

YOGA: Too big to fit into one style

By Kausthub Desikachar

Yoga : too big to fit into one style Faith in Healing Interview with TKV Desikachar
Celebrating Yoga Of Yogis and Yoga

I was spell bound at the spectacle that beheld me. A couple of years ago, I was invited to witness a baseball match in San Diego. Never having watched one before, I presumed that it was one of those super bowl matches, and was all excited at the prospect. I accepted immediately and soon the day arrived. My hosts were busy preparing for the game – packing lunches, water and other things that they may come in needy. Soon we left and were on our way to the “stadium”. It turned out to be a park with loads of picnic benches around and we soon occupied those “treasured seats” with the best-promised view of the game. When the teams soon arrived, and play began, it was the moment when I turned pale with shock. The game was between “Iyengar Yogis” and “Ashtanga Yogis”, and it was probably one of the most aggressive sports matches I had ever witnessed. The animosity between the two teams went beyond just the game. This pained me deeply.

One of the central messages of yoga, a message so important that it is embodied in the word “yoga” itself, is the concept of union. “Yoga” is a Sanskrit word which means, “to unite”. Sadly, these days what seems to have happened in the yoga world is division, rather than togetherness. This is contrary to the central teaching, and main goal, of yoga, where two or more things unite to become one. For example, during asana practice our mind, body and breath become linked as one, it is a state of yoga. This linking dissolves the boundaries, which exist in our mind. It is important to realize that these divisions exist only in our mind. Using the tools offered by yoga, we could also use this same mind in a positive way, to break down these barriers.

An example of the creation of boundaries, where none existed before, can be seen many places, particularly among the various “schools” of yoga which have sprung up in the western world. In an article in Yoga Journal (June 2001 issue), it is widely accepted that T Krishnamacharya, was one man who has influenced most of the yoga that is practiced today. He is the teacher of great teachers such as Indra Devi, Pattabhi Jois, BKS Iyengar and b, to name a few. When Krishnamacharya taught his many students, he was the one source through which the teachings flowed, like the trunk of a tree carrying water to the branches. He respected individuals as a unique person, and taught what was appropriate to each of him or her at their stage in life, when they met him. This is because the tools of yoga are so vast and it can be tailored to suit individuals in ways that are very appropriate. Also some students spent more time than some others. Hence how much they received also differed. Some of these students have become some of the greatest yoga teachers in the world today. It has been my great privilege to meet most of them, and I have found that the respect they have for their teacher is immeasurable by words. Similar is the case with the students of the great monk Swami Sivananda, who himself had many great students, each of whom became such important teachers of Yoga and Vedanta.

When the students of such eminent masters started teaching their students, somehow this differentiation in the techniques of teaching began to become more important than the actual teaching experience. This became especially very important to the students of these masters. It was at this point that the boundaries began to grow. Instead of seeing that these teachers were different branches from the same tree, many students, especially in the western world, clung to “their” branch, thinking “my branch is better than that branch over there”. But what happens if you cut the branch of a tree off from the trunk and the other branches? It dies! We must remember, there is strength in unity. A tree depends on all its branches and its trunk in order to grow.

Individuality exists and must continue to do so. The importance of recognizing this fact is strongly emphasized in T Krishnamacharya’s teaching. Naturally, different teachers have different ways of teaching for the very reason that we are all unique, teachers and students alike. This must be respected.

The problem arises when we start to think our way is the only right way for everybody. We ignore the fact that everyone is different. We forget to respect the individual. In some places, students have started to see the particular branch of yoga, which they are practicing, as being superior to all others. This sort of “us and them” mentality is what wars are based on! This is why we see this feeling expressed even in a simple baseball match!!!

At all times we must constantly refer back to the source from which all these different branches of yoga came, and remember, with humility, that a branch cannot survive without the support of a strong trunk or base. In yoga, the teachings of Patanjali are that strong base, which goes back thousands of years. Patanjali is the first master of yoga who compiled the teachings of yoga in the form of his masterpiece Yoga Sutra. Krishnamacharya, like many other great sages, believed that it was important to respect Patanjali’s teaching, which is that the teaching is more important than the teacher, and that the teaching must be adapted to suit the individual, not vice versa.

We, as yoga practitioners, need to remind ourselves again and again that of the eight limbs of yoga, asana is only one. One of the other limbs is yama, which is our attitude towards others. The first yama is ahimsa – not to harm. Let us try to listen to the wisdom of what Patanjali is telling us. Rather than feeding this destructive human tendency to create divisions in our minds between others, and ourselves let us try to cultivate friendship, mutual support and unity. Ego-driven attitudes of superiority and inferiority are not consistent with ahimsa (non-harming).

Surely we all have the same goal – to practise and teach yoga in order to help ourselves and others come out of suffering. So let us try to practise yoga – all aspects of yoga – starting with a positive change in our attitudes. The change will be gradual and may not be easy at first (old habits are hard to break!), but if we, as teachers and students of yoga, can unite and work together to help yoga flourish, then surely there is hope for the rest of the world.

Any positive step in this direction towards unity in yoga acts as an expression of our gratitude to the great yoga masters of the past. It is a way of, not only repaying them for what they have given us, but of actually “living the teachings”. What better way is there of honoring our teachers and the teachings they stood for. This is the very goal towards which they devoted their lives.

Only if we can all try to put aside our differences and move forwards together the same goal, will we be worthy of calling ourselves students of yoga, for we will be making the meaning of yoga, union, our reality.

It was with this intention that I conceived the Krishnamacharya Yoga Festival. A festival that honored T Krishnamacharya, who stood by this philosophy that yoga, was to bring us together. This festival was conceived with the idea that three of Krishnamacharya’s senior students would come together to teach at the same event. Never before this happened. Since BKS Iyengar, declined to participate owing to his reduced travel plans (but sent a very nice note blessing the event), we decided to go forward with Pattabhi Jois and TKV Desikachar. The event attracted a lot of attention, as it was a moment in history.

Man Proposes. God Disposes. Two weeks before the actual event began, the son in law of Pattabhi Jois passed away, making him unable to participate. When I called him to ask, “should we cancel the event or postpone it”, he replied immediately “the teaching [is] more important. I will send my student Tim Miller to represent me.” I was moved profoundly. It took a lot of effort to bring the event together. A few people, who could not see beyond the surface level, were disappointed that he was not coming and cancelled their participation (what a pity). However the event was still a sold out event, and it was a moment of celebration. Yoga had brought everyone together. There were people from every continent, and every “style” to celebrate the 115th birthday of the grand master of masters.

As one participant wrote “My Iyengar teacher came to the conference, specifically to have the experience of receiving teaching from your father. She has always been somewhat resistant to those of us who also study ashtanga. She said: “I’m not here for the ashtanga. I just want to meet Desikachar.” Yet, she did the primary series both days with Tim Miller (the first time she’d ever done it) and there were tears in her eyes at the end. I think she found it very moving and was overwhelmed by the deep feelings it aroused....The transformation in her views was, to me, clear evidence of how persuasive your family is and can be in drawing the yoga community together.”

When different yoga “styles” come together, the whole community can benefit. This requires that we set aside our egos, and are open minded to learn and enjoy the full spectrum of yoga. It is possible. It only needs some efforts from us in the right direction. My feeling is that it is a test of our yoga. If it cannot happen in the field of yoga, it cannot happen elsewhere. This is why I always repeat this one line to my students, which I very strongly believe in. Just like god is too big to fit into one