



ASHTANGA, EMBODIMENT AND COMPLEX SYSTEMS

Reflections during my years of practice with Sharath Jois

2014–2024



IAIN GRYSAK

Praise for

ASHTANGA, EMBODIMENT
AND COMPLEX SYSTEMS

Upon diving into Iain's book, I found myself fully absorbed and unable to put it down. Having shared similar experiences with influential figures like Sharathji Jois and Rolf Najokat, I felt a strong connection to Iain's narrative, resonating deeply with his insights and reflections. The book chronicles his journey from his initial trip to Mysore to his later practice at Sharath's shala in Hebbal, offering a fascinating glimpse into the evolution of his thoughts and perceptions over time. Yoga instructors will appreciate Iain's candid exploration of the realities and mysteries of yoga, while practitioners will find inspiration in his honest and relatable account, which serves as a roadmap for their own potential journey.

—Clayton Horton, Senior Ashtanga Yoga Instructor, Greenpath Yoga

Iain Grysak's 'Ashtanga, Embodiment, and Complex Systems' offers a profound and timely contribution to yoga literature. The author's lived experience shines through in his writing, providing dogma-free insights into the practice that resonate deeply with my own twenty-year journey with Ashtanga yoga and meditation. What struck me most about this collection was its ability to put into words sensations and experiences I've had but struggled to articulate. Iain's clear, vivid descriptions helped me connect the dots between my practice, my sense of self, and the world around me. This book is more than just a personal reflection—it offers a quiet hope that through authentic embodied encounters with reality, we can find a viable path forward for both individuals and our species. The release of 'Ashtanga, Embodiment, and Complex Systems' is a gift to the Ashtanga community, which is currently navigating a period of healing. But its significance extends far beyond this community, speaking to anyone interested in yoga, meditation, or personal growth. I believe this book will continue to give back to readers for years to come, offering a rich source of inspiration and guidance on their own paths towards greater awareness and understanding.

—Gregory Steward, Senior Ashtanga Yoga Instructor, Ashtanga Vidya

Iain Grysak shares his unique worldview and intimate experience with Ashtanga yoga in this collection of essays. With vulnerability, authenticity, love, and hope, he opens up about his journey as a student, teacher, and disciple of Guruji Sharath Jois. Through his writing, Iain shows that consistent dedication to an Ashtanga practice can restructure both body and mind. Moreover, by embracing difficulties with an open heart, we can navigate the challenges that arise on our spiritual paths. Iain's essays offer a powerful reminder that humanity has the potential for growth and positive change. His work is a testament to the transformative power of yoga and meditation, and his message is one of hope and encouragement. By sharing his insights and experiences so openly, Iain invites readers to embark on their own journey of self-discovery and spiritual exploration.

—Sérgio Ramos, Ashtanga Yoga Nazare

Iain Grysak's 'Ashtanga, Embodiment and Complex Systems' is a remarkable and sensitive book that weaves together a rich narrative about the embodied experience. Drawing on diverse resources from yoga to vipassana, systems theory, biology, psychology, environmental science, and phenomenology, it offers a nuanced exploration of what it means to be human. Despite the theoretical depth, Grysak's focus remains firmly grounded in practice, examining how we live, move, breathe, heal, listen, and respond to ourselves and others. A core insight that emerges is that relationships between entities are more significant and real than individual components alone. Starting from various postures or concepts within Ashtanga yoga, these essays expand into a comprehensive vision of bodily and earthly experience. I highly recommend this book to anyone interested in yoga, meditation, nature, or embodiment, as it offers a unique and thought-provoking perspective on the interconnectedness of human experience.

—Andrew Alexander Davis, Professor of Philosophy, Belmont University

This collection of essays bears witness to Iain's ongoing evolution, exploring the intricate complexities of a practitioner's personal and collective realities, embedded within the dynamically interconnected systems shaping our world. Rather than adhering to any cultural narrative or echo chamber, Iain advocates for developing one's unique organic and adaptive identity, at the intersection of decentralized processes that challenge the pursuit of an unattainable perfect state. Instead, he leans towards self-realizing embodied paths which naturally reconcile apparent contradictions. Interconnectedness has it that in 2003 I introduced Iain to Ashtanga yoga after meeting at a meditation retreat. After just a few sessions with an early Western teacher in the Mysore-style practice, he fully committed himself to this path and has since become one of today's most profound and knowledgeable yogis.

—Sébastien Arcand-Tourigny D.O., Osteopath, Yogi and Musician

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Reflections during my years
of practice with **Sharath Jois**
(2014-2024)



IAIN GRYSAK

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INTRODUCTION

I WAS APPROACHED IN EARLY NOVEMBER 2024 with the idea of collecting various essays I had written and publishing them in a book format. At the time, I was busy preparing for what would be my seventh trip to practice with my teacher, Sharath Jois, in Mysore, India. Less than one week after I agreed to the book project, we received the shocking news of the sudden and untimely passing of Sharathji.

My departure for Mysore was less than two weeks away and I grappled to come to terms with the massive void that had suddenly opened up in my own life and in the heart of the Ashtanga community. The implications of the sudden departure of Sharathji weighed heavily on both the future of the lineage of practice and on short-term considerations for my upcoming trip.

As did many of my peers who were due to practice in December and January, I decided to take the scheduled flight to India as planned, arriving in Mysore just in time to attend a memorial ceremony for Sharathji.

Still groggy and disoriented from a night of air and bus travel, the memorial ceremony allowed for the reality of the situation to permeate deeper into my being. The subsequent days felt empty and pointless, as I went through the motions of getting my belongings out of storage, setting up



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A NEW CHAPTER

Reflections from Mysore, six weeks in

— November 2014 —

I DON'T OFTEN PUBLICLY EXPRESS opinions or viewpoints until I have fully digested and integrated the experiences that lead to their formation. I realize that this has become increasingly rare in today's world of social media where we can impulsively broadcast all of our experiences and opinions instantly. It is not uncommon for photos, quotations and reactions from a certain experience to be uploaded to thousands of people on social media, before the experience itself is even finished.

Often, this sharing creates a fabricated picture of a fairy tale life rather than a representation of the reality as it is. I find this fascinating, disturbing and bizarre, all at once. Even before the era of social media and widespread use of the internet, I never owned or carried a camera, much to the disappointment of friends and family who wished to see visual documentation of my travels and experiences. I felt that the act of taking a picture was already turning the experience into a false representation of itself and removed me from actually participating in and experiencing it fully. I feel the same way about social media these days and so I do not tend to publicly share many representations of my day-to-day life.

Yet, I have been touched by the number of emails and messages I have received over the past seven weeks from friends and acquaintances who are genuinely interested to know how my time here, in Mysore, is going. After writing a similar description numerous times in email replies, I decided to write a longer reflection of my time here to share with others.

In order to do that, a bit of background to the current situation is required.

Though I have been drawn to practice in Mysore a few times over the 16 years that I have been practicing yoga and the 11 years that I have had a daily Ashtanga practice, for the most part I have not felt it to be a strong priority. Not coming to Mysore had become a conscious choice, as I worked my way through the Ashtanga series and became a Mysore-style Ashtanga teacher. The next logical step for most people pursuing this track is to come to Mysore, practice at the KPJAYI and receive authorization.

In fact, I did come to Mysore in 2000, while I was still an Iyengar Yoga practitioner who had a strong draw to the flow and breathing in the Ashtanga method. After finding the old AYRI shala in Lakshmipuram, I knocked on the door and met Sri K. Pattabhi Jois briefly. He asked me two or three questions and then advised me to watch a Mysore style session the following morning. My Iyengar biases did not lead to a favorable opinion about what I saw that morning and I happily left Mysore to return to my Iyengar teacher in North Goa.

In 2003, I met Mark Darby, and was inspired to switch my personal practice to the Ashtanga method, learning Primary and Intermediate series from him. As I was already teaching yoga in the Iyengar style at the time, it was natural for my teaching to follow this shift in my personal practice. By 2006, my teaching had completed the transition that my personal practice had taken three years earlier to the “correct” Mysore-style method. As I was living in a remote part of Northern Canada at that time, without access to a senior teacher, I had to use my instinct and intuition

to guide both my practice and teaching of the method as I founded an Ashtanga community there.

In 2007, I decided that things were serious enough that I should emerge from my Northern isolation and connect to the global Ashtanga community.

Coming to practice in Mysore seemed to be the most appropriate way to do that and I began to seriously plan for this.

During a course I took with Richard Freeman, a fellow student happened to recommend to me that I should visit Rolf Naujokat if I was intending to go and practice in India. She felt that Rolf and I would be a good match for each other. I instantly felt a strong draw to go and see Rolf and registered for classes with him that same winter. So, I had revised my plan to include a winter of practice with Rolf before I started going to Mysore. That was 2007.

That first winter with Rolf became seven winters. When you know you have met your teacher, it is clear.

Rolf initially took away my self-taught Third series practice and insisted on teaching it to me in the correct way, which meant a certified teacher giving me the postures one by one. He retaught me Third series over 3 winters, and then taught me Fourth series over 4 winters, which we completed in April 2014.

As I progressed through the advanced series and began to place more emphasis on my career as a Mysore style teacher, I would question from time to time whether I was doing the right thing by choosing not to go to Mysore. It would help me a lot as a teacher to get authorized and to “prove” myself to the greater global Ashtanga community in this way.

Yet, inside, I had no desire for the Mysore experience. I was spending 3–5 months each year with Rolf and also sitting an annual 30–60 day Vipassana retreat. I felt completely devoted to Rolf as my teacher. I had no desire or need for another teacher, and felt I was getting a truly authentic

transmission of the Ashtanga lineage from Rolf. It seemed counterproductive to fragment my time and my *Bhakti* by trying to develop a relationship with Sharath at the same time as I was practicing with Rolf. If I went to Mysore during those years, it would only have been for the authorization certificate, which to me was not an authentic or appropriate reason to go.

In making life choices, I have always tried to allow my heart and my connection to my deeper yearnings to lead the way. Often, this went counter to what logic or reason dictated. I have always chosen the experiences that lead to deeper fulfillment inside me over experiences that might give me a strategic advantage in some superficial realm of life.

Many things in my life and inside me changed during the years of 2012–2014. One of those things was my feelings about Mysore.

In many ways, my relationship with Rolf came to a form of completion when we finished Fourth series in April 2014. While nothing about my feelings for him changed, the superficial aspects of our relationship did. There were no new postures to learn after that, as he had taught me as far as he had learned himself. While that did not mean I could no longer benefit from and enjoy practice with him, there were other aspects of his yoga shala that were less than ideal for me. These had become increasingly difficult to ignore.

In fall 2013, I was teaching for what would be the last time in my previous home of the Yukon in Northern Canada. I was starting to get ready for what would be my final trip to Goa to finish Fourth series with Rolf. I was researching something online and came across a blog post from a well-known certified Ashtanga teacher. I casually read the post, which ended up being a description of some aspects of her experience in the shala on her previous trip to Mysore. She was learning the end of Fourth series with Sharath and it happened to be about the same place in the series as I was at in my learning with Rolf. Though her description was brief, I had a powerful visceral reaction to how she described learning that part

of Fourth series with Sharath. I could literally feel the intensity and focus of the shala in her description and I could sense how it would be to practice what I was practicing if I were in the shala in Mysore with Sharath.

And so, it was awakened—a deep authentic yearning to practice in Mysore. Not for authorization, not to prove myself to anyone, but simply to come and feel what it was like to practice there. And for me, that was the right reason to go.

Fourteen months later, it is November 2014, and here I am—seven weeks into my first practice session with Sharath Jois in Mysore, which brings me back to how things are going here.

I came with a very open mind, with as little expectations as possible as to what I might experience and how it might be here.

I've heard all the negative stories about Mysore—the superficial competitiveness and aggressive attitudes of some folks, the anonymity, the inexperienced assistants giving poor or dangerous adjustments, etc.

I also knew that I would have to let go of my Fourth series practice for my time here, and start over as a beginner, surrendering to the pace that Sharath would deem appropriate for me to progress through the system again under his guidance.

Thus far, I haven't felt negatively affected by any of these factors. I do see that some practitioners are competitive and superficial. They are desperate for some form of recognition from Sharath—chasing after the next posture, or authorization, and this forms the basis of their actions and experience here. It doesn't seem like a pleasant experience for them.

Yet, I don't find it to be anywhere near the degree that other people have reported. I also don't experience the social discussions about practice to be geared in that direction either. Which posture or series one is on has only been given a passing mention in most of the conversations I've had with other practitioners, and that also in a non-judgmental way.

It's also a fact that I am my usual hermit self here, and socialize very

little. Most of the socializing I have done is with people I already know from other places and already feel some sense of like-mindedness with. So, it's possible that I'm just blind to certain attitudes in the general student population. Nonetheless, I think the important point is that it is not a part of my own experience here, which shows that it is avoidable.

Another factor in this is that I have arrived in Mysore at an ideal time in my own journey. Having completed Fourth series with Rolf, I have my practice. It is something that no one can take away from me, and after 11 years of daily practice, I am beyond needing to prove anything to anyone. Whatever postures Sharath gives me has no bearing on the practice that my teacher taught me over the past 7 years.

I am also an established and respected Ashtanga teacher. Whether I get authorized and certified or not has no bearing on the opinion of the many students who have practiced with me as their teacher over the past decade.

So really, I have nothing to chase after here—only to enjoy what is given as a bonus to what I already have. If I had come even 3 or 4 years ago, I might have felt more caught up in the chasing after recognition part of some other people's experience here.

In terms of safety, I could not feel more at ease, and I think that is the experience of many people. All the stories of bad alignment and frightening adjustments are not true, from what I have observed. In fact, I think more of this goes on in other studios around the world, and amongst teachers who have misinterpreted the Ashtanga method or feel as they, as teachers, have something to prove to their students.

Sharath runs a very tight and clean ship. He has an excellent sense of how and what each student should be practicing, and he keeps a close eye on his assistants and what they are doing. He is very good at making sure each student develops the protective factors of strength and alignment in the practice.

The only posture I have been adjusted in here is catching the legs in

the final backbend. Sharath is truly masterful at this adjustment, and he continues to take me much deeper into it than I have ever experienced before. When he adjusts me in this posture, it feels almost effortless and very safe and well aligned. This morning he moved my hands to hold my knees for the first time ever. It was intense, but didn't feel like a struggle. It was relatively easy for something that seven weeks ago I would have said was impossible for my body. When I came up from the backbend, he was smiling broadly at me.

When the assistants adjust me, it is obviously without the level of skill and experience that Sharath has, but it is usually very good and I have yet to have a “bad adjustment.”

I could see the potential for less experienced practitioners who are also very enthusiastic and less aware of their own bodies and limitations to use the heat and intensity of the room here to push themselves too far in certain postures—but overall I would not say it is an unsafe place to practice, in fact, it is the very opposite.

Coming from a daily practice of Fourth series, followed by several hours of teaching on most days, I was looking forward to my time here as a bit of an easy ride. I knew I would be practicing Primary series only for at least a few weeks, and then adding on Intermediate postures one by one. As I completed both of these series 9 or 10 years ago, I assumed it would mean three months of relaxed, easy practice. I looked to it as a restorative yoga holiday of sorts.

The heat and intensity were the first things that struck me here. I arrived at the very beginning of the season and Sharath started off with a series of 5 led Primary series class for everyone. I've never practiced with so many people at once—80 people in the room. Sharath's pace and vinyasa count was also quite strong for me and I felt humbled to be struggling in Primary series during those first five classes. I enjoy hot, sweaty practices very much, but it has been a long time since I practiced in the kind of

heat that I arrived to here. I've also done fast Primary series practices, but holding *chatwari* was not something I was used to.

Ever attentive, Sharath called me out on several things during the first led classes, including holding the entire class up in *chatwari* for some time while he yelled at me from the stage to “do it properly.” I had no idea what he meant until he finally told me to “go lower.” I had been accustomed to keeping my upper arms parallel to the ground, but he insisted that I go down until my chest was nearly touching the ground.

Since I've adapted to his specifics and to the heat, I've enjoyed practicing Primary series here thoroughly. I have taken the opportunity to develop more strength in some of the transition vinyasas and my focus on *mula bandha* more deeply. As the postures themselves are all very accessible for me, I've taken the opportunity to challenge myself more in other areas of the practice.

By the second or third week, my upper body felt noticeably bigger and stronger, but not in a way that was making me tighter. I still felt tired in my breathing muscles (due to being extra precise and clean in the vinyasa) by the end of each practice until the end of the first month.

After practice at the shala, I come home and do my 45-minute pranayama practice in the open air on our balcony and I was surprised at first to find that this was also challenging due to the extra workout I was experiencing on the muscles of breathing and stabilizing. It was also a month before my pranayama practice regained its usual ease.

Sharath started me on Intermediate series at the end of my third week. He gave me a few postures every few days for a couple of weeks and then held me on *Kapotasana* for a week. This week he gave me the go-ahead to start *Supta Vajrasana*.

Now that I feel fully adapted to all aspects of practice here, it is really a sweet practice experience. To be able to flow through postures that have long ago been integrated into my body and nervous system is now giving

me that restorative experience that I thought I would feel in the first month. To be able to take the time to deepen the meditative and strengthening aspects of vinyasa, breath and *mula bandha* in Primary and Intermediate series is a nice experience after all these years of putting my focus on the advanced series.

Sharath is an excellent teacher in all ways. He is truly a master of this system, and he understands all of its aspects from the physical, to the psychological, to the spiritual. His ability to be present and keep track of 200–300 students per day every day is stunning. He doesn't memorize exact details about everyone, but he does know each person and where they are at. He also knows how to work with each person as an individual based on that understanding, and what each person is and isn't ready for. The fact that he keeps this up for six months continuously, perhaps seeing 600–800 different people over these six months is truly astounding. He has my full respect.

His talks and the way he answers questions in conferences are also very good. I was happy to discover that he does talk about yoga and what is important in the same way that I have come to understand. His storytelling and references reflect a context of traditional Indian philosophy—something I've moved away from in the past year or two—but the essence of the meaning and his understanding of it are similar enough to my understanding for me to enjoy his talks thoroughly.

Sharath tirelessly expounds the same essential messages to all the students. “The yoga has to happen inside you.” He says this several times during each and every conference. He regularly reminds us that he has woken up at 1 a.m. every day for the past 25 years, not to self-aggrandize, but rather to convey the message of *bhakti*. He wants all students to understand that focus and dedication are essential ingredients for true understanding and experience of “the yoga happening inside you.”

In his physical adjustments, Sharath knows how to take you deeper

into a challenging posture in a way that feels both safe and effortless. I've noticed he does not adjust very much. Only catching the legs in the final backbend (or working up to that for those who cannot yet catch), and a few other key postures from each series. Nothing that is not necessary. He spends a lot of time sitting on the stage, surveying the entire room, quietly watching.

A few mornings ago as I walked out of the shala after practice, Sharath happened to be standing near the door about to help someone in a backbend. He'd been up since 1 a.m., done his own practice, and was probably about halfway through his daily task of supporting and teaching 200–300 students for 6 hours.

“Thank you, Sharath,” I said quietly as I walked past him. He turned his head and for a moment met my gaze and smiled a true and authentic smile. He showed no tiredness, no impatience, no patronizing—neither of us wanted anything from the other. “Thank you,” he replied, and turned back to his next backbending adjustment.

I have little doubt that I have found my new home for developing my own practice, and my next teacher.

ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS

☛ **On “orthodox Ashtanga” and whether traditional practice instructions should be strictly followed without modification**

I believe the backlash against “orthodox Ashtanga” has been created by practitioners and authors who have misunderstood the system. Those who took a strongly fundamentalist and narrow-minded interpretation of the system, and later abandoned it because it did not work for them or their students, can tend to be very outspoken against what they see as a very rigid system. I think this shows more about the inner tendencies of these practitioners than it does about the system itself.

Sharath's approach to teaching the system does not fall into this narrow-minded category, from what I have observed. Sharath treats each student as an individual, and sets different standards for physical expectations based on the individual's unique characteristics of age, injury, health, etc. He may set stronger standards for a young, healthy or physically capable student to achieve perfection in a difficult asana before moving them on in the series. With other students who are older, injured, or simply do not have the physical capacity, he will move them on without having achieved the same degree of perfection that other students may be expected to have. He may grant teaching authorization to someone who is less advanced in the physical practice, while someone who is further along may not be authorized.

In conference talks, Sharath constantly emphasizes that physical development in asana is only a doorway to the real yoga, which must happen inside oneself. He reminds us that someone who "only" does half of Primary series can be a real yogi, while someone practicing advanced series may not attain this inner understanding and transformation of yoga. Sharath expounds the message that yoga is the transformation of the entire person, and that physical attainments in asana are not a guarantee of this inner transformation.

I have never met or practiced with an Ashtanga teacher who falls into the narrow-minded, fundamentalist category. Although I am sure such teachers do exist, I think they are by far a minority, and the greater Ashtanga community (especially those who seek training from Sharath) do not fall into this category.

My own personal approach, and the approach taken by other teachers and peers that I respect and have worked with, is to adapt the system to bring healing and transformation to each student—on all levels of the being. A 65-year-old with various chronic pains and injuries can practice the same system as a 25-year-old who is strong and healthy. They can learn the same sequences. What will be very different is how they practice these sequences. The older, less physically capable student will likely move more slowly and



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ASHTANGA, EMBODIMENT AND COMPLEX SYSTEMS

Reflections during my years of practice with Sharath Jois

2014–2024

The collected essays in this book represent the evolution of my Ashtanga practice, teaching and worldview for the 10-year period that began with a new teacher, a new home, and a new philosophical and spiritual framework in 2014.

Four of the essays were specifically written about my first, second and fifth trips to practice in Mysore with R. Sharath Jois.

The other essays explore physical, energetic and philosophical dimensions of Ashtanga practice, reinterpreted through my own animistic and complex systems oriented worldview.

“Yoga instructors will appreciate Iain’s candid exploration of the realities and mysteries of yoga, while practitioners will find inspiration in his honest and relatable account, which serves as a roadmap for their own potential journey.”

—Clayton Horton, Greenpath Yoga

“The release of ‘Ashtanga, Embodiment, and Complex Systems’ is a gift to the Ashtanga community, which is currently navigating a period of healing.”

—Gregory Steward, Ashtanga Vidya

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