

Young and incorruptible

Ashtangi **Ajay Kumar** finds the balance between the traditions of yoga and the expectations and demands of the modern world, **writes Tej Rae**



THE PULL OF TWO FORCES, the modern and the traditional, run parallel to what Ajay Kumar is grappling with as he enters the increasingly commercialised yoga market.

WORDS: TEJ RAE. IMAGES: SUPPLIED.

A young yogi, Ajay Kumar is only 30 and is studying Sanskrit philosophy towards a PhD. Kumar was in Dubai in October 2013 to lead a series of workshops at Zen Yoga as part of a 10-country tour that included Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, France, Italy, Sweden and the UK, among others. When I sat down to talk to him at an Indian vegetarian

restaurant in Dubai Marina, the first thing I noticed were his large, shiny earrings. One in each ear, contrasting with a smudge of white ash on his forehead - a Shiva devotee.

It doesn't really matter what he wore, of course, except that this pull of two forces, the modern and the traditional, also run parallel to what he is grappling with as he enters the world's increasingly commercialised yoga market. He does not foresee an»

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ashram with 200 students, where anyone can show up, pay and join in. Keeping the integrity of the traditional yogic approach is paramount for Ajay as he continues to negotiate between market forces and tradition.

“Just because I am in a Western country does not mean I have to change my ways,” he explained over coconut chutney and dosa, a savoury pancake. “I know who I am.”

Kumar found his way to yoga when he was only 10 years old, after wandering a few blocks from his house to BKS Iyengar’s shala in Mysore to check it out. He had the good fortune to live in close proximity to a direct disciple of Krishnamacharya, a co-student of the famous ashtanga teacher Sri K Pattabhi Jois.

‘Yoga boy’, his friends called him, and by 12 years old, he knew he wanted to be a yoga teacher. He dragged his friends along to the shala, but most of them lost interest and left, while Ajay continued.

By his telling, he started teaching because he was coerced by friends. His teaching style has been described as technical and all-seeing. “He breaks you down to build you up,” describes Laura Farrier, a Zen Yoga teacher who studies with him every year in Mysore.

The small space he ended up renting in his early 20s soon filled up with students from all over the world, but only those he felt were ready were accepted for training.

In the West, a yoga student signs up and pays for teacher training – the

student chooses the teacher, not the other way around. Traditionally, in India, it is the teacher who chooses the student. Whether the student can pay or not is secondary to their spiritual readiness and their emotional connection with the teacher. This is the criterion Kumar uses when earnest yogis come to study with him. Those who cannot afford it find other ways to pitch in. Kumar wants to get them ‘on the inside’, for yoga, he feels, is not about asanas. On this topic he is so passionate that he is writing a book about the roots of yoga, to counter the notion that ‘yoga is exercise’.

If you follow this premise to its logical end, it has other implications: the student who does not show proper respect is asked to leave the shala. Ajay’s view of a proper teacher-student relationship can cause some ripples when he takes his teaching abroad.

He found, in each country, a few students along the way who lack a sense of humility towards the teacher, students who come into the room as ‘experts’ rather than learners. “Roll up your mat,” he tells them, and there are no second chances. He refunds anyone’s money if they didn’t stay, because he prizes the nature of the teacher-student interaction over the quantity of bodies in the room.

In Dubai, yogis who attended one or more of the three workshops he offered at Zen Yoga in October noticed this difference. “Ajay’s approach was quite straightforward and direct – he was there to perform his dharma, to teach and pass on



learnings from his teachers. His lineage and authenticity was very clear. Sometimes we need to look beyond the words and understand the intention beneath,” said Sonali Edwards, who comes from India.

Gareth Davies recognised a similar dynamic, along with its benefits. “I imagined a strict task master whipping us into repeating over and over any postures that we did wrong. However, when Ajay saw us having trouble, much to my surprise he took us outside of the ashtanga series and showed us how to do completely different exercises to help us understand what muscles, tendons and bones he wanted us to engage. I was on a bit of a high after the workshop, as confidence in what my body is still capable of came rushing back.”

To be a modern teacher of an ancient tradition like Ajay is to spend one’s day inside various paradoxes. Ajay, with decades of teaching ahead of him, is doing his best to balance the expansion of his own shala against the traditions that are integral to ashtanga. ✨