

What is really "Ashtanga Yoga"?

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The word Ashtanga means "eight-limbed". This is an expression used by the author of the Yoga Sutra, Patanjali.

Patanjali was an ancient yogi who was living in India probably in the age around 300-200 BC. He is one of the most important figures of the yoga tradition, because he is the first one that has written a text with clear and systematic instructions about yoga.

He uses the expression "eight-limbed" to indicate eight important levels in the spiritual progression of a yogi:

- Yama - Code of conduct, including moral values such as Non-violence
- Niyama - observances - commitments to practice, such as study, devotion, and meditation.
- Asana - An easy, steady, comfortable pose.
- Pranayama - regulation of breath leading to control the inner energy.
- Pratyahara - abstraction of the senses, withdrawal of the mind from the physical senses.
- Dharana - concentration, one-pointedness of mind
- Dhyana - Deep meditation (quiet activity that leads to samadhi)
- Samadhi - the quiet state of blissful awareness, superconscious state

Already from this short introduction, is easy to understand that what we usually call "Ashtanga" nowadays has very little to do with this ancient method.

The misunderstanding comes from the fact that, more recently, a very popular "acrobatic-yoga" teacher from South India, called Pattabhi Jois, has decided to use as a name for the style of dynamic Hatha Yoga that he has invented, this ancient name: Ashtanga.

The dynamic yoga sequences invented by Pattabhi Jois have really not any direct historical or philosophical link with the traditional Ashtanga Yoga system of Patanjali, but due to the huge popularity of his modern form of yoga (many famous personalities, including Madonna seem to like the Pattabhi's teaching...), most of the people nowadays believe that the real Ashtanga Yoga is actually the one created by him. Obviously this is not true, it is just a weird paradox, unfortunately typical of the limited knowledge of the Western culture for the traditions coming from the East.

In fact the style of yoga of Pattabhi Jois, is just a modern developing and interpretation of some Hata Yoga exercises (asanas, bhandas and mudras), mixed with some dynamic movement. This dynamic work-out may have one of its root in the physical exercises that the British soldiers used to do to maintain them self in good shape when they were in India. In fact Krishnamacharya, the Guru of Pattabhi Jois used to observe the exercises of the English soldiers that were in India at that time, considering that some of those exercises could have been healthy for students of yoga in a young age. It seems that he was believing that everyone should approach yoga in a different way according to his or her physical characteristics, and so he was considering that some strong and dynamic exercise could be good for young people because they have notoriously more difficult to remain still for a long time in one position and they feel the need to keep the body in action.

So, maybe also because of this reason Pattabhi Jois later decided to develop even more this concept of "dynamic yoga", creating a system that nowadays has become one of the most popular in the world.

However, in the last years many followers of the dynamic style of yoga of Pattabhi Jois, decided to change the name of it to avoid confusion and misunderstanding between this modern style and the traditional system of the Patanjali's Yoga Sutra .

Some of the names that have become common nowadays are:

- Pattabhi Jois's Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga
- Vinyasa Yoga
- Mysore Yoga
- Yoga Flow
- Power yoga

It is important to mention also that some of the followers of the Pattabhi Jois method claim that the sequence of asanas of this teacher have actually a more ancient root. They say that they come from a very ancient text found by the Guru of Pattabhi Jois. The name of this ancient manuscript suppose to be "Yoga Kurunta". Unfortunately, also in

this case there are, so far, no historical evidences that can prove that this statement is true. In fact, in the tradition of India it is not mentioned any text with the name "Yoga Kurunta", and Pattabhi Jois himself doesn't have any copy of this manuscript.

It has been said that the copy that he found has been eaten by the insects, or in other cases, it has been said that this text has just appeared in some mystic vision of the Guru of Pattabhi Jois (Krishnamacharya).

It is possible to find more information about Patanjali, Ashtanga Yoga, and Pattabhi Jois at the following links:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ashtanga_Yoga

<http://www.yogahub.org/blog/guest-author-eric-shaw/>

<http://www.ayri.org/index.html>

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