

Connected to Divine Sparkle for Decades*

Are You Ready to follow Your Inner Voice? (Part 1)

Magazine "Healthier Living"

Interviewer: Goran Kojić

*Anyone in Serbia who is familiar with Ashtanga Yoga, must have heard about Ranko Stoiljković. His school, yoga studio – Ashtanga Yoga Shala is directly spreading its founder's several decades old experience. According to his opinion, Ashtanga Yoga is probably the most efficient yogic method to raise awareness (which is also accomplished through the techniques of Kundalini and Kriya Yoga), but also a method that creates a strong and flexible body and mid. Ranko Stoiljković answered our questions from Mysore, India, the city he has been visiting every year since 2008 with the purpose to stay at Sri K. Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute and keep improving his skills with his teacher, Guruji.***Goran Kojić:** How and when did everything start?

Ranko Stoiljković: At the age of sixteen, I became seriously interested in martial arts and started training karate intensively. In that period several books about yoga and hermetism somehow appeared. I read them with great passion and they inspired me to practice but also to experiment. In my childhood, my health was rather poor, I often had bronchitis and flue, and in elementary school I had serous pneumonia for three times caught a cold for a number of times.

I liked the first book written by Ž.M. Slavinski, a true yoga and hermetism expert in the region of former Yugoslavia, "Psychological Training of Hindu Fakirs and Yogis" so much that I started practicing asanas, pranayama and concentration along with my karate trainings. I realised that I should not only have a strong and flexible body, but also a peaceful mind. I wanted that with all my heart, which is the characteristic of every true fighter. I accidentally met Jasmina Puljo, the pioneer of Yoga in this region. Her friend, who was a journalist, and I used to live in the same building. I would occasionally run into her, and finally decided to go to my first class. However, I was disappointed because I saw only older overweight ladies

* This is an unofficial translation provided by Ashtanga Yoga Belgrade for informative purpose only. The original version of this newspaper article is written in Serbian and was published in Magazine "Healthier Living".

practicing with her. So, I decided to practice alone with the help of books such as "Yoga and Sport" and "Yoga and Health", written by Selvaradzan Jesudijan, one of the first yoga teachers in Europe, and "Yoga Self-Taught", written by André Van Lisbeth.

Training, karate training in particular, both-in the club as well as at home, along with self-taught Hatha yoga instantly became my great pleasure and enjoyment. Somehow, at that time films with Bruce Lee also appeared and so, karate became the centre of my high school life. I used to compete with seniors because there had not yet been junior competitions at that time.

And then, all of a sudden, in the fourth grade of high school, after a serious flue that I survived "on my feet" I was hospitalised due to extrasystoles (a premature contraction of the heart independent of its normal rhythm). After three weeks at hospital, which I will always remember as the most difficult part of my life, I was diagnosed with chronic pericarditis (inflammation of the lining surrounding the heart) with the necessity of further home treatment, and ban to go to school and perform any kind of training. I used to take several different medicines each day and felt really unhappy. I was broken because my dream to become an athlete and a karate master and to study the Faculty for Physical Education collapsed.

By the end of high school and graduation in June 1975, I decided to take control of my health, to become healthy and continue practicing and studying hatha yoga even more seriously. My teacher of martial arts, Mario Topolšek also started teaching me tai chi, a Chinese therapeutic and martial system of exercising.

I started studying law, and later graduated at Faculty of Law, University of Belgrade, but without emotion and true desire.

Our leading cardiologists, such as for example Professor Romano, advised me to give up karate and I was instantly deliberated from the obligation of military service for two years. I wanted to be healthy with all my heart, to return to karate, to keep improving my character, to find my true nature and to become a good fighter.

After seven years of constant practicing of hatha yoga and tai chi, at the examination for final estimation of capability for military service the doctors were surprised to see that the extrasystoles of my heart had disappeared and that I could pass through military training. They asked me what I had been doing and could not believe that yoga and tai chi had helped me. I was incredibly happy and, at that very same day I became absolutely certain that nothing could separate me from karate and yoga. Ever! I instantly returned to karate trainings and continued practicing hatha yoga and tai chi because all these activities made me feel

good. I strongly felt that that was my path, that combination of Eastern skills that gave and are still giving me benefits and tranquillity. It is all the same today, after twenty five years of active karate practicing and winning medals on national and international tournaments. In 2003, after World Championship of Okinawan martial arts Naha, Okinawa I stopped practicing karate so that I could completely dedicate myself teaching and practicing yoga.

When the Student is Ready, the Teacher Emerges

Goran Kojić: Who was your first yoga teacher? Who was the first to teach you hatha yoga and who has left the most important trace on your yoga journey?

Ranko Stoiljković: My first teachers of yoga were my books. Since my early childhood I was very fond of movement and different physical activities, especially football like all little boys (I used to play football in Partisan's pioneer team), my karate training directed me towards other similar skills that I used to "copy" from books because I systematically studied every available literature related to martial arts, yoga and hermetism. In my high school days, I read "Siddhartha" and "Demian", well known books written by Hermann Hesse, for several times and used to think about the purpose of life and how to give your best while doing something you really enjoy. Nevertheless, I was lucky enough to find (or to be found by) Dragan Lončar, one of yoga pioneers in our region.

One day, at the beginning of the nineties, he emerged on my karate exam, we got to know each other, became friends and started teaching one another. He wanted to practice tai chi in order to expand and enrich his knowledge about the East, since he had already visited India for several times.

In return, he started directing my long-term self-taught hatha yoga practice towards the Bihar school, which I had already been following in accordance with the book "Kundalini Tantra" that made me think about visiting the main ashram of this yoga school, situated in Bihar, India.

We became good friends, which we still are today, and soon, in December 1994, I went to India with Dragan's group, to Bihar, where something that is important for every true and dedicated student occurred to me. I met my Guru, Yoga Acharia or Yoga Teacher – Swami Sivamurti Saraswati, who had established the largest centre for this type of yoga in Europe – Satyananda Ashram in Athens, Greece.

Of course, it was an unforgettable, I would say unreal intercourse with the energy that clearly tells you that you should follow it in the form of your teacher, of Guru if you want, who is real and standing right in front of you. Just like in books, I used to be happy and grateful for days because of this amazing experience that soon changed my life and completely directed me towards my commitment to yoga and yogic life.

I was given my personal mantra that I kept repeating, I slept very little and was enchanted by India and Yoga, I kept feeling that sweet and pleasant sensation and wished that my journey would never end, that this increased energy would never weaken and that the feeling of happiness and accomplishment would never change a single bit of its fullness.

Of course, even the best experiences have to end, but the feeling of peace, inner joy and certainty caused by the fact that I am determined to remain on my journey of yoga has never left me.

After a year and a half of practicing yoga under the supervision of my Swamiji and staying in her ashram in Athens for three times, after serious preparation and without hurting persons who were close to me, I completely abandoned all my nonspiritual obligations and on 5th of July 1996 started living in Satyananda ashram in Athens, Greece.

My martial arts teacher sensei Mario Topolšek accompanied me to Ashram. I am deeply grateful to him for everything he has taught me, which goes beyond the fighting itself and refers to the improvement of my character and to the possibility to become not only a better fighter but also a better person.

At our farewell, I promised to him that I would continue my practice, my martial arts trainings in the best way I could and he promised to help me and still teach me martial arts occasionally. I started a new chapter of my life.

Towards the Highest Awareness with the Practice of Kriya Yoga

Goran Kojić: Your choice is Ashtanga Yoga. Why?

Ranko Stoiljković: A simple and short answer would be because this practice really suits me. I simply fell in love with it. My latest sadhana, or spiritual exercise has been lasting for the past nine years. Its full name is: Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga in the tradition of Sri Krishna Pattabhi Jois and Sri Rangaswami Sharath Jois.

In a broader, essential and etymological sense, it belongs to the practice of Kriya Yoga. In accordance with Patanjali's "Yoga Sutras", the best known text about yoga, as well as according to other written sources, Kriya Yoga is the yoga of action and it includes three elements:

1) Tapas, the burning desire to practice yoga, to direct an intensive effort towards a complex practice that changes us.

2) Swadhyaya, generally meaning the study of the self and self-improving from our body to our inner being; studying sacred texts, understanding the tradition and creating space for change on every level of our personality.

3) Isvara Pranidhana, believing in the highest energy and surrendering to that energy; constant awareness directed towards the Highest Energy or God, if you want. Said in a Christian manner, burning desire to connect with the divine.

So, if these three aspects are practiced persistently, suffering can be overcome (this refers to Buddha's simple definition of enlightenment as the end of suffering) and the experience of the Highest Awareness (Samadhi or the Awareness of Jesus) can be achieved. One of the best known contemporary spiritual teachers, Eckhart Tolle describes this as "natural state of feeling unity with the Being".

My practice of Kriya Yoga has not changed since 1996, when I chose this path. What I did change is the actual expression of this spiritual practice (in 1996 I was initiated in the practice of kundalini Kriya Yoga by my Swamiji).

It is very important to understand that Ashtanga Yoga (this is a shorter term used for the first time by Patanjali) does not consist only of asanas. They represent only one eighth part of yoga, but, unfortunately, people are often not aware of that.

Sri Rangaswami Sharath Jois, called Gururji by many of his students from all around the world, including myself, who inherited the tradition of his grandfather, Sri Krishna Pattabhi Jois, a renowned South-Indian yoga master and guru, says that the tradition of Ashtanga Yoga includes eight groups of practice that correspond to eight levels of body and mind, all of which are practiced simultaneously in order to obtain true experience of yoga.

Managing to perform advanced asanas is not, or does not have to be, the sign that the practitioner has made any spiritual progress, but the asanas are one of the methods to calm your mind and control it.

After traditional eight years I spent in my Swamiji's Ashram practicing Kriya Yoga and other styles of this beautiful tradition, I "accidentally" heard of Ashtanga Yoga from my friend and first yoga teacher Dragan Lončar. In autumn 2005, right at the time I felt the need for change, he gave me a video cassette Ashtanga Yoga with David Swenson and immediately started practicing because this practice instantly captivated me. One again, I was blessed by the Highest Energy.

I had been practicing by myself for two and a half years and then, in 2008 visited Mysore for the first time. In magical Mysore, yoga haven situated on the southern part of India I met the incredible Jois family and once again experienced the same feeling of joy and happiness for being on the right path that was given to me and that completely suits me.

With the blessing of my Guruji I am disseminating this knowledge in my beloved Serbia and around the region. At the moment, I am here in Mysore, where I practice and also assist to my teacher, like I have been doing every year starting from, as I have said, 2008.

I am incredibly grateful to other teachers and advanced practitioners who I am practicing with and who I am constantly learning from: David Swenson, Shelly Washington, Rolf and Marci Naujokat, John and Lucy Scott, Laruga Glaser, Gabriele Severini. At the end, I would also like to thank to all my students and people who have tried to practice Ashtanga Yoga with me, at least for a short period of time. I learn from them and we grow together.

I would also like to use this opportunity to invite your readers to come to our Ashtanga Yoga Shala in Belgrade, Dečanska 11, and to directly experience probably the most efficient yogic method for systematic raising of awareness and creating strong and flexible body and mind by practicing with me and my assistants.