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Photo by Mikko Seppinen

Talking with Susanna Finocchi: Roma, Mysore, Copenhagen

By Deborah Crooks

On a recent trip to Mysore, India, I was happy to meet Authorized Ashtanga yoga teacher Susanna Finocchi who was taking a break from co-managing Ashtanga Yoga Copenhagen with her partner Jens Bache to continue her own studies at the Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute. I sat down to talk with her over breakfast at Santosha about her Ashtanga evolution.

Q: How long have you been in Copenhagen?

SF: The school [has been] there from 2000 but I've been there from 2001 and stayed on from 2002, teaching with Jens.

Q: Tell me a little bit of your path. You are an herbalist and were assisting your mom who is also an herbalist with whom you had a shop in Rome. Then you became an ashtangi, coming to Mysore every year. Now you're an authorized teacher in the tradition of Sri K. Pattabhi Jois.

SF: I just started yoga because I liked it. There was no other reason. I started out of curiosity because a friend said, "Try this yoga, you sweat." My mom was doing yoga first in my family. She inspired this part. My friend and I were both doing African Dance in previous years so I trusted her that if she liked [it], I would like it, too. Then my friend stopped doing Ashtanga and I continued. This was in Rome in 1993. My friend is still into the yoga but she followed another path and is studying with Desikachar. We still meet and have very fruitful discussions about the yoga.

Q: And you kept going

SF: I was just practicing. Practicing. I was an herbalist. That was my job.

Q: When did you first come to India?

SF: I was here in Mysore completely as a beginner in '95, not even practicing 2 years and then again in '96. I was very surprised by the atmosphere of people. I was like "Alice in Wonderland!" People were here staying abroad and far away from family for long periods of time. So I was surprised that people could stay that long away from work and family. Guruji has his saying, "Practice and all is coming." I had been practicing a while, 7-8 years. Just practicing and following Lino Miele a little bit, assisting in workshops, and then working in the herbal shop. So basically my life was the same. But I was saying to myself, "I am practicing quite a lot and nothing is coming."

Q: Did you expect something would come?

SF: Yes! All is coming: the enlightenment, the men, the love, everything!

Q: And you were doing second series?

SF: Lino was putting me into the third and some of the fourth series in the practice. Here in Mysore, I do intermediate and have just started the third with Sharath. Between 1997 and 2000, I was teaching my classes between shop hours. My mom owned the shop and I had been working in the shop from the age of 20 to 38, almost 20 years. I was always on the scooter going from one place to another and my life was very hectic. But after 2000, everything changed, and my mother said to me, "Your heart is more in the yoga than the shop."

Q: This was in Rome?

SF: We opened the school in Rome with some friends and with Lino and Tina's guidance. In Rome we built the shala and started to teach regular classes. As we already knew students, the school started to take form. At the same time, a group of practitioners had opened a school in Copenhagen. We were connected through the Ashtanga community. Then, Copenhagen entered my life.

Q: In the form of Jens?

SF: Yes, in the form of Jens. I went to teach there. The teacher who was there was from New Zealand, Gwendoline [Hunt]. They needed a pick up and Lino said, "OK, go there." Then I met Jens . . . a few months later he was in Rome. So, all of sudden, it became love, yoga full time, completely fast, it all came. You never now what "all" is, but it was a big change in that sense. In 2001, I went there to live.

Q: Did he run the school?

SF: Yes, he was part of the team there. The school is an association, there's no owner. It's a group, it's not a company. Ashtanga only.

Q: What do you love about teaching?

SF: To see people grow. It's like that story of a little duckling becoming a swan and then you can fly.

Q: And I imagine you've taught hundreds of people by this time.

SF: Yes, in the school there are almost 50 Mysore students every day.

Q: When you are here in India, do you miss teaching?

SF: Now I start to feel the itch on the hands for teaching. But in the beginning it's very nice to just be a student and not have any responsibility, and to find time for myself and Jens, of course. To find time just to think.

Q: Teaching is a huge responsibility, don't you think?

SF: Yes, and actually, I didn't know. If I'd known, I couldn't have started. It just came. It's a responsibility. I get up at 5 and class starts at 6. After, I practice at 8:30-9. I'm not a workshop teacher. I'm better at building a relationship and I think this comes from my life, working in the shop.

Q: Do you take more of a hands-on approach or do you like doing a lot of [hands-on] adjustments?

SF: Yes, I like adjustments. Every time I come here, I adjust my ideas and my process and teaching approach. Sharath gives me very nice input. On this trip, especially, I had this thought to have the student try to catch the poses by themselves a little more. I like giving adjustments because I think it's effective but I think it's important also to give the student space. The mat is an internal world and when you're practicing you create this space inside of you. Creating this space for yourself will make things pop up, feelings, emotions, whatever is coming.

Q: When students are struggling with that, do you make any recommendations? Do you think Ashtanga practice is a complete package to handle those strong feelings? What do you say to people who just start to practice?

SF: And stop!

Q: Yes.

SF: There are many, many, many obstacles. I think it's a very personal journey. Somebody could be frustrated, somebody could find it easy, somebody can get sick or have pain and stop because they think yoga isn't supposed to bring this up. Or you can have someone who [does] not have an easy body [who meets] yoga much earlier than someone who has an easy body because they have to find another opening. If yoga is a self-realization path, then these things have to come up. I think there is a lot of justice in this practice.

Q: Justice?

SF: Justice in the sense that, sooner or later, everyone finds obstacles. Maybe you have such a flexible body and do unbelievable things but this doesn't mean anything. It doesn't mean you are focused or realized or enlightened, it just means you have an easy body. I see people that have a very difficult primary series and, to me, they are much more yogic. In a sense, they are more steady, they are more balanced, and they are more determined about what they want to do. They are more on the way. Some of us with an easy body, it brings us all over because we can do whatever. You don't stick, you don't meditate, and you are just wandering around.

Q: Do you incorporate the Yoga Sutras into your teaching or have sutra classes?

SF: Again, this trip is bringing things up. We will invite someone to teach the sutras in the school [when we return]. And chanting. I love chanting. I'm just starting to study with Lakshmi but I am a beginner. We will also bring someone in to teach that. It's important to acknowledge your limitations. I think learning the sutras and chanting are very important because this practice is very powerful. It's very easy to fall into the physical kick, adrenaline path. You can be like that at the beginning but after, it has to become something else.

Q: What do think is the best supporting practice for the asana practice?

SF: Yama and niyama. It's about respect, love for other people, to care about other people, peace, non-aggression, internal happiness, not this craving about another asana. And to be pure in our search. We get very easily attached . . . I see myself getting in this path. I'm talking as a practitioner and as a teacher. Everything goes together. It is important to give respect to aspects other than asana. So of course, yama and niyama.

Q: And you do that with your presence.

SF: Yes, I'm excited to go back and bring more yoga, not just asana. I have a lot of ideas. It's been a very fertile two months.

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