

Pattabhi Jois Obituary: Memories of my Teacher

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Monday 18th May 2009 is a day that will long be remembered by students of the Ashtanga yoga method. It saw the passing of K. Pattabhi Jois, the man who popularised of this vinyasa-based style of Hatha yoga, at the age of 93. Jois had been in poor health for almost two years and had been released from Mysore Intensive Care Unit into the care of his family just prior to his death.

I was fortunate enough to have studied in India with Jois, Guruji as he was known to his many students, for a decade. During that time I amassed many happy memories of him and his teaching so, rather than offer an obituary of my teacher I would like to share a little of what he meant to me. It is through that these memories and his teachings that his legacy will continue

One day during my first trip to Mysore I asked him about his guru. He told me in his broken English that although Tirumalai Krishnamacharya had been his guru but that his *Sat Guru* (root or true guru) was Sankaracharya.

Sankaracharya was an Indian mystic and saint of the 9th century who composed commentaries on many major Hindu spiritual texts. He propounded a philosophy called Advaita Vedanta. This philosophy, Jois told, meant that "Simply, God is one." All things, whether animate or inanimate were part of God's being. "When you look at a wall you see a wall," Jois said, "I see God. Simply God is one." Jois told me that to appreciate the beauty of Sankaracharya's work and to understand the philosophy that he proposed I would need to learn Sanskrit, the language of the ancient yoga texts and of the commentaries and texts that Sankaracharya authored.

Several years later I attended the celebrations to mark Guruji's 85th birthday. I had recently introduced my Sanskrit teacher to him and he asked that I accompany her to the celebrations. During a gap in the afternoon's proceedings Guruji, without warning, asked my Sanskrit teacher to sing for him. She thought for a moment and then, in the most melodious voice I have ever heard, gave a rendition of Sankaracharya's poem the *Guru Ashtakam* (Eight verses in praise of the Guru). This poem stresses the need for devotion to one's Guru regardless of worldly success, fame, wealth or knowledge.

Guruji was so touched by the rendition and by the sentiments that the poem expresses that, in front of the hundreds of people at the event, tears rolled down his face.

Guruji was a deeply learned man, often quoting long Sanskrit *shlokas* (verses) from memory. He had spent his professional life as the head of the Mysore University department of yoga, retiring in 1973 to teach yoga full time at the school he had established in 1948 at his home and continuing to teach yoga until the final years of his life.

Yet despite spending 70 years studying, practicing and teaching yoga the words of his Sad Guru spoke to him across the centuries. I started learning to chant the *Guru Ashtakam* the following day.

Pattabhi Jois' philosophy was simple: yoga is experiential not theoretical. As those of us fortunate enough to study with him often heard him say "Yoga is 99 per cent practice and one per cent theory." He believed that one should simply "Do your practice and all is coming." Practice alone would quieten our "monkey minds" and allow us to progress along the path of yoga outlined by the great seers of the past. He was deeply committed to the Advaita Vedanta darsana (philosophy) of Sankaracharya. Pattabhi Jois' other favourite saying came from Patanjali's Yoga Sutras. "*Sa tu dirgha-kala-nairantarya-satkarasevito drdha-bhumih*" – yoga practice, to be successful, should be undertaken for a long time, without a pause, with an attitude of devotion.

When I remember Pattabhi Jois I will always remember his long-term commitment and devotion to his teaching, a teaching I will be eternally grateful to have received. Jois believed in the necessity of having a teacher or Guru who could show you the true depth of the yoga method, just as Krishnamacharya had taught him. Guruji was often saddened that people in the west were teaching what he considered to be his yoga method without ever studying with him. He felt that to be a teacher you first had to be a student and that to teach the Ashtanga Vinyasa method that he worked so hard to share you should study with him and learn from the source, thus keeping the *guru parampara* – the lineage of a guru passing on the teachings directly to the student. He believed that you could reliably pass on the Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga method only by showing him the type of dedication he demonstrated to his guru, Krishnamacharya.

Perhaps of greatest testament to his abilities as a teacher are the myriad of Ashtanga yoga based offshoots – such as vinyasa yoga, flow yoga – that are now taught in yoga centres and gyms around the world. In a brand-conscious, hard-sell yoga marketplace, Guruji never advertised. He spent his life serving those who came to him, teaching them what his Guru had taught him.

Krishna Pattabhi Jois was born in the village of Kowshika, Karnataka, South India on July 26, 1915. This was *Guru Purnima*, the full moon day in the Hindu month of Ashad (July-August) which is observed as the auspicious day sacred to the memory of the great saint Vyasa. He passed away in the presence of his family on Monday 18th May at 2.30pm Indian Standard Time. A memorial ceremony, attended by more than 300 people, was held in his honour in Mysore on 31 May.

For a full biography of Pattabhi Jois' life please visit <http://kpjayi.org/biography.html>

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