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# ‘A tool to help me through the darkness’: suffering and healing among teacher-practitioners of Ashtanga yoga

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## ABSTRACT

Yoga is widely regarded as beneficial for physical and emotional health, and as a safe ancillary intervention for managing a range of psychological conditions. Evidence of injury, harm, and abuse in yoga traditions is difficult to square with this emphasis on healing. Drawing mainly from on online memoirs by long-term practitioners of Ashtanga yoga, this paper examines the relationship between suffering and healing in yoga, showing how long-term abuse can be perpetuated and injury sustained in a system widely understood and labeled by its practitioners as therapeutic. The paper argues that elements of healing and harm are present in the rituals of practice, the concepts that support it, and the power structure of the Ashtanga system. The system’s organizational dynamics together with a therapeutic discourse that links suffering to its transcendence enabled the same kinds of abuse and trauma that Ashtanga yoga is purported to heal. The analysis raises questions about the overarching narrative of yoga as safe and healthy, and about the connections between healing and harm within therapeutic traditions.

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## Introduction

In yoga’s recent reconfiguration as a health practice, many claims have been made about yoga’s capacity to improve physical and emotional health and wellbeing. These claims are usually made in relation to yoga performed as a healing ritual, in a class situation with a teacher. In general, this ritual comprises a series of postures (*asanas*) that stretch and strengthen the body, along with elements of controlled breathing (*pranayama*), meditation (*dhayana*), and relaxation. As social performance, healing rituals have ‘the power to be constitutive of physical and social well-being by mobilising the support and resources that set healing in motion’ (Thompson, Ritenbaugh, and Nichter 2009, 133). Further, the more gradually internalised ‘practice of rehearsing and/or imagining a particular state of health may *itself* have perlocutionary force in the body’ (Thompson, Ritenbaugh, and Nichter 2009, 134; italics in original). Anthropological approaches to yoga’s therapeutic potential thus complement clinical studies, in that they are concerned with the factors that tend to

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be bracketed off in clinical studies as ‘placebo effects’ (Thompson, Ritenbaugh, and Nichter 2009; see also Shaw and Kaytaz, this Issue).

Extending the insight that the body is simultaneously natural and cultural - i.e., ‘mindful’ (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987), socio-cultural studies show that patient expectations, the nature of the therapeutic relationship, and individual perceptions of what constitutes a meaningful therapy are important factors influencing the efficacy of a treatment or healing ritual (Harrington 1997; Moerman 2002; Jonas 2011). With pain management, for example, the context of treatment and the conscious expectation of recovery along with verbal suggestions can produce a therapeutic bodily effect (Pollo et al. 2001; Vase et al. 2003). Further, therapeutic relationships may be mediated by power relationships in negative ways, while ‘good’ therapist-patient relationships may enhance therapeutic outcomes (Caspi 2003; Benson, Herbert, and Friedman 1996; Nichter and Nordstrom 1989).

These perspectives on embodiment invite consideration of variables often dismissed as biases within clinical trials of yoga’s efficacy: practitioner expectations and experiences, and the therapeutic context, process, and relationship. This paper explores these variables in an analysis of memoirs by long-term practitioners of Ashtanga yoga. The Ashtanga system offers an interesting opportunity for exploring claims about yoga as therapy because of its standardised, highly controlled features and the student’s linear mode of progression through it. Further, although Ashtanga yoga is widely understood by its practitioners as therapeutic, the global Ashtanga community has recently confronted evidence of long-term, physical, and emotional harm at the core of this system, first brought to light following public revelations that the system’s founder sexually abused female students, over many years, causing some of the forms of suffering that Ashtanga yoga is reputed to heal. This paper explores how the Ashtanga system can be both healing and harmful, sometimes simultaneously.

In what follows, I set out a widely held narrative about Ashtanga yoga as a healing practice for body and mind. I then complicate this narrative with reference to the dynamics of the teacher-student relationship, identifying an alternative narrative of injury, violence, and sexual abuse at the core of the Ashtanga system. Drawing from discussions of how power is embedded within religious organisations and disciplines (Asad 1983; 1993), I suggest that Ashtanga yoga’s organizational dynamics, in combination with a therapeutic discourse that links suffering to its transcendence, created power dynamics that enable both healing and suffering. First, I introduce Ashtanga yoga and outline my data sources.

## Ashtanga yoga

A hugely influential first-generation style (Jain 2015), Ashtanga yoga originated with Krishna Pattabhi Jois (1915–2009), who founded the Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute (AYRI) in Mysore, South India in 1948, and taught there until his death. Since then, Jois’ daughter’s son Sharath, who had assisted his grandfather for nineteen years, (Donahaye and Stern 2010, 183), has directed the Institute, re-branding it the Sharath Yoga Centre in 2018. The system Jois developed from the teachings of his guru, Tirumalai Krishnamachara, should not be confused with the Ashtanga yoga or eight-limbed path of Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras (500 BCE – 400 CE), in which *asana* (posture) is but one limb. Possibly Jois’ system is named after a posture ‘in which eight parts of the body ... touch

the ground simultaneously' included in the gymnastic *dand* system of physical education in 1930s India (Singleton 2010, 205).

Ashtanga yoga is a physically demanding practice comprising set sequences of postures across six series, Primary through Intermediate to Advanced (A, B, C and D), and a closing or finishing sequence.<sup>1</sup> The Primary Series is also known as *Yoga Chikitsa* (Yoga Therapy) and the Intermediate Series as *Nadi Shodana* (Nerve Cleansing, or, more literally, the purification/detoxification of bodily channels). These Sanskrit labels probably originated with Jois, who saw the practice as curative.<sup>2</sup> Across all series, breathing and postures are synchronised to *vinyasa* count (Jois 1999, Stern 2019).<sup>3</sup> Teachers may lead an Ashtanga class by verbally instructing students to breathe and move simultaneously to the *vinyasa* count, but 'Mysore-style' teaching is characteristic of the AYRI. In a Mysore-style class, students are expected to memorise the sequence and practice individually, silently, moving to the rhythm of their own breath through the sequence, as far as the posture they are currently learning. The teacher provides hands-on assistance by realigning, turning, or in another way adjusting the student's body, enabling them to enter, stay in, or exit a particular posture, with no or minimal verbal guidance. Teachers most often adjust students in this way at gateway postures, which students must master before being permitted to progress to a new posture or series.

Mysore-accredited practitioners have been taught and are expected to teach in the same way, and departing from the sequence and method may result in Mysore accreditation being withdrawn.<sup>4</sup> A *guru-shishya* (guru-disciple) relationship, denoted by the Sanskrit term *parampara* (lineage), perpetuates the system (Byrne 2013). *Guru-shishya parampara* is characteristic of Indian cultural and religious learning traditions and evolved from the tradition of oral instruction whereby students live with a spiritual guide to receive their teachings. At the AYRI, the student is required completely 'to surrender in body, mind, speech and inner being' to the guru who currently embodies the tradition.<sup>5</sup> Students become authorised, at the guru's discretion, to teach at levels 1 or 2 (Primary or Intermediate), or certified to teach the Advanced series, after daily practice within the guru's presence for a minimum of one month annually for several years. 'Blessing' to teach is not simply a matter of proficiency in postures but emerges from a relationship of 'mutual love and respect between student and teacher...that can only be cultivated over time', indeed, 'only after the student has spent many years with an experienced guru.'<sup>6</sup>

In 2018, the AYRI website listed 739 people worldwide with accreditation to teach Ashtanga yoga 'in its traditional form': 334 authorised at Level 1 (Primary), 369 at Level 2 (Intermediate), and 36 certified at advanced levels (8 with honorary certification). Since accreditation must be maintained through regular visits to Mysore and may be withdrawn, the website number is some fraction of the total number of people who have ever studied at the AYRI, some of whom have significantly shaped the contemporary yoga market. Power, Forrest, Jivamukti, Vinyasa and Flow yoga were all founded by former students of Jois or strongly inspired by the Ashtanga system.<sup>7</sup> Mysore-accredited teachers have opened *shalas* (yoga schools) around the world promoting Ashtanga; others, with or without Mysore-accreditation, teach Ashtanga yoga or styles strongly influenced by it. Two founders of the Los Angeles-based company YogaWorks, which before the Covid-19 pandemic operated 40 studios in the USA and runs international teacher training programmes, were among the first Westerners to study with Jois in Mysore.

## Methods

My main sources are publicly available materials about Ashtanga yoga and the Mysore experience posted online by students and former students of Jois and/or his grandson Sharath. For Ashtanga yoga's healing narrative I draw on the Ashtanga Parampara website created by Ashtanga practitioner Lu Duong, who conducted most of the interviews posted there since 2014. This website archives 'the background and history of teachers that have been blessed [accredited] by Pattabhi Jois or his grandson, R. Sharath Jois, to teach and spread the Ashtanga method'; it is promotional and contains, in discursive fashion, much information about studying in Mysore.<sup>8</sup> Motivated by 'sincere gratitude and devotion to the practice', Duong's project constitutes a sequel to a book of memoirs of Jois by the first-generation of Westerners to study with him in Mysore from the early 1970s (Donahaye and Stern 2010). Of the website's current forty-nine memoirs, the most recent comments on Jois' sexual abuse of students and the Ashtanga community's response. For the counter-narrative of injury and abuse, I also draw on blog posts, podcasts, and social media posts by other current long-term and former Ashtanga practitioners; the web links were all valid in December 2020 unless noted.

In other words, I draw mainly on the memoirs of a largely self-selected group of Ashtanga 'yoga professionals', distinguishable from yoga tourists, travellers, and other yoga practitioners going 'to the source' in Mysore by virtue of their accreditation and long-term commitment to the practice (Nichter 2013, 212–213). At the time of their interviews, the majority of the Ashtanga Parampara practitioners (37/49) were authorised at level 2. Most were aged in their thirties or forties and some were in their fifties or older. At least twenty had studied in Mysore between five and ten times, almost as many had made between ten and fourteen trips, and four had made over fifteen study visits. The majority (35/49) are women, as is true of yoga practitioners generally, though the gender balance of the eight certified teachers was equal. Over half of the participants were based in the USA and almost half of them were born there.<sup>9</sup>

In his study of the modernization and medicalization of yoga in 20th century India, Joseph Alter includes as field data what he calls 'pulp nonfiction' - the vast number of yoga magazines, pamphlets, books, and booklets produced at that time to promote yoga as India's contribution to the modern world (Alter 2004, xix). Today, this would include online materials such as websites of yoga professionals, instructional videos, podcasts, blog posts, and social media posts. Much of this material is promotional, some of it is cautionary or critical; it thus links online and offline worlds with intended potential social effects (Miller and Slater 2000). Alongside hard-copy promotional materials displayed at yoga workshops, web-based resources are widely consumed and discussed by yoga practitioners.

Alter writes that 'provided one does engage with real live interlocutors - in the sense that is required in social and cultural anthropology - it is possible to deal with certain bodies of literature in the mode of a participant observer' (Alter 2004, xvii). I practised Ashtanga yoga from 2008–14 - in led classes and Mysore-style with accredited or certified Ashtanga teachers, and once with Sharath - in Oxford, London, Boulder Colorado, and Los Angeles. I joined conversations about studying in Mysore, often described as 'the source' of Ashtanga yoga and often spoken of as a place of pilgrimage, a desired destination for aspiring practitioners and a regular one for those could afford the time, fare, and fees. Tips on practice and managing injuries circulated among us. I kept a diary from which I draw lightly here.

But I studied neither with Jois himself nor in Mysore; instead, I completed teacher trainings with the British Wheel of Yoga and YogaWorks Los Angeles. I know some of the participants, so I use unattributed quotes or pseudonyms when quoting from the Parampara archive.

## Motivations for starting yoga

Since practitioner expectations as well as subsequent experiences are likely to shape their perceptions of yoga's healing efficacy, this section considers the Parampara practitioners' motivations for starting yoga over ten, twenty, or, in four cases, thirty years ago. Most had started Ashtanga in their twenties or younger, while at high school, college, or just after, eventually transitioning to yoga professionally. Most of them had previously been active in a range of sports or dance. Their motivations for trying yoga fall into three slightly overlapping categories: exercise, lifestyle change, or healing.

Over half of the practitioners tried yoga for exercise: out of curiosity after seeing a notice in a gym, as a 'cool down after running', or 'to meet a meagre gym requirement before graduation.' Julie thought yoga 'might be like martial arts without the sparring'. At least four were dance and theatre students who had yoga in their study curriculum or were advised or chose to try yoga to broaden their experience. Several women recalled their initial motivation as unhealthy because they were exercising obsessively to be thin, such as by 'taking 2-4 yoga classes a day'.

Over a third of participants were seeking lifestyle changes: healthier habits, self-discovery, to find or consolidate a new life-direction, to pursue an interest in Indian spirituality, or for specific mind/body training. Sandra was struggling with marriage, motherhood, and in 'spiritual crisis' when a friend suggested Ashtanga. Paula, a married university graduate, jobless due to her visa status, started Ashtanga for 'new, healthier habits'. Rosa resolved to address her drinking problem after a relationship break-up, taking a Friday-night Ashtanga class 'to enforce the "no drinking" policy'. Alec took a yoga class 'to begin some personal work' after a bad break-up. Marcelo started yoga to help his acting and tried Ashtanga after 'reading an article about...the big transformations that [it] could bring to your life'. Maya, trained in classical Indian dance, realized while watching a man practicing Ashtanga at a temple in India 'that this is what I had been looking for, and in the spirit of my grandmother, would be my form of prayer'. Carol, a single mother, working full-time, rock-climbing at weekends, weightlifting daily, and attending meditation classes, started yoga to learn to sit comfortably in *zazen* (meditation); yoga replaced the gym when she encountered Ashtanga.

Nearly a quarter of practitioners started a dedicated Ashtanga practice to assist their recoveries from illness, injury, or trauma. For six people, the hoped-for healing was primarily if not entirely physical: to help with 'skateboarding maladies'; because of an injury from running, or as a non-allopathic cure to avoid taking steroids after being diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis. William started yoga to 're-invent' himself but discovered its 'healing power' after falling sick with dengue fever: 'that was what really changed everything. Yoga became my life. I put my [other] plans on hold and decided to go on a quest to India to find a guru'. Matt, a former competitive swimmer and professional dancer, had a major mountaineering accident, breaking bones, shattering joints and snapping muscles; he tried yoga to help his recovery and 'couldn't get enough of this controlled, detailed set of healing, opening and strengthening movements'. Zara, then a graduate student, had practised yoga for two years when she was involved in a near-fatal car accident, breaking her neck and

almost paralysed. Grateful to be alive, convinced not to waste time, she ‘instinctively wanted...some sort of *sadhana* [spiritual practice] to heal emotionally and physically... It was obvious that ashtanga was the path.’ Her insurance company paid the *shala* fees and for her first trip to Mysore seven years later.

For six other practitioners, healing goals were primarily psychological. Aaron started Ashtanga on a friend’s suggestion when recovering from a psychotic episode induced, in part, by drug use. Tom was committed to recovery from drugs and alcohol addiction when he tried a friend’s Ashtanga class with the encouragement of his 12-step program sponsor. Ben, overweight as a child and anorexic in his mid-twenties after long-term dieting, turned to yoga in his late 30s to support his recovery, aiming to ensure a healthy weight distribution after trying exercises such as weights and running. Maggie sought help with managing anxiety attacks while at university; instead of prescribing anti-anxiety medication, her physician ‘suggested I stop dabbling in yoga and commit to practising at least three times a week’. Cathryn had always suffered ‘a deep sense of darkness and depression’ that led to ‘serious eating disorders and addictions’ in her early twenties. After further personal traumas she resolved to confront her pain, but without resorting to mainstream therapies or medication, and joined an Ashtanga class after other alternative therapies proved ineffective. Jihae, born in Korea, adopted at two years of age, describes having had a fragmented sense of self from early adulthood. After a suicide attempt, dropping out of university, and experimenting with different yoga traditions, she encountered Ashtanga: ‘from the very first Mysore-style class, I knew I had found my practice, and I signed up immediately for their program.’

### ‘Hooked from that first class’

Like Jihae, many practitioners described being elated, uplifted, ‘hooked from that first class’, ‘feeling that yoga “high” that many talk about...like I could suddenly truly breathe, and my mind felt so clear ...I kept going back every week’. William left his first class ‘floating on air’. Paula found ‘the challenge of the sequence took me to a different place’; after 90 minutes ‘I hadn’t thought about anything other than my body and my breath. There was no turning back. I was hooked’. Aaron immediately felt the ‘connection of breath and body, the mind quietening’; he was also impressed with the teacher’s physical prowess: ‘the teacher...effortlessly lifted himself from lotus up into a handstand. I thought that was pretty cool too. I started to practice everyday... I was hooked! I started to read more and more about yoga.’

That first class, for many, was invigorating and almost intoxicating, and they wanted more. Susan had ‘never experienced such a powerful combination of breath and movement, it was magic’. Straight after a beginners Ashtanga workshop she ‘signed for five days a week Mysore-style practice’ and by the end of the year ‘was on the plane to Mysore’. Frank, a former businessman and ‘stressed-out borderline junkie’, considered himself fit, ‘but oh my god that first practice kicked my ass. At the end of the session ... I came out of savasana [corpse pose] and I was in a different world, something had happened in my brain or in my being. I knew: this is the thing. This method is what I’ve been looking for. The timing was incredible.’

Not everyone was immediately hooked. Tom hated his first Ashtanga class because it was hard, sweaty, and released ‘a flood of emotions’, but his sponsor encouraged him to

return a week later. Again, his emotional reaction was powerful, but this time he felt calm and at peace with himself.

## Emotional and psychological change

That the practice improves mood, even if temporarily, is a recurring theme. In his first led Ashtanga class Alex found ‘the movement between asanas ...forced my mind into a more focussed state that had the result, after class, of greater peace and clarity... It was really a form of forced meditation.’ Several practitioners joke that this effect comes from having no energy left after practice to be stressed or angry, ‘We become good people because we are too tired to be bad.’ As their stamina, strength, and flexibility improve, practitioners found they were more mindful in their lives on and off the mat, as a result of the daily, two-hour, ritual of stepping on their mats, focusing on movement and posture, and disconnecting from day-to-day anxieties.

Awareness of longer-term psychological changes may emerge slowly, or occur by chance:

It wasn’t until I had been practicing off and on for around six months, and had gotten into an auto accident, that I got hooked. No one was really injured, but there was this lady yelling at the police officer and I. However, rather than doing my normal thing by trying to prove her wrong or yelling back, I just listened and breathed gently with sound. Later that week, I thought back on it and saw how it could have gone down so much differently. I found I was paying closer attention at other times too, and how I sighed less and thought more clearly because of the practice.

Tony ‘truly discovered self practice’ not, in fact, in the Mysore class but earlier, in prison, sentenced to ten years for conspiracy to deal in narcotics; previously, he had learnt a sequence of twenty-two postures from his first yoga teacher:

I did my routine seven days a week for six months. Yoga saved my mind and spirit and kept me very fit in prison. It gave me hope that I could somehow escape... I ... was accepted onto an early release “boot camp” ... for first time nonviolent offenders under the age of thirty. ... My discipline from yoga and martial arts gave me a strong enough mind to survive the program and earn my release in the minimum 180 days. After that, I changed my life completely and used my new discipline spending the next few years practicing yoga, earning a bachelor degree in fine arts graduating with a 4.0, my black belt in Jujutsu and an early release from parole.

Many practitioners tell of how over time the routine of Ashtanga yoga enabled them to manage or recover from psychological problems that included stress, anxiety, smoking habits, severe depression, addictions, and the eating disorders anorexia and bulimia nervosa. Cathryn gained ‘some calmness within by “doing” rather than thinking about initiating action... I slowly developed an awareness of how to control and detach from the stories of my mind.’ She found the benefits exceeded the challenges of practice: ‘The main benefit has been that I’ve found a tool to help me through the darkness. My daily practice is my anchor. There were the initial years of intense attachment to it but it has slowly evolved into something softer and deeper.’ Tom was ‘in so much pain and darkness’ before he started yoga that he was ‘dying from the disease of an addiction.’ Making his Ashtanga practice part of his daily routine taught him to care for himself, to heal his emotions as well as a body wrecked from injecting drugs.

It was not just the six who had psychological healing goals at the outset who describe these benefits, but many of those who started yoga for other reasons. The practice helped Kiera not just with a running injury but saved her 'from falling too far down into the black abyss' of burn out, stress and anxiety. Paula came to yoga for a healthier lifestyle, but also with a background of weight problems and depression. The practice gave her:

a new relationship with my body [and] I have never again suffered from the kind of depression I did prior to yoga. The physical changes and search for a healthier lifestyle are what initiated me into the practice, but it was the mental and emotional awakening that made me stick with it. One of my first Ashtanga teachers in Baltimore used to say, 'first your body changes, then your mind changes, then your heart changes.'

Veronica started yoga for exercise, but found it helped with anxiety and disordered eating. Sally too began mainly for exercise but narrates her yoga journey as a path of recovery from anorexia and a background of childhood emotional and physical trauma. Grace reports having lived for years with 'the darkness and insanity of having an eating disorder control every aspect of my life', a problem she attributes to competitive dance training as a teenager. Maggie started yoga to manage anxiety, but also had severe anorexia since her teens, associated with fear of failing in competitive figure skating; her Ashtanga practice enabled her initially to feel at ease with her 'stronger and lighter' body and eventually to manage her 'childhood perfectionism', which she understands as a deeply ingrained thought-pattern (*samskara*).<sup>10</sup>

### Mysore and the student–guru relationship

The Ashtanga healing narrative, then, is constituted in large part with reference to prior suffering and fulfils and exceeds practitioner expectations by bridging the physical, the psychological, and the spiritual. That 'first your body changes, then your mind... then your heart' summarises this connection. Some refer to this as spiritual realisation, as moving from 'darkness to light'. Jihae depicts the yoga path as a spiritual undertaking, that led her out of 'un-nameable darkness' and gave life meaning, direction and purpose.

The statements about the practice's initial psychological effects - feeling 'elated', 'coming home', and that there was 'no turning back' - are like religious testimonies (see e.g., Luhrmann 2012). And as in other conversion experiences, faith and community are important as well as the practice itself. The memoirs offer insights into what else is, or came to be, 'at stake' for these practitioners (Kleinman et al. 1995, 1320). The 'therapeutic landscape' (Gesler 1992) of Ashtanga yoga in Mysore first requires some brief historical contextualisation.

The organisational structure and pedagogy of the AYRI is in large part the result of the initial encounter between Jois and his first cohort of Western students - mostly Americans, who, in the counter-cultural environment of the late 1960s and 1970s (Syman 2010; Deslippe 2018), were drawn to India, as to Nepal, as if by a 'magnet' (Ortner 1999, 186).<sup>11</sup> These students were mostly spiritual seekers with romanticised ideas of India as a place for achieving self-understanding and facing their inner fears. In those days, a prospective student could simply turn up to study with Jois; some students were already travelling in India, seeking a guru, when they happened to hear about Jois teaching in the 12-person *shala* (studio) attached to his home in Lashmipuram, Mysore (Donahaye and Stern 2010).

Jois had minimal knowledge of English and used physical ‘adjustments’ rather than verbal explanation to assist or correct students within postures, his ‘non-Western’ teaching style adding to the mystique of learning ‘at the source’. Some of these students later opened Mysore-style Ashtanga yoga *shalas* in the West, returning annually to study in Mysore, and hosting Jois on his first visit to the USA in 1975 and on subsequent visits to the USA and Europe. Those who became accredited at the highest levels formed an inner core around Jois, as lineage holders of the Parampara tradition - the ‘sacred ancients’, in Keith’s phrase.

As the number of students coming to Mysore increased through the 1980s and 1990s Jois streamlined the sequence of postures towards the linear ‘one size-fits-all’ pattern taught today and began teaching in shifts. In 2003 he could afford to move to the ‘upscale neighborhood’ of Gokulam, where he opened a new, 60-person *shala* (Remski 2019, 69) for his Western students. Jois’ business thus expanded in consequence of the post-colonial encounter, as did other South Asian new religious movements and activities such as mountaineering in the Himalayas (Van der Veer 2007; Ortner 1999). By 2003, students could no longer simply turn up: prospective students would send a letter stating their intention to study in Mysore; they now submit an online application.

The inner core of first-generation practitioners advised, encouraged, or instructed promising students to study with Jois. When Jihae’s first teacher was about to return to Mysore for a period of study, he told her, ‘You should come! You’re the kind of student who should go practice with *Guruji* [an honorific denoting devotion, respect, and affection for a spiritual leader]’. Taking his advice, Jihae wrote a letter, booked a flight to Mysore, and stayed 8 months. Likewise, Tony asked his teacher for advice about how to deepen his knowledge of Ashtanga and was told ‘point blank to go to Mysore and study with “Guruji” (Shri K. Pattabhi Jois) at his institute’. Keith kept hearing about Jois, as a guru of legendary status, from his teacher and other students. The messages were mixed: there were only ten people in the class, ‘he [Jois] is very strong’ ... [he] ‘stood on a student and hurt his back’, he ‘popped somebody’s hamstring’, but Keith’s teacher ‘implored’ him ‘to get as close to the source as you can’. In his first class with Jois, Keith felt exhilarated simply to be noticed.

The AYRI pre-2019 website material states that the primary expectation of the serious student is devotion to ‘the guru who currently embodies the tradition’. Thus, the ‘kind of student who should go to Mysore’ for repeated yoga study would seem to be someone capable of developing an attachment both to the practice *and* to their teacher. When Martin first went to Mysore ‘there was no authorization, just this mythical certification of only about a dozen people. One didn’t go to Mysore to obtain any piece of paper. You went to learn yoga from Guruji. To touch his feet’.

Many practitioners had precisely this expectation in mind; they felt the need for a guru to whom to devote their practice and from whom to learn. On arrival in Mysore, Sally was ready to ‘surrender to this practice, this lineage and to Guruji...I had not only just met my Guru, but also someone who would unconsciously fill a huge void in my heart that had existed since my father passed away’. Veronica considers that her relationship with her teacher ‘created the space I craved and has been the basis for ongoing healing’. The expectation of devotion now extends to Sharath, whom Keith considers capable of sensing whether a student’s motivation is materialistic self-advancement or ‘to be a member of the family ... to simply learn to sit properly’ from the moment they arrive to register.

## Discipline, surrender, and control

A few practitioners express some skepticism over this expected devotion to the teacher *and* the practice. Jihae, reflecting on her early years of practice, considers the pain of separation she felt when not in Mysore was ‘perhaps not that healthy, and was an attachment of sorts, which I have had to later work out and through.’ Frank is not ‘into guru worship’, considering it the opposite of self-realization; he found it ‘dodgy’ that many students would queue up to kiss Jois’ feet after practice. Carol, similarly, is uncomfortable about putting her faith in a guru; for her, the point is ‘not faith in someone, it is faith in a principle.’

This principle to which Carol refers is sometimes described by the Sanskrit term *sadhana* (spiritual technique), through which you work on yourself to accomplish your life’s purpose. Grace, trained in dance as a child, comments that for any kind of self-transformation:

you have to step outside what’s comfortable in order to attain a higher goal or discover your true purpose...musicians, artists, athletes or dancers understand such sacrifice and its relation to practice more readily than others ... high level performance of any skill or activity requires sacrificing other things.

Practitioners describe studying in Mysore as offering numerous opportunities for mental training. First, there are the practical difficulties and cultural challenges for Westerners of travelling to India and living there on a day-to-day basis. Veronica considers that this amounts to ‘a practice in itself - [that] will test your patience, resilience and courage every step of the way’. More importantly, the style of yoga teaching in Mysore requires the student to submit, ‘melt’, or ‘surrender’ to the teacher’s physical adjustments, without questioning or expecting praise, and to accept that the teacher is the best judge of the student’s progression through the system. Alec hated most of his first trip to Mysore because he did not receive the positive feedback he was accustomed to; he expected Guruji to ‘recognise my dedication and have the same reaction as every other teacher I’d had since I was 10 years old. He didn’t and it drove me nuts. ...I felt invisible’. The ‘good’ student, moreover, must wait for teacher to ‘give’ a new posture, which can mean being ‘stuck’ or ‘held’ at the same posture from one annual visit to the next. Olive was ‘held’ for 8 consecutive years and thought her guru had forgotten her: ‘I would ask him ... every year his reply was “I will teach you more when you are ready”’. Frank was ‘stuck’ at *kapotasana* (an Intermediate back bend) for 7 years, that is, over 7 annual trips to Mysore, each year asking and being told ‘next time’.

Many long-term practitioners characterise the posture allocation process as teaching them the ethical principles and moral observances of the yogic path, thereby making them ‘better’ people (Sidnell 2017). Jihae considers being ‘held’ on full Intermediate for 7 years taught her faith and acceptance, to control her pride and attachments to external things. Cathryn describes not ‘pushing’ in posture work as *ahimsa* (non-violence) and enabling a safe practice that does not depend on brute strength. Alec describes his initial frustration at being ignored as a pattern of thinking he needed to change, believing Guruji ‘knew what I needed and could read me like a book’. Marcelo, reflects that Sharath is not just teaching postures but ‘working with our minds, with our egos...For that to work, you need to be open, and you need to trust’.

This emphasis on moral training might imply that Ashtanga yoga is best viewed as a spiritual or religious practice (De Michelis 2004; Jain 2015). An alternative view, drawing from Michel Foucault's later writings, is of Ashtanga as 'a self forming activity, as techniques for self-cultivation of self, as ethics' (Sidnell 2017,16), a view that echoes how most of the Ashtanga Parampara practitioners speak of their practice. However, the process through which students rationalise the guru's control of their progression can also be seen as a control technique typical of other religious groups, the beliefs and practices serving to reconfirm the group's validity, inhibiting individuals from being critical or speaking out (Barker 1989; Bruce 1997; Stein 2017; Remski 2019).

Some practitioners do comment on the power structure through which new postures are withheld or given, apparently at the whim of the teacher/guru, or to test a student's devotion and surrender to the system. Ben notes that 'Sharath watches like a hawk' while students do their practice, as if he has 'eyes in the back of his head', offering, in Maria's phrase, 'intuitive' adjustments 'as necessary'. Not receiving an adjustment, particularly from Jois, often invoked a fear of being overlooked or ignored - a profound fear, because being 'taught' in the 'traditional' manner is the main motive for going to Mysore. Peter practised Primary Series for five weeks without receiving any comment or adjustment until Sharath, who 'must have been watching like a master gardener watches vegetables ripening', knew he was ready to stand up from the backbend (*urdhva dhanurasana*), a gateway posture. Frank, who first studied in Mysore at the new *shala* in 2003 and was 'stuck' at *kapotasana* for seven years, felt he was 'more or less a number' in the shifts of students, and that his teacher's attention was focused on younger practitioners who were learning the series more quickly. After seven years of being 'held', Frank decided to complete a request for level 1 Authorisation. Soon after, Sharath summoned Frank to his office. Frank recalls being handed a paper on which Sharath had written his name, his bank details, and 'some astronomical figure' of rupees: "'You've Authorised me!" I blurt out. "Just pay the money, and bring me the receipt", he says.' William, who first went to study in Mysore in 2000, had a similar experience at a higher level, and eventually asked Sharath if it was time for his certification: 'I met all the criteria: I had been going every year to Mysore for eleven years and I had finished Advanced A that season, so I asked him. He didn't hesitate in saying, "Yes, it's time".'

There are brief references to the financial commitments practitioners made in order to become Ashtanga yoga professionals trained 'at the source' via annual travel to India. Most practitioners sooner or later dropped a previous career, if they had one, to devote themselves to Ashtanga yoga, working part of the year in other occupations in order to cover the costs of flights to Mysore and monthly *shala* fees until they had an income from yoga teaching.<sup>12</sup> Julie and her partner had already been practising Ashtanga for seven years when they first arrived in Mysore in 2001. The fees were double what they expected to pay, as a result of international exchange rates. 'But after we met Guruji we didn't care. The money didn't matter... we were so grateful that not only did we finally get to visit the source, but that we fell immediately in love with Guruji when we met him. It was an amazing and powerful experience'. She has now made over fifteen study trips to Mysore.

What comes to be at stake, then, is a professional identity; regular, extended study in Mysore connects these practitioners within a global Ashtanga network and supports their daily practice. For Veronica, 'the annual pilgrimage to Mysore is undoubtedly the most important time in my year'. Cathryn's numerous trips to Mysore, amounting to about five years of study, are 'an integral part of my own personal journey and an invaluable investment

to help me teach as authentically as possible'. These practitioners often highlight the distinction of being authorised/certified 'in the tradition of Sri K Pattabhi Jois' in their promotional materials (Byrne 2013).

## Pain and injury

Once, dropping back into *urdhva dhanurasana* I felt sudden pain in my intercostal muscles and needed help getting up; my teacher was unconcerned, other students remarked that I was adapting to the posture. In the Parampara narratives, pain is often glossed as progress and instructive; Sue recalls Jois responding to reported injuries with 'oh opening, very good!' and adds, 'injuries occur to give us an opportunity to grow and deepen our wisdom in the practice'. Marcelo remembers 'Guruji used to say, "injuries are blessings"'. Aaron told Jois about his rib pain in *supta kurmasana*: Jois' dismissive 'one week gone' indicated the pain would go, and it did. Danny hurt her back adjusting another student in class. Her teacher, one of Jois' advanced students, told her to carry on, which she did, against her chiropractor's advice. She found 'it is possible to quiet [the] mind even when pain is in the body'. Practising through pain is thus seen to bring positive psychological change, to be in this sense ethical. Pain in one's yoga practice 'makes [it] easier to deal with any kind of pain also out of practice' (Marcelo), so 'when we face stressful situations in our lives we have trained ourselves to be calm and relaxed' (William).

On the other hand, some practitioners emphasise the need to pay attention to pain and discomfort. Nigel says it is important to distinguish 'destructive' from 'transformative' pain. Polly considers the injunction to continue practising through soreness and pain is often misinterpreted: it 'gives Ashtanga a bad wrap ... [It] doesn't mean show up and do the whole practice even if you have an injury. Respect injuries. There is a difference between working through stiffness and pain and continuing to aggravate an injury'. Sometimes a serious injury transforms the practitioner's outlook on pain. Julie discovered after her first Mysore trip that she had a congenital spinal weakness. One day, eleven years later, she was standing up from a backbend in such pain she that could not move and required emergency treatment; she was found to have a slipped vertebra and a degenerated spinal disc. Now, she says: 'I don't ever wish to go to the extremes again ... I now do other activities rather than just yoga... I have adapted my practice to remove some of the intense backbends and to do only those postures that feel supportive of my body... Sharath is very supportive of my modifications'. William, who spoke of the psychological benefits of pain, has learnt with experience that doing intense backbends daily is 'not necessary and not healthy'.

A stronger critique of long-term repetitive practice is contained in blog posts, podcasts, and other social media posts from key practitioners who have left the Ashtanga system. The heightened sense of wellbeing that the practice brings can be addictive, but repeatedly stretching muscles, tendons, ligaments, and joints in the same way, for weeks, months, or years may produce weaknesses that eventually cause chronic or sudden, violent injury. These injuries include hamstring tears, spinal stresses, and shoulder dislocations, and can occur during self-practice, when being adjusted, or when doing something else. A survey of 110 certified or authorised Ashtanga teachers in Finland found that 62% had experienced one or more musculoskeletal injury lasting over a month, mostly in hamstrings, knees, and lower back (Mikkonen et al. 2008).

Diane Bruni, the first Ashtanga teacher in Canada, was one of the first to speak out on injury. In a public forum in 2014, she described her practice when teaching Ashtanga daily as having been 'religious and addictive'. Experiencing chronic knee pain, she followed her yoga mentors' advice to work on 'hip openers'. Her knees stopped hurting. But her new hip flexibility led to a major injury. One day, after sitting in cross-legged positions for about an hour, she stood up and, moving into a simple, wide-angled forward fold, heard, 'pop, pop, pop, pop' in her hip, as her tendons tore away from the bone. Rehabilitation required strengthening her gluteal muscles to protect her hip flexors becoming over-stretched. She now considers 'yoga works well for the average person for about five years' but after that strengthening as well as stretching exercises are necessary. As Kathryn Bruni Young, Diane Bruni's daughter, puts it, if you 'go to the gym once a week and tighten up' then you can do yoga for the rest of your life.<sup>13</sup>

### Adjustment as abuse

Injuries also can occur from being adjusted Mysore-style when, for example, a teacher presses with their hands or full body weight on a student's lower back, to open their hips wider in a seated posture or take them deeper into a forward fold. Keith had heard rumours of Jois' ability to injure students; William had been told he would love studying with Jois in India 'as long as I didn't mind the pain'. Statements by some of Jois' first cohort of students reveal that Jois' adjustments could be extreme and violent. Peter Sanson studied with Jois from 1989. He recalls that '[Jois] was very hands-on, he would get hold of you and mold you into things. You had to surrender to his adjustments, and then you would be safe ... Many times I could hear things tearing in my body - like the sound of sheets ripping - I thought I was going to be finished' (Donahaye and Stern 2010, 373).

Guy Donahaye, who practised with Jois from 1991, writes of being adjusted that he 'sometimes felt on a precipice staring down into the abyss at the prospect of death or debilitating pain' (Donahaye and Stern 2010, xxiii). Brad Ramsey, interviewed by Donahaye, observes that Jois found it amusing to cause pain, and also that 'If you don't laugh you'll end up crying'. To this, Donahaye responds, 'Most people end up crying at some point', prompting Ramsey to admit, 'That's true. I did. Usually after, when I was trying to get into the bathtub. Crawling in'. Donahaye then elaborates, 'As we used to leave the *shala*, ... we used to just stagger out and limp ... A trail of us at dawn, the sun was rising and one was holding a hip, another a knee, the other a shoulder'. 'March of the invalids', Ramsey adds (Donahaye and Stern 2010, 62–3).

Jois seems to have adjusted students in this way throughout his teaching career. Keith recalls:

Back in 2003 [when Jois was 87 years old] he was still backbending folks and holding them there with their head on the floor – now there is just too many of us. Back then he wanted you to stand up from this position by yourself! I couldn't do it. I kept trying and he kept having to lift me up, and finally one day he got annoyed and just let go of me and I landed on my head ... I just started guffawing there on the floor. So much pain ... He lifted me up. He looked at me and sneered, disgusted. I took him by the shoulders and brought my face up to his and stared at him ... and he just ... started giggling.

These accounts contain no discussion of consent; rather, the assumption is that this how you learn Ashtanga yoga in Mysore. Indeed, physical assault by male teachers towards male students appears to be part of this particular *parampara* tradition. B.K.S. Iyengar and Pattabhi Jois and others received violent adjustments from Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (Goldberg 2016; Remski 2019, 20), who received a punishing training at the hands of his own guru (Singleton and Fraser 2014, 91). B.K.S. Iyengar was also reputedly brutal to his students (Remski 2019, 20, 62–63).<sup>14</sup> Yet to receive adjustments from Jois was in large part the reason why Western students went to Mysore; resistance while being adjusted would likely lead to further injury, and avoiding Jois would likely lead to being ignored and not ‘progressing’. For the serious student, surrender, by staring into the teacher’s eye, or disconnecting one’s mind from what is happening, seemed the only option, supported by the belief that the adjustment will change one’s body and self for the better (Remski 2019, 196–197).

In form if not in execution, many of Jois’ adjustments are standard in Mysore-style classes, although teachers vary in how readily and how intensely they give them. In the sun-salutations that open the Ashtanga sequence, a hands-on-hip adjustment, elongating hamstrings and spine, is almost a greeting, indicating that the teacher has noticed you. In my observations, male teachers tended to give the more violent or dramatic adjustments to more advanced male practitioners, in a display of machismo that reflects the gender disparity at this level of practice. At one workshop, I noted that the teacher ‘jumps to stand upright with his feet on the hips of men in the wheel pose (*urdhva dhanurasana*)’ and ‘he did it again, to those same men, the next day’. I did not observe women being adjusted in that way. Nonetheless, in the same workshop, I noted that when I was moving into *supta kurmasana* the teacher ‘grasped me, pushed my shoulders to the floor, holding me, got my feet and hands in and held it all in place for a while’. The next day, approaching me struggling into *garbha pindasana*, ‘he asked, “is it okay to pull your arms? Well, we will see”, and he pulled and one arm went red’.

Teachers are aware that such adjustments can be painful because they have experienced them themselves. On the day he was interviewed for the Parampara website, Keith had adjusted a student in *urdhva dhanurasana* when ‘She came down ... and said, “that hurts in my lower back”. I looked at her and gave her two thumbs up. Really, I didn’t know what else to say ... overcoming a pain threshold is critical to development. As BKS Iyengar said, “Yoga is a painful art” ... I have been where she is. Now, I find myself standing in my teacher’s position trying to help her get through something I also suffered’.

## Sexual assault

Jois performed extreme, brutal physical adjustments not just upon men’s bodies but on women’s bodies too, causing major injury, and he sexually assaulted some women at the same time. These sexual assaults were not mere groping; they were invasive and violent. As numerous personal testimonies and some graphic videos confirm, Jois lay with his full body weight on women in advanced reclining splits positions, rupturing hamstring ligaments, while also pressing his genitals into theirs.<sup>15</sup> Jois inserted his fingers into women’s vaginas through their tights, he ‘dry humped’ them in supine poses and backbends, and he would reach from behind to touch their breasts in folding forward bends. He did this in his *shala* in the presence of and watched by other students. In one account, the student recalls starting to weep, but Jois seemed untroubled, possibly even amused (see Remski 2019, 28, 197, 198,

304). There is photographic evidence that Jois assaulted men sexually while adjusting them, but no men have disclosed this (Remski 2019, 20).

Jois' sexual abuse became public knowledge following Karen Rain's #MeToo statement on Facebook on 11 November 2017.<sup>16</sup> As evidence from sixteen women now testifies, he sexually abused women under the guise of yoga 'adjustments' over at least two decades between 1982/3 and 2002/3 (Remski 2019, 24). Senior students knew what was happening: they had seen it, received complaints from students, and had met to talk about it in 1993 or 1994. But they 'deflected' the issue; two of them stopped hosting Jois in the USA but no senior practitioner warned their students or tried to stop Jois' behaviour.<sup>17</sup> Women who complained were told these adjustments were 'not sexual' and therefore not abusive; abusive adjustments were rationalised as unlocking *shakti* (energy) and checking that the student had engaged *mulabandha* - their pelvic floor muscles (Remski 2019, 3–4, 293–294, 323–325).

Talal Asad's discussion of how power within religious institutions is produced and maintained is useful for understanding how such abuse could continue unchallenged for so long (Asad 1983; 1993). In Asad's formulation, religious power is not simply a matter of ideology and beliefs, as distinct from the hierarchical structures that support them. Rather, religious power is produced and maintained in the embodied performance of these beliefs by hierarchically placed individuals. This kind of embodiment refers to the way that religious discourse is 'involved in practice' and is what gives religious symbols their political power (Asad 1983, 244). Asad quotes St. Augustine to explain that for the individual practitioner or devotee, what might appear a free choice is often the result of 'a corrective process of "teaching" ... which might even include fear, constraint, and external inconveniences' (1993), 34). The anthropologist's task is to reveal the particular historically distinctive conditions within which 'religious representations acquire their force and truthfulness' (Asad 1983, 251). The organisational system that evolved around Jois was the result of a particular historical encounter to which participants brought their own agendas and interests. The long-term, professional practitioner who speaks out stands to lose her community, her accreditation, and her livelihood as an Ashtanga teacher trained 'at the source'.<sup>18</sup>

Ashtanga yoga's #Metoo moment has shifted some of these dynamics, forcing some long-term practitioners to reconsider their positions within the Ashtanga network. Individual teachers have made unambiguous statements of apology to the victims of abuse, acknowledging their role as bystanders, and have adjusted their teaching practices by removing images of Jois from their *shalas*, no longer referring to him as *Guruji*, and requiring students to complete consent cards before giving adjustments.<sup>19</sup> Magnolia Zuniga closed her yoga school in San Francisco, mainly 'because I can no longer honor a sexual predator'.<sup>20</sup> Two women sexually assaulted by Jois have written about how yoga institutions should respond to abuse.<sup>21</sup> Other leading practitioners have declined to take responsibility for their bystander roles.<sup>22</sup>

## Discussion

In the Ashtanga healing narrative, as analysed here, the physical practice brings positive emotional or psychological health. The memoirs repeatedly report yoga's initial and long-term positive effects on body and mind, effects consistent with an anthropological understanding of bodies (mind-bodies) as 'mindful' (Scheper-Hughes and Lock 1987), even prior to conscious awareness (Kirmayer 1992; 2003). The narrative thus supports claims about

positive embodiment through pre-reflective embodied experience supported by habitual, ritualised performance (Casey 2000, 146; Thompson, Ritenbaugh, and Nichter 2009, 128–133). Practitioners then articulate these changes through the discourse of therapeutic efficacy.

Further, the physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of yoga are, in these memoirs, usually inter-connected, perceived as progression from physical through emotional to spiritual awaking, by defining yoga as a spiritual discipline that encompasses or enables physical and emotional healing, or by equating emotional change with spiritual realisation. Ashtanga yoga is thus conceptualised as spiritual healing, a form of alternative medicine. Analytically, however, the spiritual is distinguishable, in these memoirs, from the physical or psychological. It relates most directly to ethical self-realisation: as the body changes, then the mind, then the spirit, you become a 'better' person (Sidnell 2017). The distinction, I suggest, is important for understanding the relationship between healing and suffering in Ashtanga yoga.

As we have seen, individual recovery stories are framed against pre-yoga experiences of psychological and physical suffering, from stress, anxiety, addictions, eating disorders, emotional trauma, and nearly fatal or seriously debilitating medical conditions or accidents. Suffering is thus effectively constituted as a pre-requisite for healing self and others. Tom directs a non-profit 'dedicated to sharing the life-changing practice of Ashtanga with those suffering from addiction'. Cathryn advises, 'If you want to use this practice as the deep form of therapy that it is then you need to find a teacher that has deeply experienced it'. Veronica considers her past mental suffering enables her to empathise with students struggling with the practice physically or emotionally.

That suffering predisposes to a healing career is a longstanding theme in shamanism - in the calling to heal depicted as arising from deep trauma that constitutes initiation (Lewis 1989). Many yoga styles utilise the 'wounded healer' trope. In books, blogs, Instagram, and on Facebook by celebrity yoga teachers, yoga journeys are depicted as transformations, as finding self and happiness, against a background of suffering from loss, addiction, abuse, a chaotic upbringing, or heavily gendered parental expectations (Lee 2015; Brathen 2015; Saidman Yee 2015). Some second-generation styles contain explicitly shamanistic borrowings; Ana Forrest, for instance describes herself as 'a Medicine Woman' who created her yoga style to address 'my deeper injuries: my lost Soul, the addictions ... and the on-going suffering'.<sup>23</sup>

Despite prevailing stereotypes, there is scant evidence that certain yoga styles disproportionately attract people with traumatic personal histories, mental health issues, or eating disorders, in comparison with the general population (Remski 2019, 70–71; Sidnell n.d.). Rather, suffering is an 'inescapable dimension of life' (Kleinman 2006, i). Nonetheless, styles such as Ashtanga can create a dependence on practice and/or guru that is addictive - as in being 'hooked from that first class'. While Jihae considers this 'perhaps not that healthy', some of my fellow-practitioners who recognised their dependence on Ashtanga thought it not harmful because, unlike alcohol or drugs, yoga is 'good' and will make you a 'better' person.

Suffering is arguably a component of any disciplined practice. The power dynamics of the 'traditional' Ashtanga system, whereby progress depends on the *guru-shishya* (teacher-student) relationship, create opportunities for abusive therapeutic relationships. In the teaching that devotion and surrender to a guru produces healing and the transcendence of suffering, power and ideology were entangled in a way that enabled and

perpetuated physical assault and sexual abuse. Ashtanga yoga is far from unique in this respect. Harmful power dynamics, sometimes disguised as love, lie at the root of abuse in healing relationships (Nichter 1981; 2010; Thompson, Ritenbaugh, and Nichter 2009). There are founders and senior practitioners in other ‘guru-yoga’ organisations and new religious movements who have perpetuated similar forms of abuse under the guise of spiritual benefit.<sup>24</sup> The current challenges to the *guru-shishya* dynamic in yoga teaching in North America and Europe include the movement towards what Donna Farhi terms ‘post-lineage pedagogy’.<sup>25</sup> This pedagogy challenges that of yoga styles in which the emphasis is explicitly and simultaneously therapeutic and spiritual, for instance in training the body to release past trauma and endure future suffering.<sup>26</sup>

## Conclusion

In a classic paper on Ayurvedic medicine, Zimmerman observes that in contemporary Western societies Ayurvedic medicine is marketed as non-violent, offering an attractive contrast with allopathic medicine, which is criticised for its inherent violence and harmful side effects (1992). The violent elements of classic Ayurveda, such as purges and emetics, are avoided in favour of calming, non-violent drugs and techniques. But in classic, historic Ayurveda, gentle and violent elements co-exist and are used together, for instance in baths to soften body channels followed by evacuants to eliminate humoral imbalances. In this system ‘non-violence does not mean violence *erased* but violence *managed*’ (1992, 221). Zimmermann argues that Ayurvedic and Hippocratic medicine have common Euro-Indian roots and share an underlying ‘continuity in the management of violence’ (1992, 221). Similarly, modern yoga is increasingly marketed as a gentle alternative or adjunct therapy for a wide range of physical and psychological conditions. Yet classic, historic *hatha yoga* is literally the yoga of force (Mallinson and Singleton 2017, xx).

Yoga may be a good fit for modern therapeutic culture, with its dual focus on the individual’s inward search for authenticity and the outward rationalisation of the self (Illouz 2008). From this viewpoint, Goldberg describes the recent focus on yoga’s mental health benefits as a ‘re-spiritualisation’, that began in the 1980s (Goldberg 2016, 413, 435), of early American yoga, which was ‘not physical or postural, but primarily mental and magical’ (Deslippe 2018, 1). However, the formulation of yoga as ‘spiritual healing’ should not blind us to the ways that suffering coexists with healing, and to the presence of both gentle and violent elements in both allopathic and alternative medical systems.

## Notes

1. For images, see Sweeney (2002). Jois altered the sequence of postures over the years; for instance, the *urdhva dhanurasana* ‘drop backs’ that conclude the Primary Series were originally taught only after Intermediate postures (<https://bit.ly/3ofi74t>, ‘About Nancy, Articles by Nancy’).
2. See Stern’s introduction to Jois (1999), also Stern (2019).
3. *Vinyasa*, literally ‘to place in a special way’, here refers to sequenced movements connecting postures.
4. Mysore accreditation alone may be an unacceptable teaching qualification in Western fitness centres so some Ashtanga teachers also have Western yoga qualifications.
5. <https://bit.ly/36yWmXD>
6. <https://bit.ly/39ABJw2>.

7. Beryl Bender and Larry Schultz, founders of one Power Yoga style, learnt Ashtanga yoga from, respectively, one of Jois' first Western students and Jois himself. Bryan Kest, founder of another Power Yoga, had studied with Jois. Jivamukti Yoga's founders Sharron Gannon and David Life are self-described Jois disciples. Anna Forrest yoga's style is influenced by the energy and sequencing of Ashtanga yoga.
8. <https://bit.ly/2JsZriThhttp>.
9. The others are based in the UK or Ireland (4), Spain (4) Australia (3), Canada (2), India (2), Sweden, South America, Belgium, UAE, Thailand, Hong Kong and Jamaica. Of the eight certified teachers, four are from the USA, two from the UK and two from Australia.
10. *Samskara* refers to an embedded pattern of thought or behaviour; the concept forms the basis of the theory of karma as described in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras.
11. Jois' very first student was a Belgian yoga instructor, whose *Yoga Self-Taught*, published in French in 1968, brought Western attention to Jois' system.
12. Jois charged higher fees to international than Indian students and charged for Mysore certifications. He stopped practicing yoga himself in 1978 when his son Ramesh committed suicide after a fight with his father (<https://bit.ly/>); see also Karen Rain's article co-authored with Gregor Maehle (<https://bit.ly/3muoEbe>).
13. <https://bit.ly/3os91lh>
14. Some students said his initials could stand for 'beat, kick, slap'. (<https://bit.ly/36s0Sac>).
15. For example, *Pattabhi Jois Yoga Ashtanga Yoga Adjustments* (<https://bit.ly/3lvdjpY>); initially posted anonymously and twice deleted it, is now also at <https://bit.ly/2Vt54Ad>.
16. '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. - Karen Haberman. I studied Ashtanga Yoga in Mysore for a total of 2 years between 1994 and 1998'.
17. Maty Ezraty Fact-Checks Eddie Stern about the Crimes of Pattabhi Jois, November 11, 2019 (<https://bit.ly/36zhhCh>, View the Archive).
18. Anneka Lucas, March 7, 2016, Why the abused don't speak up (<https://bit.ly/2Jlwiq6>).
19. e.g. Genny Wilkinson Priest, Nov 12, 2018, Sexual Assault in the Ashtanga Yoga Community: a Mea Culpa (<https://bit.ly/3mwXPTM>).
20. <https://bit.ly/3fZXwOI>
21. <https://bit.ly/3lzgCfM>
22. For discussions of 'an apology of sorts' from Sharath, see Gregor Maehle July 13 2019 (<https://bit.ly/3lzqLJf>) and of evidence of sexual assault by accredited students of Jois see Remski 2019, 200–238.
23. <https://bit.ly/2L04tnC>
24. In second-generation, guru-led styles such as Bikram, Anusara, Kundalini and Jivamukti yoga for instance, see: <https://bit.ly/3g2qLjV>; <https://bit.ly/36z2hfj>; and <https://bit.ly/3lplUdK>. In the Shambhala Buddhist movement, and in the Western Buddhist Order, see: <https://nyti.ms/36tY8Jc>; <https://bit.ly/3mum7O4>; also Remski 2019, 178–183.
25. <https://bit.ly/2VovaUL>; <https://bit.ly/3qn34aI>. See also Donna Farhi's discussion of similar dynamics (<https://bit.ly/2I0W42b>).
26. These elements exist within Bikram, Anusara, Jivamukti and Forrest yoga (on which see Ben Hamed, this issue) besides Ashtanga and Iyengar.

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Formal ethics clearance is not required for the analysis of publicly available online data.

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