

Mysore Magic by *Lori Brungard*

Before my first trip to India, I had been struggling to learn Ashtanga Yoga through videotapes. I was living in Pittsburgh, where there was no teacher. I had become interested in learning Ashtanga when studying at Jivamukti Yoga in New York City. My teachers, Sharon Gannon and David Life, kept telling me that soon, Pattabhi Jois would be coming to New York, and I would get a chance to experience his teaching first hand. But as fate would have it, the visa was delayed, and he arrived the day after I moved to Pittsburgh for my dream job as a full time modern dancer in September of 1993. So there I was with my VCR, watching and trying to imitate Richard Freeman, David Swenson, and any other video guru I could find. Even with slow motion and pause buttons, it was difficult to get a handle on how to get myself into those crazy positions! I found a few others in Pittsburgh who were also interested, and we tried to piece our knowledge together. Then one day my friend Angelique announced that she had decided to make the trip to Mysore to learn directly from the source. I excitedly made plans to join her during the month I had off from the dance company in December of 1996.

I arrived amidst the cacophony of India's sights, smells, and sounds, exhausted from the 48 hour trip, but excited to be there. I discovered that Sharon and David were staying in the room right next to ours in the Kaveri Lodge. Sharon immediately dressed me up in a borrowed sari so that I was presentable to meet Pattabhi Jois. At that time it was very important to respect the local culture with appropriate dress, according to Indian standards of modesty, which had not yet been westernized. I had carefully packed only clothing that would be considered appropriate for women in India, so as not to draw attention to myself, or offend Indian men or women. I packed no tank tops, only tops that covered my shoulders, very few pants, and only skirts that came down to at least my ankles. But still, a sari was the best form of showing respect, so I was grateful that Sharon loaned me one. She instructed me in how to wear it: tuck it into the petticoat skirt, wrap it around the waist, accordion fold it at the navel, and tuck the folds into the petticoat waistband again. Then I must swing the remainder of the long piece of fabric around my torso, (exposing my midriff, which for Indian women is *de riguer*, but I was quite self-conscious about) up and around what I considered to be a very skimpy top called a choli, and over my left shoulder. Sharon kindly loaned me a chiffon sari, which made all this a lot easier! I have worn saris many times since, and every time it intrigues me to cover parts of my body, like the shoulders, that I don't think of as being immodest, and then bare other parts, like the midriff, that I would otherwise never show, even here in the US. I find it interesting how dressed up and feminine it makes me feel, in a way that I rarely feel at home. I was also surprised at how comfortable it was to move in, as the folds of endless fabric allow for a great range of movement. The only real concern was, "Is it going to stay on?" The fear of it unrolling like toilet paper and leaving me quite uncovered in a culture that has strict rules about showing skin (except in the aforementioned places) was quelled by a few safety pins. Little did I know that Indian women had this secret method! (Or maybe this was something that was introduced just for sari wearing westerners like me, I don't know!)

We hopped in a rickshaw, bumping along on the road amidst cows and vehicles honking horns incessantly, and headed over to the Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute, (actually Pattabhis Jois' home) in the neighborhood of Lakshmiapuram. After years of anticipation, I was finally to meet Pattabhi Jois himself, and request teaching in the traditional Indian way. I was instantly

struck by his rare combination of warmth and sternness. He and his wife Amma made me feel very welcome, but at the same time, I was awestruck and he inspired incredible respect in me. I accepted him as my teacher without hesitation, ready to do anything he asked.

At 4:30am the next morning, I had my first chance. I was asked to arrive so early in the morning that it was still dark out. I was awakened in the middle of the night anyway by jetlag, the pre-dawn prayers blasted out through speakers from the local temple, and the smell of burning garbage. We practically tripped over the sleeping hotel staff as we made our way out in the dark. Luckily my friend Angelique was there to lead the way to the yoga shala. It was unexpectedly chilly at that time of day. The few Indians that were out wore winter hats and sweaters. We dodged barking dogs, riding our rented bikes on roads that were labeled in the curly characters of the local Mysore language, Kannada. The words were undecipherable to me, but fortunately the roads had been given descriptive English names such as “Double Road” and “Rope Road” that helped me to identify them.

My excitement was both an eager anticipation of what I would experience in the classroom with Pattabhi Jois, and a certain fear as well. I knew that I would probably end up facing a physical and psychological excavation that, in the process of healing, might be as painful as it was sweet. When Guruji (he was already that to me) chanted the mantra I felt immense power and charge in the room. I practiced what I thought I knew, and he adjusted and corrected the asana sequencing when necessary. When I got to Ardha Baddha Padmottanasana, he stood behind me and firmly, yet compassionately helped me to accomplish this pose that I had feared would end my dance career. My hips and knees were resistant from the demands that years of dancing on hard floors had placed on them. But I made it through and felt his conviction that I could do these things which I never imagined possible. Then at the end of my practice, I forgot again about my newly opened borders, and when Guruji told me to practice Padmasana, I said that I could not do it. I amended that to “maybe I could do it, but it would have to be with my more flexible left leg first.” In his firm way, he insisted that I do it the “correct” way, with the right leg first. By helping me, he showed me that despite the discomfort of uncharted territory, I could. Slowly I felt his conviction about my ability to surmount challenges become my own conviction as well.

Already I felt a deep change happening inside me as my physical limits and boundaries began to dissolve. With that, my own psychological constructs were expanding into a more vast idea of who I really was, beyond those borders. I was afraid of what I might confront as the lines that defined me became blurred. Was I still the clearly defined person who came there, or something larger that could not be so easily delineated? Did the labels about my job, appearance, and personality that I usually used to describe myself still apply? During that month I felt the promise of understanding something deeper about myself. Angelique and I chanted up a storm, until mantras were working themselves continuously underground in my consciousness. I felt like they were guiding me invisibly towards wholeness, in concert with the guidance I was receiving from Guruji. Even though I didn't know what I was doing, there seemed to be an inherent logic and perfection that was manifesting through them.

There were many moments when this connection to something larger appeared to manifest in a single event. One day, I was riding my bike along the road, and noticed a boy smelling a flower. By the look on his face, I almost smelled it myself. Immediately when that thought registered, I found the flower in my own hands and under my nose. He had tossed it to

me in that very same moment and I caught it easily without even thinking. I felt enormously grateful for this symbol of common connection which had become real: a sweet smelling reminder of how nature provides, and our development towards Self-understanding is inevitable if we just step aside and allow it to happen. The Yoga Sutras teach that when one becomes established in non-violence, truth, non-stealing, etc, that these same things manifest as the fruit of those convictions. I think that this flower arriving under my nose instantly at the moment when I “smelled” it was helping me to see the truth of this, before I had even read the Yoga Sutras.

The feeling of connection I was having constantly imbued even the most innocuous comment with a certain portent. For instance, because I was there over the Christmas holiday, the staff at the hotel made a little Christmas display for us. In true Indian fashion, they welcomed any opportunity for an expression of spirit, even if it wasn't in their own tradition. In the corner of one display was some sand, seashells, probably some image of Jesus, and maybe even Santa Claus, along with some plugs, sitting in the middle as though they were part of the display. I asked what they were for, and they said “Power, Madam!” At the time, I assumed that they meant that they had added them as a representation of spiritual power, but in retrospect, I realize that perhaps they were actually there to access the occasional surge of electricity (it was very intermittent at that time) to light up the twinkling Christmas lights that surrounded the whole display! But yet again, this was another example of how India can bring out the sacred even in the most mundane.

Even the simple lifestyle that India necessitated at the time encouraged a closer connection to nature and its inherent logic and beauty. Never before had I gone to sleep and awakened with the sun. The frequent (often more than once daily) power cuts helped me to experience the simple pleasures of being more in harmony with natural rhythms. I loved having to light candles if it was dark, or just go to sleep when there was nothing to keep me awake and distracted. (When we were without power in NYC as a result of the hurricane, rather than allow it to disturb me, I welcomed the opportunity to relive this experience, even in the big city!) I found this to be very calming and balancing. It shed a whole new light on the meaning of Suryanamaskar, the salute to the sun, that began every day's practice. I began to understand the powerful life-giving force of the sun and truly appreciate it, almost as though I were a plant growing and flourishing under its nurturing warmth and light.

The fact that we did not practice on new and full moon days allowed me to pay attention and notice that it easily regulated my menstrual cycle to be in sync with the cycles of the moon, something that I had previously discounted to be just a quaint idea with no real veracity. Rather than bemoaning my “ladies holiday” as an enforced time off practice, due to outdated Indian customs, I embraced it as another acknowledgment of our deep connection to nature and its healing properties.

Not having access to my familiar foods gave me the opportunity to experience a more simple diet, as I shied away from most spicy Indian dishes and sweets. At that time, there were very little western foods available in Mysore. Students who were staying there for long periods would have large bags for brown rice shipped to them from the states. There was no pasta, and very few prepared foods. Sometimes for fun we would gather up what we could find and cobble together something familiar to eat, like making an ad hoc red sauce. But for the most part, my diet became quite simple, which was extremely helpful for accomplishing the deep

cleansing twists like Marichyasana D. And when eating in the local canteens, I enjoyed learning how to use my right hand to scoop up the food, pushing it into my mouth with my thumb. I was impressed with how economical this system was...nothing to carry with you or store, just wash your hand and you're done!

And of course, "yoga fever", the reaction to India's sanitation, which we all experienced, provided useful internal cleansing. The vomiting and diarrhea, which accompanied the fever, removed accumulated western toxins as well as Indian ones, and ultimately reset my body to a more neutral state. I was grateful for the squat toilets, which made all this elimination physically easier by forcing one to squat, which is the most effective position, and also easier to clean up by just splashing it with a bucket of water. Learning how to wipe with just water was a challenge, but also an eye opener about the waste of paper that we think nothing of in the west. In India, everything was boiled down to the bare essentials, and it gave me a lot to think about in terms of what I really truly needed to live. Realizing that this was much less than I had been brought up to believe by my American culture was truly freeing, and has helped me to keep my needs as simple as possible so as to be able to have as little impact on the environment as possible, to allow others to have what they need, and remind me that what is really important cannot be purchased.

Despite the overwhelming positive effects that first trip to Mysore had on my mental outlook, my body went through painful tectonic shifts. Perhaps this physical excavation actually scraped out vestiges of old habit patterns that I had clung to, allowing space for my natural happiness to emerge. I did not know at the time that "guru" meant "remover of darkness", but I felt it happening. At the end of my first week, I practiced with other students outside of the yoga shala, since there was no class that day. Trying to demonstrate my new fearlessness, I went into padmasana with the right leg first, as I had been doing everyday with Guruji, and heard a squirting sound coming from my knee. That didn't sound very good, and I imagined that a piece of bone had somehow pierced the joint capsule. Surprisingly, however, it didn't hurt, and I was able to complete the practice with no pain, saving face in front of the other more experienced students. The next day was Saturday, our day off, during which I attempted to find ice to treat it the way I always treated my chronic sprained ankle. (I was probably unsuccessful, as there was very little refrigeration at that time, and the regular power cuts would make it impossible to freeze water for ice.) By our next practice on Sunday, my knee was quite swollen, though still not very painful. In Ardha Baddha Padmottanasana, I simply could not bend my knee enough to place my foot in the proper place. As he had done before, Guruji came over to help me. I told him that I could not do it because of the swelling. He did not believe that my limits could decrease, only expand, and accordingly, assisted me into the full pose. As he took me past the place of resistance, I was again astounded to realize that on the other side of what I had assumed was a barrier, was a sense of freedom. My practice that first month with Guruji continued in that way until I my month off from the dance company was over and I had to begin rehearsals again. I said goodbye to Guruji, touching his feet in gratitude, and knowing that I would be back again as soon as possible. He wished me a "happy journey" in typical Indian fashion.

I was quite concerned that my swollen knee might impact my ability to dance well. I returned home to Pittsburgh and the next day boarded a plane to the big island of Hawaii, where we had a residency. I was looking forward to being there because I knew that many of

Guruji's first western students were living in Hawaii, and had heard that Norman Allen taught by donation in Kona, which was about a 30 minute drive from where we would be staying for three weeks. As Norman lived 'off the grid', it was challenging to find him. I took the dance company's car in the morning before anyone else was up and needing to use it, and made the trip down to Kona to find Norman's little shala in the gym by the beach. It had a very similar feel to the shala in Mysore. It was so dark at first when I arrived just at dawn that I couldn't even see Norman for at least a half an hour, so I just sat there watching and taking in what was happening. Just like in Mysore, students were practicing quietly and with great focus, and all that could be heard was the raspy sound of Ujjayi breathing. When Norman finally became visible to me, I approached him about studying with him to continue the work I had started with Guruji in India. I went to practice every day, and he helped me complete the process of change in my knee both through his adjustments and some additional bodywork sessions where he used techniques he had learned in Mysore.

After Hawaii, I was determined to return to India, despite the challenge of doing so on a dancer's salary (which was about \$300/week at the time.) I had experienced such a profound transformation that within a year, I decided to quit my dance job, go back to Mysore for several months, and then return to New York to train to be a yoga teacher. I figured that this was my own version of graduate school, and that since regular student loans were not readily available for this kind of study, that I would just have to fund it with a credit card (in true western fashion!). So in January of 1998, I returned to India to settle in for the recommended three months of study. When I arrived, there was some degree of chaos and sadness, as Guruji's wife Amma had just passed away suddenly. Guruji was extremely shocked and the death rituals in India dictated that he not teach for some time. So Guruji, who would not miss teaching for the world, was out of commission for a week or two after my arrival.

With the extra time and open schedule that my three month stay in Mysore afforded, I set to work on completing the nearly 100 question long Jivamukti Teacher Training application. This was designed to be a yoga research project, and India was a great place to do that research. I began the long process of study of yogic texts that I still continue now. Although Guruji said that yoga is only 1% theory, that 1% is the tip of a big iceberg of Indian philosophy! Just recording my answers was a challenge, as this was before the big IT boom in India, there were no computers available for rent in Mysore, and I didn't have a laptop. So I was handwriting my answers, and then had to rent a typewriter and use whiteout whenever I made a mistake, which was fairly frequent.

As there were no classes at the beginning of my trip, I spent more time hanging out at Nagaratna's, the local yoga breakfast place just down the road from the yoga shala. There I met students, and often times we made arrangements to practice together. It was a very informal setup, and there was a feeling we were all just an extended family. This was something I had always enjoyed about being a dancer...having a feeling of family with the other dancers with whom I spent all day sharing sweat, and many nights sharing hotel rooms on tour. When Guruji began teaching again, I would stumble in to Nagaratna's after class each morning in varying degrees of psychic and physical disassembly, feeling mostly cracked open, but occasionally stronger and more secure. But I felt comfortable that whatever state I was in, there would be another student who could just listen, empathize, or give support or advice. I formed many long lasting friendships from the camaraderie and sharing of growth with my fellow ashtanga

students. We would cheer each other up and on as we all progressed on our journeys individually and together.

The promise of understanding something deeper about myself that I had felt during my first month in Mysore the year before began to come to fruition. I no longer told anyone that I was a dancer (not even an EX-dancer) and started to feel more comfortable just being whoever I was with no label. At the same time, I caught glimpses of that identity being much greater and more inclusive than I had ever imagined. Was this a direct result of the asana practice and Guruji's dogged insistence that I exceed my limitations daily? I'm not sure, but certainly I was coming face to face with the fact that many long held ideas of what I could and could not do were not in actuality, real. Put your legs behind your head? Sure, why not? Put your legs in lotus, slip your arms through a space that you can't even see light through and then roll around nine times and lift? The word "can't" was not in Guruji's vocabulary, and I discovered that when I used it, it was a way of limiting, making myself small, instead of allowing for an infinite range of possibilities. So "can't" became transformed into an assumption of "can", as I progressed through the Primary Series with Guruji as my guide. So often I was terrified of the things he asked me to do, like dropping back into a backbend. But he was always there pushing me and supporting me at the same time, and ready with a warm hug afterward.

After intense rooting out of deeply entrenched patterns, and a long period of time, I began to feel myself as limitless, something that Guruji knew from the very beginning. Perhaps I did too, but I needed him to remind me of it. I will be forever grateful for this profound gift that he gave me, something that I never asked for, but needed more than anything else. I have sometimes forgotten this teaching, but having received it from Guruji, I know that I can always remember it, as I remember him as someone who was a true teacher who helped me to see my own real light. The actual asana practice became only a vehicle to this larger truth.