

Ageless

Ageless

A yogi's secrets to a long and
healthy life

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with

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 juggernaut

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*To my grandfather,
who gave me this practice*

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Introduction

From sickness to health

As a child, I was always ill. My early years were racked with pain. Tonsillitis, rheumatic fever and infections from the fever, hernia . . . you name it, I had it. I was so sick that the doctors forbade me from riding a cycle, which, you can imagine, is quite devastating for a child. My dreams of becoming a professional cricketer were also dashed because my sickness didn't allow me to register for the National Cadet Corps. I spent months in bed, convalescing from illnesses. I was a miserable pre-teen desperate to be outdoors playing with other children.

But there was one silver lining.

My time spent in bed meant I watched a lot of movies! Especially *Ramayana*. Rama, Arjuna, Ganesha and Bhima were the superheroes of our

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time. They were intelligent, strong and blessed with supernatural powers. But my personal favourite was Hanuman. I probably watched *Sampoorna Ramayan* about twenty times as a child.

I loved Hanuman's spirituality, his power and his devotion to Rama. Hanuman is so humble, he doesn't even understand how immense his strength is until Jambavan the bear tells him about his capabilities and encourages him to fly to Lanka in search of Sita.

As a sickly child, I wanted to be just like Hanuman – strong and spiritual. He was my superhero. Perhaps I was too young to realize that my biggest strength was with me in my home – my grandfather, Pattabhi Jois.

I was born on 29 September 1971 in Mysore. During the early years of my childhood, my mother, sister and I lived with my father in Jamshedpur, Jharkhand. We would often visit my maternal grandparents in Mysore. At the time, my grandfather, Pattabhi Jois, taught Ashtanga Yoga in the tradition of T. Krishnamacharya to Indian students and a handful of foreigners.

Pattabhi Jois's father, my great-grandfather, had been an astrologer, priest and landholder, and by the time my grandfather was five years old he had been instructed in Sanskrit and Hindu rituals, as

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all Brahmin boys were. In 1927, my grandfather – along with B.K.S. Iyengar and Indra Devi, under the mentorship of the then king of Mysore, Krishna Raja Wadiyar IV, also known as the philosopher king – started studying with T. Krishnamacharya.

In 1948, Guruji started the Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute in Lakshmipuram with the aim of experimenting with the curative aspects of yoga as taught to him by Krishnamacharya, whose main source was the famous *Yoga Korunta* – the ancient manuscript of Ashtanga Yoga attributed to the sage Vamana. No one has seen a copy of the *Yoga Korunta* and there are doubts that it existed as its teachings were passed on by word of mouth to T. Krishnamacharya. But it has unrefutably inspired one of the most powerful and beautiful yoga systems that has spread rapidly around the world in the last few decades.

In 1975, when I was four, we moved back to Mysore as my father was not around much because of his job and I had a very bad bout of tonsillitis which could be best treated in a bigger city. The illness compromised my immunity further. Later, when I turned eleven, I was diagnosed with a rare illness called rheumatic fever, which can take anywhere from five to ten years of antibiotic medication to heal completely. I was physically depleted from all these illnesses.

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Once we moved to Mysore, I, along with the children of other students, started yoga with my grandfather. At that time, his two sons, Manju and Ramesh, were also studying with him, assisting him as he taught. And my mother, having also studied with him at a very young age, was also teaching on her own merit. Yoga had always been deeply ingrained in our family.

Yoga with my grandfather changed my health for the better. Instead of a decade of antibiotics, a series of very simple postures helped me become stronger. I could feel my body heal and repair. As my immunity grew, I started stepping out of the house more. I found I had more energy to play with the children in our neighbourhood. The doctors said my recovery was a miracle because of how severely my young body had been weakened by the onslaught of illnesses. Later, I would learn that the ‘miracle’ was not mystical; it was simply the result of the practical and logical yogic practice to which my grandfather introduced me.

The benefits of a yogic practice and lifestyle are, of course, difficult to explain to a child, and perhaps even to most adults. Later, when I was stronger, my formal tutelage began, and it was against my will. As a youngster, I resented being made to practise yoga. Like other adolescent boys, I wanted to be left alone to play cricket all day long. My love for cricket has

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remained. Even today my son and I never miss a single cricket match on television.

Every day after school, my grandfather (soon to become my Guruji, I just didn't know it then) would make my sister and me practise with him at his shala, then at his home in Lakshmipuram. My friends who'd be playing cricket outside on the streets would ask for me, but my grandfather would sternly turn them away. We were all frightened of him because he was very strict. So, when he left the room to have coffee in the kitchen, I would sneak out of the back door to play cricket on the street. You see, my friends had a vested interest in me because I was a very good batsman. After his coffee break, my grandfather, upon realizing his pupil was missing, would waste no time in coming to look for me. And the great Pattabhi Jois would open the doors of our house and holler down the streets of Lakshmipuram, furiously calling my name. My friends would tell me to hide. And I would! I'd find a good spot in the gullies around our house, only to emerge after my grandfather had given up his search. Later he would chide me, 'People come from all over to practise here and our own children are wasting the opportunity ...' I was extremely scared of him, but the fear did not stop me from being errant. Such is the power of youth!

I learned the yogic way of life from my grandfather

Few people know this, but my grandfather would wake up every day at 4 a.m. and do his morning chants, while making coffee for everyone in the house. No matter who you were you would get coffee made by him in your bed! What a luxury! He was a very disciplined man. Even on a holiday he would give everyone coffee in bed! He always washed his own clothes, even when he was eighty-five.

He lived a very simple life. He never socialized. Yet he didn't force any of this on me. I never thought I would go back to yoga. Or become a teacher. He never expected me to come to the shala at four every morning. He never imposed rules or regulations on me. But he was so inspirational, I followed in his footsteps without any questions.

The only place he would correct me was in the shala. There I was just another student. He gave me no special treatment. He pushed me more, in fact! The way we learn and teach in India is so powerful. We don't pamper our children or our students. There was extra pressure on me to work hard. I liked to think of it as encouragement in disguise. He would get very

angry with me in the shala when I didn't perform. I was scolded in front of everyone.

My quiet and wondrous transformation

Despite my early rebellions, yoga was deeply entrenched in my life and my daily routine. I would practise every evening after school. Back then, I was just playing with asanas. My body was very supple, and it was easy for me to do the postures. I was simply having fun. I was not concentrating on my breath or anything. It's amazing that such little effort helped me get over the illness and weakness that had caught hold of my body.

In 1989, I was seventeen years old when I had my first experience teaching Ashtanga Yoga. My mother, Saraswati, had gone to the US and my sister and I oversaw her students and her shala for four months. I only had to help a few students – mostly ladies from the neighbourhood who had been coming to my mother for years for a little exercise. But I hated teaching there. All the ladies wanted to do was gossip and chat! And all I wanted was to go out and meet my friends. I waited impatiently for those four months to get over. But, when I look back now, I realize how

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valuable that experience of assisting was to me as a yoga teacher.

Two years later, at nineteen, I started assisting my grandfather, who was getting along in years, at his shala. When I started the second time around, my once strict grandfather had softened. He had lost one son, Ramesh, and the other, Manju, had moved to the US permanently. I was doing a diploma in computers and had a year left to complete the course. So, I started helping him and did a little of my own practice too. Unknown to me, something was slowly shifting within me.

Ashtanga Yoga works in quiet ways.

‘Purvabhyasena tenaiva hriyate hyavasho’pi sah,’ says the Bhagavad Gita. This means – in this birth the mind will be attracted to yoga by tendencies developed towards yoga in previous births.

The eight limbs of Ashtanga, as outlined by Patanjali in the Yoga Sutras, work towards internal and external purification that help you connect with the Universal Self or atman. Through this practice, whatever your reason for starting may be, results will show – if I may use the cliché – slowly, but surely.

As I became serious about Ashtanga Yoga, I realized this had to become my sadhana (a disciplined and dedicated study). I was no longer

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simply Ashtanga. During those months, something marvellous happened both inside and around me. I had been watching people come and go, learning, being helped by yoga, and then an inexplicable transformation happened in my own practice.

In the beginning it is tough to learn a new skill or art. After a certain stage you start to enjoy that pressure, those challenges and the process. And when you understand the system – the pressure falls away. As I understood breathing and asana and vinyasa, advancements happened.

The asana part of Ashtanga is extremely challenging. But to experience many asanas and to advance yourself, you have to go through all those difficulties. In my life I have learned many postures. I had the time, I had the passion, I had the best Ashtanga teacher, and even then I found it very challenging.

But I wanted to go deep into the practice. When you want to go deeper, just like when you reach deep into a jungle, you are bound to face many challenges. The important thing is to remember that this is temporary, and you will emerge on the other side stronger.

In *Yoga Mala*, my grandfather writes, as the weak and sick practise yoga or perform certain asanas specific to their ailments, under the guidance of

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their guru, their strength increases while disease and weaknesses get eliminated. Many incurable diseases, including mental illnesses and leprosy, have been cured through the practice of yoga, leaving even physicians dumbfounded. I later realized that it was yoga and the principles of yogic living that had nurtured me back to good health as a child.

In 1997, my grandmother passed away. I had been her favourite grandchild. Her advice and support were the foundations on which my practice was formed. When I got a job at an electronics company, she advised me not to go to Bangalore and to instead commit myself to my grandfather. As I became increasingly more serious about my practice, she would feed me twice a day. She would mix sambar and rice and put it in my hand. This is a very traditional way of eating called *tuttuanna* that shows the affection between mother and child. She made sure I got all the nutrition I needed. And of course, all the love. My grandmother was a strong woman with a great sense of humour. She emanated a warmth that attracted people – from yoga students to government officials, elderly people to children who would drop in for a chat and her special coffee; the best coffee in all of Mysore!

The 1990s were generous to my spiritual journey

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and my yogic education. There were very few students with my grandfather at the time, out of which fewer than twenty were foreigners. I practised for three hours every day and felt the immense pain of my body changing. From that change first came stability. I saw how within my body, with the practise of vinyasa – the act of breathing and moving while practising an asana – a purification was taking place. As my blood became hot, it became cleansed and started to circulate freely; it rid my body of toxins, impurities and disease, and then it became easy for me to purify my nervous system. And through all this came stability of my mind.

How Ashtanga and I grew

In December 1997, after having been denied a visa thrice, I finally travelled abroad for the first time, to Sydney. Soon after that, my grandfather and I visited the US a few times. Around this time yoga, and Ashtanga Yoga specifically, started gaining popularity at a phenomenal pace. Hollywood celebrities like Gwyneth Paltrow and Willem Dafoe were doing Ashtanga regularly and had become staunch advocates of the method. Paltrow practised with Guruji when we visited New York in the aftermath of 9/11. At this

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time in American history, Ashtanga became a release and a powerful healer for Americans.

As its popularity grew, the number of students coming to the shala in Mysore also increased. After Americans came Europeans, then Japanese and Chinese. Yoga began to spread like wildfire. I did demos from Japan to Chile. My grandfather would do the counts and I would do the postures. In 2000, I visited the US for a demo. People had no idea where yoga came from. In Japan, people thought yoga came from America!

And so I had to explain. Yoga is Bharat Bhumi. Just one look at Indian history and you will see how even before India was India, people came here from all over the world to learn yoga.

Today, students and shalas of K. Pattabhi Jois Ashtanga Yoga Institute (KPJAYI) are spread over more than a hundred countries.

*Evam paramparā prāptam imam rājarsayo vidub |
Sa kāleneha mahatā yogo nastah parantapa ||¹*

O scorcher of foes! This Yoga handed down from teacher to disciple in succession, was known to the Rājarsis (royal sages). But owing to long lapse of time, it was lost to the world.

The eight limbs of Ashtanga

Guruji lost both his sons. He missed them. I think I came to fill this gap in his life, and in my grandmother's. I was a support to him. And we became very close. We would go everywhere together. And his passion for philosophy would follow us everywhere. This was the privilege of being his grandson. We would talk a lot about Shankaracharya or the Gita or Upanishads. This was the special part of our relationship. As a teacher, he expected his students to respond to his passions, which ranged from philosophy to asanas. He saw this interest in me and showed me books and talked to me about different topics. When you seek and are curious, your teacher sees it and tries to give you as much as possible. Even outside the classroom, we would have long chats about philosophy. He would quote stories and sometimes when he forgot a verse my grandmother would back him up!

Literally translated, Ashtanga means: ash – eight and tanga – limbed. Derived from Patanjali's Yoga Sutra, this defines the path to discovery of the Universal Self or atma through the practice and adherence of these eight steps:

1. Yama: moral discipline
2. Niyama: observances

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3. Asana: physical posture
4. Pranayama: breath control
5. Pratyahara: sense withdrawal
6. Dharana: concentration
7. Dhyana: absorption or meditation
8. Samadhi: absorption into the Universal or enlightenment

The way to make the mind one-pointed, says Guruji in *Yoga Mala*, in order to see the Universal Self, is to follow these steps. These limbs are just as important, or more, as a yogi's physical asana practice. To develop a spiritual practice, it's important to be aware of these limbs, otherwise your yoga is meaningless. Let's look at the first two limbs, yama and niyama, as they concern and can be adopted by everyone.

Yama refers to a universal moral code that applies to everyone. They are a guide to yogic living. Yamas are:

Satya: truthfulness

Ahimsa: non-violence

Asteya: non-stealing

Aparigraha: non-possessiveness

Brahmacharya: fidelity or celibacy

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Niyamas, or observances, are recommended habits for a long and healthy life. They are personal practices which are, once again, for everyone no matter what your situation is. Niyamas include:

Saucha: cleanliness

Santosa: contentment

Tapas: self-discipline

Svadhaya: self-study

Iswara pranidhana: surrender to God

Together these provide an infallible moral value system and practical daily guideline for us within any given context. And while these are important concepts for non-yogis too, we must not forget that it becomes easier to dedicate oneself to these limbs with a strong asana practice.

During discussions on the Bhagavad Gita, Guruji would often talk about the sixteen chapters that explore the yogic method and what your mental state should be both on and off the mat. In this book, I mention the Gita many times. Don't get me wrong. I'm not pushing a particular religious agenda. The Bhagavad Gita does not belong to any one religion, nor does it talk to the people of just one religion. It belongs to all humanity. It addresses all human beings. In the

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Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna talks about philosophies and how to conduct yourself, what your karma is, what your duties should be. And every single message in it is applicable to any human being across every religion, whether you are a yoga practitioner or not.

Why yogis live long lives

Tirumalai Krishnamacharya lived till 100. Pattabhi Jois lived till ninety-three. B.K.S. Iyengar lived till ninety-six. They were all serious yoga practitioners with a big following.

What was the secret of their long lives?

In *Yoga Mala*, Guruji talks of the yoga practitioner who can achieve anything in the world by a dedicated practice of the limbs of yoga. Such a practitioner can even redo creation, as Sage Vishvamitra did when he created another Indraloka – world of the gods – for ‘a lower-caste man’ who wanted to go to heaven, making the gods fearful of his strength.

One’s journey to immortality begins with a strong body. Your body is the home you live in. Without a strong foundation, your house will crumble. Of course, you also need a steady spiritual base.

That is why yogis live long, healthy lives. They dedicate themselves to clean and simple practices and

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routines that make them strong and ageless. Yogis live long lives because they have built strong foundations for themselves. The bedrock of which is minimalism – less is always more simplicity – happiness, discipline, empathy and selflessness. These are values that have been forgotten by the modern world. The best part is that all of these values are free. It just takes a change of perspective to achieve them.

Today, a purification through Hatha Yoga means first developing an asana practice. Yogis live long, healthy lives (never forget it's not just quantity, it is also quality) because there is an inherent focus on living, eating, sleeping, walking and reacting *mindfully*.

Of course, a disciplined yoga practice is just the first step. Yoga helps you listen to and strengthen your body. But in due time, it also makes you sensitive to other aspects of life – that connect you with other people and humanity.

Another reason why yogis live to a hundred years is that they keep things simple! They eat sattvic foods which have for centuries been known to keep the mind and body light and clean. They understand maya and its trappings.

Today, more than ever before, life comes with anxieties not simply of everyday routine, but also those fostered by the media. Yogis are constantly bombarded

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with what/how/where/when to eat/wear/sleep/work. I, for one, yearn for those days when the only advice we got was passed down undiluted and full of anecdotes from parent to child. In a life surrounded by toxins, we desperately need to find a way to conquer those toxins of the mind, our senses and our bodies. We need to take notes from simpler times on how to uncomplicate our lives.

All of this is also connected to the mind. A healthy body needs to be complemented with strong emotional and mental well-being. Today, our minds are brittle, fragile, overwhelmed because we have stopped taking care. Our minds need tending to, just like any other organ. In an age rife with depression and medications, yogis can provide a prototype for dealing with emotional stress of modern-day life and help find a space of quietude, confidence and peace. And when the mind is at peace, we will automatically see a reduction in lifestyle diseases that are so prevalent today. There is no magic here. You only need to look on the internet to find all the studies corroborating the connections between mind and body health.

If nothing else, take inspiration from my story. I went from being a very ill child to a yoga guru, who teaches thousands of students every year. It was my

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yogic life and practice that enabled me to become who I am today. And that is the beauty of yoga. Everyone can be healthy and fit by learning from the lives of yogis. I hope my story can show you how yoga and yogic living have helped me overcome the challenges that life threw in my direction. Now, you too can benefit from them. It doesn't matter if you are young, old, sick, frail, thin, fat, shy, inflexible – yoga has the solution to all problems.

Through this book I will show you how yogic practices related to eating, breathing, asana and seva can contribute positively to your mental and physical health. I have tried to present simple ideas that are not intimidating – from walking barefoot to connect with the earth to eating fewer times in the day. These ideas may contradict recommendations, such as eating six meals, that you may have heard all your life, but they have come to us from ancient Vedic texts and we can't disregard their wisdom.

Remember, living like a yogi does not mean renouncing the world. To be a yogi, you don't have to give up your life in the city and run off to the mountains. I am not asking you to do any such thing. This book aims to make adopting the habits of a yogi as easy and commonplace as brushing one's teeth.

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Living like a yogi is about becoming connected with vitality and health. It's about spending time under a tree, reading a book, breathing in as much fresh air as one can, being kind to other living beings, ahimsa, and giving without thinking of taking back. With so much conflict in the world, and the onslaught of 24/7 news and the culture of the internet, it's more important than ever to turn our gaze towards yoga, and go back to the principles of yogic living to achieve peace and strength of character.

If by eating correctly, living consciously, breathing deeply and doing basic asanas we can alleviate chronic lifestyle-related pain and discomfort, then why should we all not have a little bit of yoga in our lives, in a form that is easy to digest?

Outside of daily habits, I have also put together a basic asana routine accessible to all people, even those who are not yet ritualized into a regular practice. As they say in the Yoga Sutra,

*Sa tu dīrghakāla nairantarya satkārādarāsevito
drdhabhūmih ||²*

Practice becomes firmly grounded when it has been cultivated for a long time uninterruptedly with earnest devotion.

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Yoga should be a part of everyone's life, no matter what religion you follow. We are all human beings first. A yogic life can help us lead a healthy, stress- and delusion-free life. It can alleviate the suffering of the mind and the body. I want to demystify a yogi's life, while also releasing it from the Westernized, commercial aspects it has become synonymous with. I hope this book can motivate people to do some basic yoga and unlock the secrets to living a long, healthy and peaceful life.



- Simple practices and routines can make us strong and ageless.
- Develop a spiritual practice, otherwise your yoga is meaningless.
- Eat small, eat local and eat at noon, when your jathra agani is at its peak.

1

Eat Less to Live Longer

In a land far, far away, in a time long, long ago, a five-year-old boy is not allowed to sit on his father King Uttanapada's lap. Angered, the boy, Prince Dhruva, leaves for the forest to look for God, and childishly demands from Lord Vishnu a kingdom bigger than his father's.

The child prince starts an intense meditation. He doesn't eat for days, then eats only leaves and grass, drinks water only every nine days. By the fourth month, he suspends his breath and stands only on one leg. The demigods are worried. At one point, Dhruva's suspension of breath is so powerful, the whole world stops breathing. When Lord Vishnu goes down to meet his devotee, Dhruva realizes how materialistic

and immature his demands were. He promises to devote his life to God, but Lord Vishnu in his infinite wisdom blesses him. Dhruva goes on to rule the earth for 36,000 years in a fair, kind and just manner.

Dhruva's story (this particular one is from the Bhagavata Purana) is just one of many in our scriptures that address why fasting is and was so important to ascetics or those trying to achieve a higher spiritual connection.

Fasts help achieve siddhi (psychic power) that leads to haadi vidya; a knowledge, upon acquiring which, one feels neither hunger nor thirst and can go without food or water for several days at a stretch. Without these distractions, one can concentrate on one's tapasya or quest to connect with the Universal Self. Often in the epics, sages and kings would devote themselves to great penance to achieve their goals, and abstinence from food was considered the highest of sacrifices, because subsisting on prana, awakens the life force within. Quite simply put, prana is the Sanskrit word for life force.

But don't get me wrong. I'm not asking you to starve yourself.

Of course, these fantastical stories seem absurd and impractical today. But we should not relegate them to the realm of mythology either, because they hold

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a secret to longevity we've all forgotten – frugality. And the first aspect of our modern lives that we seem incapable of applying this secret to is eating.

Today, food is immensely abundant. Food (especially junk and processed food) is cheap and found everywhere at the press of a button. Yet this very abundance is making us sicker. It causes us pain. Obesity rates and heart diseases are at their highest ever in history. And food lies at the centre of most illnesses. The very same substances which give us life are killing us now. The father of Ayurveda, Charaka says, 'Even food, which is the life of living creatures, if taken in an improper manner destroys life.'¹

We've not only forgotten frugality, we've abandoned it altogether. So, in this chapter I'm going to make a case for why eating less can change your life dramatically.



Since longevity is difficult to study in human beings, independent studies were conducted in the 1980s by the University of Wisconsin and the National Institute of Aging in Maryland in the United States of America on rhesus monkeys – the closest animals to human beings in similarities of ageing and age-

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related disease and decay. Nutritionists observed that monkeys put on calorie-restrictive diets showed a marked delay in ageing and the onset of age-related disease. Less food meant longer lives.

Eating less, as advocated by yogis, has been scientifically proven to reverse ageing. Undereating, as the theory goes, slows down the body's metabolism in a way such that it produces less damaging oxidants – agents that rust the body from within. When your body isn't working hard to digest food from the last meal you ate, you are giving necessary biological repairs a chance to take place. Makes sense, doesn't it?

Neither my grandfather nor Krishnamacharya read these reports, but throughout their lives, their diets were simple and restricted. And they both lived long and healthy lives. My grandfather died when he was 93 years old, while Krishnamacharya lived till a 100. Until my grandfather died in May 2009, he was very active and taught almost to the very end.

There is more and more proof in the assertion that eating less is one of the secrets to a long life. Yogis have practised this for many years. Eating less, combined with the other food habits I discuss later in the book, can help add not just years to your life, but nourished, healthy years. But first let's take a look at what yogis think and say about digestion.

The fire in your belly

It's only now that modern science has begun to understand the importance a healthy gut plays in the well-being of an organism. But ancient yogis and vaidyas were on to it long before modern science.

Fire in Vedic times was the great cleanser and purifier. It linked the mortal world to the divine. To appease the gods, one made sacrifices to fire. The significance of fire sacrifices was not lost on the Ayurvedic tradition. But here, sacrifice was thought of differently. Sacrifice was an internal offering. The one we made with food. Ayurveda considers eating a kind of daily inner sacrifice because the region of your stomach is dominated by the fire element. This potent fire of digestion, called Jathragni, was the seat of all physical balance and harmony. Jathragni, according to Ayurveda, is how your food gets digested. It is the act of digestion in your digestive tract.²

If this doesn't make sense to you – think about it like this. Food is fuel. Without it, there will be no life. If the stomach is where this fuel gets transformed into energy, then there must be some kind of combustion taking place. And combustion requires fire. So the vaidyas imagined the stomach to be a great sacrificial fire that ensures our existence. Hence, the act of eating

was considered a pure and crucial inner sacrifice. Eating is considered 'sacrificial worship' and an Ayurvedic text goes so far as to call any person who eats in a healthy manner a 'fire worshipper'.

If you've ever built a fire or seen someone doing it, you'll know that fire needs a good balance of fuel and air to light up properly. Give it soggy wood and it will not kindle. Pile it up with too much wood and there will still be no fire. This goes for the fire in our stomachs too. Load it with too much food, and it will extinguish combustion. Give it nothing, it will corrode the intestinal lining and stomach with its gastric acids. Eating, then, becomes a fine craft of stoking this wondrous fire. Today, most people are guilty of overfeeding this digestive fire and hence suffer from a host of digestive issues. With such an abundance of food, we desperately need to reassess quantities. Yogis understand this ancient science and hence rarely fall sick.

You will initially find it difficult to eat less. But think for a minute of your body as a machine. If you load your 10 kg washing machine with 15 kg of clothes it is bound to work slowly and eventually break down at some point. And because our bodies are extraordinary machines you can't overload them with too much food. If you overfeed your body, you

will damage it because essentially you are killing the digestive fire. Everything you put inside your body will be processed, broken down and assimilated. And this background work that we don't see requires time. It takes five to six hours for your body to digest what you put into it in the form of food, so it's very important to limit what you eat.

Let's now look at what it means to have a healthy digestive constitution and how much food is required for our optimum function.

Eating less results in a healthy constitution

Have you ever wondered why some people are hyperactive and some inherently slow? Why some body types are prone to quick weight loss and gain and some never put on weight, no matter how many pieces of rava fried fish or samosas they eat? Some get angry in a heartbeat, while others stew in their juices for days and months and then slowly explode? Or why some of us grey prematurely, and others go bald?

None of the above is random.

Ayurveda describes all of our individual idiosyncrasies and characteristics according to our doshas. What this means is that each one of us has a unique blueprint that defines us. According to

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Ayurveda, these blueprints are scripted by the five elements – earth, fire, water, air and ether. All these elements are present in us. The word ‘dosha’ comes from the word ‘dosh’ meaning fault. Doshas are the by-product of an organism being alive. There are three main doshas – vata, kapha and pitta. And these are present in all living beings, mostly in combination.

Vata is represented by wind and ether. It is a moody artist, responsible for all motion, ideas, dreams and movement. Vata is kinetic energy, quick, light and always raring to go. Pitta, on the other hand, is potential energy. A creation of water and fire, it takes care of all transformations in the body. Hence, digestion, cognitive ability, the processing and assimilation of information are its domains. Pitta is the pinprick of life in your eyes. Kapha is made of water and earth, and it governs the areas of stability and lubrication so that the whole show runs smoothly.

A healthy constitution is when the three doshas are in harmony. However, if there is excess, lack or impurity in our lives, then an error manifests, upsetting the balance of the doshas. This is when illness rears its head and the body is thrown into chaos. Eating incorrectly is the surest way of doing this. In the digestive system, excess vata means flatulence and constipation. Too much pitta leads to acidity and

excessive hunger. And excess kapha means indigestion. We need to feed the digestive fire the good stuff and, most relevant today, in the right quantities.

Today, most of us eat too much and too often, and so we are in effect dousing the fire and are beset with a host of digestive problems. From obesity to flatulence, haemorrhoids to cancers, the list is endless. But all of this can be cured if we are mindful about our food intake.

It's hard to change what we eat in one day. Switching to a completely new healthy diet takes effort, time and also money. But how about quantity? That's not very difficult if we think about it. We don't have to buy new ingredients or equipment. We just need to reduce the amount we eat.

Less food makes a sharper mind

Yogis wake up early for their practice. If we eat too much, our bodies become sluggish and heavy. If our stomachs are too full, we can't concentrate. Yogis usually eat one big meal, and then something light in the evenings. According to the shastras and the Bhagavad Gita, as long as your yoga doesn't suffer, you should limit your food, your sleep and karma. Here, think of karma as your daily work and routine or any

action in your daily life. And just like anything else, you cannot work for long periods of time with no rest. You must experience other things in life.

Try to apply this principle to your life. Watch how you perform at a meeting after a big meal and how you fare after a smaller one. Is it easier to read or work when your stomach is stuffed with food or when it is lighter? I think you already know the answers to these questions.

Overeating disturbs the body, makes you physically and mentally sleepy and inactive. To keep your mind sharp, eat foods with a low glycaemic index (GI), which allow the sugars in foods to be processed and broken down more steadily. It's like going up an escalator instead of a lift. Foods that come in packets or are processed work quickly, send a burst of energy in your body. To see this in action, observe a child after he/she has eaten a chocolate. The child will go from inactive to dizzily active in no time! This is the effect of simple sugars. Once our bodies, much like a child, get addicted to those quick bursts of energy, it's more likely to trick you into craving these efficient sugar rushes. And that's why most of us reach out for a biscuit and tea in the afternoon.

Whereas foods like oats, non-starchy vegetables (such as cauliflower, carrots, cucumber, spinach,

eggplant, etc.) and whole wheat breads break down and release their energies more gradually, thus, making you less likely to crave a quick sugar rush.

Do not eat breakfast like a king

*Yuktāhāra vibhārasya yukta cestasya karmasu |
Yukta svapnāvabodhasya yogo bhavati dukkhabā ||³*

For one who is temperate in food and recreation, who is detached and self-restrained in work, who is regulated in sleep and in vigil – yoga brings about the cessation of the travails of samsara.

These lines from the Bhagavad Gita ask us to keep everything in balance, never overindulging in sleep, food, work or recreation. It suggests that if your life is balanced, your mind will be balanced too.

My grandfather and T. Krishnamacharya followed this dictum seriously. They lived meagrely, following the middle path. And that was the biggest secret to their long and healthy lives.

My grandfather never ate breakfast. At night, Guruji avoided most foods, and would eat just a banana and drink a big glass of milk. Both Guruji and Krishnamacharya drank a lot of milk, morning and

evening. It was only when he turned eighty-five that he began to eat a small breakfast, because he would get tired. Krishnamacharya too, like my grandfather, would not eat breakfast.

We've always been told to eat 'breakfast like a king'. But how many of us have stopped to think about this old adage? Eating a heavy breakfast may not always be conducive to productivity. Your brain is most active in the morning. Eating a light breakfast or skipping it altogether will make you feel light and keep you on your toes, whereas eating a heavy meal first thing in the morning will make you feel lethargic and tired, because your body will expend all its energy on digesting that big meal. And so contrary to popular opinion, you don't need to eat like a king before you start your day. At the most, you need just a little energy to set you off. If you have gastric issues or simply need some energy, eat a light, nutritious meal of fruits or sprouts.

When I am teaching in Mysore, I wake up at 1 a.m. to finish my own yoga practice. An Ashtanga practitioner needs to start at this sacred hour – a time when the mind is quiet and receptive. For years I would eat nothing until lunch, subsisting only on coffee. In fact, I would often say 'no coffee, no prana'

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because it was the only way I could wake up to teach! But this habit started giving me painful acid reflux, so now I eat a bowl of oats with nuts, seeds and a sprinkle of spices after I finish my morning practice. It's important to find your own equation.

Eating less or nothing in the morning may take some getting used to. Try it one day and monitor how your body feels. You may get hunger pangs, but that is because you are used to feeding your body a lot of food. So, it will be unhappy and demanding when you take that away, just as a cigarette smoker gets withdrawal pangs when he/she is deprived of nicotine. But if you persist, you will find that you can think better, your mind will be sharper and you will feel less sleepy and lazy and as a result be more productive through the first half of the morning.

That being said, do check with your doctor before embarking on any dietary changes.

Eat one big meal a day, and make that lunch

In my home lunch is the biggest meal of the day. It traditionally consists of rice and sambar and fresh salad. Sometimes we replace rice with ragi mudde or ragi balls. Ragi mudde, the food of farmers in

Karnataka, are just dough balls of millet cooked and then eaten with sambar or rasam. But they are packed with nutrition.

The logic behind making lunch your biggest meal is really quite simple – you have the rest of the day to digest it.⁴ Also, according to Ayurveda, the body's jathra agni is at its peak at noon, when the sun is at its strongest. This is the time the body's pitta, the dosha responsible for transformations, is most active, making it easiest for food to be assimilated with no side effects like acidity or heartburn.

However, eating a large meal is not an excuse to eat anything you want. Your plate must have a mix of complex carbohydrates, proteins, fibre, and a healthy amount of green leafy vegetables that are your source of vitamins and minerals. For lunch, look for foods that are packed with both nutrition and energy. Replace the simple sugars of white rice that lead to that dreadful afternoon drowsiness with finger millets or whole grains like amaranth and quinoa, which take longer to digest. Millets are a healthy choice for people suffering from diabetes as they have a low glycaemic index and are rich in antioxidants.

A large bowl of salad with finger millets or whole grains, protein in the form of tofu or animal protein and boiled sprouts is excellent for those who want a

change from their dal–sabzi routine. One can even make a healthy sandwich from sourdough, wholegrain bread and a medley of vegetables, mushrooms and green leaves and some healthy cheeses.

Meals in a bowl can be inspired by a cross-section of Asian and South American dishes. Add avocados, when they are in season, to a bowl with wholegrain millets and a lentil and pumpkin curry. Or try a mix of stir-fried vegetables with tofu and unprocessed rice.

Let your culinary imagination run wild and you will approach lunch every day with joy and excitement. If you find yourself hungry in between lunch and dinner, put down that samosa or batata vada! Keep a box of dried fruit handy or perhaps eat a bowl of oatmeal with seeds around teatime. Smoothies also satiate hunger pangs, and help you get in some vital vegetables and fruit. Replace sugar with honey.

Burps are the stomach's red light. Stop eating much before you burp

You can eat your way to a century. The Okinawa islands in Japan have the highest number of people in the world over 100 years old. They eat mainly vegetables, whole grains and fish. But more importantly, they have a cultural practice called Hara Hachi Bu – to

stop eating when you are about 80 per cent full. And this is the key factor to their longevity.

Having said that, it's hard to tell when we are 80 per cent full. How do we know for sure? Amazingly, our bodies do send us reports. And the most effective and communicative one is the burp. Burps are the red light of our stomachs, that clearly tell us that you're full, you have to stop sending down more food! Try to stop eating before you feel a burp surfacing.

Another way to limit food intake is through portion control, where you eat as much as you want, not as much as you think you want. You can do this by choosing a smaller plate. A large plate makes food appear less, versus a small plate that will look filled up and thus is psychologically more filling, satiating the hunger of our mind.

Keep it simple

At home we translate the simplicity of a small plate into simplicity of menu. In much of South India, including Mysore, Karnataka, where I live, meals consist majorly of rasam, sambar, rice and vegetables. We also eat a lot of salads like kosambari, which is made with split pulses, seasoned with mustard seeds. The legumes we use are usually bengal gram and

green gram, which we mix with grated vegetables like beetroot, cucumber and carrot. We add generous amounts of root vegetables with sprouts and banana stem, which is high in fibre, to our salads. The one thing we don't do is complicate our food habits.

Our food is not fancy. It's simple, fresh and wholesome. Everywhere in South India you will find variations of the same balanced meal. Carbohydrates come in the form of red rice or ragi balls, protein from millets and dals, vitamins and minerals from vegetables and fruits, fats in the form of ghee. A simple South Indian meal is perfectly balanced and has everything the body needs.

Think about your food, but don't overthink it. If you are confused about how to start eating healthy, begin with what's always been cooked at home. Your staple food menu should be your first drawing board. Then, begin substituting the ingredients by choosing healthier options. Switch your cooking oil to a healthier one (look for cold-pressed, unprocessed, organic oils, especially those with a low smoking point), switch to red rice from white, go for organic vegetables rather than the usual fare. Once you've done this, you can experiment with other foods and cuisines too. Most people skip these steps because they think these improvements are tough

to implement when you've always eaten a certain way.

Others may think such simple steps boring and want to jump straight to fancy and international ingredients which in the long run is hard to sustain. As the world becomes smaller, returning to these habits means we can move towards living more sustainable lives. High food demands all year round cause huge water stress and loss of biodiversity.⁵ This also increases the risk of eating pesticide-laden or genetically modified foods, all of which lead to an increased toxicity in our bodies and the environment. The bottom line – don't complicate food; stick to tried-and-tested and clean eating traditions passed down from your ancestors.

Eat traditionally

About 400 years ago, the Portuguese arrived in Andhra Pradesh and brought with them tomatoes, which soon pushed out the traditionally used tamarind from its role as the sour ingredient added to legumes to make them more digestible.⁶ Soon though, entire villages came down with fluorosis – a disease that causes permanent deformities – because the water in those areas had large amounts of naturally occurring

fluoride. Research later determined that tamarind binds with fluoride to prevent it from entering the body.

We see a similar trend today. Due to rising incomes and access to international cultures, Indians are eating out more frequently. Today, we crave pizza, pasta, fries and burgers all the time.

Traditional foods and methods of cooking are being discarded in favour of Western diets rich in junk food. This is mostly because we've come to think that eating Western foods takes us up the social and economic ladder. But I've never heard anything as crazy as this.

When term begins in Mysore, I see many of my Western students eating dosas and idlis. But this doesn't agree with them in the long run. They suffer from cramps, indigestion and loose motions. How can a stomach that's not used to eating spices adapt to them in one season? I too can't eat foreign food. I will eat an occasional pizza because of my children, but it doesn't work for my body. I don't feel good. I can't even eat North Indian food. I don't mind the occasional roti, but in the afternoon I must have rice.

Cuisines across the world have developed differently because of a simple reason – availability of produce. And so our diet is strongly dependent on

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where we live, the climate and whether our ancestors ate foods rich in protein or fibre. While climate, terrain and availability of certain foods determines what finds its way on to your plate, there is also something called genetic memory. Carl Jung refers to it as the memory presented at birth through our DNA from our ancestors. It is what makes us who we are. How we look, behave, function, interact and react to our environment. Modernization has enabled us to ignore our genetic memory and this has taken us far from our ancestral diets, causing diabetes, obesity and cardiovascular diseases the world over. Journalist Michael Pollan writes that populations that eat a wide range of traditional foods generally don't suffer from chronic diseases. These diets run the gamut from those high in fat (the Inuit in Greenland who subsists largely on seal blubber) to ones high in carbohydrate (Central American Indians subsist largely on maize and beans) to others that are rich in protein (Masai tribesmen in Africa live chiefly on cattle blood, meat and milk).

Foods that come from your ancestors suit your body and help you live longer. Follow old traditions, don't throw out recipes handed down by your grandparents without a second thought. Our foods are different even from what our neighbour is eating.

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If we stick to eating traditional foods, it will automatically mean we are eating seasonal produce. Mangoes in the summer and oranges in the winter. Gourds in the summer and carrot and cauliflower in the winter. Seasonal foods give us the most nutrients, simply because they are fresh. Do some research about the fruit and vegetables available in season, and then choose those when you are out shopping.



Since the time we have existed as thinking, sentient beings, from the ancient Greeks to our own epic heroes from the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, we have been enamoured by the idea of immortality. And is it really as complicated as our good old heroes from the epics made it out to be?

Honestly if I can do it, so can you. I have shown you the first and most important step in the journey towards good health, now let's turn our attention to how yogis eat and what sets them apart.



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- Eat less to reverse ageing.
- Eat slowly.
- Explore traditional recipes to cure modern lifestyle diseases.
- Cook your own food to infuse it with love.
- Drink warm water to flush out toxins.