



COUNTING IN ASHTANGA YOGA

Why Do We Count in Ashtanga Yoga?

Ashtanga Yoga is a structured practice that requires focus and discipline. It is designed to clear and sharpen the mind through the harmonious integration of prāṇa (breath), āsana (posture), and drishti (gaze). At first glance, Ashtanga may appear to be purely physical, but at its core, it is a moving meditation.

Counting plays an essential role in this meditation, helping the practitioner stay deeply connected to each breath and posture and preventing the mind from drifting.

How the Count Fits into the Practice

In the Ashtanga system, there is a precise order when it comes to counting: the count comes first, followed by the breath and the posture.

The link between breath and movement is called a vinyāsa, and every vinyāsa is given a specific count. Each sequence is made up of a set number of these counted vinyāsas.

For example, Sūrya Namaskāra A (Sun Salutation A) consists of nine vinyāsas, beginning and ending with Samastitihi, the neutral standing posture, which is considered “count zero.”

The Mālā Analogy

Guruji Sri K. Pattabhi Jois often explained the relationship between count, breath, and posture through the image of a pushpa mālā – a loop of natural flower beads traditionally used in Hindu and Buddhist meditation practices.

A mālā is a circle of beads held together by a single thread. If the thread breaks, the beads scatter, and the garland loses its form. Similarly, in Ashtanga yoga, the breath is the thread and the counted vinyāsas are the beads.

If the breath stops or becomes irregular, the deeper meaning and benefits of the practice are lost.

Within each sequence, there is also a key posture held for five breaths, representing the special bead in the mālā.

In Sūrya Namaskāra A, for instance, this special bead is Adho Mukha Śvānāsana (Downward-Facing Dog).

Benefits of Learning the Count

Focus and Presence – The rhythm of the Sanskrit count steadies the mind and keeps awareness in the moment

Calm Effect – The Sanskrit numbers have a powerful, calming effect on the mind and connect you to the ancient roots of the practice.

Depth of Practice – The count enriches the physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions of each sequence.

Mental Clarity – Memorizing and following the count strengthens concentration and sharpens memory.

Elevated Awareness – A steady count guides the practitioner toward a higher state of consciousness.

Counting is far more than a practical guide.

It is what weaves breath, posture, and attention into one seamless meditation – the living heart of the Ashtanga tradition.

