

Krishnamacharya's Legacy – Yoga Journal Article

You may never have heard of him, but Tirumalai Krishnamacharya influenced or perhaps even invented your yoga.

By Fernando Pagés Ruiz

Whether you practice the dynamic series of Pattabhi Jois, the refined alignments of B.K.S. Iyengar, the classical postures of Indra Devi, or the customized vinyasa of Viniyoga, your practice stems from one source: a five-foot, two-inch Brahmin born more than one hundred years ago in a small South Indian village.

He never crossed an ocean, but Krishnamacharya's yoga has spread through Europe, Asia, and the Americas. Today it's difficult to find an asana tradition he hasn't influenced. Even if you learned from a yogi now outside the traditions associated with Krishnamacharya, there's a good chance your teacher trained in the Iyengar, Ashtanga, or Viniyoga lineages before developing another style. Rodney Yee, for instance, who appears in many popular videos, studied with Iyengar. Richard Hittleman, a well-known TV yogi of the 1970s, trained with Devi. Other teachers have borrowed from several Krishnamacharya-based styles, creating unique approaches such as Ganga White's White Lotus Yoga and Manny Finger's ISHTA Yoga. Most teachers, even from styles not directly linked to Krishnamacharya—Sivananda Yoga and Bikram Yoga, for example—have been influenced by some aspect of Krishnamacharya's teachings.

Many of his contributions have been so thoroughly integrated into the fabric of yoga that their source has been forgotten. It's been said that he's responsible for the modern emphasis on Sirsasana (Headstand) and Sarvangasana (Shoulderstand). He was a pioneer in refining postures, sequencing them optimally, and ascribing therapeutic value to specific asanas. By combining pranayama and asana, he made the postures an integral part of meditation instead of just a step leading toward it.

In fact, Krishnamacharya's influence can be seen most clearly in the emphasis on asana practice that's become the signature of yoga today. Probably no yogi before him developed the physical practices so deliberately. In the process, he transformed hatha—once an obscure backwater of yoga—into its central current. Yoga's resurgence in India owes a great deal to his countless lecture tours and demonstrations during the 1930s, and his four most famous disciples—Jois, Iyengar, Devi, and Krishnamacharya's son, T.K.V. Desikachar—played a huge role in popularizing yoga in the West.

Recovering Yoga's Roots

When *Yoga Journal* asked me to profile Krishnamacharya's legacy, I thought that tracing the story of someone who died barely a decade ago would be an easy job. But I discovered that Krishnamacharya remains a mystery, even to his family. He never wrote a full memoir or took credit for his many innovations. His life lies shrouded in myth. Those who knew him well have grown old. If we lose their recollections, we risk losing more than the story of one of yoga's most

remarkable adepts; we risk losing a clear understanding of the history of the vibrant tradition we've inherited.

It's intriguing to consider how the evolution of this multi-faceted man's personality still influences the yoga we practice today. Krishnamacharya began his teaching career by perfecting a strict, idealized version of hatha yoga. Then, as the currents of history impelled him to adapt, he became one of yoga's great reformers. Some of his students remember him as an exacting, volatile teacher; B.K.S. Iyengar told me Krishnamacharya could have been a saint, were he not so ill-tempered and self-centered. Others recall a gentle mentor who cherished their individuality. Desikachar, for example, describes his father as a kind person who often placed his late guru's sandals on top of his own head in an act of humility.

Both of these men remain fiercely loyal to their guru, but they knew Krishnamacharya at different stages of his life; it's as if they recall two different people. Seemingly opposite characteristics can still be seen in the contrasting tones of the traditions he inspired—some gentle, some strict, each appealing to different personalities and lending depth and variety to our still-evolving practice of hatha yoga.

Emerging from the Shadows

The yoga world Krishnamacharya inherited at his birth in 1888 looked very different from that of today. Under the pressure of British colonial rule, hatha yoga had fallen by the wayside. Just a small circle of Indian practitioners remained. But in the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a Hindu revivalist movement breathed new life into India's heritage. As a young man, Krishnamacharya immersed himself in this pursuit, learning many classical Indian disciplines, including Sanskrit, logic, ritual, law, and the basics of Indian medicine. In time, he would channel this broad background into the study of yoga, where he synthesized the wisdom of these traditions.

According to biographical notes Krishnamacharya made near the end of his life, his father initiated him into yoga at age five, when he began to teach him Patanjali's sutras and told him that their family had descended from a revered ninth-century yogi, Nathamuni. Although his father died before Krishnamacharya reached puberty, he instilled in his son a general thirst for knowledge and a specific desire to study yoga. In another manuscript, Krishnamacharya wrote that "while still an urchin," he learned 24 asanas from a swami of the Sringeri Math, the same temple that gave birth to Sivananda Yogananda's lineage. Then, at age 16, he made a pilgrimage to Nathamuni's shrine at Alvar Tirunagari, where he encountered his legendary forefather during an extraordinary vision.

As Krishnamacharya always told the story, he found an old man at the temple's gate who pointed him toward a nearby mango grove. Krishnamacharya walked to the grove, where he collapsed, exhausted. When he got up, he noticed three yogis had gathered. His ancestor Nathamuni sat in the middle. Krishnamacharya prostrated himself and asked for instruction. For hours, Nathamuni sang verses to him from the *Yogarahasya* (in Sanskrit, *The Essence of Yoga*), a text lost more than one thousand years before. Krishnamacharya memorized and later transcribed these verses.

The seeds of many elements of Krishnamacharya's innovative teachings can be found in this text, which is available in an English translation (*Yogarahasya*, translated by T.K.V. Desikachar, Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram, 1998). Though the tale of its authorship may seem fanciful, it points to an important trait in Krishnamacharya's personality: He never claimed originality. In his view, yoga belonged to God. All of his ideas, original

or not, he attributed to ancient texts or to his guru.

After his experience at Nathamuni's shrine, Krishnamacharya continued his exploration of a panoply of Indian classical disciplines, obtaining degrees in philology, logic, divinity, and music. He practiced yoga from rudiments he learned through texts and the occasional interview with a yogi, but he longed to study yoga more deeply, as his father had recommended. A university teacher saw Krishnamacharya practicing his asanas and advised him to seek out a master called Sri Ramamohan Brahmachari, one of the few remaining hatha yoga masters.

We know little about Brahmachari except that he lived with his spouse and three children in a remote cave. By Krishnamacharya's account, he spent seven years with this teacher, memorizing the *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali, learning asanas and pranayama, and studying the therapeutic aspects of yoga. During his apprenticeship, Krishnamacharya claimed, he mastered 3,000 asanas and developed some of his most remarkable skills, such as stopping his pulse. In exchange for instruction, Brahmachari asked his loyal student to return to his homeland to teach yoga and establish a household.

Krishnamacharya's education had prepared him for a position at any number of prestigious institutions, but he renounced this opportunity, choosing to honor his guru's parting request. Despite all his training, Krishnamacharya returned home to poverty. In the 1920s, teaching yoga wasn't profitable. Students were few, and Krishnamacharya was forced to take a job as a foreman at a coffee plantation. But on his days off, he traveled throughout the province giving lectures and yoga demonstrations. Krishnamacharya sought to popularize yoga by demonstrating the *siddhis*, the supranormal abilities of the yogic body. These demonstrations, designed to stimulate interest in a dying tradition, included suspending his pulse, stopping cars with his bare hands, performing difficult asanas, and lifting heavy objects with his teeth. To teach people about yoga, Krishnamacharya felt, he first had to get their attention.

Through an arranged marriage, Krishnamacharya honored his guru's second request. Ancient yogis were renunciates, who lived in the forest without homes or families. But Krishnamacharya's guru wanted him to learn about family life and teach a yoga that benefited the modern householder. At first, this proved a difficult pathway. The couple lived in such deep poverty that Krishnamacharya wore a loincloth sewn of fabric torn from his spouse's sari. He would later recall this period as the hardest time of his life, but the hardships only steeled Krishnamacharya's boundless determination to teach yoga.

Developing Ashtanga Vinyasa

Krishnamacharya's fortunes improved in 1931 when he received an invitation to teach at the Sanskrit College in Mysore. There he received a good salary and the chance to devote himself to teaching yoga full time. The ruling family of Mysore had long championed all manner of

indigenous arts, supporting the reinvigoration of Indian culture. They had already patronized hatha yoga for more than a century, and their library housed one of the oldest illustrated asana compilations now known, the *Sritattvanidhi* (translated into English by Sanskrit scholar Norman E. Sjoman in *The Yoga Tradition of the Mysore Palace*, Adhinav Publications, New Delhi, 1999).

For the next two decades, the Maharaja of Mysore helped Krishnamacharya promote yoga throughout India, financing demonstrations and publications. A diabetic, the Maharaja felt especially drawn to the connection between yoga and healing, and Krishnamacharya devoted much of his time to developing this link. But Krishnamacharya's post at the Sanskrit College didn't last. He was far too strict a disciplinarian, his students complained. Since the Maharaja liked Krishnamacharya and didn't want to lose his friendship and counsel, he proposed a solution; he offered Krishnamacharya the palace's gymnastics hall as his own *yogashala*, or yoga school.

Thus began one of Krishnamacharya's most fertile periods, during which he developed what is now known as Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga. As Krishnamacharya's pupils were primarily active young boys, he drew on many disciplines—including yoga, gymnastics, and Indian wrestling—to develop dynamically-performed asana sequences aimed at building physical fitness. This vinyasa style uses the movements of Surya Namaskar (Sun Salutation) to lead into each asana and then out again. Each movement is coordinated with prescribed breathing and *drishti*, "gaze points" that focus the eyes and instill meditative concentration. Eventually, Krishnamacharya standardized the pose sequences into three series consisting of primary, intermediate, and advanced asanas. Students were grouped in order of experience and ability, memorizing and mastering each sequence before advancing to the next.

Though Krishnamacharya developed this manner of performing yoga during the 1930s, it remained virtually unknown in the West for almost 40 years. Recently, it's become one of the most popular styles of yoga, mostly due to the work of one of Krishnamacharya's most faithful and famous students, K. Pattabhi Jois.

Pattabhi Jois met Krishnamacharya in the hard times before the Mysore years. As a robust boy of 12, Jois attended one of Krishnamacharya's lectures. Intrigued by the asana demonstration, Jois asked Krishnamacharya to teach him yoga. Lessons started the next day, hours before the school bell rang, and continued every morning for three years until Jois left home to attend the Sanskrit College. When Krishnamacharya received his teaching appointment at the college less than two years later, an overjoyed Pattabhi Jois resumed his yoga lessons.

Jois retained a wealth of detail from his years of study with Krishnamacharya. For decades, he has preserved that work with great devotion, refining and inflecting the asana sequences without significant modification, much as a classical violinist might nuance the phrasing of a Mozart concerto without ever changing a note. Jois has often said that the concept of vinyasa came from an ancient text called the *Yoga Kuruntha*. Unfortunately, the text has disappeared; no one now living has seen it. So many stories exist of its discovery and content—I've heard at least five conflicting accounts—that some question its authenticity. When I asked Jois if he'd ever read the text, he answered, "No, only Krishnamacharya." Jois then downplayed the importance of this

scripture, indicating several other texts that also shaped the yoga he learned from Krishnamacharya, including the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, the *Yoga Sutra*, and the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Whatever the roots of Ashtanga Vinyasa, today it's one of the most influential components of Krishnamacharya's legacy. Perhaps this method, originally designed for youngsters, provides our high-energy, outwardly-focused culture with an approachable gateway to a path of deeper spirituality. Over the last three decades a steadily increasing number of yogis have been drawn to its precision and intensity. Many of them have made the pilgrimage to Mysore, where Jois, himself, offered instruction until his death in May, 2009.

Shattering A Tradition

Even as Krishnamacharya taught the young men and boys at the Mysore Palace, his public demonstrations attracted a more diverse audience. He enjoyed the challenge of presenting yoga to people of different backgrounds. On the frequent tours he called "propaganda trips," he introduced yoga to British soldiers, Muslim maharajas, and Indians of all religious beliefs. Krishnamacharya stressed that yoga could serve any creed and adjusted his approach to respect each student's faith. But while he bridged cultural, religious, and class differences, Krishnamacharya's attitude toward women remained patriarchal. Fate, however, played a trick on him: The first student to bring his yoga onto the world stage applied for instruction in a sari. And she was a Westerner to boot!

The woman, who became known as Indra Devi (she was born Zhenia Labunskaja, in pre-Soviet Latvia), was a friend of the Mysore royal family. After seeing one of Krishnamacharya's demonstrations, she asked for instruction. At first, Krishnamacharya refused to teach her. He told her that his school accepted neither foreigners nor women. But Devi persisted, persuading the Maharaja to prevail on his Brahmin. Reluctantly, Krishnamacharya started her lessons, subjecting her to strict dietary guidelines and a difficult schedule aimed at breaking her resolve. She met every challenge Krishnamacharya imposed, eventually becoming his good friend as well as an exemplary pupil.

After a year-long apprenticeship, Krishnamacharya instructed Devi to become a yoga teacher. He asked her to bring a notebook, then spent several days dictating lessons on yoga instruction, diet, and pranayama. Drawing from this teaching, Devi eventually wrote the first best-selling book on hatha yoga, *Forever Young, Forever Healthy* (Prentice Hall, Inc., 1953). Over the years after her studies with Krishnamacharya, Devi founded the first school of yoga in Shanghai, China, where Madame Chiang Kai-Shek became her student. Eventually, by convincing Soviet leaders that yoga was not a religion, she even opened the doors to yoga in the Soviet Union, where it had been illegal. In 1947 she moved to the United States. Living in Hollywood, she became known as the "First Lady of Yoga," attracting celebrity students like Marilyn Monroe, Elizabeth Arden, Greta Garbo, and Gloria Swanson. Thanks to Devi, Krishnamacharya's yoga enjoyed its first international vogue.

Although she studied with Krishnamacharya during the Mysore period, the yoga Indra Devi came to teach bears little resemblance to Jois's Ashtanga Vinyasa. Foreshadowing the highly individualized yoga he would further develop in later years, Krishnamacharya taught Devi in

a gentler fashion, accommodating but challenging her physical limitations.

Devi retained this gentle tone in her teaching. Though her style didn't employ vinyasa, she used Krishnamacharya's principles of sequencing so that her classes expressed a deliberate journey, beginning with standing postures, progressing toward a central asana followed by complementary poses, then concluding with relaxation. As with Jois, Krishnamacharya taught her to combine pranayama and asana. Students in her lineage still perform each posture with prescribed breathing techniques.

Devi added a devotional aspect to her work, which she calls Sai Yoga. The main pose of each class includes an invocation, so that the fulcrum of each practice involves a meditation in the form of an ecumenical prayer. Although she developed this concept on her own, it may have been present in embryonic form in the teachings she received from Krishnamacharya. In his later life, Krishnamacharya also recommended devotional chanting within asana practice.

Though Devi died in April, 2002 at the age of 102, her six yoga schools are still active in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Until three years ago, she still taught asanas. Well into her nineties, she continued touring the world, bringing Krishnamacharya's influence to a large following throughout North and South America. Her impact in the United States waned when she moved to Argentina in 1985, but her prestige in Latin America extends well beyond the yoga community.

You might be hard-pressed to find someone in Buenos Aires who doesn't know of her. She's touched every level of Latin society: The taxi driver who brought me to her house for an interview described her as "a very wise woman"; the next day, Argentina's President Menem came for her blessings and advice. Devi's six yoga schools deliver 15 asana classes daily, and graduates from the four-year teacher-training program receive an internationally recognized college-level degree.

Instructing Iyengar

During the period when he was instructing Devi and Jois, Krishnamacharya also briefly taught a boy named B.K.S. Iyengar, who would grow up to play perhaps the most significant role of anyone in bringing hatha yoga to the West. It's hard to imagine how our yoga would look without Iyengar's contributions, especially his precisely detailed, systematic articulation of each asana, his research into therapeutic applications, and his multi-tiered, rigorous training system which has produced so many influential teachers.

It's also hard to know just how much Krishnamacharya's training affected Iyengar's later development. Though intense, Iyengar's tenure with his teacher lasted barely a year. Along with the burning devotion to yoga he evoked in Iyengar, perhaps Krishnamacharya planted the seeds which were later to germinate into Iyengar's mature yoga. (Some of the characteristics for which Iyengar's yoga is noted—particularly, pose modifications and using yoga to heal—are quite similar to those Krishnamacharya developed in his later work.) Perhaps any deep inquiry into hatha yoga tends to produce parallel results. At any rate, Iyengar has always revered his childhood guru. He still says, "I'm a small model in yoga; my guruji was a great man."

Iyengar's destiny wasn't apparent at first. When Krishnamacharya invited Iyengar into his household—Krishnamacharya's wife was Iyengar's sister—he predicted the stiff, sickly teenager would achieve no success in yoga. In fact, Iyengar's account

of his life with Krishnamacharya sounds like a Dickens novel. Krishnamacharya could be an extremely harsh taskmaster. At first, he barely bothered to teach Iyengar, who spent his days watering the gardens and performing other chores. Iyengar's only friendship came from his roommate, a boy named Keshavamurthy, who happened to be Krishnamacharya's favorite protégé. In a strange twist of fate, Keshavamurthy disappeared one morning and never returned. Krishnamacharya was only days away from an important demonstration at the yogashala and was relying

on his star pupil to perform asanas. Faced with this crisis, Krishnamacharya quickly began teaching Iyengar a series of difficult postures.

Iyengar practiced diligently and, on the day of the demonstration, surprised Krishnamacharya by performing exceptionally. After this, Krishnamacharya began instructing his determined pupil in earnest. Iyengar progressed rapidly, beginning to assist classes at the yogashala and accompanying Krishnamacharya on yoga demonstration tours. But Krishnamacharya continued his authoritarian style of instruction. Once, when Krishnamacharya asked him to demonstrate Hanumanasana (a full split), Iyengar complained that he had never learned the pose. "Do it!" Krishnamacharya commanded. Iyengar complied, tearing his hamstrings.

Iyengar's brief apprenticeship ended abruptly. After a yoga demonstration in northern Karnataka Province, a group of women asked Krishnamacharya for instruction. Krishnamacharya chose Iyengar, the youngest student with him, to lead the women in a segregated class, since men and women didn't study together in those days. Iyengar's teaching impressed them. At their request, Krishnamacharya assigned Iyengar to remain as their instructor.

Teaching represented a promotion for Iyengar, but it did little to improve his situation. Yoga teaching was still a marginal profession. At times, recalls Iyengar, he ate only one plate of rice in three days, sustaining himself mostly on tap water. But he single-mindedly devoted himself to yoga. In fact, Iyengar says, he was so obsessed that some neighbors and family considered him mad. He would practice for hours, using heavy cobblestones to force his legs into Baddha Konasana (Bound Angle Pose) and bending backward over a steam roller parked in the street to improve his Urdhva Dhanurasana (Upward-Facing Bow Pose). Out of concern for his well-being, Iyengar's brother arranged his marriage to a 16-year-old named Ramamani. Fortunately for Iyengar, Ramamani respected his work and became an important partner in his investigation of the asanas.

Several hundred miles away from his guru, Iyengar's only way to learn more about asanas was to explore poses with his own body and analyze their effects. With Ramamani's help, Iyengar refined and advanced the asanas he learned from Krishnamacharya.

Like Krishnamacharya, as Iyengar slowly gained pupils he modified and adapted postures to meet his students' needs. And, like Krishnamacharya, Iyengar never hesitated to innovate. He largely abandoned his mentor's vinyasa style

of practice. Instead, he constantly researched the nature of internal alignment, considering the effect of every body part, even the skin, in developing each pose. Since many people less fit than Krishnamacharya's young students came to Iyengar for instruction, he learned to use props to help them. And since some of his students were sick, Iyengar began to develop asana as a healing practice, creating specific therapeutic programs. In addition, Iyengar came to see the body as a temple and asana as prayer. Iyengar's emphasis on asana didn't always please his former teacher. Although Krishnamacharya praised Iyengar's skill at asana practice at Iyengar's 60th birthday celebration, he also suggested that it was time for Iyengar to relinquish asana and focus on meditation.

Through the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, Iyengar's reputation as both a teacher and a healer grew. He acquired well-known, respected students like philosopher-sage Jiddhu Krishnamurti and violinist Yehudi Menuhim, who helped draw Western students to his teachings. By the 1960s, yoga was becoming a part of world culture, and Iyengar was recognized as one of its chief ambassadors.

Surviving the Lean Years

Even as his students prospered and spread his yoga gospel, Krishnamacharya himself again encountered hard times. By 1947, enrollment had dwindled at the yogashala. According to Jois, only three students remained. Government patronage ended; India gained their independence and the politicians who replaced the royal family of Mysore had little interest in yoga. Krishnamacharya struggled to maintain the school, but in 1950 it closed. A 60-year-old yoga teacher, Krishnamacharya found himself in the difficult position of having to start over.

Unlike some of his protégés, Krishnamacharya didn't enjoy the perks of yoga's growing popularity. He continued to study, teach, and evolve his yoga in near obscurity. Iyengar speculates that this lonely period changed Krishnamacharya's disposition. As Iyengar sees it, Krishnamacharya could remain aloof under the protection of the Maharaja. But on his own, having to find private students, Krishnamacharya had more motivation to adapt to society and to develop greater compassion.

As in the 1920s, Krishnamacharya struggled to find work, eventually leaving Mysore and accepting a teaching position at Vivekananda College in Chennai. New students slowly appeared, including people from all walks of life and in varying states of health, and Krishnamacharya discovered new ways to teach them. As students with less physical aptitude came, including some with disabilities, Krishnamacharya focused on adapting postures to each student's capacity.

For example, he would instruct one student to perform Paschimottanasana (Seated Forward Bend) with knees straight to stretch the hamstrings, while a stiffer student might learn the same posture with knees bent. Similarly, he'd vary the breath to meet a student's needs, sometimes strengthening the abdomen by emphasizing exhalation, other times supporting the back by emphasizing inhalation. Krishnamacharya varied the length, frequency, and sequencing of asanas

to help students achieve specific short-term goals, like recovering from a disease. As a student's practice advanced, he would help them refine asanas toward the ideal form. In his own individual way, Krishnamacharya helped his students move from a yoga that adapted to their limitations to a yoga that stretched their abilities. This approach, which is now usually referred to as Viniyoga, became the hallmark of Krishnamacharya's teaching during his final decades.

Krishnamacharya seemed willing to apply such techniques to almost any health challenge. Once, a doctor asked him to help a stroke victim. Krishnamacharya manipulated the patient's lifeless limbs into various postures, a kind of yogic physical therapy. As with so many of Krishnamacharya's students, the man's health improved—and so did Krishnamacharya's fame as a healer.

It was this reputation as a healer that would attract Krishnamacharya's last major disciple. But at the time, no one—least of all Krishnamacharya—would have guessed that his son, T.K.V. Desikachar, would become a renowned yogi who would convey the entire scope of Krishnamacharya's career, and especially his later teachings, to the Western yoga world.

Keeping the Flame Alive

Although born into a family of yogis, Desikachar felt no desire to pursue the vocation. As a child, he ran away when his father asked him to do asanas. Krishnamacharya caught him once, tied his hands and feet into Baddha Padmasana (Bound Lotus Pose), and left him tied up for half an hour. Pedagogy like this didn't motivate Desikachar to study yoga, but eventually inspiration came by other means.

After graduating from college with a degree in engineering, Desikachar joined his family for a short visit. He was en route to Delhi, where he'd been offered a good job with a European firm. One morning, as Desikachar sat on the front step reading a newspaper, he spotted a hulking American car motoring up the narrow street in front of his father's home. Just then, Krishnamacharya stepped out of the house, wearing only a *dhoti* and the sacred markings that signified his lifelong devotion to the god Vishnu. The car stopped and a middle-aged, European-looking woman sprang from the backseat, shouting "Professor, Professor!" She dashed up to Krishnamacharya, threw her arms around him, and hugged him.

The blood must have drained from Desikachar's face as his father hugged her right back. In those days, Western ladies and Brahmins just did not hug—especially not in the middle of the street, and especially not a Brahmin as observant as Krishnamacharya. When the woman left, "Why?!?" was all Desikachar could stammer. Krishnamacharya explained that the woman had been studying yoga with him. Thanks to Krishnamacharya's help, she had managed to fall asleep the previous evening without drugs for the first time in 20 years. Perhaps Desikachar's reaction to this revelation was providence or karma; certainly, this evidence of the power of yoga provided a curious epiphany that changed his life forever. In an instant, he resolved to learn what his father knew.

Krishnamacharya didn't welcome his son's newfound interest in yoga. He told Desikachar to pursue his engineering career and leave yoga alone. Desikachar refused to listen. He rejected the Delhi job, found work at a local firm, and pestered his father for lessons. Eventually,

Krishnamacharya relented. But to assure himself of his son's earnestness—or perhaps to discourage him—Krishnamacharya required Desikachar to begin lessons at 3:30 every morning. Desikachar agreed to submit to his father's requirements but insisted on one condition of his own: No God. A hard-nosed engineer, Desikachar thought he had no need for religion. Krishnamacharya respected this wish, and they began their lessons with asanas and chanting Patanjali's *Yoga Sutra*. Since they lived in a one-room apartment, the whole family was forced to join them, albeit half asleep. The lessons were to go on for 28 years, though not always quite so early.

During the years of tutoring his son, Krishnamacharya continued to refine the Viniyoga approach, tailoring yoga methods for the sick, pregnant women, young children—and, of course, those seeking spiritual enlightenment. He came to divide yoga practice into three stages representing youth, middle, and old age: First, develop muscular power and flexibility; second, maintain health during the years of working and raising a family; finally, go beyond the physical practice to focus on God.

Desikachar observed that, as students progressed, Krishnamacharya began stressing not just more advanced asanas but also the spiritual aspects of yoga. Desikachar realized that his father felt that every action should be an act of devotion, that every asana should lead toward inner calm. Similarly, Krishnamacharya's emphasis on the breath was meant to convey spiritual implications along with physiological benefits.

According to Desikachar, Krishnamacharya described the cycle of breath as an act of surrender: "Inhale, and God approaches you. Hold the inhalation, and God remains with you. Exhale, and you approach God. Hold the exhalation, and surrender to God."

During the last years of his life, Krishnamacharya introduced Vedic chanting into yoga practice, always adjusting the number of verses to match the time the student should hold the pose. This technique can help students maintain focus, and it also provides them with a step toward meditation.

When moving into the spiritual aspects of yoga, Krishnamacharya respected each student's cultural background. One of his longtime students, Patricia Miller, who now teaches in Washington, D.C., recalls him leading a meditation by offering alternatives. He instructed students to close their eyes and observe the space between the brows, and then said, "Think of God. If not God, the sun. If not the sun, your parents." Krishnamacharya set only one condition, explains Miller: "That we acknowledge a power greater than ourselves."

Preserving a Legacy

Today Desikachar extends his father's legacy by overseeing the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram in Chennai, India, where all of Krishnamacharya's contrasting approaches to yoga are being taught and his writings are translated and published. Over time, Desikachar embraced the full breadth of his father's teaching, including his veneration of God. But Desikachar also understands Western skepticism and stresses the need to strip yoga of its Hindu trappings so that it remains a vehicle for all people.

Krishnamacharya's worldview was rooted in Vedic philosophy; the modern West's is rooted in science. Informed by both, Desikachar sees his role as translator, conveying his father's ancient wisdom to modern ears. The main focus of both Desikachar and his son, Kausthub, is sharing this ancient yoga wisdom with the next generation. "We owe children a better future," he says. His organization provides yoga classes for children, including the disabled. In addition to publishing age-appropriate stories and spiritual guides, Kausthub is developing videos to demonstrate techniques for teaching yoga to youngsters using methods inspired by his grandfather's work in Mysore.

Although Desikachar spent nearly three decades as Krishnamacharya's pupil, he claims to have gleaned only the basics of his father's teachings. Both Krishnamacharya's interests and personality resembled a kaleidoscope; yoga was just a small part of what he knew. Krishnamacharya also pursued disciplines like philology, astrology, and music too. In his own Ayurvedic laboratory, he prepared herbal recipes.

In India, he's still better known as a healer than as a yogi. He was also a gourmet cook, a horticulturist, and shrewd card player. But the encyclopedic learning that made him sometimes seem aloof or even arrogant in his youth—"intellectually intoxicated," as Iyengar politely characterizes him—eventually gave way to a yearning for communication. Krishnamacharya realized that much of the traditional Indian learning he treasured was disappearing, so he opened his storehouse of knowledge to anyone with a healthy interest and sufficient discipline. He felt that yoga had to adapt to the modern world or vanish.

An Indian maxim holds that every three centuries someone is born to re-energize a tradition. Perhaps Krishnamacharya was such an avatar. While he had enormous respect for the past, he also didn't hesitate to experiment and innovate. By developing and refining different approaches, he made yoga accessible to millions. That, in the end, is his greatest legacy.

As diverse as the practices in Krishnamacharya's different lineages have become, passion and faith in yoga remain their common heritage. The tacit message his teaching provides is that yoga is not a static tradition; it's a living, breathing art that grows constantly through each practitioner's experiments and deepening experience.

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