

# **THE BOX**

## **BEING INSIDE LOOKING OUTSIDE: AN ASHTANGA STORY**

*I would like to present this piece in the spirit of compassion, co-operation and communication. My thanks to Sri K. Pattabhi Jois, Sharat Jois and all teachers who have developed this practice and helped me along this path. The purpose of writing is to encourage debate and dialogue amongst practitioners. Some of what is written might be controversial but this is not a rocking of the boat simply for the sake of provocation. If I see an elephant in the room it needs to be said – even if that elephant is Ganesh. This is a heartfelt attempt towards understanding this tradition and the possibilities for transformation.*

### **ONE DAY MANY YEARS AGO**

There are endless beginnings: one beginning is a morning in March 1963 when I took my first breath (it was an inhale). Another beginning was a day in 1973 when a young American called David Williams turned up at a house in Mysore to ask its inhabitant – a Brahmin in his late 50s called Sri K. Pattabhi Jois – to teach him yoga. I was 10 years old: I imagine myself happily playing in short trousers without too many worries. David Williams was 23 years old and on a mission not only to find himself but also to discover a source of living long life. He had been inspired by stories of Indian yoga practitioners who did miraculous feats and lived forever and while travelling in India he came across a demonstration of physical prowess by a yogi called Manju Jois. Manju's father was his teacher – hence the journey to Mysore.

This has been a journey subsequently followed by tens of thousands in search of...well something: something that might be variously described as a place of peace, a well of insights, a way of health. After months of intense study with Pattabhi Jois – which included 2 ½ hours of asana practice in the morning, a brief rest and then a pranayama practice – David Williams returned to the USA where he taught such people as Danny Paradise and David Swenson: the Ashtanga yoga wheels were rolling.

Fast forwards nearly 15 years: Ashtanga yoga is becoming firmly established in the USA. There is growing interest in this athletic and physically demanding form of yoga. It's 1987 and Richard Freeman – a long established Iyengar yoga practitioner and Sanskrit scholar – meets Pattabhi Jois on one of the now regular tours that he's making to the west (he first visited the USA in 1975). Now I was 24: an anarchist rebel struggling against the state and on the cusp of the second summer of love when we would find ecstasy teaching the white man how to dance.

Long gone were the short trousers: it was about to be baggy trousers. It was also in 1987 when Derek Ireland and Radha Warrell first went to Mysore: Derek and Radha being among the most important individuals in the introducing of Ashtanga yoga to western Europe. Six years later – 1993 – and I would start regular attendance at a yoga class that subsequently became an Ashtanga practice when the teacher studied with Derek and Radha.

## **TRAPPED OR TRANSFORMATIVE?**

For more than 15 years I have been practicing Ashtanga yoga: first in led classes and since 1999 in the self-practice environment with a certified teacher. This has been a journey: from straining to touch my toes to a practice that has a level of smoothness flowing through the poses. But what I am interested in knowing is if this practice reinforces or reduces neuroses? We are all neurotic to a greater or lesser extent: we all experience differing levels of unease which in the words of Carl Jung are expressed as “restlessness, vague apprehensions, psychological complications”. There is a similarity to the kleshas of yoga philosophy: a translation is “torments of the mind”. A contrast to the kleshas is ‘metta’ (sometimes translated as “gentle”): can our practices lessen the kleshas and increase the metta? Can there be a diminishing of torments and a growing of gentleness? Are we trapped in Ashtanga or can it be transformative?

Richard Freeman wrote “as yoga students and teachers, we tend to become attached to and prejudiced about our own school and methodology... consequently it is not uncommon to simply rest on the superficial levels of the school we consider to be our own”. Might this be true for us Ashtangis? These are questions that puzzle me – perhaps I am looking for answers in writing this piece.

One criticism that comes from those outside Ashtanga is that of its self-declared ancient origins. Pattabhi Jois claimed to discover the original postural sequences on banana leaves (sometimes it was said to be palm leaves) that were a few thousand years old. Conveniently these leaves then promptly crumbled to dust leaving no evidence at the scene. Often when Pattabhi Jois recounted this story it would be with a smile – and as has been documented in books such as ‘*Yoga Body*’, the origin of the Ashtanga postural sequence is probably more about 19<sup>th</sup> century physical health movements in Europe than distant yogic texts.

On the basis of this evidence Ashtanga has been described as “fraudulent deception”– which somewhat misses the point. An authorised Ashtanga teacher said “one of the reasons I got into this yoga thing was because I was looking for an alternative to the likes of the creationist Christians...now looking at it, it is as if the whole raison d’etre of practice is based on a similar creationist myth”. But the important point is that for Indian religions this method is a tested way of introducing new ideas into tradition. Rather than Pattabhi Jois being a fraud, in fact he (along with his teacher Krishnamacharya) were original thinkers attempting to adapt and update their tradition. This practice of introducing innovation into tradition existed for example in Tibetan Buddhism (see footnote 1).

## **THE TURN TO SPIRITUAL PRACTICES**

Far from being a fraud, Pattabhi Jois has been a significant figure in the western turn towards spiritual practices. The vehicle of Ashtanga has been a transmission belt for many people to enter practices they might not have considered. The athleticism of Ashtanga has been attractive to those who could dismiss yoga as navel gazing. Plenty of people have come to practices that they otherwise would have not been reached – which is great. Because in this western world (for all its material abundance and relative egalitarian openness) there is loss of meaning, there is breakdown of human community, there is lack of appreciation, there is unsustainable strain placed on environment. Cultures that were more contemplative have been replaced by absorption in distraction: rather than arts of storytelling we have fascination with celebrity and an endless parade of so-called

information in the mass media. These are the anxious ages – though anxieties have been part of the human condition since the start of our species.

There is profound dislocation in modern society and not only are we dislocated, this is an unsustainable social structure. We are living out Easter Island (where they cut down all the trees and then civilisation collapsed) on a global scale. Despite the abundance, despite the great social gains of the last 150 years, this is our reality within the materialism of modern world.

That brings us back to the question: does Ashtanga yoga help in resolving such dislocations and this meaninglessness – in bringing us closer to places of insight and peace? For some people definitely yes and for some people probably no: because we are disparate individuals with our own storylines. So for one person Ashtanga can become a meditating in movement which creates ground for stillness and lucidity in mind. For another person Ashtanga is the basis for more striving, the struggling and the straining where we are simply replicating already present patterns in the fixation on postural success.

According to Richard Freeman “if you practice a system unwaveringly, something will remain unaddressed or unresolved and there is likely to be residue from the practice and some aspect of your life that remains unconscious”. We come to the requirement for paths to be plural – what can be problematic is that some people who are drawn to Ashtanga are the ones who might need it least: what could be called the type A success oriented personality.

## **PERSONALITIES**

It's these personalities – and there are many of us like this – who are easily caught in the ladder of Ashtanga yoga: climbing through the postures so practice just strengthens the wanting mind. One experienced student came back from a week retreat with a certified teacher stating “I was the worst practitioner there” – when the actual reality is that she has a strong practice. Ashtanga can be such a hard taskmaster with its narrative principally written by winners rather than losers. One senior teacher said "that's why you get such good results" (which some would query). But how many have to be broken on the wheels of rigidity and dogma?

It is these wheels that can cause the failure to point out the obvious (such as jumping straight into chaturanga can damage shoulders, such as turning feet out for drop-backs can damage knees). The acrobatic aspects of practice does mean that the inherently flexible rise up the hierarchy of teachers more rapidly than others. Admired for their circus skills, maybe more essential aspects of teaching – such as personal integrity, ethical foundations, empathetic connection – are not as well developed.

This wanting mind means that we might be less likely to critique the way that these postures are adjusted by teachers: some adjustments are verging on brutal because of that drive to be getting further on through the sequence. There are the nightmare stories of over-enthusiastic teachers struggling to force round pegs of individuality into what could be viewed as the square holes of Ashtanga.

Too many adjustments have been done with too little awareness and rather than the body being a temple, it becomes a battlefield to be bullied into perceived perfect posture. How many authorised teachers have broken people's knees in postures such as bhekasana or garbha pindasana – and certified teachers breaking femurs in Marichyasana B? And the many examples of everyday Ashtanga teachers causing injury through too much zeal, too much attachment to how a posture should be (and also of course making mistakes – that human fallibility).

## **CONDUITS FOR CONNECTION**

But at the same time adjustments – when done well – are a powerful way of encouraging and enabling practice: showing us what is possible within the body, gently leading towards places where we probably thought that we would never arrive, a genuine conduit for connection. This requires skill and sensitivity to ensure that adjustments are not just a copying of what someone else has done: that the adjusting arises from a place of care and love. Because often this does not happen – at times when being adjusted I have wondered where is the love.

There has been no serious attempt made to study the rate of injuries amongst Ashtanga practitioners – there do seem to be a number of sensitive shoulders and sore backs. And those knee operations that are held up almost like badges of battle honours, the long-term practitioners who experience degrees of discomfort in their bodies. But it has to be noted that this applies to other yoga styles – two teachers (one teaching since 1985 and the other from the early 1990s) told me that as much as there are knee issues with Ashtanga practitioners, there are hip issues with Iyengar practitioners. Both of these teachers trained and taught within the Iyengar tradition before branching out.

There is anecdotal evidence of long-term intense yoga practice wearing out joints – though it could be said that so does life. If it's all about sitting in padmasana surely something has gone wrong somewhere? And it's not just about sitting in padmasana – in Ashtanga it's sitting in padmasana always leading with the right foot. This might have been one of the straws that broke the camel's back for a third series practitioner – she simply said "I got fed up with putting the right foot in first".

## **ASHTANGA AS HEALING**

Yet I know several people who have experienced significant healing from conditions such as cancer or chronic fatigue thanks to their Ashtanga practice. There are many examples of sick people getting better because of Ashtanga – practice definitely has the potential to be healing. One reason is that this strong stretching of the physical body can be highly therapeutic as there is releasing of held tension and a breaking down of emotional tightness. It is unquestionable that Ashtanga can be healing: but this does not mean that we cannot question the how of practice and encourage a wider perspective beyond physical postures.

And maybe one reason why it might have gone wrong sometimes is the arrogance that often attaches itself to Ashtanga. Of course arrogance isn't solely reserved to Ashtangis: other systems and styles can be greatly arrogant. But within Ashtanga there can be an arrogance that accompanies a high level of physical proficiency – yet one of the few certainties in this highly uncertain world is that over time physical proficiency declines: so if there is an attachment to that, then inevitably there is greater suffering.

Two meditation teachers illustrated these difficulties: Tsoknyi Rinpoche said “one of the pitfalls when hatha yogis use the body solely is arrogance” (footnote 2). Rigdzin Shikpo wrote: “physical yoga develops both power and feelings of power...the feeling of power that comes from the successful practice of yoga can be used to manipulate others...success in physical yoga can also produce pride...it takes significant effort to accomplish this kind of practice, although it’s nowhere near as difficult as working directly with the mind”.

This attachment to power and physicality could be called “the tantra of Ashtanga” – and it is true that amongst yoga systems, Ashtanga is one of the closest to tantric hatha yoga practices with its emphasis on breath, bandhas, drishti. There is an approach of sacred body which draws inspiration from tantra – but to balance dangers of over-attachment, tantric practitioners would live in charnel grounds to watch the decomposing of bodies: flesh rotting away, falling off bone, being eaten by birds and other animals. Maybe us modern Ashtangis could go to crematoriums and work in hospices as a reminding of the inevitability of physical impermanence: getting ever fitter or being botoxed will not prevent sickness, old age, death.

## **FLEXIBILITY AND INFLEXIBILITY**

As well as this attaching and arrogance there can be inflexibility amongst long-term practitioners, which is ironic considering the levels of physical flexibility. The teacher verbally assaulting a student when they wanted to practice elsewhere – the teacher refusing to let one of their students assist another teacher – the certified Ashtanga teacher who said to a student when she asked if she could use a block: “no, that’s not yoga”.

Yet there are numerous examples of teachers acting with great generosity and kindness, encouraging and enabling their students, assisting other teachers to set up their own classes even when that is in ‘competition’ with them. These teachers being beacons on a path. However there is a tendency amongst some teachers towards controlling – rather than sharing, there is a reaction where behaviour is defensive and sectarian: blind faith might lead to blindness. This calls into question aspects of what we are practicing.

One suggestion for such behaviour is the sheer speed of the practice – holding postures for five breaths is an advanced form and the breath easily becomes shallow. Despite Pattabhi Jois’ instruction – according to Lino Miele: “teaching a long breath...a practice of ten seconds each inhalation, ten seconds each exhalation” – often the breath is much shorter. Research has shown that when shorter breath is combined with vigorous physical movement we go more into the sympathetic nervous system. It’s the sympathetic nervous system that is fight, flight, freeze – and here we become defended and individualised. In the parasympathetic nervous system there is much more ability to connect: that’s a system of tending and befriending, resting and digesting.

This suggestion that practicing Ashtanga could be pushing us into the sympathetic nervous system needs consideration. Fast breathing is demonstrated in Sharat’s audio CD of the primary series: each pose (not including entry and exit) takes about 20 seconds. With the five breaths in each pose this means that there are four seconds per breath which is an inhalation in two seconds and an exhalation in two seconds. The rapidity of this breath along with strong physical movements might be putting us into that

fighting fighting freezing nervous system: where rather than openness and inclusivity, abundance and compassion there is control and rigidity.

Because isn't a point of this practice to encourage openness and inclusivity, abundance and compassion? This isn't a matter of adept physicality (if it was, then this is just gymnastics) – it is a matter of transforming consciousness so there is an increasing of insight balanced by loving-kindness. But sometimes it doesn't feel like that within the Ashtanga box.

There is rivalry, there is competitiveness, there is lack of dialogue and defending of empires. Of course this is true of many aspects of life and it has been said that Ashtanga is just a mirror that brings up the existing tendencies. But a practice within Buddhism is that students are encouraged to spend time with teachers from different traditions which might help to undermine such tendencies. This is not so true within Ashtanga with its emphasis on "practice, practice and all is coming".

## **SOMETHING'S GOING TO HAPPEN**

But what kind of practice? Many Ashtanga practitioners just do the physical practice: that postural sequence. One practitioner told me how as he went through the third series he really thought something was going to happen when he got to the end: but nothing did. He then finished the fourth series – and still nothing happened: maybe that is the lesson in itself. His practice now is the standing sequence several times a week and a sitting practice. When talking about other teachers he said "I need to look inside myself and wonder if there is any animosity towards that person".

This practitioner's honesty was significant – in contrast possibly to others who are more in the realm of physicality. Because it is in stillness of sitting that there might be more possibilities for self-reflection and maybe growing of awareness. Ashtanga can help us to be aware and reflective but this 'movement as meditation' proposal which is presented by those who are only doing the physical practice could be lacking in validity for many of us.

We entertain ourselves with movement thus keeping the distractions at arms length as we stay addicted to stimulation. In the stillness and simplicity of sitting there are opportunities for observation that are not so present when we are moving. And if we are able to embrace the boredom of meditation it becomes more like equilibrium in which we could be free from that craving for entertainment – and our need to grasp happiness and fight discomfort is gradually relaxed.

As we move from pose to pose there is clearly a requirement for attention (a studying of body and breath) but we can just become fixated in this body and not go as deep within as a stillness practice might perhaps enable. As well as a lack of validity, this breaks one of the traditions that Ashtanga is upholding: the tradition that the physical postures are preparations for sitting and meditation – the sixth and seventh limbs: dharana and dhyana. In all the sweating and the striving of much Ashtanga these limbs seem to be have been marginalised.

I love the Ashtanga practice: I love the power that it gives to me – I love its flow and the concentration required for practicing: yet I feel that there is a lack somewhere. The fascinations with flexibility ignore the fact that we can have highly flexible bodies but tight

minds. It's often forgotten that for nearly all of us this brain is the stiffest muscle. The common failure to encourage practitioners towards other forms such as pranayama and sitting mean that Ashtanga stays as a sequence of physicality. And the intensity of practice lessens the probability that people will look outside the box (this can be a cult characteristic).

## **MENTAL CLEARING**

A number of practitioners have said to me that they do not have the time to meditate. Obviously there are many demands on time: the childcare commitments, the struggle to survive in this world – but it's about what we prioritise. Pattabhi Jois called meditation “mad attention” and he never taught anyone to sit. The truth is that it is much easier for us to ground ourselves in body instead of this mind that is so like a chimpanzee caught in a cappuccino bar: the busyness and things to do. But Pattabhi Jois also said “this is not physical practice, this is mental clearing”. At some point we have to investigate mind. We need to be reminded that “the purpose of asana is to tune our body in such a way that we can sit for long hours in meditation” (the words of SL Bhyrappa who studied with Pattabhi Jois in the 1970s).

Essentially when the perception is of primacy of the physical practice that means a prioritising of physiques over mind training. Obviously there is very significant overlap and an intimate connection between mind and body: but there are differences in techniques for body and mind. Norman Allen (one of the first westerners to be taught by Pattabhi Jois) was asked “how far do you think the physical practice can take you?” His reply was succinct: “in most cases probably nowhere without taking other steps”.

Sakyong Mipham Rinpoche is the spiritual leader of Shambhala which is a network of Buddhist centres set up by Chogyam Trungpa. He studied with Pattabhi Jois and is an Ashtanga practitioner. He talks of the need to bridge gaps between meditative forms – some of which are called ‘Buddhism’ – and physical forms – some of which are called ‘yoga’. In describing these meditative forms Sakyong Mipham emphasised “to understand what is going on we have to stabilise the situation...we have to slow down and get a feeling of who we are and what we are doing...through the practice of meditation we learn to penetrate the confusion of our minds and our perceptions”.

We have our well-toned Ashtanga physiques but ultimately so what – where's the liberation from conditioned existence when we can see the rope is actually a rope (far too often we think it is a snake), where we experience insight into phenomena and are connected to compassion?

## **SNAKES AND ROPES**

Both Pattabhi Jois and Chogyam Trungpa would have very probably seen that the rope is a rope. Both came from places of having no students from outside their own cultures (South Indian Brahmin and Tibetan) to being enthusiastically followed by thousands of westerners. Both displayed an approach that has been called the trickster (this is meant in a positive way and comes from the words of Richard Freeman). As they went on there was a making up regulations and on occasion fooling their students to help the waking up process.

Yet as their spheres of influence grew there arose problems. One of those close to Chogyam Trungpa was Reggie Ray – in an interview he said: “He worked with us each individually but later his teachings were converted into this sort of step-by-step process with a somewhat rigid curriculum. We all relied too much on trying to pin everything down mainly because I think our community was so large and we couldn't think of any other way to do it. I think this was a mistake because beginning in the later 1970s we were running things the only way we knew how which was to fall back on a lot of rules to try to preserve what he had taught”. (See footnote 3).

Having been in this box for a period of time, it is interesting to look back and observe the changes: from not touching my toes to folding flat forwards – from fearing headstand to standing on my head for a long time – from that first inhale to the young boy in short trousers to those baggy trousers and anarchist politics to now. By looking backwards we can understand how much change is present in life. An obvious example of this change was the death of Pattabhi Jois in May 2009 – the successor has been his grandson, Sharat.

## **INTERESTING TRANSITIONS**

The death of the guru can be an interesting transition: the guru often feels free to make it up as they go along (there is freedom in being the guru while the disciples are more rigid). Recently there appears to be a tendency towards corporatisation of Ashtanga into a brand more like Bikram: an increasing strictness of sequence (Pattabhi Jois introduced postures into the practice over the years); growing emphasis on money-making (one practitioner said a two week teacher training in Mysore could have been easily condensed into two days – and 70 people were present each paying £1000 to ensure their placing in the hierarchy); moving towards studios that are centrally controlled.

Is Ashtanga going to become trademarked as a way of preserving control and maintaining income streams? Transformation might be evolving into a business – like Bikram (how many Rolls-Royces, Rolexes and law suits does one man need (see footnote 4)). How can we avoid the corporatising of a practice that promises liberation, the institutionalising of a philosophy that preaches freedom?

A question that has to be asked is whether we are being empowered as individuals – with qualities such as insight, kindness, autonomy – or are we being diminished and controlled? Part of the problem is that the price of freedom is eternal vigilance. This is challenging work – but necessary for transformation: being aware, being vigilant, being awake. In many ways it's much easier to just stretch this body and perhaps partially delude ourselves that we are on a spiritual journey.

## **DIFFERENT STROKES**

Maybe it's a journey that takes a very long time – BKS Iyengar said “the philosophical teaching came to me only after 1960” (about thirty years into practicing and teaching). But do we have the luxury of that length of time – especially when there are many calls for us to sit down and watch the contents of this mind, especially when we are at this stage of so much speeding up? This doesn't mean enlightenment in one lifetime. What it does mean is that considering all current circumstances then stuff has to shift: are we shifting quick enough?



There was a Zen teacher in the 13<sup>th</sup> century – Dogen: when he returned from a long period of retreat, he was asked what he had bought back. His reply was simply “a soft and flexible mind”. That reminds me of a journalist asking the Dalai Lama “when were you happiest?” – the answer was “now”. Obviously both Dogen and the Dalai Lama had gone through very long periods of training but these responses – the soft and flexible mind, the experience of happiness right now – does show what might be possible: a lessening of unease, a greater ability to be present: not so neurotic. A young American – Alan Clements – who undertook a rigorous meditation training in 1970s Burma described his experiences as: “awareness put eyes and ears where there had been none...it enhanced perception and revealed greater nuance...sounds were accentuated...colours became brighter...tastes more subtle and sweeter...smells more fragrant...I fell in love with the simplicity of just being”.

Can Ashtanga help us to get to such places – my answer is “I’m not sure”. It can be a stepping stone, part of paths towards awareness – but too often it becomes too stuck, too rigid, too fixated.

## **WHAT’S GOING ON**

Having examined to some extent this Ashtanga culture it is important to remember that there are flaws and failings within all traditions. The life expectancy of Zen monks in Japan is significantly less than average – another example of the harshness within Zen is when a student was experiencing the appearance of a nervous breakdown, the teacher told her “if you feel you’re dying, please die peacefully”. A long-term teacher encountered the rigidity within orthodoxy when she was informed by a meditation centre that “if you don’t give up walking meditation, give up your body movement that we hear you are doing, your mixing Zen practice in, then you are not belonging to our lineage”.

Some meditators can be distant and dry and disconnected – using the tool of meditation as an avoidance strategy to lessen engagement with living life. And in the Buddha’s own time there were splits within the community one of which (according to old texts) culminated in an assassination plot against him by a senior monk. Striving - and the consequent envy - occurs in meditative experiences as much as Ashtanga experiences. Someone recently told me that “I am jealous of my friends’ having satori experiences”. I reassured him that he had no need to be envious of me as I had not had such events.

In this writing and thinking (it has taken two years to put together this piece) it is worth remembering words from the 7th century teacher Chandrakirti: “attachment to one’s beliefs and aversions for another’s view – all this is thought”. I am conscious that some of these constructs that have been used are just fleeting mental formations. This is human nature – as much as we breathe and we bend how easily we find division and discord. On occasion this has benefits but at times it is about building brands and defending empires.

What intrigues is how well certain paths serve a purpose in our practicing to be better human beings: a problem is that waves see themselves as separate from the water (and then there is that fear which arises from separation). A purpose of practice is dealing with this unsteadiness that one commentator beautifully described as “the mind is more than capable of seeing a stationary blue car and constructing out of it a six act melodrama”. A purpose of practice is to overcome our mistaken perceptions, to enable us to connect

inside and outside so we can discover what many traditions describe as the luminosity of mind where there is insight and peacefulness: a brightening of the inner skies.

Some people get stuck and some people don't: this vehicle of Ashtanga is a powerful transformative practice but all of us need to look at our practicing with an approach of curiosity. I am just one person attempting to make some sense of what is around me – like a young boy faced by the emperor's new clothes I have to try to see with clarity. Hopefully this piece will deepen our debates and discussions about the meaning of practice. My own feeling about Ashtanga is great affection and respect – but there is much fixation on the external form. Rather than all the sweating and all the striving, practice as a gentle daily ritual with less attachment to asana could have more possibilities for deeper impact. A question for us as practitioners is – in the words of the religious scholar Huston Smith: are our practices “enhancing awareness, patience and generosity and enabling us to respond creatively to the complexities, distractions and uncertainties of modern times”.

I think that there is a requirement for other flavours on particular paths – you could call it a seasoning of path: because otherwise the path might be too tight where there is a tautness which becomes neurotic. The point is this self being less stuck so that in the words of a poet there is a realisation that “we are a process and an unfolding”. There aren't any particular answers: it's more how honest can we be with ourselves and how much can we temper that honesty with kindness. The hope is to keep questioning and to stay as open as we can: to feel our way towards a more easeful existence.

Thanks to all those who have talked to me and helped me along these paths.

Norman Blair June 2011

[www.yogawithnorman.co.uk](http://www.yogawithnorman.co.uk) for more writings on practicing yoga and ideas of self-transformation. [Norman108@clara.co.uk](mailto:Norman108@clara.co.uk) for any comments/suggestions/feedback. Please feel free to distribute.

## FOOTNOTES

1. “Padmakara, with his overwhelming presence and spiritual power, is the central figure and inspiration of the Nyingma tradition. He realised that the Tibetans were not yet ready for many of the profound insights of tantra...and so he magically concealed a vast number of teachings for the future...These hidden teachings are known as ‘terma’, treasures. He prophesied that they would be rediscovered at the appropriate time by certain accomplished practitioners...a person who finds them is called a ‘terton’, ‘revealer of treasures’. The tradition of teachings being concealed until the appropriate time for their propagation is not confined to Tibet, but goes back to India...” (‘Luminous Emptiness’ – Francesca Fremantle).

2. “People start identifying with and then clinging to the body – a transitory, composite impermanent – and so end up suffering in the aging process and having to let go of attachment to a body that they spent so much time cultivating...sincerely take a look at any practice, and notice within yourself if compassion, faith and wisdom are developing from it. If they are, then stay with it. If they're not, take a look and either change the way you experience the practice or change the practice itself” (Tsoknyi Rinpoche).

3. Reggie Ray is an important Buddhist teacher in America. He studied under the guidance of Chogyam Trungpa – after Trungpa’s death in 1987 he became one of the leading teachers in this lineage. In 2005 he separated from the Shambhala organisation and set up Dharma Ocean Foundation. This is from an interview with him in 2010: "What I learned from Chogyam Trungpa was that however esoteric or prestigious or exotic any practice might seem, it was always about the same thing: nothing more than a way to strip oneself down even further to the empty, exposed core of one's being. It was about being more absolutely and utterly naked as a human being. It was about surrendering more and more fully to this world, this life, this experience and entering more deeply into it and giving oneself over to it. What I learned from him is that the dharma is not about credentials. It's not about how many practices you've done or how peaceful you can make your mind. It's not about being in a community where you feel safe or enjoying the cachet of being a 'Buddhist'. It's not even about accumulating teachings, empowerments or 'spiritual accomplishments'. It's about how naked you're willing to be with your own life and how much you're willing to let go of your masks and your armour and live as a completely exposed, undefended and open human person. Which is what he was: he was so human. What he taught us in the very early 1970s, there were a myriad different ways to meditate, and he showed us what they were... At a certain point Chogyam Trungpa was asked 'how are we going to keep all this together?'. And basically he said 'maybe we should just let it go. Let it fall apart. It's probably the best thing that could happen. Just let the whole thing go'."

4. In the words of Bikram: "Before me, there was no money, no business with yoga...From pope to president to prime minister, billionaire, superstar, novelist, sportsman, athlete, hooker, street boy, they say, 'Bikram, you changed my life, you saved my life'...I have balls like atom bombs, two of them, 100 megatons each...Nobody fucks with me...Bikram yoga is so big – this is a bathroom slipper you buy \$2 in Kmart" he says, waving a plastic flip-flop in my face. "But you put 'Bikram' on it, it'll sell for \$35 in a second...all the time I have to think about law and justice and courts". (Interview 2005 'Mother Jones'). Yet when Bikram first arrived in America, apparently he was humble and gentle – perhaps this might be a sign of too much power and too little dissent, a lack of peer groups and critiques.