



# Guruji

a personal perspective by Mia Forbes Pirie

I was one of the many whose lives were deeply touched by Sri K Pattabhi Jois whom we all knew as Guruji. Six years ago, I went to Mysore for the first time and spent four months studying with him. Since then my life has been dramatically different. I have not been the most assiduous of students. I tried to spend a month in Mysore now and then when I could but never as much as I would have wanted or he would have counselled. My life has, however, been filled with a spiritual quality and a purer purpose since I met him. There is not much that I regret – but, like many, I imagine, I do wish I had spent more time with him. Somehow, I thought he would always be there.

Despite the thousands of students who crossed his path, his English was never perfected but communication was not a problem. He would give short instructions, point, sometimes grunt gently, "Huh" – telling you either to do something or that you had done it correctly or incorrectly, depending on the tone. With few words, he was very expressive.

When I first arrived in Mysore, despite having practised Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga for about 2 years, I was a beginner. I did my basic practice next to some of the most advanced practitioners in the world and feel very privileged to have studied with Guruji and among them. Having experienced the benefits of the practice and knowing him to be my teachers' teacher, I arrived in Mysore ready to put my full trust in him. He saw that. He understood people, and knew what each person needed. He treated everyone differently – giving them what they needed. If you arrived in Mysore with arrogance and a big ego, he would knock that out of you very quickly. If you needed support and nurturing, he would give that to you too – all within the confines of a Yoga room and the Ashtanga practice. Just being in his presence was a powerful and healing experience. He inspired great focus and dedication but often also infused a loving and light-hearted energy into the room.

In my case, I arrived (unbeknown to me) with a lot of fear in my heart. This was very obvious to him. Every day, almost unfailingly for 4 months, this 87 year old man would stand behind me in *Prassarita Padotanasana* (wide leg forward bend), put his hands on my hips and

tell me in his warm broken English, "Don't fear! – you touch your head" – indicating that I should move further forward and touch my head to the ground.

His touch was almost from another world – a deeply grounded place of peace and tranquillity reverberating with joy and a sense of ease. When he touched you to adjust you in a posture, something melted inside you and your heart opened. He was a true sage - but he was not perfect! And that was what was so perfect about him! He was real, human, tangible, and loving. His laughter had such a pure relaxed, almost holy ring to it – sometimes it touched me so deeply, it would bring tears to my eyes. He was diabetic but (like many of his students) he loved chocolate! He loved his students: however many would come, he was always happy to see them, welcome them and untiringly and uncompromisingly give them his teaching – he would sometimes teach tirelessly from 4.30 in the morning until well into the afternoon.

Not only did he inspire confidence, but his presence demanded it. I had never sat in the lotus posture and my first day in Mysore, he told me to take my right foot and place it on top of the left and then, gently, he showed me what to do with the left leg. I had no idea which posture he intended me to take, I just followed his instructions. Suddenly, I was in lotus! Then I began to panic - I couldn't believe what had happened - but it was too late! I was already in it! Towards the middle of my stay, after closing postures (which are done in another room), a long *Savasana* and a shower (before they took the shower away – you are not supposed to shower straight after practice), I came down to find the room cleared and him in his office. I went in and told him, with the glee of a 5 year old at Christmas, that I had managed to take 30 breaths in *Padmasana* (lotus)! This man, who had contorted his body into the most extreme postures over many years and to whom 1000 breaths in lotus would have been the easiest thing in the world, shared my joy and excitement. He beamed warmly at me like a grandfather, seeing a child take its first wobbly few steps on a bicycle without stabilisers and said "Good, good!"

## Guruji had many catch phrases:

*"Do your practice and all is coming" is known the world over. Along with one that is very often quoted but that I, personally, did not hear him say so often "Yoga is 99% practise, 1% theory".*

*When someone did a posture badly or just did something he didn't like or didn't agree with, he would sometimes say "Bad lady" or "Bad man" – this was very affectionate – although it did sometimes unnerve people who didn't know him.*

*Guruji believed and taught that Yoga is a lifelong practice. There was no hurry. People would get impatient to get new postures and he would only give them when he felt they were ready. Guruji did not believe in giving breathing techniques or meditation too soon either: "First asana perfecting, then pranayama". And my favourite: when you do your practice – "Think only God".*

We pay tribute to the man by continuing to follow in his footsteps, by getting up every morning and doing our practise, and by respecting his work and lineage. His grandson, Sharat, now leads the Ashtanga Yoga community. As Sharat says in the film *Ashtanga NY* "After practising Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga, their lives have been changed". This will continue to happen under his guidance. The passing of Guruji marks the end of an era and the beginning of a new one. He dedicated his life to Yoga, to God and to his students. He was a Sanskrit scholar and encouraged all his students to learn the sacred language. The world is a richer more beautiful place because he has walked on it.

*Further information concerning Mia and Sri Pattabhi Jois and his Institute, see page 47. Mia will be publishing a series of articles in Yoga & Health from January onwards called 'Yoga Perspectives'.*