

the edge finds its centre

[the evolution of Shandor Remete]

Shandor Remete is the founder of Shadow Yoga and has been practising yoga since the age of six. In this article he

speaks to
Greg Wythes.

Shandor Remete is a man of a quiet intensity, and carries himself with a bearing that reflects a deep sense of self possession. He is an Australian yoga teacher very much at home on the world stage and one who is perhaps better known in the major yoga centres around the globe than he is at home. His students appear inspired by a strong sense of loyalty; both to the man and to his teaching, and it is remarkable the number of experienced yoga practitioners and teachers who cite him as a major influence.

In the contemporary yoga world Shandor is often regarded as something of a renegade or a revolutionary, a teacher who works at the edge or the margins, or one who has taken yoga into unfamiliar territory. His style reflects many influences. However the process that has shaped this style is not one of academic or arbitrary innovation but rather one of development driven by the process of yoga itself – the process of practice-driven internal transformation – a process that has taken Shandor back to the central core of traditional yoga.

"Actually I never wanted to teach," says Shandor. "It kind of evolved out of the situation. I was happy just to practise. My father was my first teacher and he had studied with two teachers before World War 2 in Budapest. He used to retire to his room every day and close the door. One day when I was about six I conjured enough courage to

go in and see what he was doing. When I walked in he was on his head. From that day on I walked in every day. After a while I started copying him and when I got frustrated he came and helped me. Then he began to leave all kinds of photographs and pictures that I accidentally found. But it wasn't an accident."

In 1965 Shandor's father brought the family to Australia. He didn't want his sons to go to war or spend years in prison camps as he had done in Europe. But at that time Australia was at war and through a misunderstanding of the registration procedure for conscription, in 1968 Shandor found himself in the Australian army and, in 1971, in Vietnam.

"The war made me see things in a different way," says Shandor. "It definitely had a great influence on my commitment to the choice I decided to follow. I said to my father when he took me to the airport that I guess you can't get away from your own destiny."

The sense of destiny is a strong thread that runs through Shandor's life. Back in Australia after the war he began to study the Iyengar tradition, firstly from *Light on Yoga*, and then later in Pune with BKS Iyengar.

"Mr. Iyengar was as strict as my father," he continues. "That's why I think I connected with him so strongly, right from the first time. I saw the same qualities I saw in my father and that firmness is important. I was at home with it."

In Australia Shandor began teaching in the Iyengar tradition and gave himself fully to it. At this time he was unaware that Iyengar's

He knew me better than I knew myself. Just by saying that and not giving me more I went out of my way to find out what this was.

teacher, Krishnamacharya, had also taught Pattabhi Jois, the founder of Ashtanga yoga, but soon an opportunity arose for him to study the Ashtanga system. Its emphasis on a dynamic, flowing vinyasa approach to asana work was to have a strong influence on him.

"Once I began studying the Iyengar way I stayed with it, but somehow openings came. One day I had a guy walk into my school in Adelaide. I had never heard of Ashtanga, never heard of Pattabhi in those days. He said, 'Look, I do this sort of yoga.' It looked good. He had a very nice practice, very smooth, not rushed. He had lived next door to Pattabhi in Mysore for six years. So he taught me what he knew and I taught him the things I knew.

"I don't think there is any contradiction with this. Styles are many but the basic principles of energetics are the same. Each style has its plus and its minus, but if one knows how to use and adapt then there is no saying one style is better than the other. It's like many things: whatever is appropriate."

At this time Shandor's growing interest in the energetic principles and the *marma* – that is, yoga's energetic framework – began to fuel his study and his practice.

"It was from my teacher, Mr. Iyengar, that I first heard the word '*marma*,'" says Shandor. "And I said to him, 'What's this *marma*?', and he said, 'Oh some point.' He knew me better than I knew myself. Just by saying that and not giving me more I went out of my way to find out what this was. Most of the old texts mention *marmasthana*. The *marma* is the energetic geography and history in the body and it describes the 108 junctions or points in the body through which one can increase or decrease one's life force and existence. It's a much older system than acupuncture but it

corresponds exactly. It was developed by the Indian sage Agastya and much of it deals with therapy. Two sections deal with *asana* and *pranayama* and this science is utilised in the martial arts of southern India, the *kalarippayat*.

"Out of the 108 junctions there are 12 that are referred to as

vital or central junctions and these include the seven *chakras*; the other 96 are referred to as medial life centres. If these centres are utilised correctly, whether in yoga or in life, then the obstruction to the movement of life force or energy is overcome. But if the activity is incorrectly carried out it will increase the obstruction."

The seed planted by his teacher took Shandor back to the ancient yoga texts, such as *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* and *Gheranda Samhita*, to research how the science of *marma* and the study of the energetic principle had shaped the way yoga had been originally taught.

"The two systems they used in the old days," he continues, "were the *virasthanas* – or what they called the warrior stances, which were borrowed from the martial arts tradition – and the *suryanamaskas*, the sun salutations. Usually the new student was given these practices for the first few years. I know this from a friend who studied with Pattabhi. For the first two and a half years all he was given were the basic standing poses and *suryanamaskas*. But after that period he achieved the entire length – and it's quite extensive in the Ashtanga system – in a year and a half. All because of the correct preparatory work.

"But in those days people walked everywhere. They knew how to squat. Today people are not walking as much as in the past. They're sitting in cars or gazing at the computer. The preparatory steps today are very different to what they were then. People need to learn how to squat like they do in the martial arts. Squatting on the balls of the feet, with the feet shoulder width apart, wide horse stance. In the martial arts you do a lot of squatting. In this way you build power."

Slowly Shandor's own style began to evolve and grow out of the crucible of his own practice and a mind that needed to inquire into the causes behind appearances. But at all times any change was driven by the experience of practice and the fruits of this practice. It became clearer that the grosser physical form of the body was underpinned and empowered by a finer and more subtle energetic system, and that, depending on how one practised, this energetic system could be enhanced and strengthened. Or as Shandor discovered through experience, that if the practice is incorrectly applied, then the flow and balance of energy could be easily upset.

"What I learnt from Mr. Iyengar helped me understand this because whatever he taught me, I worked it. I worked it for years. I was doing a lot of daily practice and suddenly things went wrong. My body bloated up overnight; overnight I became longsighted. My hair turned grey and some of it fell out.

"I questioned what was going on – too much heat in the head – why? I decided the applications were incorrect. It was a questioning time. This was in the early '90s, I was having difficulty doing even the most simple things. One can have familiarity, ability, capability; but it's not about this. It's about learning and understanding what one has to do in order to arrive somewhere; not to dwell on what is already there but to see what is not there, because what is missing, that is the obstruction. This means that until one sees what is missing one cannot advance."

Even though Shandor's style had grown out of the work of two of the most influential yoga teachers of the twentieth century, he had found in his own body, through his own practice, that something was not complete. There was a missing element and this missing element was the major obstacle to any further progress. To find this missing element he turned to yoga's origins. But chance and destiny also played a part.

"I decided when things started to go in the wrong direction to look to the basic things, to research back to the beginning," says Shandor. "I had the temple walls in India as references and a couple of really great books on all the stances and positions of Shiva and Parvati and the other gods.

"The books say that Lord Shiva has given

8,400,000 poses and out of this 84 are suitable for human beings. Then the hatha yoga texts break that down to eight or nine, and in the end to one. What are they saying? Well, for the cultivation of energetics not much is needed. One can learn the basic energetics through the simple moves that are very close to daily activity. In this way yoga borrowed from the animal and plant kingdoms and from different arts, crafts and the martial arts. Each one of these activities contributes to a certain development or certain parts of development of the individual.

"I researched the original warrior stances and found that some of these were used and some were discarded or lost over time. When you go to the temples in India you will see the gods doing stances or sits. Nothing else. You don't see difficult postures. You see a god with a pair of legs and many arms. For me the many arms shows the movement of succession from one point to another."

For Shandor, the hand and arm movements represented in the statues, such as the dancing Shiva, reveal an ancient commonality of practice between yoga and the martial arts; a practice that in recent times has perhaps been more associated with the energy cultivation practices of qigong.

"When you observe those they are no different to what you see in the martial arts" he continues. "Martial stances, one legged stances, warrior stances and the hand and arm movements. They are all there on the walls but people don't relate to it because yoga has been represented in a very different way."

The contrasts between the way yoga had been taught originally – as depicted on the temple walls and in the ancient texts – and the way it had changed over time and metamorphosed into what is recognised today as yoga, did not seem irreconcilable to Shandor, despite the apparent differences. However there was to be one further influence before this fusion was complete.

Shandor had some experience and training earlier in his life with Japanese martial arts and around this time began travelling to Japan to study with an old sword master. Following this he went on to London. It was at this time that these new ideas about the energetic system and the power associated with it began to solidify and become

integrated after he met a Shaolin monk.

"This was at a big week called 'The Way of the Warrior,'" recalls Shandor. "I was invited to teach yoga because it is a healing art. I remember the audience was made up of martial arts masters and grand masters amongst others. Three Shaolin monks came on to the stage, just monks and the head monk who had been sent there to open the temple did one stance. A qigong stance. It was over in half a minute. That's all he did but it felt like the whole ceiling lifted up and that the stage was going to sink under the power of his feet. There were a few thousand people in that hall and they all felt it. They were up on their feet, standing. He just did this one simple move and walked off.

"I became friends with this monk. He showed great understanding of and empathy towards yoga. I wanted to do some sessions of qigong with him but there wasn't much time. He said that he would teach me one thing and I just worked on that, and all of a sudden I woke up and saw many things. When he left he gave me a very beautiful present; it was a scroll and on it there were yoga poses for beginners. They are exactly the same ones spoken of in the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*. You find that unless those steps are followed the cultivation of the

that the introduction of more advanced poses at an early stage could have a counter-productive effect on the individual.

"I realised that they were using those for the cultivation of power. What became obvious to me was that the monks do possess the power of application and healing, but they are quiet about it."

One of the dilemmas for a teacher like Shandor – a teacher whose practice is in a continual process of growth and whose teaching style is forged by immersion in a variety of influences – is a sense of responsibility to the students who have studied with him over a period of years. The dilemma of maintaining their trust and allegiance when it may have seemed to some that the pace of change was too rapid or the direction of the change too unfamiliar, or perhaps – for those who prefer the stable and the known – the nature of the change just too challenging.

"What I have learnt over the years I've taken a long time to introduce" says Shandor. "When this came alive inside me I had the difficulty of bringing it to my students. Maybe they're going to call it qigong or something else, because they don't really know. Then I lose them for themselves. So I began with what I

My father used to retire to his room every day and close the door. One day when I was about six I conjured enough courage to go in and see what he was doing. When I walked in he was on his head.

individual's mind toward the energetic principle will get clouded and confused. It gets lost from too much."

The monk's gift was a key that confirmed for Shandor the absolute importance of the correct approach to the early stages of learning yoga. It became clear to him that these poses for beginners were an essential platform for the sound development of the flow and balance of energy in the body, and

call the '*vajrasana* sequence', which has a lot of squatting, and some twisting and kneeling. But it has the rhythm of what is now in the stances, so people could relate to it as yoga and help avoid confusion. Then I slowly began to put together what I call '*pratigna*', the beginning of inquiry. I took a couple of stances from the forms and married it into one form and after that I added some *asana* work.

"I don't feel I devised anything new, I just took that which existed and was lost. These teachings have been around for so long. If this is all I can do, and contribute, then I'm happy. Definitely it helped me, and my students seem to take to it and feel happy with it – and they grow. I feel that yoga that has been with me since childhood is not by accident, it has a purpose."

Today Shandor continues to immerse himself in the study of yoga and its relationship with the *ayurvedic* practices of ancient India, particularly those of the southern state of Kerala where these arts are still a living tradition. But he does have other interests.

"I love poetry," he says. "In English I love really old poetry. I studied Beowulf. One of my students translated the old English into modern English. It is very powerful stuff. The story of Beowulf, the way it was written, was very similar to the old yogic texts. And in the old Hungarian myths there are a few of these things as well that I love."

It is not difficult to see how the values of the Beowulf story have inspired the life and work of Shandor Remete. Beowulf is unique in

literature. His virtues are those of the ideal, noble man; a man of great gifts of strength and courage who uses these gifts not for his own benefit but for the good of his family and his people. No hero in any other myth can match his character, modesty, good humour or moral strength. Though this morality is drawn from a Christian world, it has much in common with the ethics and the virtues of yoga. Shandor would seem to espouse these ideals and bring to the modern world of yoga a tireless and concentrated approach that is accompanied by the sense of practice and experience distilled to their essential elements; an approach that reflects yoga's most fundamental values.

Shandor may claim that he has developed nothing, but there are those that would dispute this. His teaching aspires to open the body and the energetic system that empowers the body, and reveal them in a way that is fresh, clear and practical. His work has a central integrity that embraces the most ancient of yogic teachings but places them firmly in a contemporary context. It is a singular and enduring contribution.



Photo Captions to go in here.

Greg Wythes is based in the northern suburbs of Wollongong. He holds classes at the Moore Street Yoga Room in Austinmer and teaches massage at Karuna College in Wollongong. For information about Shandor' go to www.shadowyoga.com

Yoga Warehouse