

# Dedication, Devotion and practice, practice, practice

After a 20-year apprenticeship, and with the blessing of his late grandfather, Shri Pattabhi Jois, 38-year-old Sharath Rangaswamy now holds reign over one of the oldest yoga lineages in the world. *Australian Yoga Life* was fortunate to catch up with Sharath on his recent Australian trip.

By Peggy Hallstone

On first impression, you could easily mistake the handsome, quietly spoken Indian man for a boy half his age. "His energy is really light," explains Sydney-based Ashtanga teacher, Eileen Hall. "In the studio he is quite different," Hall explains, "much more sure of himself, more in his element".

The subtleness of Sharath's energy makes sense when you hear about his schedule and dedication. "I get up at 2:00am to do my practice," he says. By 4:30am, he is opening the door of the Mysore shala to students from all around the world.

"ALWAYS THERE ARE MORE THAN 100 students, and often 150-200," he says with a smile that has the potential to illuminate a yoga studio. Excluding new moons and full moons, Sharath can be found in the shala every day until midday. "In the afternoons, I take a break and rest for one or two hours," he says. "In the evenings, we have local Indian students coming. That goes from 3.30pm to 6.00pm."

While many might say it is dedication that goes with the territory,

Sharath lives what he believes. "Yoga is my life," he states categorically. "It's like a routine, how we get up and take a bath, and brush our teeth, have food. Yoga is like that for me. It's in my schedule every day. I get up and do my practice."

**CURRENTLY IN AUSTRALIA TO TEACH TWO** weeks of Ashtanga workshops, this is Sharath's first Australian trip without his beloved grandfather. Over the past 48 months, his work has called him to Florida Keys, New York, San Francisco, Toronto, Copenhagen, Helsinki, London, Bali, and now, Australia. It's a hectic schedule for a man who dearly misses his family and loves being at home.

The problem is that many students can't get to Mysore. "These people are my dedicated students. They want to see me. They want me to go to their country and teach because it is special for them. Sometimes it's very difficult to say, 'No, I can't come'." The balance, Sharath explains, will be found by travelling every second or third year; and possibly there will be some international travel for his

wife, Shruthi, and his children, Shraddha and Sambhava.

In contrast to his grandfather who spoke little English, Sharath is a modern yogi. He is fluent in English, enjoys cricket, photographs wildlife for a hobby, and earned an electronics diploma in his teenage years.

Differences aside, Sharath says his teaching style and yoga will be the same as his grandfather's. "Guruji was three generations behind me but the yoga has not changed. The teaching, or the way I practise, I think it has been the same. Only the environment has changed a little bit. The fundamentals of Ashtanga won't change."

**WHEN ASKED HOW HE FEELS ABOUT** following in his grandfather's footsteps, Sharath is light-hearted and humble. "I think it must be my previous life's good things," he jokes. "I am very honoured to take part in this yoga family and to try and keep this legacy for coming generations." When talking about this legacy, he points out the importance of the blessing of a group, and the guru's

blessing and guidance. Without these, he explains, it is difficult to take the legacy or teachings further.

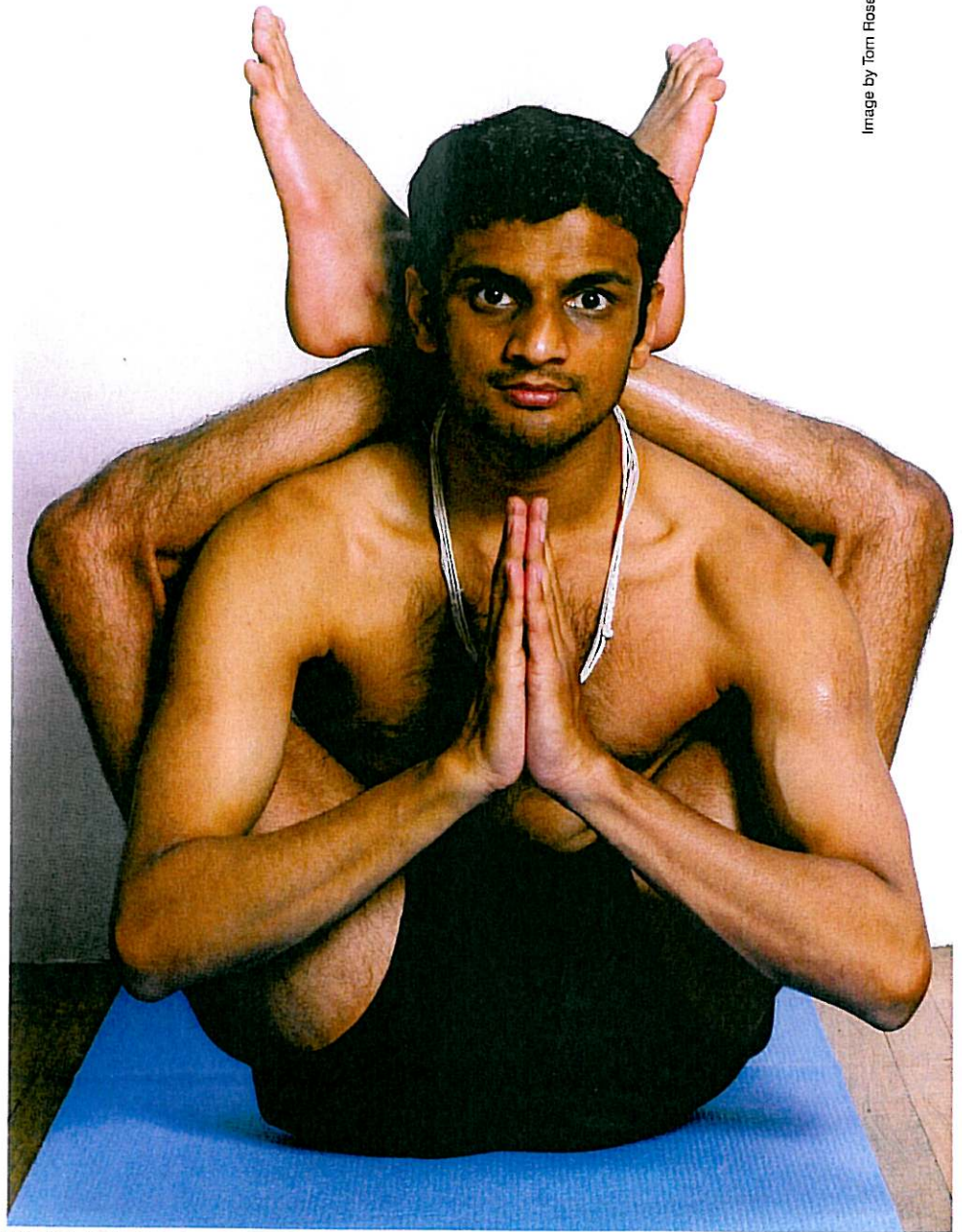
Devotion, dedication, and practice feature strongly in conversation with Sharath. There is little doubt he was devoted to Guruji; evident in the 19 years he sat by Jois's side, assisting him with the operation of the Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute, and in his willingness to carry on the Ashtanga lineage. Dedication is obvious too; in his leadership, and in the responsibility this carries in regard to the lineage. "First of all, not everyone can do it. You need lots of dedication towards the practice ... you need lots of dedication to learn the system, and devotion toward your guru. Then, I think, you will come to understand the system and get perfect in your practice. Without you being perfect, you can't teach your students."

**LIKE HIS PREDECESSOR WHO PREACHED,** 'practice, practice, practice and all will come', Sharath is an advocate for yoga's practicalities. "You should work hard – to get certain postures doesn't come easily."

Sharath also sticks by his grandfather's words about the importance of practice. "Those words are like a yoga sutra. It is just one sutra but it gives lots of meaning." He says humans are very academic. "They are always saying, 'I should do that' and groups are always saying, 'you should do this' but you cannot be purely academic about yoga. Just reading books and studying will not do it. When we apply practice in our daily life – that is how you become a yogi." Transformation, he assures, happens only by practice.

With its focus on a primary series of asana followed by series 2, 3, 4 5, and 6 – all of which feature progressively more advanced asana – the Ashtanga system maintains a strong focus on the physical. Sharath refers to asana as the 'foundation of the limbs', but is also quick to point out it is only one part of yoga. "He who follows all these limbs becomes a yogi. It's not just asana. These other things should be followed as well."

The key, it seems, is discipline. Something we Westerners generally experience as a struggle. "Without discipline it is impossible to be a yogi," Sharath says. He also offers practical



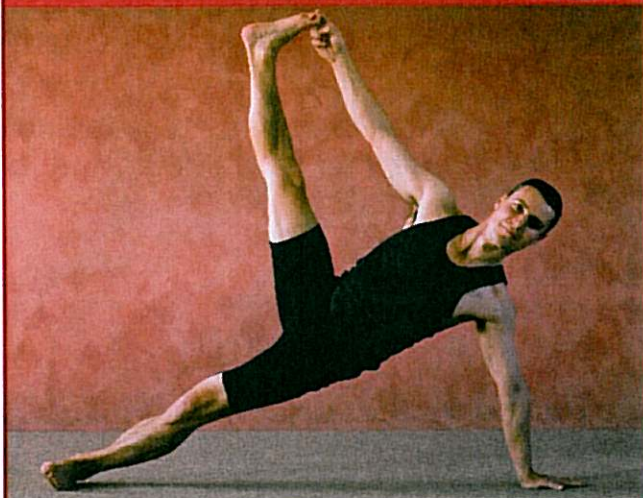
Shirath in Dwipada.

## [Introducing KPJ Yoga studios]

On 21 November, in Sydney, the first of a series of KPJ Yoga studios will be opened. When the doors open, the studio will carry the name and legacy of Krishna Pattabhi Jois. With the full blessing of Pattabhi Jois's surviving family, KPJ Yoga will continue the teachings of the Ashtanga tradition. Sonia Jones, born in Sydney but now residing in the USA, is the founder of KPJ Yoga. She practised with Pattabhi Jois for many years before his passing away this year. Sonia explained, "After Pattabhi died, I wanted his legacy and

teachings to continue to be spread across the world and to carry on. He was a very special being and was beloved by all who were in his presence." She plans to open Ashtanga yoga studios worldwide. Well-known Australian teacher Eileen Hall will manage the studio. The opening will be celebrated by a 10-day workshop, which will be given by Saraswathi and Shammi, the daughter and granddaughter respectively of K Pattabhi Jois.

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advice on deepening one's practice: think about what you are doing ... practice ... read to acquire more knowledge ... and devote yourself to understanding what you are doing and how it should be done. "You have to do your homework too," he prompts. "In the yoga sutra, it is called Svaadhyaya (self study). This is also very important."

The example Sharath offers is that the teacher may teach the philosophy of yoga but it is the student's duty to think about it, and to think about how to connect with it and gain a proper understanding of the system. "You need to put in effort and you need to think about it," he reiterates.

With yoga, in a myriad of forms and styles, being taught in gyms and fitness centres across Australia, I was interested in whether Sharath thinks it is losing something of its essence. "Yes, of course," he replies, without hesitation. "The meaning of yoga will change. Yoga is not like lifting weights, or doing aerobics; it's not just exercise. What we do is not external exercise, though it looks external. It's a spiritual practice and you should create an environment that is appropriate."

Similarly, Sharath's views on the use of social media, DVDs, or books as a means of learning yoga are firm. "I think if you just watch TV or video, in practice you get only limited knowledge. It is very important for people watching videos or studying books to know it is impossible to learn yoga properly this way. Yoga has a system and it has to come through your guru, through the lineage. Yoga has come from thousands of years, guru to student, and that is how it has been passed on to the generations."

**SHARATH AGREES THAT YOGA HAS CHANGED IN THE PAST SEVERAL** years and views these changes as both good and bad. Though he doesn't expand on these aspects, the impression is that yoga's growth and popularity - its enmeshment into mainstream Western society - offers a mixed bag.

Sharath focuses on what he has been taught and what he now embodies - the necessity for practice and the value of the teacher/student relationship as the heart of spiritual progression. "If you go to a teacher and spend time with your teacher, I think the knowledge will be very strong in you and the understanding of yoga and the system is much stronger," he says.

In terms of Sharath's future, he divulges that a biography on his beloved grandfather will come from him, 'in two or three years'. He tells too that, through the Pattabhi Jois Charitable Trust, he has plans for an old-age home in Mysore.

Sharath also reveals that he has all kinds of students - healthy, sick, physically motivated, Indian, Asian, and Western - but that nearly all of them hunger for spirituality and knowledge. And when talk drifts to science and yoga, he demonstrates why he is the Ashtanga lineage's next guru in the making: "Scientifically, many people have proven that yoga is very good for health reasons and for spiritual reasons. There can't be anything wrong with yoga at all," he beams. "It's just not possible."

Peggy Hailstone is a Melbourne freelance writer and a (currently non-practising) yoga teacher. She can be contacted at: [phailstone@researcheditwrite.com.au](mailto:phailstone@researcheditwrite.com.au)