

Pattabhi Jois - Sexual Abuse Discussion

I am not a regular FB user, I don't prefer to be. So I am often being told through word of mouth if I've been included in a post about yoga etc. So this is the case here - apparently my name has been mentioned a few times in relation to this discussion. If I have seemed tardy or aloof, I apologise here for that - I've been busy with other life matters, but I think better late than never.

As it happens in my own community - students & teachers of Vinyasa Krama - I have been quite vocal for many years in commenting on the flaws, both physical and ethical, of the Ashtanga Vinyasa system. That is to say, I express my dislike of both the ethical approach to the physical system itself, and the ethics of its teachers - principally Pattabhi Jois and Sharath Rangswamy.

In all of my courses I encourage open dialogue with the participants so we can discuss such things as the difficulties of dealing with power dynamics and abuse - particularly between teacher and student. So I don't exempt myself from this equation - I point back at myself and ask students to comment.

Recently this has included discussion on the problems perpetrated by Pattabhi Jois, and my opinions of them. For any student, faced with abuse from someone in a position of power, a lot of energy can go into simply standing up for oneself, even when you may normally be a vocal, independent human being. A great deal of gravity within any group (or cult in this case) can be unconsciously pulling its members into a homeostatic state of compliance. That is, don't rock the boat, at least we're floating!

I have been slow to respond publicly to Karen's posts since last year, and after that, my interviews with Matthew Remski. I am fully in support of Karen's posts, and acknowledge that Pattabhi Jois was sexually abusive to a number of women in his classes over many years. I do not consider Pattabhi Jois a good example of a Yoga Teacher. I have never considered him as my "guru" - for the period of time when I was his student, I considered him my asana teacher, versus a true master - for I could see the flaws, which clearly indicated he was quite far from enlightenment. On these last points, I think the same of Sharath Rangswamy - I would not classify him as the best example of an ethical Yoga teacher. I would not call him a guru. More on this below.

One of the interesting facets of this - to me - is how I'm talking about the sexual abuse issue now vs dealing with it then and there - when I was witnessing it. I have read a number of responses from Ashtanga teachers claim they were not particularly aware of Pattabhi Jois being sexually abusive. Also some teachers saying "off record" they were aware of some problems, but unwilling to put that "on record". This is a huge disappointment for me, and in my opinion an avoidance of the truth.

I am also saddened and disappointed in my younger self. I was aware of these problems, back since 1993! But rarely did I speak up about them. In defence of this younger self - I was between the ages of 23-26 when I spent most my time in Mysore - I was young, relatively inexperienced, and I loved practicing Ashtanga Vinyasa with Pattabhi Jois. But... again I was also there between the ages of 30-33 for a few years, and nothing much had changed. Pattabhi Jois had gotten older, the abusive adjustments had gotten less, but some were still going on.

So why didn't I speak out? Essentially because I didn't want to get kicked out of the club. For fear of losing my place, my income, my credentials. Things I had worked hard for. I think this problem is

ages old, for as long as humans have been dealing with each other. We become complicit with abuse out of fear of losing our hard earned place.

So why have a number of Ashtanga teachers been quiet about this? Well maybe like me they've been busy with other matters. But also like me, maybe you realise it's hard to talk about mistakes. To admit that you made a mistake by not speaking out, is even harder.

So perhaps there are some in the cult of Ashtanga Yoga that are still afraid - afraid of censure from your peers, censure from Sharath, even from yourself. Abuses were going on, and in many ways they still are. We all know it, we all knew it. Claiming you were not aware - that Pattabhi Jois was being abusive - sounds like plausible deniability to me. It seems to be surprisingly easy to bury your head in the sand and call that yoga.

For me, some time ago I moved away from the style of Pattabhi Jois' teaching - for these reasons and more. For the abuses are not just sexual, but lie in the lack of open dialogue, the lack of true ethical discussions on what is healthy, what is not, and what falls into grey area. My purpose in teaching yoga has been to be increasingly inclusive, to show up and help others to show up - with all of their being - whether calm and yogic, or troubled and emotional. All states can be included and a healthy practice for presence. All beings can be included in yoga, versus rejected, marginalised or abused.

My work as a therapist, physical and psychological, my work as a yoga teacher, my work as a guide for others has forced me to face some of these painful truths. I am learning - for I may have started with a whole bunch of flaws - but my redemption has usually lain in revealing them, versus trying to claim I don't have any - past or present.

So I want to tell a small story of the past.

So at the time when I was in Mysore - and often practicing with Karen Haberman coincidentally, I was aware that a particular female student (I think she was from Northern Europe but I don't actually remember her name) was really upset with the adjustments she received from Pattabhi Jois. Her boyfriend, who happened to be American, was supporting her to go and confront Jois about it. They asked a few of us if they should, and the general consensus was yes, if you feel strongly about it, do it.

So she confronted the "guru", and essentially his response was embarrassment. Now if his response had been indifference or no apparent change, there might have been grounds to conclude he was not being abusive. (That is, only from his point of view.) But for some 2-3 weeks after this confrontation, for the most part he simply stopped adjusting most of the women. He seemed to be afraid of the possible fallout - particularly in view of the fact that the local police would have taken a very dim view of him touching foreign students in an inappropriate way. Which he was.

So here's the hard part for me: I admit I did nothing then, I said nothing further. So I was just the same as everyone else who chose to ignore it. The female student left shortly thereafter, and that was that... the adjustments went back to "normal." Until the next time someone complained.

Most students would conveniently forget how uncomfortable it was when the problem was revealed, when someone spoke out. And later you could pretend it never happened. The discomfort

was the reality - facing difficult stuff - the status quo it returned to was a return to ignorance. Understandable, but sad. Remaining in ignorance is often more comfortable than change.

These days, I have become more proficient with immediately admitting when I am upset, or being difficult or just plain wrong. I am right here, right now with difficult situations. I don't want to avoid them, I want to face them front on, and be as exposed as necessary to face the truth.

So with that in mind, I wanted to add something that is sure to put the fox amongst the chickens - to talk about the abuse still going on within the Ashtanga community.

The following three points are concerned with Sharath Rangswamy.

1. Much like Pattabhi Jois, historically Sharath Rangswamy has given a lot of strong adjustments to students in postures like Marichyasana D and Kapotasana. As a result he has injured many students. This is clear physical abuse. It's not just once or twice, and not just in the past. It occurs to this day. He has never acknowledged or apologised for these mistakes. He has been confronted on this issue a number of times, by the injured student. I witnessed this myself more than once, and have been told of a number of other instances. I have also witnessed this from other traditional Ashtanga teachers. A number of my students, past and present have been injured by such teachers, including Sharath. But he has never acknowledged any fault. What happens here is much the same as the sexual abuse issue. You can deny it happened, particularly if it's not right in front of you. And even then you can say it was the student's fault. This is horrible! It is not the student's fault, the responsibility lies with the teacher. What happens after a student has been chronically injured? (yes some students have been crippled by these adjustments) So what happens? They leave. They don't come back. Then we can deny they ever existed. No problem here. You can also contend this issue was in the past or infrequent. That is still not the case. This issue - the physical abuse caused by giving overly strong adjustments, and by following the set sequence blindly - is not limited to Sharath, but is actually supported by many teachers within the Ashtanga Vinyasa community. If anyone seeks to deny this I can site a number of examples, both in the more distant past and recent times, that support this claim.

2. Also historically following in Pattabhi Jois' footsteps, Sharath does not encourage open conversation about the Ashtanga Vinyasa policies - to the point that he has threatened to kick out teachers who didn't conform to all of his demands, or even just whenever he wanted to. That is, he has threatened to revoke your Ashtanga Vinyasa teacher's certificate, as and when he wants. He has, I believe, retracted some of this since last year, but we have heard no apology or recognition of wrongdoing.

3. No public statement regarding acknowledgement of the sexual abuses committed by his grandfather. The expression 'plausible deniability' comes to mind.

Sharath has been consistent with this at least - you are not allowed to question or doubt the teacher, you are not allowed to question the teaching of the method, or question the sacredness of the set sequence. Ashtanga Yoga is pure, don't change it, the teacher is pure, no fault here, so we're all going to heaven... This is misguided and unethical. The latter would be the very definition of a bad yoga teacher, not a good one.

Why do so many students seek to justify or deny a teacher's abuse when there are clear problems at hand that are not being addressed? Once again, because the community, the cult phenomena, demands it. In any power dynamic the ethical considerations are much greater and require much greater diligence - even nitpicking - to assure balance between unequal parties.

You may have never received a poor adjustment yourself, but you might then extrapolate this, and assume Sharath only ever gives good adjustments to everyone. Does Sharath actually check if giving an adjustment or doing a specific posture is good for the student in the first place? There are no checks, no counterbalances, for the fallout of an adjustment or posture gone wrong.

Even when an adjustment is innocently given - do your practice and all is coming - can still lead to an injury, which is still the teacher's responsibility. Yes, all is coming - including pain, abuse, and complicity with abuse if you accept that philosophy without some discernment. The Ashtanga philosophy is not innately wrong, but too easily it can go wrong! Do your practice and all is coming is another way of being coerced to follow the teacher and the teaching blindly without natural questioning or authentic dialogue on these difficult subjects.

More pain in your body is not a good thing! Your body is telling you something. Why don't you try listening to your body for a change (your body never lies by the way) versus sacrificing your sweet self to a teacher who does not have your best interest at heart. A teacher that encourages you to have open discourse and argument - directly with the teacher, is someone to follow. A teacher who doesn't invite this dialogue, and essentially just says shut up and do your homework, is not. Don't get me wrong, there may be times when the latter is important, but only for short periods. Your freedom to express, to be honest, and to move away from physical pain - immediately - is required of any good, ethical yoga teacher.

So here is my hope - stand up and shout out about abuse. Not just if it's happening to you, but also if it's happening to someone else. Don't pretend you didn't see, or claim it's none of your business. It is your business - it's everyone's business to be mindful, and caring and proactive as we can be.

Dealing with abuse and interpersonal confrontation can be incredibly challenging. So here is what I do.

1. I do not condone or give permission for any kind of abuse - verbal, physical, sexual, financial, intellectual - in my community or in any community I am connected to. I stand up against abuse. By saying no to an abuser, or saying no to a community that supports abuse, you accept the risk of such actions: Rejection, condemnation, dislike or even hatred... But you can step away from either passive acceptance of abuse, or being intellectually against it, but still not taking action. Stand up!

2. I try to teach others to admit their particular attachments to the ego and mind - and thus to see yourself so clearly your transformation from lower consciousness to higher consciousness is inevitable. It's important to understand when you are being unconscious in relation to any personal problems, and point the finger back at yourself. Look and see yourself so clearly, that abuse can no longer hold you captive, on any level.

3. From there you can practice both compassion and ethics in the same breath.

So thanks Karen, for vocalising this.

<https://karenrainashtangayogaandmetoo.wordpress.com>

Thanks Matthew Remski for your interesting interviews!

<http://matthewremski.com/wordpress/>

Much love and kindness

Matthew Sweeney

Addendum

Sexually abusive adjustments and inappropriate sexual contact committed by Pattabhi Jois - that I was aware of:

1. Coming out of the deep final back bend - Chakra Bandhasana - with final hug and grab of bottom... bum wobble / jiggle
2. Lying on top of woman in Supta Trivikrmasana - prone splits
3. Pulling a woman's hips back onto Jois' groin area when exiting from Mayurasana - highly sexually suggestive - and close genital contact
4. Lifting a woman out of Padmasana, typically after Kukkutasana, by grabbing under and holding the pubic bone in order to flip her back to Chaturanga - actually touching the vagina
5. Resting a hand on a woman's bottom and/or groin while she was inverted in Urdhva Padmasana, Pindasana or Pada Hastasana
6. Kissing women on the lips, typically in farewell