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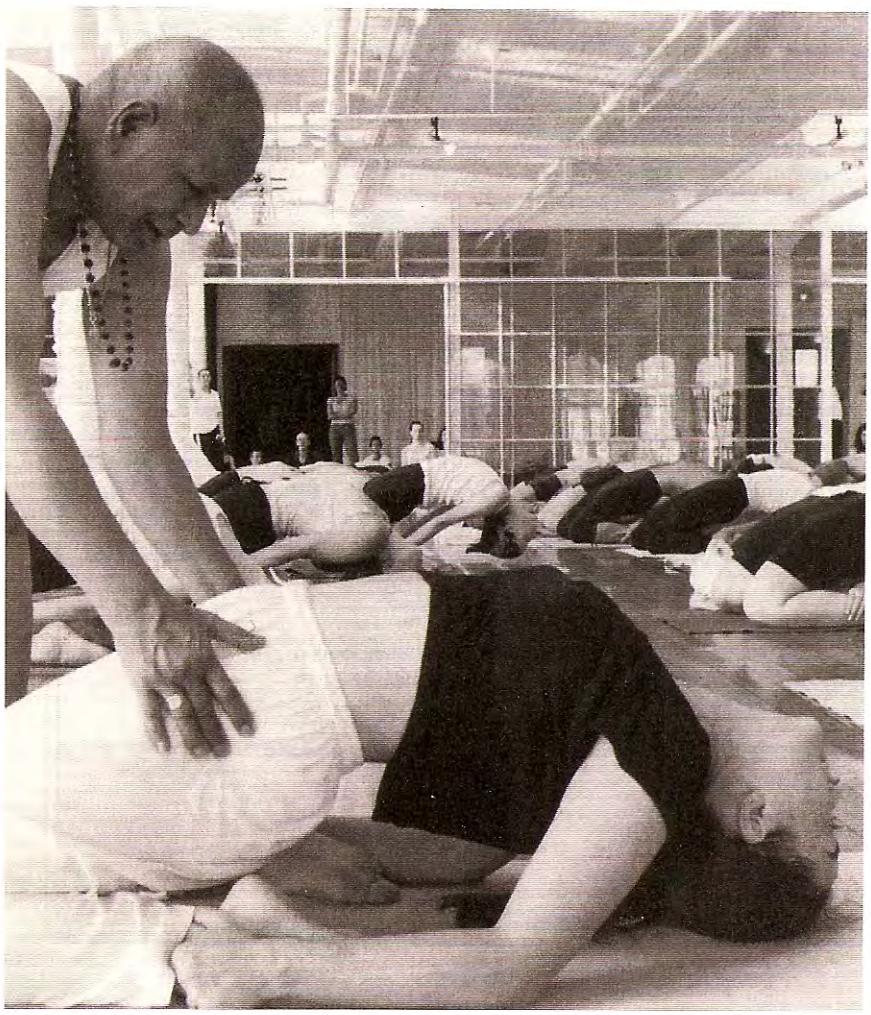
BY KATHERINE PEW

repetition & realization

with Sri Pattabhi Jois

For a long time I had been curious about what it is that draws thousands of devoted students of Ashtanga Yoga master Sri K. Pattabhi Jois—some of the most intelligent and creative people I know—to travel across the globe to Mysore, India, year after year. I found out this past summer, when for the first time in a decade Pattabhi Jois came to New York to teach, and I had the opportunity to study with him for two weeks.



Photos by Kate Donovan

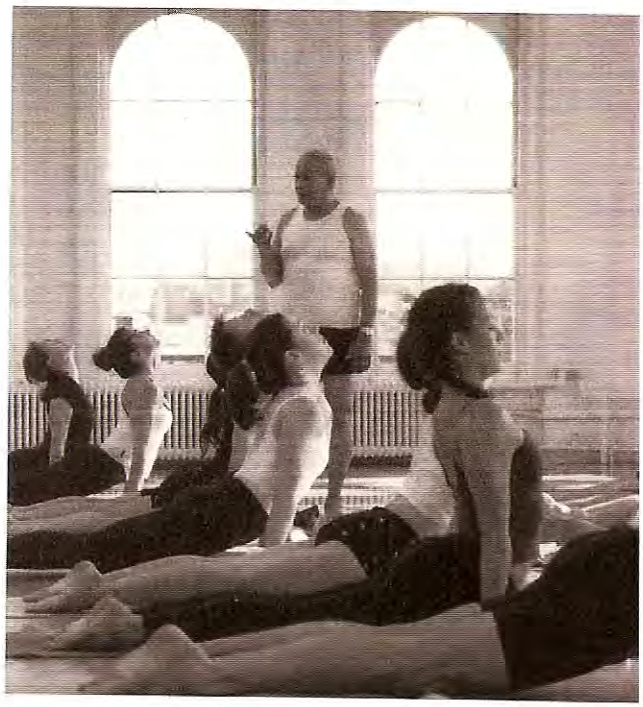
Every day that I practiced with Guruji, as Jois is fondly called, I kept looking for a way to understand and absorb the meaning of his teaching. What struck me as the spark—the one thing I could put my finger on—was the repetition. Not a mindless, automatic repetition, but a conscious, disciplined repetition—an elevated repetition—motivated by pure intentions. It reminded me of an ancient alchemical precept I learned through Jivamukti Yoga: "Through repetition, the magic is forced to rise."

When Guruji strode onto the ballroom floor of the Puck Building, where classes were held each morning, all snippets of conversation ceased and a hush fell over the room. As he took his position at the front, everyone rose to their feet, like musicians in an orchestra. He scanned the room to be sure that we were all with him. When he brought his palms together in front of his heart, in *namaste*, all hands came together, like musicians raising their instruments in anticipation of the first note, "Om." The morning Om and Ashtanga chant >>>

with Guruji marked the beginning of the daily practice of conscious repetition.

Like a conductor indicating the changes in the music with his baton, Guruji has a repertoire of familiar gestures he makes for each pose. He directs the class to come into upward-facing dog with a commanding, upward motion of the hand, palm up. His hand hovers momentarily in midair before it descends, palm down, for downward-facing dog. When Guruji says, "Inhale," 150 people fill their lungs with air. The rise and fall of all those breaths, with all those supple bodies moving in unison, creates a slow, steady, powerful rhythm, like the ebb and flow of the surf.

What makes Ashtanga different from other forms of yoga is that it follows a set series of postures, in the same order every time. And when you practice the same set of postures in the same order every time, you begin to find the harmony in it, to detect the hidden nuances, as you do when you listen to the same symphony or read the same book many times. As Clifton Fadiman said, "When you reread a classic, you do not see more in the book than you did before; you see more in you than was there before." The same is true of Ashtanga. The practice itself remains the same, but you are growing and changing all the time, and when you commit yourself to the Ashtanga practice, those changes are clearly reflected in the body and mind. You can watch the body open and become more malleable as you gain control of it.



Persevering in the repetition even when it seems unbearably frustrating, when you want more than anything to just quit and walk away, is what forces the magic to rise.

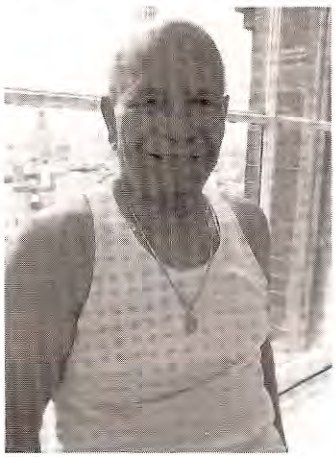
You can watch the breath become deeper and steadier, even in the midst of difficult postures. And you can observe the mind growing more disciplined and focused.

Guruji roams the room like a five-star general inspecting his troops to ensure that we are standing at full attention. If an inattentive student moves from *chaturanga* to upward-facing dog before he has instructed it, the class comes to a halt. "Bad lady!" or "Bad man!" he bellows, jarring the dazed student from their absentmindedness. The point of the repetitive nature of the Ashtanga practice is to move with heightened awareness, fluidity, and grace—not to become so familiar with each movement that you move automatically, allowing your mind to wander. If you are in one pose and already thinking about the next, the purpose of the practice has eluded you. In everyday life, when we allow our mind to wander from the person or situation or task at hand, we are missing the spark of life in each moment.

As Guruji led us through the Ashtanga practice, the power of the repetition inspired and motivated me. When my energy started to flag and I felt like giving up or taking a break, the effort and concentration of the people around me kept me going. When I sensed that those around me were slacking off, it made it more difficult to remain focused. When Guruji sees that you aren't focused on what you're doing, he chastises you in an effort to rein in your wandering mind. Although he can seem gruff and intimidating, his bouts of fierceness dissolve in an instant, replaced by a playful twinkle in his eye and a broad smile. His reprimands have a clear purpose. Complete concentration is essential to attain yoga, and the conscious repetition of the asana practice is the starting point.

At the age of eighty-six, Guruji is still driven to help even >>>

the most inflexible-seeming students to stretch their bodies and limbs until their hands come together, binding the pose. He pushes people to live up to their full potential. Day in and day out, he goes for the stiffest pupils and sits down on the floor next to them, bracing his knee against their shoulder and steadily, insistently coaxing their resistant bodies into place, pulling their arms toward one another and clasping their hands firmly together. He is determined to show each student what they are capable of, no matter how difficult, awkward, or impossible it may seem. And through the daily repetition of the practice, transformation arises like magic. It manifests physically, but it is also rooted in the mind. Through the steady, everyday repetition of the Ashtanga practice, the mind grows increasingly stronger, clearer, and more quietly determined.



His bouts of fierceness dissolve in an instant, replaced by a playful twinkle in his eye and a broad smile.

At one point, in *marichyasana D,* Guruji stepped on my thigh and took hold of my arm, adjusting me with such intense force that I felt a twinge of panic. But I managed to keep breathing deeply and evenly, focusing my attention on the steady repetition of my breath, and eventually—astonishingly—I felt my fingers intertwine. The repetition had worked its magic, coming to fruition without my even realizing it. Yoga is about finding and seeing union where before there was separateness. We have to learn how to bend ourselves—both physically and mentally—in different directions, and to have faith in our higher potential. Guruji physically shows us how we can find oneness within the limbs of our own body—through dedicating ourselves to and trusting in the repetition of the practice.

Persevering in the repetition even when it seems unbearably frustrating and you feel inadequate, when you want more than anything to just quit and walk away, is what forces the magic to rise. When you practice faithfully every day, you begin to discern the mental limitations you place on yourself. Over time, through repetition, your willingness to take chances, to surrender to doing things you didn't believe you were capable of, increases. That is when the breakthroughs happen—the small, fiery sparks that give us an inkling of what we are ultimately reaching for. As Simone Weil wrote, "Even if our efforts of attention seem for years to be producing no result, one day a light that is in exact proportion to them will flood the soul."

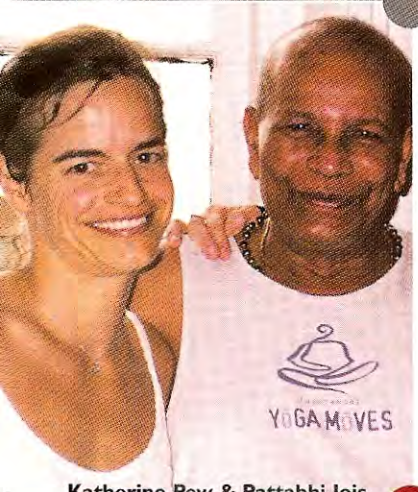
There is something refreshing in the notion of honing and heightening one's alertness and awareness through the practice of repetition, rather than through seeking ever-new experiences. Finding magic in repetition is unexpected—and unexpectedly satisfying. When we were engaged, my husband and I deliberated over whether we should make up our own marriage vows. On the one hand, the same old vows that everyone knows by heart seemed a little tired and boring. We thought maybe we could improve them by sprucing them up and breathing some new life into them. But in the end, something my father said resonated with us both. It struck him that there was something powerful in repeating those same, sacred vows that so many other husbands and wives had exchanged on their wedding day for hundreds of years. He felt that the repetition of those vows served to elevate and strengthen them, rather than decrease their value. When he repeated those familiar words to my mother, he said, he felt the power and the meaning in those vows that had marked the union of so many other couples.

I find a similar phenomenon in the Ashtanga practice. When you persevere in the repetition of the same set of movements that so many other yogis have practiced on the path to enlightenment for thousands of years before you, it seems that the power of putting your own body into those same, sacred asanas can't help but heighten your own practice.

Freelance writer Katherine Pew teaches yoga at the Jivamukti Yoga Center in Manhattan and at Yoga People in Brooklyn, New York.

Rolf Sovik

Rudolph Ballentine



Katherine Pew & Pattabhi Jois

Jeff Wright

contributors

Probing the meaning of fire, **Rolf Sovik** (Pandit Upadesh) walks us through the sacred fire offering performed at the Maha Kumbha Mela in Allahabad this past January. The co-director of the Himalayan Institute of Buffalo and a psychologist in private practice, Sovik was among the thousands of Westerners who joined the millions of Easterners that gathered for this grand spiritual event. His feature, "Fuel and Flame," focuses on our connection to something larger than ourselves, on our place in the great web of life.

Yoga International was lucky that **Linda Johnsen** was part of this great gathering. A regular contributor, Johnsen delivers an inspiring account of the internal experience of "heaven grazing the earth"—how this legendary festival moved participants personally. Her story offers us a glimpse into the state of pure awareness that existed there—the experience of divine nectar being poured into our lives.

Dr. Rudolph Ballentine (who incidentally was also at the Kumbha Mela) knows the importance of regular practice. In our third feature, Dr. Ballentine shows how exercise can help us crack the shell of inertia and restore a sense of flow, energy, and joy. A holistic physician practicing in New York City, Dr. Ballentine helps his patients do just this—reconnect with their innermost, joyous selves.

Freelance writer **Katherine Pew** teaches at Jivamukti Yoga Center in Manhattan, at Yoga People in Brooklyn Heights, and at a housing project in Chinatown. What she loves most about teaching is the challenge of weaving the spiritual teachings of yoga philosophy into asana practice. In this issue, she shares with us some of the lessons she learned from Ashtanga master Sri Pattabhi Jois last summer. Originally from Tucson, Pew has happily adjusted to a northern climate, making her home with her husband in the Cobble Hill section of Brooklyn.

Born in Minnesota and now based in Dubuque, Iowa, **Jeff Wright** lives yoga from his roots in Midwestern America. Wright has been teaching and writing about yoga for fourteen years, working with troubled teenagers, and raising his own three children. His approach to yoga has been to make it accessible to mainstream American students—like those found in a typical midwestern city. The piece included here comes from his book on this practical philosophy, *Dubuque Yoga*.