



A LETTER TO ASHTANGA YOGA ROOM STUDENTS from Melanie Fawer

Those new to Ashtanga Yoga may know nothing about it as I did not when I was introduced to it 24 years ago.

It is a classical style of yoga (spin offs and watered down versions are called Vinyasa, Flow or Power yoga) full of posture sequences (therefore, it is Hatha yoga) but also encompasses other components of yoga theory referred to as the limbs of yoga (“Ashta” meaning eight and “anga” meaning limb in Sanskrit.) The eight limbs are: yamas (ethical codes for right living in society of which there are five,) niyamas (personal codes for right living of which there are five), asana (posture,) pranayama (breath control,) pratyahara (sense withdrawal,) dharana (concentration,) dhyana (the ability to merge with the object on which you are concentrating) and samadhi (union with Universal Consciousness.) If one truly cultivates all eight limbs and not just asana, the Ashtanga method can bring about great insight, clarity, softness and strength. (For greater exploration of yoga theory, I recommend Edwin Bryant’s, The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali and The Bhagavad Gita by Eknath Easwaran.)

A man named Pattabhi Jois, from Mysore, India (hence the name, “Mysore Style”) was responsible for bringing Ashtanga yoga to the west. He was a student of the late T. Krishnamacharya, considered the father of modern day yoga, for two and a half decades. Jois taught Mysore Style Ashtanga yoga for more than seven decades and did much good for many by sharing this method. In the past six months, however, it has come to light that he also took advantage of his status by sexually assaulting or inappropriately touching many women under his tutelage causing them great harm and distress.

I am now considered a senior Ashtanga teacher by virtue of having spent much time in Lakshmipuram, Mysore as Jois’ student, being given Certification by him in 2001 (there is no higher honor in his line of Ashtanga yoga than Certification,) by being a practitioner of the method for 24 years and by teaching daily Mysore Style Ashtanga at my studio for more than 16 years. The following is my first statement on the current state of affairs within what is referred to as the “Ashtanga community.” (There are closing remarks to Ashtanga Yoga Room/ AYR students following my statement.)

“To Not Speak Out is Ordinary”

On November 11, 2017, Karen Rain posted a statement on her Facebook page, “After reading other women's posts, I am inspired by the importance of sharing experiences and naming names. Pattabhi Jois sexually assaulted me regularly in his yoga asana "adjustments." I also witnessed him sexually assault other women regularly in a similar manner. His actions were protected by a culture of denial and cryptic justifications. I studied Ashtanga Yoga in Mysore for a total of 2 years between 1994 and 1998.” (Links to Rain’s interview transcript and video interview are at the end of this statement.)

Karen and I met in September, 1994, in Mysore, India. I was 25 years old, Karen was 28. Karen was learning Advanced B and I was as green as grass. I didn’t know Pattabhi Jois or anything about him. “Styles” of yoga, the Primary series, drishti, bandha, ujjayi, vinyasa -- no idea. When Karen and I met, she was running in circles around her head in a headstand and I was learning Surya Namaskara A. My first two trips to Mysore crossed with hers from 1994-1996. We were there together a total of seven months. Karen and I became friends.

Pattabhi Jois was my teacher from 1994 until his death in 2009. He asked me to take Certification in 2001. After 24 years of practice and 16 years of teaching Mysore Style daily at my studio, I know the method Jois taught is sound and extraordinary. The practice for me has only been therapeutic, healing and uplifting. I was neither a victim of sexual assault by Jois nor did I receive any adjustments that resulted in any injuries, however, I believe Karen’s story of sexual assault. I believe it because I have read her testimony, I witnessed Jois sexually assault another woman in Mysore (I did not witness Karen’s sexual assaults nor any others) and because at the time, there was talk within the inner community of teachers senior to me of his inappropriate touching of women. It disturbs me greatly that no other Jois Certified “senior” teacher to date has stood up in support of Karen and the other women that have been hurt by Jois and that they perpetuate this secret by their silence.

A French woman named Marianne (name changed), maybe in her mid 40’s, was in Mysore on my first trip and I never saw her again. She came to practice in loose fitting short shorts and no underwear. In down dog, I could see her genitalia. In down dog, holding on to her pelvis from behind, Jois repeatedly thrust into her. Outside of the shala, Marianne let it be known that she enjoyed Jois’ treatment and wanted to have sex with him. I observed Sharat witness his grandfather’s behavior, I saw the look on his face, there were senior teachers present who witnessed it too and there was talk about it later. I share the details of Marianne’s background, attire and manner not to suggest that she was responsible for the assault but to illustrate how troubled Marianne was when she was there. She needed help not victimization. I also share these details not to generalize about anyone’s background but to share my truth and personal experience

of the situation. There was no misinterpreting Jois' behavior though I tried at the time. It was not an adjustment, it was unacceptable sexual assault.

Thanks to Karen and other victims, not only can this dirty aspect of Jois' legacy be as much a part of his story as the good parts, but it begins to break down the mystique of an Ashtanga community. I for one welcome this new transparency and hope all that were aware of Jois' "issue" will acknowledge it. The victims deserve and need to be heard and this all started because of a lack of communication. My hope is that the lack of communication which led to this secret can be broken down and we, as a community, can move forward with open honesty and with no human greater than any other. "We are only as sick as our secrets."

Yoga is Truth. This is what I was seeking when I arrived at Jois' doorstep in Lakshmpuram -- a greater inner knowing of Truth, a greater sense of Self, through yoga. And I suspect that is what we were all looking for, all of us that found our way to Jois' house. It confounds me that so many have lost their way. It is my hope that shortly, all other "senior" teachers and Jois' family members will speak out so that healing, balance, and understanding, around all the layers of this "issue," can be gained and restored. "You shall know the Truth, and the Truth shall set you free."

Sincerely,
Melanie Fawer
Owner Ashtanga Yoga Room

interview transcript: www.matthewremski.com/wordpress/karen-rain-speaks-about-pattabhi-jois-and-recovering-from-sexual-and-spiritual-abuse-video-interview/

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Closing Remarks to My Students

What are referred to as "adjustments" in Mysore Style Ashtanga yoga are an integral part of teaching this method. All of Jois' students and teachers have interpreted his words, adjustments and teaching differently. There is no concrete definition for any of these. I interpret adjustments as a means to 1) correctly and safely anatomically align a student. I have learned alignment from 24 years of practice, from insightful adjustments from Jois and from outside study, 2) align students without taking them away from the focus of their breath and dristi, 3) allow students to safely feel a posture more deeply without taking them past their mental, physical or emotional edge.

Due to the nature of the Mysore teaching method, students and teachers at AYR are able to develop one-on-one relationships of trust and respect. Open dialogue regarding adjustments is encouraged and teachers check-in with students during adjust-

ments to make sure their boundaries and wishes are being honored. While adjustments are integral to the teaching, they are not required for study at AYR and students are invited to talk with me with any concerns or questions.

AYR strives to maintain an environment of open communication, fellowship, support, safety and care. Teaching is my joy and my gift. It is my honor to be able to give and to receive.

Sincerely,
Melanie