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Students and teachers of ashtanga yoga return to Goa yearly to deepen their practice and transform their lives

The West's approach to yoga ranges from idle curiosity to celebrity craze, from exotic aerobics to healing panacea, and even a New Age religion in itself. Amid all of this there are communities and groups who are quietly but seriously dedicated to their personal and sometimes intense daily practice. The yoga master from Mysore, Sri K. Pattabhi Jois has taught many Westerners his rigorous and austere system of yoga postures, which is referred to by him and his students as "ashtanga" (meaning, "eight-limbed). A dedicated German student of Sri Jois, Rolf Maujoket, teaches ashtanga yoga each year at a humble retreat in Little Vagator, Goa, in Western India. Most of his students are American and Australian, but they include Europeans as well. As it turns out, Hinduism Today photographer Thomas Kelly is one Rolf's students. In 2000, he interviewed several of the veteran yogis.

By Thomas L. Kelly, Kathmandu

Word spread to the ashtanga community that Rolf had returned from Mysore and that classes would begin at 8:30 am. For us old-timers, the 50-by-50 foot platform of cowdung-glazed earth, set back from Little Vagator beach and surrounded by coconut trees overlooking the distant seascape,

is a welcoming site. Most of us jump on bicycles or mopeds after a quick tea and a "good morning" to the friendly Goan families whom we rent an extra room from.

The drive to Little Vagator is pure bliss. The dirt road, with occasional patches of pavement, winds its way through swaying coconut groves and tiny Goan hamlets dotted with either a Christian cross or Tulsi plant shrine in front of the house. Village women can be seen mudding their house porch, or waving incense before their Tulsi. The road heads past the familiar Orchard provision shop, past the Orgasmic restaurant and then opens up going north towards Little Vagator. The morning air is an elixir to the lungs, and the soft sun rays a warming caress to our bodies. Bikes are parked along the cliff edge. It then takes a few minutes to walk down to the platform. By the time we hear the familiar whine of Rolf's Russian 125cc motorcycle, we will have almost finished our first few surya namaskars.

Rolf, 45 and vegetarian, is never late or early for class. We all know that he and his assistant, Kersten Berg, have just finished their own several-hour practice. Class begins with a prayer-chant, and we all resume our series. We each practice our routine independently, at our own pace, and Rolf and Kersten scrutinize, advise and assist as needed.

Originally from Germany, Rolf has been teaching ashtanga for nine years. He came to India overland in 1973. He met the sadhus in Haridwar and lived there for one year with the Juna Akara sadhus. He says of that time, "I was initiated to go inside myself, to clean myself, to purify." Rolf received his teaching

certificate from B.K. Iyengar. He then lived with the Naga Babas near Rishikesh. From them, he says, he acquired a rhythm in living. In 1989, he met Sri Pattabhi Jois. Since then he's been practicing two-to-four months out of every year in Jois' Mysore yogashala. The rest of the year he spends in Goa, teaching yoga. In 2000 he left India for the first time since 1973 to teach seminars in Berkeley, California, Singapore and Bali, returning again to Goa in January, 2001.

Sri Pattabhi Jois' asthanga yoga practice progresses in a specific series. Rolf is now in the fourth. "The first series helps to cleanse the organs, eliminating toxins," he explains. "The second series is intense. It often helps to release blockages. The mind is calmed down. The advanced series gives stability inside but is very tough. Breathing into each posture is very important. Many negative habits are vanquished."

Western yogi and asthanga teacher Danny Paradise told Hinduism Today that he gave Rolf his first ashtanga yoga class in Goa in 1983. Paradise (a musician as well as yogi) has been teaching yoga internationally for 20 years, including personal tutoring of stars like Sting, Madonna, Paul Simon and Mickey Hart. Paradise elaborates on the deeper benefits of ashtanga, "Once a person begins the practice of ashtanga yoga in earnest, it becomes evident that the practice is much more than just physical. The results are much more profound. First of all, the main result is well-being. The application of deep breath, focus on internal locks, and increasingly challenging positions allows the practitioner to come fully into concentration in the present. This is the beginning of understanding meditation, as full attention in the present is one definition of meditation. You cannot separate the physical,

mental, emotional and spiritual aspects in an individual. This should be elementary to people who are familiar with nondualistic Eastern philosophy: 'All is one.' The practice works on all levels at the same time. A healthy body contributes to a healthy, aware mind."

Assisting Rolf is Kersten Berg, a 30-year-old American with a BA in Arts from San Francisco. She says, "Ashtanga is criticized as a macho form of yoga. But really it's not this at all. If practiced, it develops an energetic quality which is really quite subtle. It helps balance the mind. At the same time, the practice gives women a chance to develop upper body strength."

Kersten became involved in ashtanga three years ago. "With the practice, I found an incredible friend," she explains. "It has helped my strength in all areas. Ashtanga has now become a vital part of my life. The way I live has been simplified and disciplined. I've cleansed my body of all toxins, and it has given me divine stamina."

Those who venture to Goa for yoga include beginners and advanced practitioners who teach elsewhere. Both practice side-by-side under the premise that yoga is not about being flexible, but about gaining flexibility. The tales of their experiences and what led them to yoga are often remarkable.

The Swedish Maria Boox, an ashtanga teacher for the last 12 years, spent nine months living in Poona. Her first exposure was to Iyengar Yoga in 1987. In 1997 she studied with Pattabhi

Jois in Mysore. Maria had a difficult childhood, with an alcoholic father. She states that her practice of yoga helped her acquire discipline, tone her body and improve her self image. "The more challenging postures force out intense emotional blocks; blockages that are very deep. But the practice isn't about overachieving to the point of hurting oneself," Boox stresses. "The most important thing to keep in mind is the discipline to do the practice. With the yoga, I can work off any stress, and the discipline has helped me to transfer this feeling of well-being to others. I'm now a teacher, and I love to assist others in reaching a more balanced nature in everyday life."

Sarem Atef, 28, lives in Austria. "I began my practice with Shivananda Yoga and Tai-chi," he says. "I travelled to Sri Lanka when I was 19 years old. I did a lot of Vipasana meditation too. This gave me a foundation. I then took courses from Mantakchiya in Switzerland. It was finally in Thailand one day, relaxing on the beach, when I met a man practicing ashtanga [Paradise teaches in Thailand]. He told me about a three-day workshop in ashtanga. I signed up and have been hooked every since. At this workshop, several people told me about Rolf and that he teaches in Goa. A year later I bought myself a plane ticket to Goa, and I met Rolf. As a teacher, he's incredibly observant. His instruction is very accurate, and he emphasizes self practice. I also love Rolf's gentle energy."

Charlie Taylor Rugman of Britain was a strung-out journalist who loved surfing. His wife, Alice, was an inner-city UK-based school teacher. They both wanted to change their lives. One day they were working out in a gym when they met a man doing Iyengar Yoga. Charlie relates, "We started our yoga practice with Iyengar. We then researched and came to know

about ashtanga and fell in love with the fluid nature of it." Alice suffered from chronic fatigue syndrome. "I wanted to find a practice to overcome this," She explains. "I needed incredible reserve energy to handle the inner-city teaching. Ashtanga has given me this strength."

Charlie's tale is similar. He says, "I was a very moody person. Journalism strung me out. I knew that I needed to find a practice to help me control my mood swings. Ashtanga helped. I was also a big smoker. Ashtanga practice took care of this quickly. I immediately became more healthy. This practice has also helped in my relationship with Alice. It's grounded me, given me a discipline to follow. I begin my day with the practice and it sets the tone of the day. I'm more calm. It cleanses my system. I sweat out all my stress and negativity. I've become more humble. We were fortunate to meet Rolf here in Goa. He's a very empathetic person, very humble person, and supportive. He gives 110 percent."

Born and raised in Switzerland, moved to Asia 25 years ago and now at home in Nepal, Emil Wendel, 48, practiced Iyengar Yoga for three years and ashtanga since 1997. "I had trouble with sitting still. Relaxation was hard to attain," he explains of his beginnings. And of Rolf, he says, "It is not that he pushes his regular students into pranayama, dharana (concentration) or dhyana (meditation) after they have mastered the basic asanas. Rolf says that with patience and discipline, there will be changes in body and mental state. There was no hurry, no goal to meet. Things would happen. Rolf radiates sincerity and strength. He practices the advanced series of ashtanga very early in the morning before teaching. He is a serious man, no New Age pliability around him, and above all, in the true yogic

tradition, he always stays humble. It was not difficult to believe him. Things did happen. I now sit still with a degree of ease. Indeed, there is this very special delight in the fact of sitting."

Photographer Thomas Kelly lives most of the year in Kathmandu--that is, when he is not traveling on assignment through Asia and the Himalayas. Every winter, he, his wife and children journey to Goa for Rolf's yoga retreat. At the request of Hinduism Today, Kelly sacrificed his own practice for a day in order to assemble this story. Thank you, Thomas!