

Magnolia Zuniga -

'Yoga doesn't make you a better person. It makes you a powerful person'.

This was the culmination of a recent conversation between a good friend/colleague and myself. Yoga will actualize what you desire. If you desire fame and fortune, this becomes possible. If you desire an ascetic experience, this becomes possible. Our intentions become reality.

My reasons for turning to Yoga (including Ayurveda and Tantra) was in order to heal, not only my past but that of my ancestors. This is indeed what I received in return. Not that the healing is over by any means but that history has been rewritten enough for me to stand firm as a new woman and human in society. There's a new sense of freedom from the confines and imprisonment of a hurtful past. A sort of rewritten history.

When I first started studying Ashtanga Yoga it was primarily taught by older white men (or older indian men) yet most yoga practitioners were and continue to be women. Although there are more and more women teaching these days, there is still an imbalance, energetic or otherwise. Don't get me wrong, I respect and deeply admire many of my male colleagues, however, men experience life and the practice differently than women. I was taught mostly by men (with the exception of the month I spent with Saraswati, which was wonderful). That said, I've always felt that the male teachers in my life could not have prepared me for the changes I was about to experience as a woman in this lineage. When I was approached for this project a few years ago, I thought it timely and essential.

Childhood Trauma and Abuse

Statistics: 1 in 10 children suffer from child maltreatment. 1 in 16 children suffer from sexual abuse. Nearly 1 in 10 children are witnesses to family violence.

Statistics:

- Mental Health Disorders, Addictions, & Related Issues - Higher risk for intimate partner violence, alcohol/drug abuse, depression/anxiety/eating disorders, PTSD, suicidal tendencies.
- Sexual & Reproductive Health Issues & Risks - Higher risk for multiple sex partners, sexually transmitted diseases, unintended pregnancies, early initiation of sexual activity.

I was abused as a child by my caretakers. (3-5 yrs old) and blocked out memories until I was 13. I'm not sure what triggered them. Suddenly I began waking up in the closet, curled up on the floor, scared, crying, in a fetal position. I asked my mother for help and that's the first we spoke about it. The moment she mentioned it, clear and vivid memories began rushing recklessly, without restraint. The beatings, screaming, locked in a closet, locked in bathrooms, cold tile floor, sounds of laughter, adults in another room. Things began to come together and fall apart. I was about to embark on the first real obstacle in my life; memories of trauma and suffering written and stored in the body. The mind may forget, in an effort to cope, but memories remain in pockets of the subconscious.

Many women in my family suffered tremendously from savage rapes, beatings and abuse. Stories of horror that cloud my eyes and darken my heart to this day. Their history and my own has effected me deeply. As an adult, I found myself in abusive relationships. The most devastating part was not the abuse itself, but the realization that I was repeating cycles of my

past, of my ancestors. Even though I now lived in America, the promise land of hopes and dreams, I was not making better choices for myself. had better opportunities in my life so I didn't understand why these difficulties. Nothing had changed. This is textbook trauma and victim behavior. The moment I realized this, I decided to make serious changes; to attempt to change the karmic cycles of abuse and suffering in my family. I could no longer blame my family, parents, the system or circumstances for my decisions. I needed to become an active participant in my healing process.

Rape and PTSD

Statistics:

1 in 3 women around the world will be raped, beaten, coerced into sex or abused in her lifetime. 1 in 5 American women will be raped in her lifetime. 1 in 6 men have experienced abusive sexual experiences before reaching adulthood. Some will experience repeated sexual victimization in their lifetime.

The first time I was raped I was 14 and a virgin. The second time, I was 35.

Here are some of the battles I had to face when I decided to speak up. 1) Convincing family and (some) friends that it happened to me. 2) Listening to family and friends urge me to keep quiet and 'just move on with life'. 3) Retelling the story over and over again to police or other bureaucratic employees that could care less. Sitting in a half lit room, blank grey walls, story of the attack, a small expressionless man with disproportionate limbs, horrifying details barely legible on white paper. 4) Peers in the yoga community. They too urged me to keep quiet, fearful of what it would do to them, to the community. It was too difficult to admit that there was a rapist among us. Loyalties were challenged and sides were taken. Usually the victim takes the hit when a community is ill prepared and delusional of its role in society, especially in the yoga community.

When a victim of rape steps forward she (or he) is re-victimized from family members, friends, community, society, police, lawyers, media etc. Most attacks go unrecorded and the perpetrator goes off the hook. Did my stepping forward make it worse? Yes. Do I regret it? No. I believe victims and their supporters need to step forward and speak up not only for ourselves but for future generations. It's not easy, but I believe this is how change happens. We, as a society, do not understand how to speak to a victim of rape let alone be supportive and helpful. We have a long way to go.

Since most practitioners of yoga are female what we're really looking at is a room full of women and men that have been, or will be, seriously disempowered, disenfranchised and victimized in their lifetime. Are we as teachers prepared to guide others through this process?

The Ashtanga world (and the yoga world in general) has an ego problem that is presented with a vague promise of a 'Cure All'. This promise is hard to ignore when it's observed via a new age lens of disassociation from our essential human-ness. It's this depersonalization of Yoga that keeps it from being truly medicinal. Essentially this keeps us from getting real with the fragility of our egos and personalities as we board the Yoga mothership.

Statistics:

Effects of PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder mainly associated with veterans and sexual assault survivors), depression, likely to abuse drugs/alcohol, possibly suicidal

After the second rape, I experienced intense PTSD. Up until this point (approximately 10 years) I had not taken any type of western medicine or seen a western doctor. I became a student of Ayurveda in 2001 and made a commitment to only practice Ayurveda and to use natural, herbal remedies instead. I was strict and regimented in my thinking. In an effort to manage the symptoms I turned to Yoga, Pranayama and Meditation. Unfortunately, this didn't provide any actual relief. I thought perhaps it was work related stress so I took a break from working. This didn't help either. I thought perhaps it was the city I was living in, so I moved. But the symptoms gradually became worse. I couldn't sleep more than 2 hours a night and life became a dream like state I was no longer a part of.

After 8 months I was diagnosed with PTSD. I was referred to a psychiatrist that suggested a western pharmaceutical approach. I automatically refused. I have always had faith in Yoga as a healing modality and knew it would work. It eventually did, but not until all of my beliefs, preferences and rigidities were tested. My doctor asked me to think about it. For months I considered it hoping for some change. No change. I finally came to the painful realization that I was in crisis mode. I was going to lose more of my life if I didn't make a change. I agreed to take the western approach. We devised a plan.

- One year on pharmaceutical drugs
- Weekly therapy sessions,
- Daily Ashtanga Yoga (sometimes modified as necessary to manage stress levels), meditation (Trataka, Yoga Nidra) and Pranayama (Nadi Shodhana, Ujjayi, sometimes Sheetali to manage body temperature). The meditations and pranayama I learned from Bihar School of Yoga.
- Ayurvedic diet and lifestyle,
- Monthly group therapy sessions (these were important so I did not feel isolated in my experiences).

After one year we would re-evaluate where I was in my life before weaning off. We needed to make sure I was in a safe place before beginning that process. It took a couple of months to find the right medication and dosage. I had moments of complete blackouts, not knowing what I had done. This terrified me yet I grew to trust the professionals I was working with and they trusted me in return.

In the end it was the best thing I did for my healing. It helped me find a neutral place (albeit synthetic) so I could begin putting the pieces together of a fragmented life. Eventually that synthetic neutral place became a new reference point for me to work from. The program, in its entirety, worked really well.

Within our communities, shaming around rape culture combined with shaming of the use of western meds may make it difficult for yoga practitioners to be treated effectively. I'm not suggesting that western meds is the way to go. Sometimes healing happens in unexpected ways. Everyone is different in the various ways that trauma expresses itself and that in turn requires various approaches, treatments and modalities. Sometimes Yoga, Pranayama and Meditation are the way to go, sometimes not. For me, Yoga Pranayama and Meditation were part of the solution but not THE solution. It took a village of healers for me to find my way.

If you or someone you know is in need of help here are some resources.

Some resources:

Excellent for information about rape, abuse and incest

<https://www.rainn.org/>

The Trauma Recovery Center (through UCSF) in San Francisco has an exceptional program that helped me tremendously

<http://traumarecoverycenter.org/>

For more information on my counselor and therapist please write to magnolia@mysoresf.com

Ayurveda

I practice and study Ayurveda. Ayurveda is the science of life, an ancient medicinal science that originated in India. It asserts that science, philosophy and spirituality are all necessary aspects of healthy living. Ayurveda and Yoga are sister sciences, born from the same root of the Vedas and comprise the most comprehensive system for mind, body, spirit relationship. They are meant to be taught and practiced together.

Guruji's recommendations of diet and lifestyle were also in synch with Ayurveda. Sharath continues this though in more subtle ways. I teach from an Ayurvedic perspective. Keeping in mind the constitution of each individual in order to guide them through the practice appropriately. I've noticed that when a practitioner combines these systems of healing, as they're intended, the possibility of a peaceful and personal revolution is possible.

Like Yoga, Ayurveda is about right relations in life. For me this has meant establishing a genuine and stable relationship with a doctor both in India and in the states. This has been crucial for me to be able to move through obstacles; perceived, actual, physical or spiritual.

Ayurveda Diet & Cleanses -

I follow an Ayurvedic diet which focuses on an individual approach. According to Ayurveda, 'One man's medicine is another man's poison'. It's not what you eat, it's what you digest. The organic, non-GMO vegetable may be delicious and good for you but if it can't be digested and assimilated properly, it will not be useful and may become toxic.

To better understand what diet and lifestyle recommendations are best for you, you'll need to understand your Ayurvedic constitution. Surveys over the internet are a step in the right direction but may not be entirely accurate. It's important to meet with an Ayurvedic doctor/practitioner to read the pulse and tongue. The crux here is finding the right doctor. I recommend finding someone that has studied at a reputable school and has plenty of both personal and professional experience. The art and medicine of preparing Ayurvedic herbs and treatments is deeply intuitive and requires much life and practical experience in order to heal others.

Additionally, I recommend students do what they can to establish a strong and dependable support system around them. If we're truly and genuinely looking within, we may cross paths with a few personal villains. During these times the support system we have established for ourselves will play a major role in our healing. Sometimes it's our Mysore community, or a conversation with the teacher. Other times it may require professional help via therapist, psychiatrist etc. I feel it's necessary to emphasize the fact that the yoga teacher is not (with a few exceptions) equipped to play these roles. Be discriminating.

Ayurveda, Menstruation and Birth Control -

Convenience is America's nouveau religion. Although we have everything at our fingertips, we're not necessarily healthier or wiser in terms of taking care of ourselves and others. In the past I've joked with students quoting Swami Satyananda, 'Convenience is a poison to spiritual practice'.

I've consulted with my Ayurvedic doctor to help me better understand Ayurveda's approach to menstruation and birth control. Of course every woman has different needs and a one size fits all approach does not work for everyone. That said, all of our choices have a significant impact on how we practice and how our bodies digest and assimilate not only physical food but emotional and spiritual food as well.

Western culture promotes a negative attitude towards menstruation. We learn at an early age that menstruation is a monthly inconvenience. It's dirty, gross and should be as invisible as possible. We learn that we should not discuss it except on girls night get togethers. As adults we're taught to completely ignore it. Any sign of emotional or physical weakness is deemed hysterical, weak and fragile. So like this we develop, at a very young age, an unhealthy relationship to our bodies and its natural systems. We're taught to hate ourselves and oppose ourselves and each other. These attitudes early on set us up to be more vulnerable as adults and we continue this cycle of self hatred.

Ayurveda considers a woman's menstrual cycle crucial to understanding her health, wellbeing and fertility. Not only is it an important time and opportunity for the body to detox, each monthly cycle gives us a month-by-month update about how our body is doing. It also informs us as to what dosha is out of balance. It is a clear indication of how to move forward for optimal health and well being. What to eat, what activities to take part in, etc. When I first began studying Ayurveda in 2001 I was immediately drawn to a more open and healing attitude towards menstruation. A sort of embracing and looking towards it for answers instead of avoiding and disliking this necessary process of the body.

Ladies Holiday:

The specific instructions I received from Guruji was to take 3 days rest minimum while I was menstruating. I asked about periods that last shorter or longer days. He responded '1 day 2 days [bleeding], 3 days rest. 4, 5 days [bleeding], 4 or 5 days rest, your choice.' So 3 days rest. If your period lasts 1 or 2 days, take 3 days rest. If your period lasts 4 or 5 days I instruct that if the flow is heavy on the 4th day to take rest, If on the 5th day there is minimal flow then it's your choice.

There is a common misunderstanding that simply refraining from doing inversions while menstruating is sufficient. This is misinformed. While we're menstruating the flow is moving

downwards and needs to be able to eliminate and remove menstrual blood completely. While we practice we must engage both uddiyana and mulabandha. When these are properly engaged we are essentially containing, squeezing (gently) and lifting the genitals and lower parts of the torso. This direct oppositional force to the downward movement of the flow of blood may have adverse effects on the body but most importantly on the heart, mind and spirit. Deliberately creating oppositional forces within ourselves is antithetical to what Yoga's healing potential.

If you're truly practicing daily you will find yourself looking forward to these monthly breaks. If you find it difficult to take those breaks I suggest looking at the overall attitude and motivations for practice. There may be mental or emotional imbalances that needs to be looked at more honestly in order to approach Yoga appropriately.

When we're in synch with Nature we are more likely to develop a loving and generous approach to our periods. According to Ayurveda, when a woman is in synch and balanced she will menstruate on the new moon and ovulate with the full moon. Understanding the changes in our bodies and periods as we practice helps us develop a stronger and more independent relationship with our body. This is empowering and crucial for every woman's growth. This new relationship also allows us to develop a more compassionate and holistic approach to our periods. This is what Yoga can be ; a corrective solution from societal pressures, programming, past behaviors and tendencies.

Birth Control:

Choosing a method of birth control is a personal choice between doctor and informed patient. It's been my experience that doctors often prescribe what is easiest and most convenient as opposed to what is best for the patients body, mind and spirit. So how do our decisions about birth control effect us and the practice?

From an Ayurvedic perspective, synthetic hormones (menstrual suppression methods especially) often mask an imbalance and make it difficult to treat effectively. Similarly, Yoga is trying to bring us to a state of balance and harmony with Nature, with ourselves. Synthetic hormones also tend to mask an imbalance which can keep the practice from doing it's best work.

In regards to pills, the period one experiences every month is not the same as a regular period. It's referred to as 'withdrawal bleeding' meaning that there is bleeding because there's been a change in hormone levels. This is why pills are said to lessen the pain and amount of bleeding, because it's not really a period. From an Ayurvedic perspective this is a breach against wisdom.

I have found the most challenges in working with women that have an IUD. In my experience I have found that it causes an energetic block and an inability to engage bandha properly. If the student chooses to switch birth control methods and has the IUD removed, they have access to a whole new practice, a new experience. Of course, these are personal choices we make with our doctors. Also, there are many reasons, other than preventing pregnancy, to be on menstrual suppression programs.

I recommend entering a gynecologist's office as an informed patient, not only from a western perspective but from an eastern one as well. In order for these natural healing modalities to

work we need to put some time and energy into educating ourselves as much as possible and hopefully find the method that suits us best.

Pancha Karma:

This is a Sanskrit word meaning “five actions” or “five treatments”. Pancha karma (PK) is a process used to clean the body of toxic materials left by disease, poor nutrition and incorrect lifestyle choices. Usually the body is able to recalibrate itself into proper health. However, depending on each individual constitution, background and tendencies, this may be more difficult for the body to do on it’s own. Panchakarma can be a useful way to reorganize and bring one to balance.

My first Pancha Karma treatment was in 2004 with my doctor in Mysore, India. Each Pancha Karma is performed under close doctor supervision which is one of the reasons I was drawn to this. It felt genuine and more appropriate to have a doctor diagnose me completely and plan accordingly as opposed to self-diagnosing. According to Ayurveda, if you’ve been living out of balance for some time then you will be less likely to recognize what is healing or not; ‘Lika attracts like, opposite creates balance’. While cleanses and fasting are popular and trendy in the yoga community. In Ayurveda, these options for healing are considered carefully and designed on an individual basis for maximum efficiency and efficacy.

Until this first PK I had experienced severe asthma, chronic sinusitis and bronchitis. During the second day of PK I had a strong physical and emotional reaction to the medicine. I began to hyperventilate, choking and coughing intensely. At the same time I began having flashes, memories of a difficult time as a young woman. My parents left when I was 16. It was a stressful time in our lives and I was presented with a choice to either follow them or stay behind. Although they were treating me as an adult, I was a sophomore in high school and way too young to make these life changing decisions. I chose to live alone intrigued by independence and self reliance but the ramifications of all our choices once again stored themselves. I later understood what was happening. I was cleansing and exorcising the pit of anguish I thought I had dealt with through therapy and counseling. I realized I had only touched the surface and this was the final evacuation so to speak. The space between my eye brows became a movie screen of my deepest anguish and grief. I watched over and over, hyperventilating, choking until there was nothing left. In the process, I coughed up large chunks of phlegm that looked like hunter green colored slugs. I was sweating, exhausted yet relieved. I felt a dead weight lift. A new path seemed to reveal itself to me. I later was told that in agreement with Ayurveda; adult onset asthma is usually due to a traumatic or difficult event in ones life.

Again, like Yoga, that first PK truly healed something within. It also healed the asthma and I no longer suffer from chronic sinusitis or bronchitis. I have since done 7 or 8 PK treatments (with the same doctor) to keep my immune system and digestion strong. I recommend PK treatments for folks that need deep deep healing but your Ayurvedic practitioner will know if it’s necessary for you and how to proceed.

On Going To India / Studying In Mysore -

There is a bewitching and enchanting beauty to India. She is a mysterious creature that is maddening, terrifying, comforting and soothing. She brings me closer to creation and spirit,

reminding me what's real. There's no place like it. I heard it said once that India is the opposite of America. In America beauty is on the surface and all the shit is underneath. In India the shit is on the surface, in your face and the beauty is underneath, hidden. A concentrated dristi helps. I have found this to be true.

Going to Mysore was not easy for me. I had been living paycheck to paycheck since I was 16 so for me to travel to India meant working 2 or 3 jobs, sleeping on friends couches and sacrificing many things. I was essentially homeless for 4 years in order to save money and not have to commit to renters lease. I dabbled in teaching vinyasa but my heart wasn't in it. It felt inauthentic to teach something different from what I practiced. My peers were teaching and branding their own styles of vinyasa yoga. They were making plenty of money and becoming local celebrities. I wanted something different. I wanted to learn from the master of Ashtanga Yoga. No One Else Would Do! No teachers inspired me enough to want to study with them. If I was going to do this I was going to go past the middle man and go straight to the source.

When students tell me they're interested in teaching my response is 'Great, when are you studying in Mysore?' I encourage students to eliminate me as their teacher and go to the source. In my opinion, Mysore is a requirement if you'd like to teach the method. With yoga being mainstream the industry is ripe with mediocrity. I encourage folks to rise above and be the best teacher they can be. Any one can teach leotard yoga, but few can truly transmit.

Here's the deal. Every certified and authorized teacher (myself included) is teaching what they have translated from Gurujii and/or Sharath. It is not the cleanest expression. There is ego, desires, livelihood necessities, stresses, pressures, neurosis etc. No teacher is perfect. I encourage students to develop their own understanding by studying with our teachers.

Home Practice and Choosing a Teacher

I had a great start with 2 amazing teachers (Noah Williams, Kimberly Flynn) that were deeply devoted to the traditional teachings of Pattabhi Jois. They taught me the integrity of the method and I couldn't have asked for better teachers. I was only with them for a short time (approximately one year) and moved on to self practice. Although I did practice in other Mysore rooms they never felt like home in the same way until I arrived in Mysore.

For me, self practice was key to cultivate healing, to learn how to better take care of myself and make better choices. I feel that at times practicing in a room full of people can be a crutch, a distraction from what the practice is truly trying to teach us; independence, self reliance, how to take individual responsibility for our practice and our lives.

To avoid the ego pitfalls that plague the Yoga world I recommend learning the method from teachers directly instead of books, videos or immersions/workshops etc. Although these sources are convenient and inspiring, proper discrimination and patience will serve a practice better than convenience or cliff note teachings. For me, Yoga is about learning better relationships with yourself and others. This is a life long practice. The teacher you spend time with in your first initial years will set the tone for your level of integration and understanding down the line. Be discriminating.

Gurujii recommended 3 months studying in Mysore. Sharath continues to suggest this though less than that is fine as well. The key is that you spend a few months and then go home to

integrate what you learned. For me, the practice is not meant to develop a dependency on the teacher, postures or the practice. Eventually self practice is the practice.

For those folks that don't live near an authorized or certified teacher. That's ok, perhaps even better because your devotion will be self cultivated without attachment to the physical person. In this case, I recommend spending a week or two with a teacher that you'd like to study with, in a daily Mysore setting (instead of workshops or retreats). Study Mysore the way it was intended to be learned, through daily Mysore practice. Once you've found a teacher that you'd like to study with reach out to them, introduce yourself and establish a relationship. I have students that have studied with me for a short time and then return to their home town. We remain in contact and continue to discuss the practice either via email or Skype. Sometimes they return to SF, sometimes not, but they continue the practice remotely.

Studying with a teacher is not about being with them physically. A teacher is presented in physical form only temporarily and this is useful, but only for a short time. Eventually we need to cultivate our own sense of devotion, gratitude and love without clinging to the physical. Many of my teachers are dead and have been for years, this does not change my strength or understanding of the practice or our relationship. In fact, it strengthens it. In my opinion, the teachings become stronger and more potent once the teacher has passed and we are no longer able to attach the physical to our internal.

I think there's a misconception that those that do self practice have an easier time at it. Or perhaps that motivation is easier for them to access than others. For me self practice has always been challenging. It isn't consistently terrible and it isn't consistently great. It is simply consistent.

Here's what I found that helps me with self practice whenever motivation is low:

****Stop negotiating. 'I've been really good and practicing everyday so what's a day off?' I am not referring to injuries or actual reasons for needing to modify or back off. I am referring to lazy mind.

****Set up a practice space. It doesn't need to be fancy or even permanent. You don't need painted OM's or dancing Shivas, just a enough space for a mat and sometimes less than that. I've practiced in the bathroom, kitchen, hallway on carpet, concrete and campgrounds. Use only what you need.

****Set up a practice space with items that are sacred and important to you. Things that will hold you accountable for your personal and spiritual growth. These items can be small and portable, if you're a traveler. They don't need to be religious items. Make sure they're items that remind you of the person you want to be, the way you wish to express yourself in the world.

****Once your space is established (even if it's portable) spend time preparing your space. I spend about 15 minutes cleaning and preparing the space. I find the more care and attention I give to the space, the more likely I am to commit to the practice. It provides a sense of peace, completion and commitment before I even begin. By the time I start practice I am better prepared and am more able to reach beyond any preferences and distractions that arise.

On Developing Strength. Third Series -

I've been asked (many times) if I think women should lift weights or do additional workouts or sports in an effort to develop strength. This is not necessary. Looking at the primary, intermediate and advanced series postures of Ashtanga Yoga, the body is synching up with the mind, developing strength in a steady, slow progression. Moving through this process with esteem and reverence is important.

If additional activities feed your heart and make your soul sing then incorporate them into your routine. Keep in mind that they will have an effect on the practice and perhaps not in the ways you would like. For example, I am a rock climber. I started when I was 17 and was an avid climber for a few years. Around the age of 35 I took it up again. Immediately my shoulders and back became stronger but also very stiff! When once backbends were graceful and felt amazing, they quickly became painful and difficult. Every action has its effect.

For students that are interested in teaching Mysore I encourage them to focus on Yoga for 10 years plus before teaching. The more experience of the overall effect of the practice with the least amount of additional influences or distractions, the stronger a teacher you'll be. If this seems like a long time or unrealistic, perhaps this is not the occupation for you. I hear teaching often referred to as 'an offering'. Sweet, but not a genuine understanding of the relationship between teacher-student.

Third Series:

There is an interesting third series trend happening at the moment. Third series for me was and continues to be incredibly strong and intense medicine. It is a daily battle of will, pushing against the strongest element, earth. It transcends the use of physical strength and requires I puncture a valve into my spiritual reserves. This practice is not for everyone and it doesn't need to be.

My time of learning and practicing third has been a time of huge transformation. I have never been strong. When I started practicing Ashtanga I was very thin and considered a waif. I was a knee grabbing, backbending girl. I was outgoing, fun, flaky and irresponsible. Once I started learning third series (after 8 years of intermediate) the changes were slow and steady, over the course of 2.5 years Sharath guided me through a few chunks of third at a time. This slow and progressive way in which I was taught instilled in me a sense of respect for the process. The ego was tempered. The slow progression was crucial for me to integrate the effects of the postures into my life and community. Although Sharath could not prepare me as a woman for the changes I was about to embark on, he was gentle, slow and protective in his approach making sure I was solid and stable before moving me forward. This was the best teaching.

As I began third I became more introverted, less social, intolerant of flakiness and my sense of responsibility began to take shape. I also began to set clear boundaries with myself, friends and family. You can imagine the ripple effects this had within my personal relationships and community. I was no longer an easy going, fun filled girl. I became a woman that said NO and quite often. Family and friends were not sure what was happening. Longterm and important friendships were challenged and or dissolved completely.. I was not prepared for these change. While there are aspects of my previous self I miss, I enjoy the strength and calm the practice

has provided. No doubt it's not only the practice but also the natural aging process and rock climbing that changed me but changes became swift and strong once third series began.

Could a male teacher have realistically prepared me for these changes when they experience the practice differently? I don't think so. That said, Sharath is an excellent teacher that knows how to work with many different types of practitioners. He is often criticized for leading people through the practice slowly. This is one of the things I deeply respect about Sharath's teaching. He is protective and understand the western mind. He is considerate of someone's appetite and aptitude before moving them forward and this is truly when a student thrives.

We say we're ready for strong, independent women but are we ready for the women in our lives to go from weak physically or energetically to strong and powerful? What happens to a family, community (and essentially society) when a woman goes through these deep changes in her psyche? Should strong medicine be 'explored'. It's important to consider the postures as more than external fun and games. They have a strong effect on the personality and may change our lives in ways we had not anticipated.

On Modifying Practice Due To Injury, Stress or Illness -

Practicing through and around injury, illness or stress is a skill that takes time to develop. There's a rut many Ashtangis fall into that a colleague named 'The All or Nothing Ashtanga Practitioner'. If we're injured and can't do the postures completely, then we won't practice at all. It's an all or nothing approach to a system that requests nothing of the sort.

I have practiced daily (mostly alone) for over 15 years. During this time I have also been in 3 scooter accidents, 1 motorcycle accident, I have experienced numerous slipped discs, extreme sciatica (no walking), broken (almost amputated) toes, PTSD and basically everything in between. For each of these times I needed to modify the practice. During the times of slipped discs and sciatica I completely redesigned a Yoga practice that healed my pain completely. Most importantly, what I learned is that the practice is teaching us to simply practice in any way, with any body and any mood. We forget the practice is here to heal us. If we're breathing, we can practice.

Over the course of this lifetime, injury will happen (in various degrees and severities) and probably more than once. A teacher of mine once said 'Between life and death, there's illness and recovery'. His dry humor was a joy and such a relief but joking aside, these words are important and useful. The times we encounter balance and happiness are as fleeting as the times we encounter pain and anguish. Showing up for ourselves during all times with equal intention and appreciation provides a strong framework for a life long yogi/yogini. This is why we practice.

Common misconceptions of Ashtanga Yoga -

It's a natural tendency to want to read books in order to learn more about a particular subject. This will work in some fields but not necessarily in the study of Yoga. When it comes to Yoga I find more misconceptions arise from books than in the teacher-student relationship.

Here are some common misconceptions you may have heard about Ashtanga Yoga:

- Ashtanga Yoga was created for young boys
- Ashtanga Yoga was created in the 1930s
- Ashtanga Yoga is based off of a combination of gymnastics, weight trying and wrestling, etc.

It's important to keep in mind that the modern yoga research field is new. Most scholars are searching for answers in the same way devotional practitioners are. Part of the problem is, there is not much information available about Ashtanga Yoga specifically, at least not information that satiates the academic, intellectual mind. Scholars, in an effort to defend their work or thesis, highlight information that is incomplete, confusing and unclear. They then formulate conclusions based on assumptions instead of truly owning the burden of proof.

As time goes on more and more information will become available to us as scholars and devotional practitioners. I believe much of the present understanding of Yoga will be proven incorrect over time. We will continue to learn from our mistakes.

I encourage practitioners to exercise appropriate discrimination in all aspects of their practice from the spiritual to the intellectual. I feel it is possible to have equal amounts of discrimination, strength, devotion and faith.

In order for Yoga to have a positive effect means our intentions need to be revised continuously. Are our intentions focused on the benefit of others? Is it true compassion or an idiot compassion as Chogyam Trungpa calls it? My relationship with the Guruji, Sharath, Saraswati and my Ayurvedic doctors keep my intentions exposed and the work ahead of me clear. My infinite gratitude to the Jois family and colleagues near and far that continue to pass on the teachings.