervous system ("Ashtanga Yoga").

Bandhas are essential components of the *ujjayi* breathing technique. *Bandha* means "lock" or "seal" (Scott 21). The purpose of *bandha* is to unlock *pranic* energy and direct it into the 72,000 *nadi* [energy channels] of the subtle body (Scott 21). *Mula bandha* is the anal lock, and *uddiyana bandha* is the lower abdominal lock ("Ashtanga Yoga"). Both *bandhas* "seal in energy, give lightness, strength and health to the body, and help to build a strong internal fire" ("Ashtanga Yoga"). *Mula bandha* operates at the root of the body to seal in *prana* internally for *uddiyana bandha* to direct the *prana* upwards through the *nadis* (Scott 21). *Jalandhara bandha* is the "throat lock" (Jois 2002 23, n.27), which "occurs spontaneously in a subtle form in many asanas due to the *dristi* ("gaze point"), or head position" (Scott 23). "This lock prevents *pranic* energy [from] escaping and stops any build-up of pressure in the head when holding the breath" (Scott 23). Without *bandha* control, "breathing will not be correct, and the *asanas* will give no benefit" ("Ashtanga Yoga").

Looking Place: *Dristhi* is the gazing point on which one focuses while performing the *asana* ("Ashtanga Yoga"). "There are nine *dristhis*: the nose, between the eyebrows, navel, thumb, hands, feet, up, right side and left side. *Dristhi* purifies and stabilizes the functioning of the mind" ("Ashtanga Yoga"). In the practice of *asana*, when the mind focuses purely on inhalation, exhalation, and the *dristhi*, the resulting deep state of concentration paves the way for the practices of *dharana* and *dhyana*, the six and seventh limbs of *Ashtanga Yoga* (Scott 23).

Instruction in *pranayama* can begin after one has learned the *asanas* well and can practice them with ease (Jois 2002 23). "*Pranayama* means taking in the subtle power

of the vital wind through *rechaka* [exhalation], *puraka* [inhalation], and *kumbhaka* [breath retention]. Only these *kriyas*, practiced in conjunction with the three *bandhas* [muscle contractions, or locks] and in accordance with the rules, can be called *pranayama*" (Jois 2002 23). The three *bandhas* are "*mula bandha*, *uddiyana bandha*, and *jalandhara bandha*, and they should be performed while practicing *asana* and the like" (Jois 2002 23). "When *mula bandha* is perfect, mind control is automatic" ("Ashtanga Yoga"). "In this way did Patanjali start Yoga. By using *mulabandha* and by controlling the mind, he gradually gained knowledge of Yoga" (Jois 2003 11).

Practicing *asana* for many years with correct *vinyasa* and *tristhana* gives the student the clarity of mind, steadiness of body, and purification of the nervous system to begin the prescribed *pranayama* practice (Flynn). "Through the practice of *pranayama*, the mind becomes arrested in a single direction and follows the movement of the breath" (Jois 2002 23). *Pranayama* forms the foundation for the internal cleansing practices of *Ashtanga Yoga* (Flynn).

The four internal cleansing practices—*pratyahara*, *dharana*, *dhyana*, and *samadhi*—bring the mind under control (Stern and Summerbell 35). When purification is complete and mind control occurs, the Six Poisons surrounding the spiritual heart [*kama* (desire), *krodha* (anger), *moha* (delusion), *lobha* (greed), *matsarya* (sloth), and *mada* (envy)]—"will, one by one, go completely" (Stern and Summerbell 35), revealing the Universal Self. In this way, the correct, diligent practice of *Ashtanga Yoga* under the direction of a Guru "with a subdued mind unshackled from the external and internal sense organs" (Jois 2002 22) eventually leads one to the full realization of Patanjali's Eight-Limbed Yoga.

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