

# The Key is in Awareness\*

## *Are You Ready to follow Your Inner Voice? (Part 2)*

### 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 mind. This is the second part of an exclusive interview with him, made during his stay in India, the cradle of yoga, where he often travels.*

**Goran Kojić:** If you observe yoga as a whole, how much does it affect your life, apart from your teaching and learning from the others?

**Ranko Stoiljković:** Gradually, I was becoming increasingly attracted to yoga. So, for me, in the past several years, it has been representing Light, Deification, definitely the Highest Energy that we all return to and that we all come from. It plays the leading role in my life and I am incredibly happy because of that.

In yoga and with yoga, you should let things happen. "Do not push the river", as someone said once, take from yoga as much as you like, as the time passes listen, observe and feel which direction you should choose.

### **The Journey to Samadhi**

Indeed, after all these years on the path of yoga and a large number of difficult moments and a much larger number of beautiful and inspiring experiences, I am convinced that the Life itself or the Highest Energy at the same time is the greatest Teacher.

I believe that the greatest Teacher is our practice, our spiritual exercise that we keep repeating persistently, constantly and continuously. It certainly leads us to the possibility to

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become better, to do good and that, therefore, the world we live in must become better. I say “the possibility” because the practice requires immense, and, what is even more important, correct and comprehensive work.

**Goran Kojić:** What exactly does “comprehensive” stand for?

**Ranko Stoiljković:** It means that yoga does not include only asanas. I would like to cite Eckhart Tolle once again, who said: “If you feel the enlightenment, it will not be published in the news or on Facebook”. That hidden and invisible aspect of yoga is much more important than being able to put your leg behind your head, as the majority perceive yoga today.

A couple of years ago, I was invited to a TV show but only under the condition I was able and willing to put my leg behind my head!

The experience of yoga cannot be stolen, but only reached and, in that sense, different types of yoga offer different ways for different persons. Of course, it is important that your predominant practice is the one that influences you the most, the one that encourages you to feel that “click” showing that you are on the right way, on your way. Everyone has to discover that “click” by himself. This cannot be learned from books or on a course. After that, nothing seems difficult, you have the access to immeasurable Energy and you become plugged in to divine sparkle that is always present, but you just need to connect with it.

Practically, in one advanced form, it means constant 24/7 awareness focused on for example, mantra and breathing or, what is more in accordance with the religions, prayer.

So, all spiritual traditions highlight that the awareness is the key. The awareness that, as I like to say, is directed towards the Highest Energy or God. However, we must not forget that words are only pale guidelines that might easily make us feel confused.

Briefly said, I am striving and giving my best to live yoga for a very simple but deep reason – it makes me feel incredibly happy and satisfied. This inner essential contentment (*santosha*) is one of yoga’s lighthouses, a guarantee that you are going to the right direction.

In Eastern traditions, this constant awareness directed towards mantra is called *smarana* and is considered very hard, or maybe even the hardest spiritual practice. Now, you can easily make a comparison with our Christian tradition. Is it not essentially the same as praying? Of course, there are some differences. That is absolutely normal.

**Goran Kojić:** Can yoga be separated from religion? Are the so called world religions compatible with yoga? Which ones and at what level?

**Ranko Stoiljković:** First of all, yoga is a practical life philosophy that has its culmination in something that we call bhakti, devotion, unconditional love for the Highest Energy, Being, God (however you wish to call it) and, of course, the realization, the experience of this energy.

The final goal or final accomplishments of yoga and religions are the same, but, regardless of some similarities, yoga significantly differs from religion. Generally speaking and without the desire to review and analyse this relation too deeply, I would emphasize that neither believing in God nor following a particular religion or accepting the possibility of deification should represent the precondition to practice yoga. And vice versa.

So, yoga is a special skill, a way of living, a philosophy and, if you want, an art.

Most people start practicing yoga with an open heart, without following any kind of religion or with a very weak connection to one of them. Through time, everybody can accomplish the experience of yoga. Again, I say “can” because I hope that everybody is intelligent enough to understand how much work it is required only to make a small step and just slightly open the door of this “skill above all skills” as I like to call yoga.

This will not occur if you only practice asanas for one hour twice a week. Although they are the basis, the foundation of yoga, they only make an eighth part of it, no matter how we practice them. After all, this is how you start to practice yoga – gradually, moderately, in a balanced manner and constantly observing and witnessing what is happening in the present moment. The only way to practice yoga is now and here.

Yoga is only one of six darshanas, philosophies, which are not perceived as intellectual practices that should answer the questions about the meaning of life but which go further, all the way to the mystical experience that brings insights, allows you a deeper understanding of life mechanism and the highest states of awareness – Samadhi or, in accordance with Christian terminology, the awareness of Jesus.

In spite of some similarities, the key difference is in the techniques. If we agree that yoga is meditation, then we can discuss the similarities and differences between, for example, praying and meditation.

I would also like to add that yoga is, of course, deliberately related to Eastern religions and taught in that manner, but that it still remains as independent as it is possible.

An approach that could be described as fully scientific should also be mentioned, since it has been becoming more and more popular along with the popularization of yoga around the world.

## With Sadhana and Teacher's Guidance to Perfection

**Goran Kojić:** In a rather short period (less than ten years have passed since the Guidelines for the implementation of traditional/alternative methods in medical protection were adopted) we have come from the point where yoga was considered a “heretic activity” to the point where the pride and the idol of the nation (Novak Đoković) sincerely talks about the role of yoga in his success as a tennis player, that football players practice yoga, that hatha yoga is included in elementary school programmes etc. What do you think about that?

**Ranko Stoiljković:** Yes, it seems that yoga is becoming increasingly popular on a global level and I am extremely pleased to hear that. Yoga deserves that, indeed. It offers solutions, answers to the questions about the meaning of life. Yoga is a practical philosophy that offers very precise ways to calm your mind, the possibility to become extremely creative, successful and productive in everything we do, to develop our talents and subtle levels of our personality. Renowned individuals in various spheres of public life are usually the first ones to realise this.

I have been teaching our famous musicians, sportsmen, but also doctors, and businessmen. Some of them are very persistent and have years of training behind them. They have accepted yoga as a way of living and that brings them numerous benefits – good health at first place, since everything else depends on that.

Yoga is one of the methods for health improvement and this is also confirmed by the law. It changes people's lives, broadens your capabilities and I believe that its broader acceptance and the recognition of its importance and depths to which it can lead anyone who dedicates himself to it can be expected in the future.

**Goran Kojić:** Is the establishment of schools for yoga instructors in Serbia that are not in accordance with the gurukul tradition good for the development of yoga in Serbia or not?

**Ranko Stoiljković:** With the completion of a yoga instructor course, of course, one does not finish his training. On the contrary. A serious, committed and long-term yoga practice leads to the possibility of yogic experience and discovering its essence. The same refers to the possibilities of teaching this skill above all skills.

Only the establishment of yogic sadhana – spiritual exercise along with correct expert guidance of the instructor who has already achieved the experience of yoga (parampara) can lead an individual to the progress on the path of yoga.

On the other hand, courses for yoga instructors offer basic knowledge and create foundations for further improvement of yoga and that is the reason why, in my opinion, they are important too. However, their quality should be really good.

I have finished four courses for yoga instructors until now. I think all of them were excellent, but I would like to single out the course I took at the school of Dragan Lončar not because we have been friends for decades, but because it really stands out due to its quality and the amount of knowledge it provides as well as due to his capability to pass on his knowledge and the way the course is organised. I was in the first generation of his students in 2006.

These courses lead to the establishment of faculties, academies, institutes for yoga, however you choose to call these institutions, however not only on paper but substantially. These institutions with confirmed teachers would upgrade the level of teaching and would actually represent a form of gurukul tradition, adjusted to modern living conditions.

Since 2008, I am very grateful and happy to be able to visit Mysore in South India every year and stay at Sri Krishna Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute and keep improving my skill with my teacher, Guruji.

### **Healthier Living according to Ranko Stoiljković**

The concept of healthier living includes and means the implementation of precisely determined, approved methods of mind and body exercise with the aim to accomplish ideal physical and mental health and well-being along with a specific diet that one should follow together with other health improvement methods.

I would definitely recommend a correct choice of exercises that correspond to individual's general condition, age, interests, previous experience, profession, and family obligations in order to achieve the expected results.

In a nutshell, it means to live in a moderate but active way, find balance in life and keep applying it. Practice and enjoy or, as one famous teacher once said: "To be Zorba the Greek and Buddha at the same time", to enjoy life but still remain disciplined.