Pamela Luther is a dedicated student of the Ashtanga Yoga Method and has travelled most years to study with Guruji, Sharath and Saraswathi in Mysore, India since 2001. Pamela has maintained a daily practice for the last 15 years and continues to practice and teach as she has been taught. Pamela was authorized by Guruji and Sharath in 2006. She has Level 2 authorization and the blessing to teach the full Intermediate Series.

Pamela currently lives in Australia with her partner Jake Barr and her little boy Rio. Learn more by visiting www.simplyashtanga.com.
Acceptance and Surrender

When I think of Ashtanga Yoga, the feelings that first come to me are softness, joy, and healing. Healing on so many levels. However, when Ashtanga Yoga is mentioned out in the world, the words that people often think of are hard, strong or intense.

It is often the physicality of the practice that gets people's attention. People associate Ashtanga Yoga with young, hard, flexible bodies and there is no wonder why that image, bolstered by the Yoga media, has become synonyms with Ashtanga. Of course, it goes without saying that Ashtanga can be, and is, a physically demanding practice for those who have that capacity. It is also a hard, strong and intense journey to go deeply into your being and have a very honest look at yourself, your habits, your conditioning and ultimately, your soul. However, when I think of this beautiful practice, I see it accessible to people of all shapes, ages, and abilities. I think of students who have missing limbs, others who have been terminally ill, or who are in their 70’s. I think about how this practice gently creeps into a person’s every cell and how changes begin to occur on gross and subtle levels. I think of the saltiness of sweat and the one-pointed focus required of powerful asana. I feel the resilience of deep daily dedication and the unwavering spirit of devotion; more than anything though, I feel softness, joy, and deep healing.

When Ashtanga came into my life, my body was wrecked from two decades of competitive sports. I was plagued with long term injuries and pain throughout my body as well as a mindset that had grown up on competition and achievement at any cost to my body and well-being. It would have been easy to transfer that mindset into this practice, but I was blessed with early teachers who had decades of experience and a complete belief in this practice as healing, therapeutic, and sustainable. None more than Guruji himself. When I started Ashtanga, I was completely burned out on the ideals of our culture. My success as an athlete and student, (things held up so highly in our culture), had given me a lot of grief, stress, pain and a seemingly endless appetite for more success. Regardless of what I won or achieved as an athlete and no matter how much more I learned through books and the academia that surrounded me, I found no lasting happiness, but rather a deep sense of something missing.

My first Ashtanga class was like finding a flashlight in the pitch black of night. I could not explain what was happening, but I knew it was big, and I knew it was going to be a part of my life from that point on. Somehow, my own breath during practice was refilling me with a deep contentment that nothing else ever had. I was changing, one practice at a time. Deep surgery was taking place inside me on a physical level, but more importantly, on the emotional, energetic and spiritual levels.

Aside from the process of healing my body, re-balancing my energies, and feeling the slow and steady flow of contentment that began to fill me, this practice also put me in touch with the feminine. As it has such a physical component, Ashtanga can appear to be a very masculine practice to those who are newer to it or those merely observing it. Indeed, it begins just that way for almost all of us as we heave and ho, push and muscle our way into the asanas with all our previous conditioning. However, in order for this practice to be truly sustainable, which it must become in order to extract its deepest
benefits, it must also become deeply feminine, for all of us, men and women alike. Effortless effort is a very feminine dance. Acceptance and surrender—things so foreign to us westerners—creep into our lives as the practice delivers her beautiful wisdom. We begin to realize that this acceptance and surrender, this softness and receiving, are foundations for lasting happiness.

Yoga is not hard, perfect, pretty, or correct. It is personal, sloppy, intimate, and real, just as humans are. I feel that to receive the continual insights and depth of personal truths that come from this practice, the practice must be a long-term journey. It seems that can only happen when there is a shift to joy within the practice.

At the beginning we may find great benefits and leaps of progress within our practice and are therefore easily inspired; however with time, things stabilize and we start to face more challenges—physical challenges, certainly, but mental challenges even more so. At this point, people often feel less inspired. The practice may even become a drag, like some sort of guilty obligation (and we westerners are experts at guilty obligations), with thoughts like, “I just have to get through it, get it done”. Sometimes it may seem like a mountain to climb as you begin the opening chant. If the practice remains this way often it will fade out in a practitioner's life. For those too stubborn to let it go, it may just become joyless and full of injury. At this point, if the practitioner has been infused with even a touch of surrender, even a hint of self-acceptance in their journey thus far, then this is the key to unlocking the devotional aspect of the practice. Letting go of the pressure, the need to 'get' anywhere, the desire to somehow have a different practice or body than the one we have. Letting go of the striving, the wanting, the discontent of where and who and what we are. A beautiful surrender to just being what we are and nothing more. To being just the breath and the movement of breath, of life, of sensation, of prana, and to whatever is showing up on the mat.

That focus on the breath, the eternal, leads us to something infinitely deep and steady, something that is always there, and always has been there. A God-space. A ground of being. As if with every deep inhale and exhale we are taking in God, seeing God and being God. Everything else about the practice drops away and one of Guruji's most famous and wise quotes comes pouring through – “All is God.” I believe this is the path of least resistance within our practice and the path the feminine has put me in touch with.

This is not to diminish the physicality of the practice whatsoever. The deepness and uniqueness of the asanas are constantly wringing out the physical and emotional blocks in our bodies. This opens the flow of circulation, breath and prana. Our nervous system is flushed and born anew. We grow incredibly strong externally and internally, becoming ever more light and flexible. As we strengthen our bodies, we soften in our approach and in our minds. Our bodies heal rather than break. Our asanas feel sloppy and curvy as breath and prana move inside us, rather than rigid and severe from a lack of prana and too much mind. I use the word sloppy in the highest regard – sloppy as watery, moveable, casual, liquid, unsystematic—a true movement of life within us. To me sloppy is a word that makes sense with a truly embodied, aware and God-infused practice.
My slow yet steady shift to the feminine has been a massive and life-changing journey. Having been an athlete, tomboy and feminist from time immemorial, I prided myself on being strong, tough and, well, very male; although I would have never thought of it like that at the time. Trying to emulate the boys or men to prove a woman's strength and integrity makes no sense at all, yet we race around doing just that in our culture. Not only are women in the role of mother and family caregiver, which is far beyond a full-time job, but we also add to this full or part-time workloads, career climbing and physical accomplishments as well. We've taken our mothers' roles and added our fathers' roles on top, plus more; and we think we've made progress. If we are willing to be brutally honest with ourselves, we would see that we seem to be making an incredible amount of stress and anxiety for ourselves, our children, and, essentially, the world at large. This is because women, as mothers, are by far the most influential people in a child's life. From the mother's breast, our children, boys and girls, become the world.

I remember a story that Nancy Gilgoff shares where she was flummoxed about not being able to practice during her periods on her first trip to Mysore in the 70's. She was complaining to Amma, Guruji's wife, about how unfair it was that she was unable to practice during her periods and how in our culture women do everything when bleeding. Amma said something along the lines of, “Ssshhh Nancy, you be quiet. Women started this! Every other day I have to be in the kitchen working. In India, women don't have to work in the fields, they don't have to talk to their husbands or cook during their ladies' holiday. The men prepare all the food and bring it to us. We get to just rest.” Nancy had never thought of it in that light before. Years later when going through menopause Amma then complained to Nancy, “Now I have no excuse. I have to be in the kitchen every day!”

I surely had not thought about my “ladies' holiday” as a time of rest and nurturing before my relationship with Ashtanga Yoga began. I remember the first time a teacher told me I shouldn't practice Yoga during my period. It annoyed me. There was no explanation offered. The teacher was male, and in my hardened and defensive mind I just thought it was an ignorant, old-fashioned and chauvinistic idea. When I asked about his reasons for such a comment after class, I saw that there was indeed a pranic explanation, but I could not get my head around it. It still seemed like an ancient idea that repressed women, especially since it stemmed from Indian culture. Since I was so new to Yoga at the time, I couldn't yet feel the pranic reasons in my own body. My mind was too stubborn to be open to it, anyway. So, I took it upon myself to do some personal research. I recorded my periods for the next three years on paper; their duration and flow, along with my own energetic feelings. I altered between not changing my practice at all, leaving out just the closing inversions, or not practicing whatsoever for the three or four main days of my period. It is funny to think about doing this now as it seems so analytical and pragmatic, but having come from a science background I guess it was what my mind needed in order to begin to loosen up. I needed to analyze my own personal experience rather than just believe what I was told. It didn't take me long to see that my periods were indeed very much affected by my practice. If I did a normal practice, the flow would be 2-3 days longer than if I did not practice at all. As my experience with the practice grew, I began to feel my body at a much more subtle level.
When I think of Ashtanga Yoga, the feelings that first come to me are softness, joy and healing.
and would eventually notice my uterus and womb would feel almost abused if I practiced during my ladies’ holiday. When I allowed myself a break, it felt so cleansing, self-nurturing, and, on a physical level, so much healthier. My research faded away when I just could not imagine practicing at all during my ladies’ holiday any longer. Not only did I not do my Ashtanga practice, but also I devoted those three to five days to almost complete rest and self-nurturing by barely leaving home and being very soft and gentle with myself.

For the past eleven years I have not practiced for my entire ladies’ holiday, not just the three first days. I feel a deep need to honour my womb and uterus and let my body cleanse and rest during my entire period. I am very grateful to have been given this insight through my Yoga practice.

I also feel that this tiny seed of insight and honour that begins with respecting what your body is going through during ladies’ holiday grows into what will eventually, for many women, be a much larger scale honouring of the entire process of pregnancy and birth. Becoming so in tune with the subtleties and care of the womb feeds right over to being very in touch with the changes that occur during pregnancy and how best to care for yourself and your baby in regards to practicing and nurturing optimal health and peace for baby and mama. Pregnancy is a miracle, birth is a transformation and motherhood, as Guruji put it, is the Seventh Series!

As I have moved through these three blessings of life, I have been profoundly grateful for my Ashtanga practice. Guruji recommended, and Sharath and Saraswati still recommend, taking rest from practice the first three months of one’s pregnancy as well as the first three months post birth. Guruji didn't always recommend this as he himself was doing research on how best to accommodate female practitioners during his teaching career. No one I know of knows exactly why Guruji decided on this advice. Guruji had his reasons and the phenomenal wealth of wisdom and research to back it up. I had planned to follow this advice before I got pregnant but once I was pregnant—and I knew that first week that I was pregnant, well before any test could confirm it—there was no question in my mind at all. Many women feel very differently about this topic and of course our inner voice is the most important teacher of all. For me, my body, which had loved this daily Ashtanga practice for over a decade, had no interest in doing my Ashtanga practice once pregnant. I wanted to breathe and be quiet and move very softly but I did not want to engage bandhas whatsoever. The deep internal strength and lift we create with our bandhas in practice felt totally counterintuitive to me once a baby was inside me, right from week one. I wanted to just let my belly bulge out, my mula and uddyana bandha be released and soft. My practice had always been a high priority in my life, but I knew from the first day I was pregnant that it would never come above my baby - forever more. I felt absolutely no hesitation about putting my practice aside. It was only my asana practice. The truth is that every other aspect of my Yoga practice has come into far more strength and vigour since those early days of pregnancy. Seventh series, as Guruji would say, and it is true. Let the Yoga begin! I think it is a real blessing that women come into these very different stages within their practice: moon days, pregnancy, motherhood, and menopause. It helps us to be humble and balanced in our practice. Anything in life that gifts us with these opportunities to let go and
surrender is truly a blessing, not a burden. These tiny steps of letting go first with periods, then pregnancy, then birth, really help ripen you up to the holiest of tasks this earth offers: motherhood.

I assumed that after the first trimester I would begin a very, very gentle practice as that seemed to be what my body was up for. I would not practice Ashtanga without bandhas as that is impossible and not really Ashtanga Yoga. So if my intuition told me that I didn't want to engage bandhas, then I would just do very gentle *asanas* and breath work rather than my Ashtanga practice. What eventuated for me, however, was something totally different and unexpected. I had a very rare pregnancy sickness called *hyperemesis gravidarum*. It is an intense, twenty-four hour per day nausea and extreme vomiting for the entire duration of the pregnancy. I was profoundly sick from week four of pregnancy until the moment I delivered the placenta, so I naturally left my Ashtanga practice for the entire pregnancy.

Fellow practitioners are often wide-eyed that I wasn't able to practice at all and ask me how that was. Honestly, my Yoga practice was never more intense and deep as it was during those 9 1/2 months of being so ill and mostly bedridden. What I may have lost in asana was unimportant to me, a complete non-issue. What I gained was a beautiful healthy baby first and foremost. On a yogic and spiritual level, my wisdom and ability to surrender, accept and persevere was taken to another level. Life gives us many opportunities to learn acceptance. Once a woman becomes pregnant, those opportunities swell to an unimaginable level through all the experiences of pregnancy, birth and parenthood. We may imagine and hope for it all to unfold in a certain way, but reality will be full of surprises and unexpected twists and turns. Fighting these unexpected turns of life will create a sea of suffering for all involved. It is such a blessing to be given so many opportunities to see yourself and your stories through motherhood.

When women ask me about advice during pregnancy, I tell them what Guruji and Sharath recommend, but I also say that whatever they decide to do should come from their clear and honest intuition, not what anyone or any book might suggest. Often we feel separate from our intuition in this culture. It might take time and quiet to tune into what your baby and your body are offering you, but it will come. Our female intuition is beautifully heightened during pregnancy. You will know what best to do. The key I suppose is being soft enough on yourself and strong enough within our culture to follow your intuition. Our culture, which is being continually amped up on the “more, bigger, better” philosophy with every successive decade, holds in such esteem this idea of a woman whose life hardly changes an iota with pregnancy, birth or baby. The more she can accomplish, the quicker she can be back at her work or career, the quicker she can be back to her former physical shape or even her return to her former Ashtanga Yoga practice does nothing to nurture the natural and beautiful changes of a woman’s life and the oh-so-important nurturing of new baby and new mother. The role of a mother is colossal in this world. In my mind there is no greater role. If we truly want a peaceful, compassionate world, it can happen through mothers and the way in which they love, nurture and respect their young. The rush to return the mother to her former life leaves neither time nor support for transitioning into this most esteemed of roles. Even when my practice was not with me on a physical level, it was always there with me, and I knew
that the care of myself and my baby was exactly what my practice had been pointing me towards and educating me about for the previous ten years: true seva, or selfless service.

Giving birth blew my mind. I have been entranced by the process of birth for my entire adult life. The whole scope of creating life, which may seem so commonplace since it happens every few minutes throughout the world, to me, has always been the most astounding phenomenon. As women, we are so honored with this role of human evolution and the intimacy of carrying inside our bodies for almost 10 months a growing human life, and then the climax of the most extraordinary of human unfoldings - birth. The internal place that a woman must go to in order to open up to the power and immensity of giving birth, the absolute surrender to trust her body to do what it is capable of, and perfectly designed to do, in my mind, brings a personal and spiritual transformation that is unparalleled. I find it funny that in our culture men like to joke about how lucky they are that they don't have to go through pregnancy or childbirth. Even within religious realms, birth is most often described as a women's tortuous task; it is seen as an affliction, the supreme suffering. It is as if giving birth has been women's greatest secret. Being infused with nature's ultimate powers and forces and the benefit we receive from this almighty event is far from something that could be called an 'affliction'. It is all-empowering. A spiritual experience that monks and sadhus spend decades searching for is delivered to women in full force during the birthing process. Tragically, the influence of modern medicine with its penchant for interference and intervention has made the birthing process more disempowering than all-empowering. Rather than experiencing their own re-birthing through such an ecstatic event, many women are traumatized by their births and their babies equally, or even more so.

My partner Jake, my beautiful baby son Rio, and I were richly blessed to have an amazing and euphoric birth experience at our little jungle home in Australia. Secluded, we were transported to what seemed like another realm. That is not to say there wasn't pain. It was the most intense and powerful event of my life. I have never been so present and so tapped into Nature's forces as she flowed through my every cell. I was in labor for sixteen and a half hours before our son was born in a warm tub right into the waiting hands of his papa. I believe everything I have ever gleaned from my Ashtanga Yoga practice was put into action during my labor. I think Ashtanga Yoga is an amazing 'training ground' for birth. It can be a test of physical endurance to have the power of nature pouring through you for such duration. The breath, of course, was priceless. Having had the years of being so intimate with breath work and understanding how the breath presides over so much of the outcome of bodily and mental workings was to me essential in being able to work calmly and clearly with my body. As these immense forces surge through you in birth, women must walk a fine line between non-reaction, or witnessing, which will allow your body to be this amazing vehicle for your baby's entrance into the world, versus reaction which will let in the thinking mind and therefore fear. I believe fear must be the ultimate culprit in the body closing down to birth. The breath does so much to help maintain a calm mind, even when your body feels like it is exploding.

Having the subtle awareness of the bandhas seemed to me like a real bonus in regards to giving birth. It helped me know how to completely and fully relax and release all bandha
action and pelvic muscularity on an inward and vibrational level. I think that my body’s rejection of the bandhas during my pregnancy was helping me to slowly let go of these strong internal forces that I was so used to engaging.

Of course, faith is the most important aspect of all. Even though I had always trusted a woman’s body to be able to give birth without any intervention, I think what may have been missing in me prior to my Ashtanga Yoga journey was the connection between faith and surrender. I was wound too tightly before Ashtanga came into my world. I was too intellectual. Ashtanga Yoga broke down the walls I had built around me - particularly concerning faith, trust, devotion, and God. Those words were a bit caustic to me before Yoga entered my life. Now, living is all about faith, trust, devotion and God. Thanks to Guruji, thanks to this practice, and thanks to India I came to see how my misunderstanding of all the above was keeping me from being me. This misunderstanding was keeping me from being open to life, trusting everything as it is, and seeing God in all. In childbirth, a woman has to completely trust with every iota of her being so that she can fully let go. Complete and absolute surrender is the only way it can work without external interventions. You cannot try to give birth. You cannot force it or control it— as much as our media loves to portray images of straining women pushing out their babies until their faces turn blue. It is not that pushing doesn’t happen, but it is happening through you, not by you. It is effortless effort. The baby and the forces beyond us create birth. We just have to trust enough to let our minds and intellects step out of the way and allow our bodies to do what they know how to do.

Guruji’s advice of not practicing post birth for three months is very wise. After Rio was born, Jake, Rio and I basked in this birth bubble, not leaving the house for a month and having only our midwife and one good friend check in on us occasionally. I had heard tales from fellow practitioners about feeling anxiety, stress or guilt over not practicing as much, or in the way they wanted to post birth and how in hindsight they had wished they had taken Guruji’s advice and been much more relaxed about it for everyone’s sake. There is SO much going in those first months post birth, not only within the mama’s body but also in adapting to parenthood and the twenty-four hour needs of a baby. Caring for my baby, settling into this new life and its rhythms and gently allowing my body to find its equilibrium again required all of my energy, all of me. That was more than enough.

I started getting back into my asana practice when Rio turned five months old; I went super slowly starting with just surya namaskara A and the three finishing poses. Slowly, I added one pose at a time, just the way I had originally learned. My body had been through a lot with all the sickness and vomiting and depletion during pregnancy, and birth, of course, takes your body to an extreme opening. My practice felt like heaven. It was so phenomenal to be moving and breathing like that again. I put no pressure on myself whatsoever with my practice. Even now, I let my practice unfold however it may on any given day, knowing that my mothering is always my first priority. Many days, it is merely some surya namaskara with a little monkey climbing all over me. I have had my boobs masterfully popped out of their sport bra so that Rio can have a milky drink in almost every single asana including backbending and inversions. Slowly, slowly, my body has returned to full strength and full lightness. My bandhas are
stronger than ever. My flexibility has changed in certain areas and my body is very different from what it was before pregnancy and birth. It is a treat to start all over again in your asana practice when you have so much history and experience with it in the past. Becoming a beginner again gives you a lot of insight. There are days I would love to just do a two-hour practice and there are days I remember that deep focus you attain when doing advanced asanas, but I know that I am in a different stage of my life and of my Yoga path and I am fully content right where I am. There isn’t a day that goes by that I don’t give thanks to this practice and Guruji. I feel like all the learning I have taken away from this practice, and all the love and acceptance I have showered upon myself through it have contributed in making me the mother that I am. I am able to give so much love, patience and compassion to my child because I have slowly learned to do that for myself. For both my partner and me, parenthood has proven the most intense spiritual journey we could have imagined. Guruji always talked about taking a family and how important that is. It is really an amazing step in one's Yoga path as you are deeply confronted, profoundly in love, and totally given over to bottomless service.

Thank you Guruji for devoting yourself to this practice and to all of us, your students. Thank you Sharath and Sarawati for carrying on this service in your light and love for Guruji.

- Pamela Luther, 2011

Update: August 1, 2015

Having written this over four years ago, I thought I might add an update. Life as a parent is full of surprises. Nothing can compare as far as looking deeply at your conditioning, patterns, habits, and self. You have a mirror at your side twenty-four hours a day--a radically honest and uninhibited mirror. It is truly an amazing blessing to be a parent. It is not an easy journey, especially if you want to be a skillful and deeply loving parent. Motherhood is my primary practice, Ashtanga is my secondary practice.

My little boy is now five and a half years old as I write this. When I think back to the woman I was when I first conceived, she seems hardly recognizable. I have grown up so much through motherhood! I love and adore my Ashtanga practice as much as always. It is such a special time for me when I step on my mat. I refuel. At different stages in my son's life that re-fueling has taken on many different shapes and sizes to accommodate his needs and the needs of my family. Flexibility is not just in the body, but in real life. I have practiced in the late mornings for periods of time. I have practiced in the wee hours of the morning for periods of time. I have practiced, as well, in scattered intervals throughout the day. There are days I only begin and then I must end. There are days that I just don't practice asana at all. Sometimes I practice for ten or fifteen minutes, sometimes for more than an hour, but I would say that these days I average about a one hour practice as well as a twenty to thirty minute meditation beforehand. I mostly do primary these days. I love it. Second comes and goes when the time, demands and lifestyle suit. It feels amazing. The advanced practices of my past are on hold. Maybe they always will be from now on, maybe not. I am not attached. I am completely free of any asana anxiety.
I am a very active mama with a very active little boy. I surf, swim, skateboard, fish and mountain bike with him. We climb trees, tumble, wrestle, jump on the trampoline, hike, and rock climb. I run and run and run....and run! I am either chasing him, he is chasing me, or I am chasing after a soccer, rugby or cricket ball. We live and love and laugh and weep together. I cannot imagine letting my asana practice get in the way of the joy and the jubilation I have with my son. It is there to keep me healthy and active and supple of body and mind, not to hinder the wild and beautiful life that I live with my family. My practice and I have a relationship. We trust and accommodate each other. It is all about support.

I have not taught much since I became a mama. I profoundly treasure my time with my boy and I know that time goes fast. Rio is unschooled, so he is always with us, which I love. I have done short teaching stints here and there, and I teach one led Primary Series class a week. I feel no teaching anxiety either. I know that my skills and wisdom as a teacher are actually growing exponentially from the time I am spending away from daily teaching. From being present to my life as a mother who is deeply dedicated to her son and family and to her practice, growth and unfolding. The time will come when I return to teaching more, and I will be a much wiser human and have much more to give through all that I am learning today.

There is a lot of talk about what Guruji meant by Seventh Series. Why did he talk so often and so passionately about taking a family? From my experience, having a child is the most potent form of practice that I have encountered: a total unravelling and untangling of the self. However, having the Ashtanga practice as your background and your baseline from which to begin this unfolding is an absolute blessing. There are uncountable assumptions and "truths" that we have all been raised to believe in our various cultures. It is part of the game of being human. Having the endurance, tenacity and strength to pick away at these assumptions and "truths" and one by one unravel them and see them for what they are is the journey towards awakening. Nothing is as we think it is. All of life is pointing to that. Certain practices seem to enhance this pointing as they come in a 'concentrated' form so to speak. Ashtanga, meditation, and relationships for example. Learning to relax into what is and not fight with reality, however reality is presenting itself at this very moment, is the great unfolding.

My deepest and most earnest gratitude to this beautiful and delightful practice for being such an anchor point in the big seas of life and to Guruji, Sharath and Saraswati for diligently sharing it with the world, and to my partner Jake and my little boy Rio who fearlessly help to expose me to my truth of being every single day.

- Pamela Luther, 2015