



Yoga On My Mind

by Jack Fisher

http://www.ashtanga.com/html/bio_fisher_jack.html

People often ask me how I can continue practicing **Ashtanga Yoga**, even after undergoing open heart surgery and suffering through the lingering effects of a stroke in eight parts of my brain simultaneously -- and why I haven't switched to a "milder" form of yoga now that I've reached the age of 66. Here's the short form answer -- and it's not so short!!

To their great misfortune, many new students are not properly initiated into yoga asana practice. And so they tend to approach it with "western mind" as yet another form of "workout," and bring to the table all the baggage that accompanies a "workout" performed in the presence of others: ego, competition, insecurity, judgment, the need to "try just a little harder to GET IT," and the desire to be "lookin' good" while doing it.

Many practicing yoga students -- let alone newcomers -- who come to my class for the first time have no concept of the fundamentals of **Ashtanga Yoga** practice: Breath (in the form of **Ujjayi Pranayama**) connected with movement (**Vinyasa**), **Swadhyaya** (moving inward toward the center of the being through the use of the three **bandhas** -- **Mulabandha**, **Uddiyanabandha** and **Jalandarbandha**) and **Dristi** (the prescribed gazing point for each asana, which helps to focus the practice and eliminate distraction).

Instead, many students feel compelled to "get" the pose immediately, focusing on each pose as a goal to be achieved RIGHT NOW. The mind then becomes fixated on the gap between where the student is and where he/she wants to be, thus creating internal conflict and tension, which can hinder movement and fluidity.

The student is then pushing too hard and too fast, instead of allowing the power of breath and *bandhas* to open the body/mind/spirit to the pose. Poses can, indeed, be achieved through struggle, but that self-same struggle limits both the immediate opening, as well as how far one can ultimately move in the practice. And struggle can and does, unfortunately, lead to injury; and the injury leads to stress in the mind and disappointment in the practice because it limits how far the student can move without pain.

Joel Kramer, author and former yogi-in-residence at the Esalen Institute, writes: "It is vital to know the difference between pain and intensity. The line between them might sometimes appear nebulous, but it is actually well-defined by the state of your mind. Pain is not only physical, but psychological, too. For it involves a judgment of discomfort -- of not liking to be there. If you are running from the feeling, it's pain. However, intensity that is not pain generates an energy and sensuous quality which can 'turn you on' to your practice."

On the other hand, if the attention is on the daily process rather than a goal of "achievement," progress and opening come about naturally. And the mind becomes more sensitive to the messages the body is sending. At the end of each practice the student feels great joy of spirit and a sense of serenity and balance. Patanjali's second sutra is ever so important to understand and accept: *Yoga Chittavritti Narodha* ("Yoga is the cessation of fluctuations of the mind").

In the early '80s here on Maui, after practicing **Ashtanga Yoga** for about 4-5 years and having fallen in love with this ancient and arcane form, I had an epiphany of sorts: wouldn't it be a wonderful thing if, at age 60, I were still able to practice **Ashtanga Yoga** and still be playing rock & roll guitar. Well, here I am, now 66 and doing just that! So, I've broadened my horizons. Now I say to myself that I still want to be doing these same things when I'm 90!

And so I constantly remind my students that this is not a "quick fix." No "buns of steel in six weeks!" No "lose all the weight you want in 60 days or your money back!" Instead, I tell them that we're embarked together on a "Fifty Year Plan." I also reinforce at every opportunity the concept that "If you lose the spirit of repetition, your practice will become difficult."

Guruji told me so many, many times: "Yes, you do! Every day! Only 15 more days, very perfect coming."

And, at the end of 15 days, when progress was not apparent or evident, I would return to him and say, for example, that *Padmasana* (Lotus pose) was still not possible. He would again repeat the same mantra, "Yes, you do! Every day! Very correct practicing. Only 15 more days, very perfect coming."

After several periodic repetitions of these strict admonitions, I finally got it! Many years later, Nike adopted that very same mantra in its advertising: "Just Do It!"

Learning **Ashtanga Yoga** is, ultimately, learning to love it -- not necessarily all the time, but as a general part of your life. If you've been doing yoga for a long time and you don't love doing it, that's probably an indication that you should question the way you approach your practice. If you're practicing **Ashtanga Yoga** with a teacher who does not continually reinforce attention to the fundamentals of breath and *bandhas*, perhaps you need to experience **Ashtanga Yoga** under more mindful guidance.

