

Images: Australian Yoga Retreats

IN CONVERSATION WITH david swenson

BY DANI CECCARELLI

David Swenson is one of the world's leading Ashtanga yogis, his path forged since 1973 and coming under the guidance of Sri K Pattabhi Jois of Mysore, India, whom he met in 1975. One of the first Western students of the late guru, David has been spending regular stints in Mysore since 1977. His practice manual and DVDs, infused with his gentle, light hearted, and realistic approach to teaching the Ashtanga Yoga system, have inspired students worldwide for many years.

Late last year David made his first trip to Australia, teaching workshops in Sydney, Melbourne, and Perth. Dani Ceccarelli, from Magnetic Island, caught up with David after the workshop at the Ashtanga Yoga Centre of Melbourne, and shares some of his words with *AYL* readers.

Dani Ceccarelli: Can you share with us what it was like to be in Mysore in the early days, when Pattabhi Jois had

very few students, and more time to devote to each one?

David Swenson: The early days with Pattabhi Jois were special, however we didn't know it was special at the time – we were like eager Labrador dogs full of enthusiasm and excitement for learning the practice. In the early days in Mysore, he had two or three students, and he would have still been in that room teaching two or three students his whole life – it just happened that he became very popular when David Williams and Nancy Gilgoff, who were among the first Westerners to go to Mysore, brought him to America in 1975. Then more foreigners started going to Mysore, and the whole thing started growing globally. And basically, when he couldn't teach anymore, he died. We had more time with him; he used to adjust us in every pose, and give theory and pranayama classes.

He was a simple man, but he had a presence that he carried his whole life; he would step into a room and you would feel like it became a little lighter. I saw him teach in massive rooms and he never amplified his voice. He would come in and say Samasthiti! (Equal Standing Pose) and wow, he just commanded that room immediately. But, what's interesting, is everyone who met him, even if they only spent five minutes with him, would say, 'I had such a special connection with Guruji!' And what's amazing is, that it's true. He was completely present with people and would remember everyone. Those of us that have spent time with him like to tell stories about him and imitate him; it's a way of keeping the memories alive.

DC: How has the relationship between guru (teacher) and student changed during your life – from your beginning as a student of Pattabhi Jois, to what it is now around the world?

DS: Honestly, I think the real guru is the practice itself, and that doesn't change. Teachers are there to encourage, inspire, and facilitate the practice, and Pattabhi Jois had an amazing ability to do that; he said, "ninety nine percent practice, one percent theory". The facilitator may change, and there are many teachers around the world now that are facilitating the practice itself.

DC: There seems to be a general move from traditional lineage based yoga systems toward the Western commercially attractive styles of yoga, with newer types of yoga evolving all the time. What are your views on the commercialisation of yoga?

DS: It's all good! Commercialisation of something just means more people hear about it. Even if it's watered down, it doesn't matter, because if someone gets a taste of yoga, then most often they're going to seek greater depth. People come to yoga for all different reasons, but the yoga works regardless of why you start. Once you start breathing, and moving, and trying to follow the principles of yoga, it has an effect. As people become interested in something more traditional, styles like Ashtanga are waiting. It's not going anywhere. I know people who've been doing this for 30 to 40 years, and they keep doing it, not because it's popular, but because it works.

DC: The practice of Ashtanga Yoga is often criticised for being focused on the physical aspect of the eight limbs. Can you share with us your ideas about how all the eight limbs can be integrated into practice on the mat and daily life?

DS: What are the eight limbs? Let's go through them. Firstly, the yamas and niyamas are choices we make in life, things like non-violence, being truthful, not stealing, and so forth. When one begins the practice of yoga, even if just for the fitness aspect, it starts to have influence on the choices you make in your daily life. Because when you do yoga you feel better,

which means that you relate better to those around you, and perform better in your work. Then we have asana, that's the physical practice of postures. Next, for pranayama in Ashtanga, we have pranayama techniques, the ujjayi breath. As regards pratyahara, the withdrawal of the senses, the Bhagavad Gita says the five senses are like five raging horses, and to control those horses you have reins. The reins are our mind, and the self is the driver sitting inside the chariot of the body. We have a body, so rather than pretend we don't, we use the body as a tool to explore other things, such as learning to withdraw the senses. In Ashtanga, there is the drishti, your visual focal point, to control your eyes; and your ears tune to the sound of the breath. So as you start withdrawing the senses, you come naturally to dharana,

is no longer disturbed by stuff around us, and this is something we're attempting with our practice. The mat is a microcosm for life when we do our practice; we apply all these facets, the eight limbs of Ashtanga Yoga.

However, it takes time. We have to think in terms of decades of practicing yoga – the rest of our lives! You will not keep doing it if you're only focusing on the physical; you'll burn out, you'll get bored. The real depth is what keeps us coming back to it because it's a tool for life

Practicing yoga helps to make you calmer, more centred, more able to make skilful choices, and more resilient to the wear and tear of life. Breath control on the mat, for example, guides us to use the breath to calm and focus us in difficult situations off the mat. You might see yogis jumping around



David Swenson adjusts a student in class.

concentration. Certainly you have to concentrate to do an asana, to stay present. Then you have meditation, dhyana. Meditation includes all of these things; withdrawal of the senses, focus, and concentration. Ashtanga just happens to be a meditation in motion. And then we have samadhi, the state of oneness where our mind

and say its gymnastics, but you'll find that the yogis experience physiological, mental, and emotional benefits. Calling it all physical would be like saying pizza is just dough and cheese, but that's not the whole experience.

DC: There's a concern that in Ashtanga Yoga there's a risk of getting injured.

DS: This yoga shouldn't hurt. I have never had an injury in over forty years of practicing Ashtanga Yoga. A couple of times I've had people push me too much, which is why I started running teacher courses to show people how to assist and adjust in a safe manner.

DC: You mentioned in the workshop that Indian bodies have spent more time closer to the earth than Western bodies. Do you think perhaps any tendency for people to injure themselves is from trying to take a body, that's not really ready, into certain positions too quickly?

DS: The issue of people getting hurt may be coming from a society where people have been trained to do everything to 110 percent. Those are the tools that have made people successful in the West: working longer hours, pushing harder, pushing

DC: What does it mean for you to be a yogi?

DS: For me it's someone who leaves a place a little nicer than when they arrived. It's how I interact with the world around me and with other people. If you can do all kinds of yoga postures but you're a mean, nasty, selfish person the rest of the day, who cares? Asanas are not the goal, they're the training ground. By using the body and breath, we learn compassion and patience for ourselves, and hopefully those values translate into how we connect and interact with other people.

Just because somebody memorises the Gita and Patanjali's Yoga Sutras, it doesn't mean they are spiritual. Mahatma Ghandi, when asked, 'what is your religion?', said, 'you come live with me, you follow me around, you

Are there characteristics that make each place unique?

DS: What's more fascinating to me is the similarity. The sound of ujjayi breathing is the same everywhere I go in the world, it transcends language and culture. There are different cultural nuances in teaching. As a very general statement, in Asia for example, people are taught from a very young age to respect and never question the teacher. Consequently, you have to be sensitive to the culture so that people are receptive to the knowledge you're trying to convey. If I'm teaching in a very religious or a communist country, I might not do the chanting. The yoga is always the same, but people learn in different ways.

DC: Humour was a really big part of the workshop, it seems like it comes so naturally to you.

DS: I've used humour as an avenue for teaching because the greatest teachers I've had also were light hearted. Pattabhi Jois was very funny, he loved to laugh, and it's hard to find a photo of him when he's not smiling. I believe that you can convey complex, serious, and deep knowledge in a humorous and fun manner. We're more receptive to learning when we're enjoying ourselves. As soon as we smile and laugh, our heart opens.

All of us have had difficulties in our lives, but if we can learn to have a sense of humour about it, life gets easier. If you can laugh at yourself, it's a way to defuse the intensity. This yoga is difficult at times, it requires discipline, and I don't think you have to make it harder by being overly severe. It wasn't discipline that made me start doing yoga. I did it because it was fun, because the other people that did it were fun, and I wanted to hang out with them.

In that same sense, a yoga studio can be a place where it's pleasant to hang out. The studio Greg and Tracy have created here in Melbourne is an oasis within the stress of city life. You feel welcome here. You smell chai, there



David speaks to Dani & Greg at the Ashtanga Yoga Centre of Melbourne.

through pain, so when they come to yoga and we tell them to be patient, it's like speaking a foreign language. Patience is not a tool they're familiar with, and impatience might breed a bad result. But you can't blame it on the yoga – it's more about trying to progress too fast.

listen to the words that come out of my mouth, see the food I eat, see the clothes I wear, how I interact with people, when I sleep, when I rise, you'll understand, that is my religion'. I like to think I'm trying to follow this path through yoga.

DC: You've taught all over the world.

are flowers, there's a big communal table where you can sit; it's totally inviting. You can tell the people that work here really care about others and what kind of experience they're going to have. People will respond to all different environments, but there's no doubt that the atmosphere in this studio is really beautiful.

DC: What are some of the things that inspire you to keep teaching?

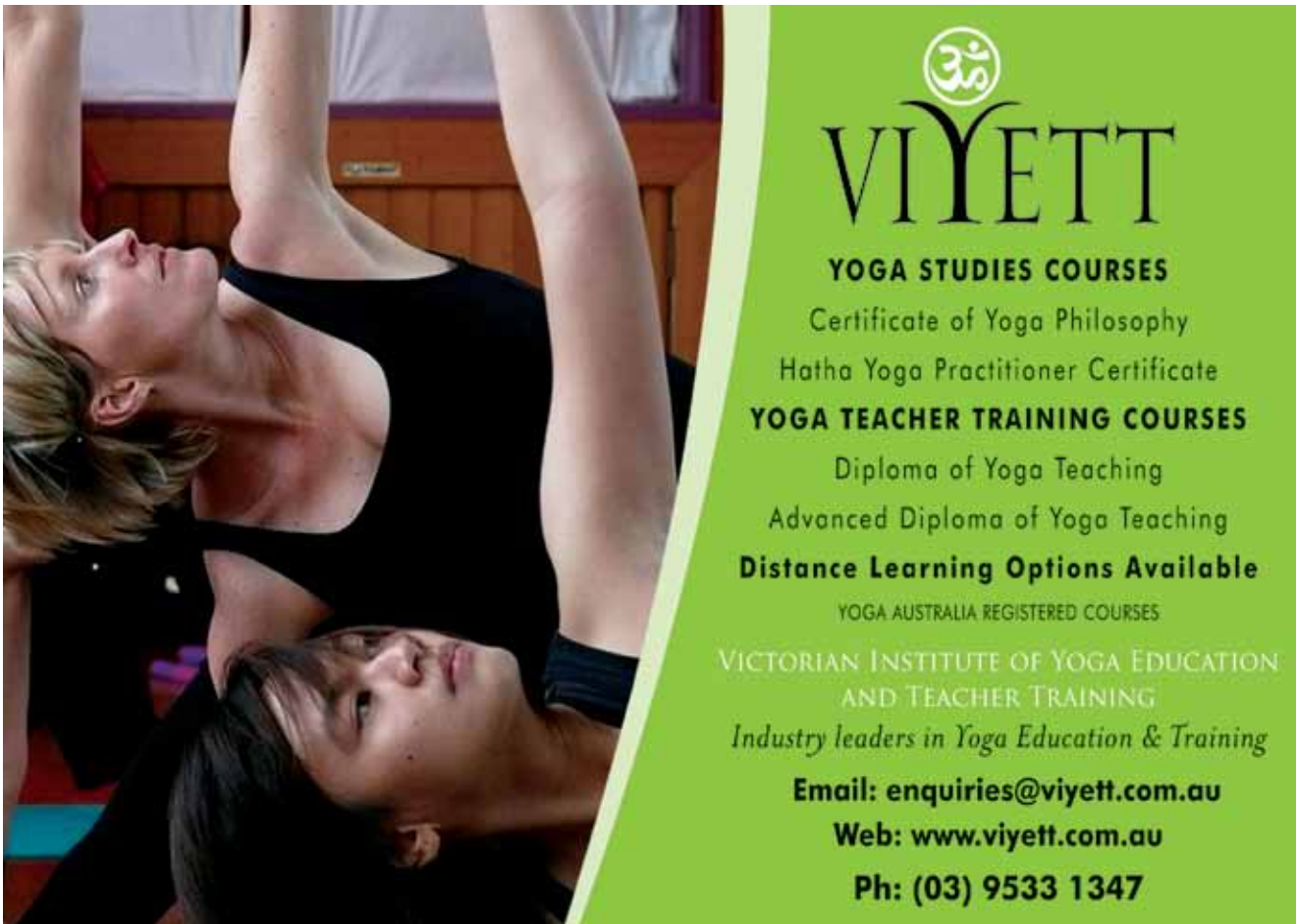
DS: In the early days, one could not make a living teaching yoga. It's only in recent years that I could support myself from teaching alone. I've worked all manner of other jobs. I've been a waiter, a salesman, a painter. I've done landscaping, construction work, and cleaned toilets. I've even had an art gallery. I taught yoga because I wanted to, and I had to do other things to support my yoga

teaching habit. And it was a bunch of hippies doing yoga, right, so they didn't have money. The increased popularity of yoga in the last ten years has allowed many teachers to teach exclusively without relying on other jobs, which can only be a good thing.

In the early days, I travelled from place to place. I slept in the yoga rooms at night, stayed in youth hostels, or slept in parks. I had this personal mantra: 'one is a class'. If one person shows up I'm going to give them all of my energy and heart, because that'll be the greatest advertisement. Yoga teaching as a vocation is new, and I never forget to appreciate this. I get to be around people that want to improve themselves. Wow, that is incredible! I get juice and energy from the students, from the places, from people. And so it's a two way street, I give energy and I get more back.

It was refreshing and inspiring to practice under David's guidance and to hear him speak. His reminder for our yoga practice to inform the tone of our contribution to the world around us was especially timely, and his classes were one of the highlights of my year.

Dani Ceccarelli is a marine biologist and a KPJAYI authorised Ashtanga yogi who lives, works, and teaches on Magnetic Island in North Queensland. She had the good fortune of studying with Sri K Pattabhi Jois, and continues to make regular trips to Mysore to study with his grandson and successor R Sharath Jois. Email dmcecca@gmail.com



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