

“Counting Beyond Words” - Interview with John Scott



(The interview was conducted by Marek Łaskawiec for Polish yoga portal www.bosonamacie.pl on 29th of March, 2016 during John's workshop at Astanga Yoga Studio in Warsaw, Poland.)

Marek Łaskawiec: You are a strong supporter of vinyasa counting during Ashtanga Yoga practice. You advocate that not only teachers should do it during a led series but also students should count themselves during their individual practice. What is the purpose of doing a vinyasa count?

John Scott: To me the purpose of counting is to transcend. When practicing yoga, we will be having a sensual experience of the breath, we will be listening to the breath, and we will be also feeling the rooting impact of the breath on the bandhas. We will be experiencing the feeling of our body twisting, stretching and contracting according to the breath. But Ashtanga Yoga is a moving system and in this system we have a choreography that is controlled by the count. Before we know there is a count, we are in the state of sensual experience and we can be indulging ourselves in this sensual feel of the body stretch and get stuck in the senses.

In our ordinary thinking mind we store our memories and emotions, associations to those memories and emotions, we make assumptions about the things we are in relation with and we make projections based on that. As a metaphor, during the workshop I put the names of participants behind their mats, so you could step out of being yourselves to discover your true potential. In this way, you could stop being bound by your individual name and all the stories that the society, family, history and the government are trying to impose on us. Our names and our stories are important because they define who we are but if we stay defined in them, we remain locked in our individuality and may never be able to experience how it is to be connected to all.

We have to get out of our ordinary thinking mind. When we practice yoga, we undergo an alchemic process of change. Entering into asana, we shift from being us, humans, to a dog, crane or frog. That is how his we learn empathy to the outside of ourselves. In order to do that, to transcend the ordinary, we need a technique to keep our individual story there but not in the way. So counting is a tool that allows us to transcend the ordinary but when we transcend we also reconnect to the senses on a higher level.

So counting is a meditation tool?

JS: Yes, in transcendental meditation, we repeat our mantra that helps us to protect the mind from the ordinary mind. One may ask: when do we stop counting? We don't. Counting dissolves, as does the mantra dissolve. If you decide to stop counting that is the ego saying, "I do not have to count any more". If the technique works, we transcend the ego and turn into the energy moving in the outward form.

Usually when talking about meditation, we imagine someone sitting motionless with the eyes closed. In Ashtanga Yoga there is a lot of action, there is movement, there is the control of breath, gaze and posture. How is it different from an "ordinary" meditation?

JS: Remember, mediation is a practice. I wake up each day and I meditate. I go to bed each day and I meditate. So I start and finish a day with a sitting, static practice. In between I have an asana practice, which is a dynamic, moving meditation. What happens in the space in-between? What is happening now? What happens when we walk home from the yoga studio? Is that not a potential meditation? What is waking up? Waking up is 27/4. It is not only when you sit for half an hour on your meditation cushion. It is not only when you do the two hour Ashtanga practice. Those are practices for real, they let us to be in relation and not distracted. We are practicing for life, to stay attentive in the life, to be the main character or the protagonist in our story.

Since vinyasa counting is a meditation technique, what should we count - the movement, the breath or the combination of the movement and the breath?

JS: We are counting the movement of breathing body. But with the body we also move the mind so we should be counting these three. We are counting the three elements that are synchronised.

However, when we look at the vinyasa count charts, sometimes what is counted is the breath only and sometimes we count only the movement. That is why I asked you what we are really counting.

JS: Hmm, you associate numbers with quantity.

And this is wrong?

JS: (laughter). That's a paradox. In Suryanamaskara A there is 9 vinyasas but there is more going on. If you look at the vinyasas closer, we have 5 breaths, i.e. 5 inhalations and 5 exhalations, which are dynamic. But you also take five, static breaths in a downward dog. So in total we have 10 inhalations and 10 exhalations, which is a one to one ratio. Then, we enter Suryanamaskara B, and the ratio changes. It is now two to one - there are twice as many dynamic breaths as static. And the purpose of this is to get us energised but only after we have been balanced. It's all about our nervous system. We breathe because our autonomic nervous system is keeping us alive. We start doing yoga and we become conscious of the breath and it changes things. When the observer appears, the science changes.

The breath itself changes. When we start doing yoga, we are told to breath consciously and freely. So this is not the usual breath we take, is it?

JS: I wish it was. I wish we could breath freely all the time. But what does freely mean? It means that the inhalation and exhalation are the same. Not necessarily in volume or length but in terms of the effortlessness and flow. The flow of *ekam* and the flow of *dve* are free. The inhalation and the exhalation are free.

But isn't it somehow contradictory? When we do yoga, we strain or twist our body into a posture and in our thoughts we count at the same time. How does it relate to the idea of free breathing?

JS: There is no contradiction. The number comes first. Then comes the breath-initiated movement. The posture is the result. The counting is like a guideline for the free breath to lead us into a posture. It is like a GPS. You input the name of the asana, which is your destination, and the count leads you there.

There is this famous song by Led Zeppelin “Stairways to heaven”. So, to use it as a metaphor, when we climb up these stairs, each of them has a number on it and we count a number, breathe and take a step?

JS: It’s a good metaphor but only to a certain extent. When we theorise, it is a reduction. We use symbols and symbols are conclusions of our experience. We have eight limbs of yoga and maybe they are eight stairs to heaven. But what should be at the end of the stairway, what should be the heaven? Is Samadhi the heaven? Is it the end result? In the West, we tend to think in a linear way. We enumerate the eight limbs of yoga and list them one after the other: Yama, Niyama, Asana, Panayama, Pratyahara, Dharana, Dhyana and Samadhi.

Let me use another metaphor. Imagine a circle (John is drawing a circle). And now place evenly the eight limbs of Ashtanga Yoga on the circle. Where should we be located in this wheel when we practice yoga? The right place to be in this Ashtanga wheel is in the centre. Actually, in Sanskrit this centre is called *sukha*, meaning “a good space” which is also translated as happiness. *Dukha*, which is misery or unhappiness, literally means “a bad space”, being off the centre.

Remember the famous three concepts of Guruji: **posture, free breathing, looking place?** Most of the time we are not in such a good place. We don’t have posture, we don’t have breath awareness and we certainly do not have a looking place. A *kha* is also a whole, like a whole where the wheel axle fits. If this whole is off the centre, the wheel axle will be also off the centre and the ride will be uncomfortable. We will be miserable. We will be in *dukha*.

There is also another way to look at the Ashtanga wheel. If I have a hole and I give it to a child, what this child is going to do with it?

Put a finger through it?

JS: Yes, and then what? Look through it! So the hole can be now a symbol of something else and each symbol has something encoded in it. When a child looks through a hole it becomes like an aperture of a camera, like a lens. And the consciousness wants to look through a properly located lens, though *sukha* not through *dukha*. If we look through *dukha*, a badly located, out-of-focused lens, we do not see much, do we? When the lens is centred, well located, when it is *sukha*, it is a different story. We can see better, we can zoom in.

There is this famous film “Matrix”, where the main character, Neo, is unplugged from the system and the technician is downloading new programs into Neo’s mind. The technician looks at the different discs and discards a couple of them as boring. The first program that is downloaded is the course in combat training. This is the Western way to start with yoga – we start with asana and we put asana on the top of the Ashtanga circle as the most important. When I started practicing with Guruji, he pointed at me and said: “This man is only exercising”. So he was implying to me that I had all my attention on asana. I was a typical Westerner; I was practicing not 99% but 110%. I was out of the Ashtanga wheel. According to Guruji, we, Westerners, usually start with the third limb of Ashtanga Yoga, which is Asana. Initially, it feels great, because it is like being promoted into the third level straight away. But then we realise we need to go back and start from Yama and Niyama.

Guruji said “**1% of theory, 99% of practice**” but this 1% is important. When we start looking at it, we add more elements to our practice. Our wheel becomes a wheel of time and the wheel of cause and effect. Asana is a force, a cause. We enter a posture and the effect is better breathing or Pranayama. The effect of better breathing is balanced and steady mind, which Pratyahara. The effect of Pratyahara is concentration, which Dharana. When you are

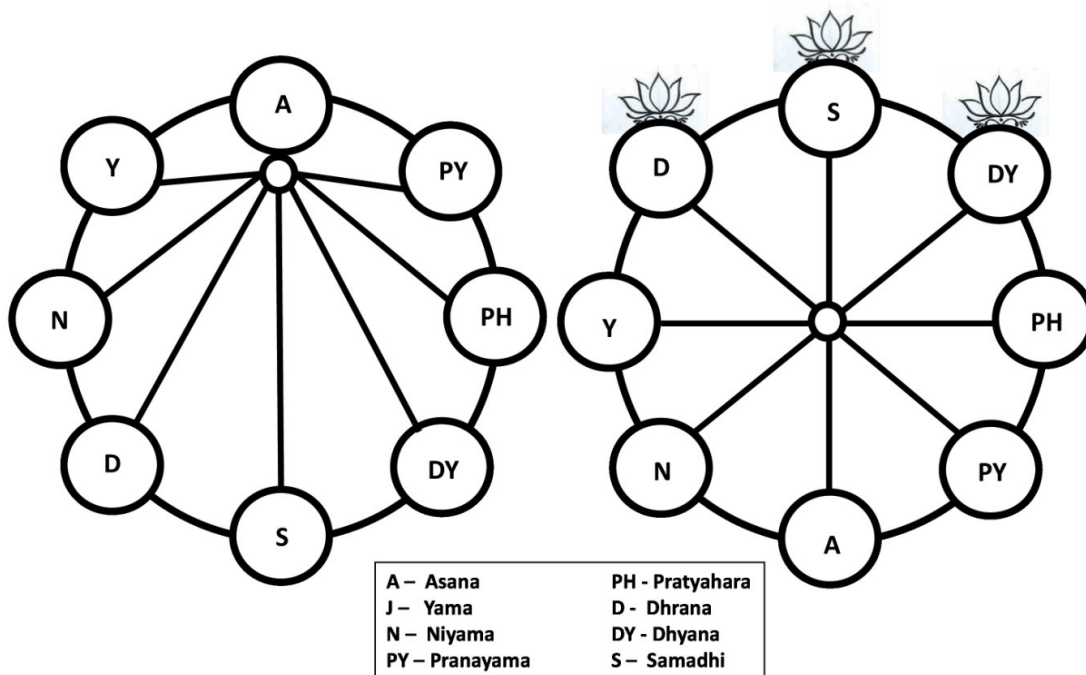


concentrated, the cause is meditation, i.e. Dyana, and meditation leads to Samadhi. Yamas are about relationships, to ourselves, to the others, to animals, to the planet, to everything around. Niyamas help us in the cleansing or purification process, so as we discover who we really are. So, by adding Yama, Niyama, Pranayama and Pratyahara to Asana we make our position in the Ashtanga wheel more balanced. The three remaining limbs of Ashtanga Yoga start to flourish as flowers. We find ourselves in the centre of the wheel.

ASHTANGA YOGA WHEEL

Asana in the center of practice - *Dukha*

Balanced practice - *Sukha*



How does the counting fit into the Ashtanga wheel? You said that counting is like a symbol. What does it symbolise?

JS: Counting is a mantra. That is why I call it the transcendental Ashtanga. We transcend from physical exercise to a moving meditation. This is like counting beads on a thread of a *mala* that in India is used for meditation. Within each vinyasa we have numbers we count which are symbols we meditate on.

And how did you start counting. When practicing with Guruji, did you count your vinyasa from the very beginning?

JS: I didn't. There was a language barrier. It was Guruji who did the counting, and he was counting each person individually. Initially I thought that *chatvari* means jump back, and that *pancha* is a name of the up-dog in Sanskrit. Only after some time Lino Miele, who participated in Guruji's led session during a workshop in France, came to me and said: "John, he is counting". So, together with Lino we took a clipboard and asked Guruji to explain us the counting method step by step, one full vinyasa after the other. I learnt another bit of 1% of theory but once I learnt it I could not reject it I had to practice it and pass it to the students.

Can we also use some other tool for meditation then counting during our practice?

JS: You can say different words, mantras, but the count is the main mantra to me when I practice. You could say that we pay attention to the breath anyway so why we should add counting to this? The problem is that when we indulge in the breath itself, we stay in the ordinary senses. Pratyahara means to control the senses but also to use them as a platform to achieve Dharana. Students sometimes like to indulge in the sensation of stretching or breathing. This is not the right level to stay at. We have to transcend the senses, stay in the sense awareness but transcend the state of being in the

senses. Through this we get to another level. That is why we have to stay in the flow of the practice and the flow of the count. Otherwise, we indulge ourselves in the senses and stop our meditation practice.

Talking about mantras. When I started transcendental meditation personal I was looking forward to get my personal mantra. Obviously, I started with all my associations, projections and conditionings and I wanted an impressive mantra, I wanted the full sensation of mantra. My teacher gave me a very simple, two-syllable mantra and I did not like it. But when I started to practice, something happened. The mantra turned into a drop of water that was falling into a bottle of black ink. This is what happens when you practice every day – a drop falls into the bottle, day-by-day, drop-by-drop and slowly, gradually ink changes and the bottle overflows.

By teaching the vinyasa count, I am giving students the mantra. It is only natural that your conditioning makes you resist it. You deny, you resist, you challenge, and then – finally – you surrender. This is nothing new. The worst approach is the total denial, the lack of believe that we can be something different. Remember 99% practice? This is what eventually makes the bottle of ink to overflow. You receive you mantra, you practice, practice and practice and the change happens. I am lucky enough to have been doing my mantra, my counting for a long time. I am now immersed in my tradition and it is natural to me. I count both in my personal practice and when I teach. Guruji counted for over 60 years. He was 90 years of age and he was still counting.

We are extraordinary beings. We should only understand properly the words of our opening chant: *“Samsara Halahala Mohasantyai”*. We should understand that we will only be in peace when we stop the cycle of remaining in the poison of conditioned existence. The practice itself is the “jungle physician”, the practice is the doctor. In the practice, there is all the technique to find the light dispelling the darkness. We are suffering from conditioning, we suffer from being normal. Yoga practice teaches us that we are not normal but we are extraordinary. Our ordinary thinking mind is caught in assumptions, associations and projects. We are living in the past because the mind is making a reference to past patterns. How do we stop it? We take posture. We inhale and we exhale. When we are in a posture and breathing we are in the current.

Once, quoting after the *Bhagavad Gita*, Gandhi said: “Watch your thoughts, because your thoughts become your words, watch your words, because your words become your actions, watch your actions because they change your destiny.” So we become our thoughts. But when we control our thoughts, becoming those thoughts can be quite a positive thing. Our mind uses Prana to use the breath to speak. Our mind uses Prana to use our breath to move the body.

We arrive to this world into the darkness and ignorance and the indoctrinated ways of living because that how it’s always been. So what we try to do through practice is to go back to the state of infancy, to the first months of absolute bliss, when all sensations were real. To get back there, we need to go back from story to chapter, from chapter to paragraph, from paragraph to sentence, from sentence to a word, from word to symbol, and then finally to sound. **“Make noise with sound”** – Guruji was saying. So we use the symbol of counting to count the noise of the breath.

Guriji’s message was so simple. He was just using a couple of concepts: mind control, counted method, breathing system, posture, looking place, vinyasa. This was Gurujis’s code that can fit on one page. This is what he taught and this is what I teach but you can spend hours just by looking at each of those concepts, you could write a book. However, when it all works, the words disappear and so do disappear the numbers in vinyasa count. You transcend language, you are beyond words.

With thanks to Marek Łaskawiec for the English translation of the original Polish

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