

Yoga : A Complete Complementary System

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Interview with TKV Desikachar Celebrating Yoga Of Yogis and Yoga

In November 1988, a legend was born at Muchukundapura in Chitradurga district, Karnataka – a legend whose life spanned a century; whose core of spirituality endowed him with the power to heal; and whose scholastic prowess made thousands of people revere him as their guru. It will not be wrong to say that T. Krishnamacharya became the single-most important factor in the revival of yoga in the 20th century. What he focused on was the adaptation and application of the ancient discipline of yoga to contemporary lifestyles, thereby enhancing health, longevity and quality of life.

Some of his world-renowned disciples are B.K.S. Iyengar (Iyengar's elder sister was married to Krishnamacharya), K Pattabhi Jois and Russia-born late Indra Devi, also known as the First Lady of yoga. At the age of 16, Iyengar received basic instructions in asana practice at the yoga school run by Krishnamacharya in the palace of the Raja of Mysore. Even at the age of 85 today, Iyengar continues to teach yoga and Iyengar yoga is known all over the world.

Son and student of Krishnamacharya, TKV Desikachar, is today one of the world's leading authorities on yoga. Starting his career as an engineer, he decided to carry the legacy of his father and became a yoga teacher. Hence was born Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram (KYM), a nonprofit yoga center in Chennai in 1976, to propagate the teachings of his father. Desikachar has written several books, the most prominent among them is Reflections on Yoga Sutras of Patanjali. Other works include Health, Healing and Beyond and The Heart of Yoga: Developing a Personal Practice. His latest work, The Viniyoga of Yoga, co-authored with Kausthub and Frans Moors, deals with the application of asanas and pranayama to various needs of life.

The yoga master took some time off during his recent trip to New Delhi to talk to Life Positive on various aspects of yoga and the role of his organisation in spreading the message of yoga:

T. Krishnamacharya said that “teach what is inside you, not as it applies to you, but as it applies to the other”. Elucidate.

My father had strong principles. His knowledge of yoga was so extensive that he taught each individual differently. He strongly believed that yoga should be adapted to the individual, never the individual to yoga. Being his student, I also believe that each individual has his own constitution... his own principles. One should first look into the person, his culture, constitution, resources and teach in such a way that it becomes a beautiful experience for him. For example when I go to America I say thank you; in India, I keep my hands together. In Japan, it is a different style altogether. But the idea

is same: to give respect to the person. And one should also experience it because experience instills confidence that if we do something good to others, we will also be rewarded. This is what my father taught and this is what KYM is based upon. KYM has promoted yoga as holistic system and a profound science, what is the nitty-gritty of your style?

Our style is to teach the person what suits him the most. Like when a Muslim comes, we teach him what is convenient to him. Similarly, when a Braahmin comes, we ask him to do yoga in sunlight, as sun is good for the practice of yoga. So in the Mandiram we approach a person in his / her totality. The most important thing is not the guru or the acharya but the person who is here to learn. So we meet everyone with the same approach. A senior teacher is always there to help. If he is not there, then I am available. KYM today is involved in transmitting Krishnamacharya's teachings through yoga classes, healing through yoga, yoga education and other such programmes.

You have said yoga is not reductionistic in its outlook. What do you mean by that?

There is a different between yoga and science. The focus in yoga is that human being is not just a dead body. It takes care of the person's physical structure, energy structure, emotional structure, intellectual aspects and his personality. For example, there is a man who is a right-hander and plays tennis with the right hand. And there is another person who plays tennis with the left hand. In the case of the latter, we have to focus on his left side not the right side and vice versa in case of the former. If the student does not like the teacher, he won't learn. And if a teacher does not like his student, he won't be able to deliver what is good for his student. The first step in yoga is to cultivate the relationship. That is why we need to have a human angle while teaching yoga.

The motto of KYM is Heyam Duhkhamanagatam (avoid the suffering which has not yet come). How can one achieve it?

Heyam Duhkhamanagatam means two things: avoid the suffering, and there may be something good waiting for you tomorrow so be prepared for that. People come to us to get comfort, to have some positive thinking, positive growth. We should not have an intention to sell our product but to help them transform into positive human beings. Here, the question arises: how should you go about this? If you cannot make a person positive, send him to somebody else who is better than you. The important thing is that the goal should be achieved. For example, people come to me with various problems. When I find I cannot help them, I say to them: you people need more energy and self-confidence so go to B.K.S.Iyengar. I believe if I cannot treat them, let the other, more qualified person handle the job. One should not stand on one's prestige. This is the lesson of Heyam Duhkhamanagatam.

Krishnamacharya had a dream to send the message of yoga far beyond India. Today the world has accepted the imporatance of yoga. Has the dream been fulfilled?

My father started practicing yoga in the 1920s to create awareness among people. To achieve this, he would even stop his heartbeat, in the presence of a doctor, for nearly two minutes. He did several such things and finally people started rediscovering yoga. He travelled all over the country to disseminate the message of yoga. People from across the world also came to learn yoga from him. For example, in 1947, a Russia-born lady named Indra Devi came to my father to learn yoga. The then Raja of Mysore told my father to teach her. My father said first she has to leave nonvegetarianism. She agreed to learn from my father, and went to teach yoga in China, Mexico, Russia, Argentina and the US.

I agree that things are changing fast today. I was an engineer and my family was not at all happy at my decision to shift to yoga. They had the feeling that if you have nothing to do, become a yoga teacher. But if we see that even during my father's time, there were several great yoga teachers. Today, the coconut tree has grown up. It was they who planted the tree, nurtured it and today, we are enjoying the fruits.

You founded KYM in the memory of your father. Have you been able to fulfil your vision behind establishing such a center? What are your plans in future?

In our society, some people are suffering so much that they have lost any hope of recovering. I had a gut feeling that in this case, my father's teaching would surely help. Being able to help those suffering brethren has been the greatest benefit and experience in my life. Today, we have a team of over 40 teachers whose motto is to spread the message of yoga everywhere.

In future, we need more and more qualified teachers who could play a sensible role in disseminating the essence of yoga. I also have a concern for mentally-retarded people who get confidence once they attend our workshop and get absorbed in the society.

What are the other programmes that you conduct at KYM?

There are several: the post-graduate diploma in yoga, week-end workshops, corporate health programmes, off-campus workshops, summer yoga course for children etc. Then there is KYM-Mitra, a course to teach yoga to the underprivileged. To achieve which we will take up special projects both independently and in collaboration with other social organizations. A number of such projects are already underway.

What is KYM's relationship with BKS Iyengar, your father's world famous student?

Iyengar, who is also my uncle, has been supportive throughout my dream of establishing KYM. I respect him a lot, not only as a teacher but also as a good human being. He had created a niche for himself in the field of yoga.

With which complementary systems yoga gets well? Or is it a stand-alone, complete system?

Yoga is a total complementary system. For me, yoga is like a catalyst for medicine. It contributes. With yoga, a belief is instilled in you that you can take care of yourself. It produces self-confidence. Suppose a person takes 10 tablets for a particular ailment, after practicing yoga, the intake would reduce to eight. Or if I have a back pain, I will do asanas and will be fine. But in acute conditions like spondylosis, yoga cannot help. Surgery would be the right step.

Yoga supports all systems. Practicing yoga in the right way, knowing your students and his constitution would help. There are no side-effects of yoga.

Yoga is very popular in the West. You and your son Kausthub regularly teach there. But hasn't it been turned into a mere physical exercise there?

I am disappointed to say that wind here always blow from the west. Yoga being a physical exercise has become a general opinion among the public today thanks to the western approach to it. I am a bit embarrassed to explain why it is like this. Some famous people in the field of yoga I met were introduced to me by the foreigners. The reason might be the lack of self-confidence in us, something the Japanese or Chinese don't suffer from.

Has yoga finally returned to India?

The time has already come. I am stunned to know about the popularity of yoga in our country. So many yoga centers, so many yoga teachers today! People are shifting from management, engineering to teach yoga. In my time, becoming a yoga teacher was considered to be a shame. Today people are very proud that I am practicing yoga.

During your programmes at Studio Abhyas here in Delhi, you delved into deepening one's yoga practice. What are the salient points and dos and don'ts?

My humble request to all is – do not practise yoga by learning it from books or CDs. Find a yoga teacher and then practise it. Enjoy a relationship with your teacher. Only then you can learn yoga in its true sense.