

Memories Of a Master: Sri T. Krishnamacharya



Often described as the father of modern yoga, Sri Tirumalai Krishnamacharya (1888-1989) is today best known among contemporary American yogis as the teacher of such yoga legends as B.K.S. Iyengar, the founder of Iyengar Yoga, and K. Pattabhi Jois (1915-2009), the founder of Ashtanga Yoga. Krishnamacharya taught many people who went on to propagate and influence the practice in the West, including his son T.K.V. Desikachar, Indra Devi, and others. But while he laid a beautiful foundation for our practice, few of us know much about him.

A scholar of the Vedas, Sanskrit, [yoga philosophy](#), [Ayurveda](#), and more, Krishnamacharya spent seven years studying yoga with a Tibetan master whose [ashram](#) was but a small cave. Upon returning to India, Krishnamacharya honored the promise he'd made to his teacher to spread the knowledge he had received, and began to teach. He never wrote a definitive manual, but he spent his life offering something so profound that it continues to be embraced by people around the globe.

Here, A. G. Mohan, a student of Krishnamacharya's for 18 years, shares his memories of this humble but exacting teacher, so that we might better understand who he was and the essence of what he taught.

-The Editors

Demonstration

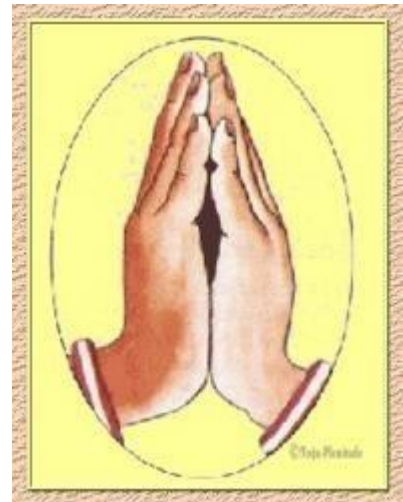
Krishnamacharya would usually sit in his chair while I practiced. Sometimes he stood to observe me more clearly. There was little space in the room; only one person could practice comfortably. The limited space wasn't an issue, though, because all asana lessons I had with Krishnamacharya were one on one. In the years I studied with him, I never saw him teach asanas to a group of students. One reason could have been that he was not running a yoga school and therefore did not have a group of students to teach. But more pertinently, most students who came to him to learn yoga were motivated by ill health and could not be taught yoga effectively in a group.

Usually, Krishnamacharya did not demonstrate asanas to me. As a rare exception, I recall a class in which Krishnamacharya mentioned that there were 32 variations of [Headstand](#). This seemed excessive to me, and I must have looked a little doubtful. He considered my expression for a few moments. Then he said, "What? It looks like you don't believe me?"

Krishnamacharya gestured toward the middle of the room. "Fold the carpet and place it here," he said. Then he proceeded to demonstrate all 32 Headstand variations! At that time, he was about 85 years old. As I observed over the years as his student, it was in his nature to rise to the occasion when faced with a question—that is, if it was a meaningful question from a serious student.

Anjali Mudra

Some photos of Krishnamacharya show him placing his palms together in a gesture known as the [Anjali Mudra](#). This gesture looks like the Indian form of greeting, in which people bring their palms together and say “Namaste,” which means “salutations to you.” These gestures are not the same, though. In Anjali Mudra, the palms are not flat against each other; the knuckles at the base of the fingers are bent a little, creating a space between the palms and fingers of the two hands. When done properly, the shape of the Anjali Mudra resembles a flower bud that is yet to open, symbolizing the opening of our heart. This signifies the potential for and intention to progress toward greater spiritual awakening.



We can use the Anjali Mudra in most asanas where our hands are outstretched and parallel to each other. Instead of keeping our hands apart, we can bring them together in the Anjali Mudra. This helps to set a peaceful inner attitude during the practice of asanas.

Additions like Anjali Mudra help ensure that asanas bring us humility rather than an ego boost from achieving the form of the asanas. Krishnamacharya greatly valued humility. The following anecdote illustrates this.

A famous singer of South Indian classical music (Carnatic music) once came to Krishnamacharya complaining of weakness in his voice. The singer was very worried that he might lose the ability to perform in concerts.

Krishnamacharya prescribed some herbs and taught the singer some simple asanas and breathing. In a few months, the singer’s voice improved significantly and he was able to perform again. He returned to Krishnamacharya to thank him. Evidently proud of his recovered abilities, the singer said, boastfully, “My voice has been restored—listen!” He was about to show off his prowess when Krishnamacharya stopped him. “I know you are a renowned singer,” said Krishnamacharya. “But you will remember, I taught you Jalandhara Bandha [in which the head is bowed so that, classically, the chin touches the sternum]. God has gifted you with a wonderful voice, but keep the bandha in mind. We must keep the head bowed and live with humility.”

What’s in a Name?

Yoga poses are named in various ways. Some are named after animals and birds, some describe the body position of an asana, and some are named after mythological figures. Some asanas are named after ancient sages or derive from mythology, with uplifting stories behind them. For instance, Bharadvajaasana is named after the sage Bharadvaja; Visvamitraasana is named after the sage Visvamitra. Bhagirataasana is another.

Bhagiratasana? I can hear [yoga teachers](#) searching their memories for this unfamiliar name. This isn't a new asana. It is widely known as the "Tree Pose" ([Vrksasana](#)), a balancing asana in which you stand on one leg with the arms overhead and the other leg raised off the floor, bent fully at the knee and rotated outward at the hip, with the foot planted on the opposite thigh below the groin. Bhagiratasana was Krishnamacharya's name for the Tree Pose.

Bhagirata was a famous king in Vedic mythology. His forefathers were performing a ritual known as the asvamedha, in which a horse (asva) played an integral part. By a turn of events, the horse mistakenly ended up at the hermitage of a sage. The forefathers caused much disturbance to the sage in retrieving the horse, so he cursed them, reducing them to ashes.

To revive the forefathers, the river Ganges, which was in the heavens, would have to be brought to the earth to flow on their ashes. Bhagirata's grandfather and father were unable to undertake this task, so Bhagirata took on the responsibility, leaving the management of the kingdom to his ministers. Forsaking all the comforts that went with his royal station, Bhagirata retired to the forest, leading an austere life and practicing deep [meditation](#), seeking the grace of Brahma, the Creator. Brahma told Bhagirata that he had no objection to the Ganges' flowing down to earth but that Bhagirata would have to request this of the Ganges.

So, Bhagirata returned to his meditation again, praying to the Ganges, who appeared before him and agreed to flow down to earth. But, she said, the earth would not be able to bear the force of her descent, so Bhagirata must first find someone to bear the force.

Bhagirata next did meditation on Shiva, asking him to bear the force of the Ganges. Shiva appeared before Bhagirata and agreed. Finally, the Ganges descended to earth, but in the midst of doing so, she was overcome with pride in her own power and thought to display her might by washing Shiva away by landing on his head.

Knowing what the Ganges was thinking, Shiva imprisoned her in a lock of his hair and would not release her to earth. Bhagirata undertook meditation once more, requesting Shiva to release the Ganges. Shiva appeared before him again and agreed to release the Ganges, which then flowed along the earth. Again, reveling in her might, the Ganges swept past the hermitage of the great sage Agastya, causing havoc in the surrounding area. Seeing that his disciples and other living beings were distressed, Agastya drank the entire Ganges in one sip, as he would do with a handful of water in his daily ritual. Yet again, Bhagirata meditated and prayed, requesting Agastya to release the Ganges. Agastya granted his wish. At last, the Ganges flowed over the ashes of Bhagirata's forefathers. In all, Bhagirata spent thousands of years in austerities and meditation with unwavering concentration, never discouraged by the numerous obstacles he faced.

What does this story have to do with Bhagiratasana? Bhagirata was supposed to have meditated for all those years standing on one leg!

Krishnamacharya called the Tree Pose Bhagiratasana because of the values in this story. He said, "When doing Bhagiratasana, keep the great Bhagirata in mind. Bring tireless perseverance and steadfast concentration to your practice."

Once, Krishnamacharya asked me, half seriously, “Do you know Dhruvasana?” The story of Dhruva is well known in Vedic mythology—that of a young prince who undertakes rigorous meditation—but I had never heard of the pose. He smiled and continued, “It is like Bhagiratasana, but you must not stand on the whole foot—you must stand only on the great toe!”

Non-acquisitiveness and Contentment

In the effort of accumulating material possessions and wealth, in protecting the acquired, in their decline, in the latent impressions they leave on the mind, and in the unavoidable harm caused to other living beings—in all these there lies unhappiness. Thus the yogi practices non-acquisitiveness.



Krishnamacharya never accumulated much money. In class, many a time he would say, “Why do we need money beyond a point? If we are free of ill health, enmity, and debt, is that not enough for a fulfilled life? In searching for money, we lose our health. And if we are unwell, how can we be peaceful? Similarly, a person with enemies will never sleep easy, nor will a person in debt. Be free of these and you will be at ease. Too much money only leads to less peace.”

I remember an instance in the later 1980s when I lost my watch. I was attending Krishnamacharya’s classes as usual but without a watch on my wrist. Krishnamacharya had taken note of it over one or two weeks. One day, he brought out a watch and offered it to me. When I demurred, he said, “You are doing a lot for me. One should never be indebted. Take it.”

I felt that, compared with the teachings I had been receiving from him for years, what I did for him was nothing. But to receive a gift from him meant a lot to me. I had the watch for years, until it stopped working. It was not only because I did not have a watch that he wanted me to take it. It was also because of his principle that he should be without obligation to anyone as much as possible. He never wanted to feel that someone had done something for him and that he had not reciprocated.

He often quoted, from the Mahabharata: “In chasing wealth there is unhappiness, as in protecting wealth earned. Again if the guarded wealth declines, there is unhappiness. Indeed, all wealth is but unhappiness!”

Devotion and Rituals

Nowadays people speak of “love, love.” What is it? True love is devotion to the Divine. Such devotion is when we have such longing and care for the Divine as we have for our own body.

The Yoga Sutra of [Patanjali](#), the most authoritative text on yoga, defines yoga as complete stillness of the mind. In such a state of mind, there is no unhappiness at all, ever. This state can be reached by practicing the eight limbs of yoga. Among the various practices, devotion to the Divine is offered as one. Being inculcated into the tradition of Vaishnavism [a form of Hinduism

in which God is worshipped as Lord Vishnu], which is rooted in devotion, Krishnamacharya preferred to follow his path of yoga by linking it with the Divine.

The practice of devotion is optional in the practice of yoga, but it is not brushed aside, or even relegated to second place in the Yoga Sutra. If there is such a thing as a shortcut in the sutras, it is not kundalini arousal or any other esoteric practice. It is devotion. In Sutra II.45, the commentary of Vyasa states, “Through the practice of devotion, *samadhi* [the focus of mind that is the goal of yoga] is closest.” The unemotional and precise work of Patanjali, with its equally precise commentaries, leaves no space for exaggeration or misstatement. The statement means what it says.

Devotion is one of the best ways to help keep the mind focused and peaceful. It can be a powerful support to meditation and to a steady life. But it must be done with a suitable conception of the Divine. As a caution, we must be aware that devotion practiced with a psychologically incorrect relationship to or image of the Divine can only lead to mental disturbance, not mental steadiness. We must understand the purpose and nature of devotion and how an appropriate attitude toward the Divine should be fashioned before entering into such practice.

Devotion is an internal attitude of trust and love for the Divine. All the other practices of yoga—for example, asana, Pranayama, and control over the senses—are essential to bringing the mind under control. They support devotion and are supported by it. By external worship and ritual we reinforce our internal attachment to the Divine. Krishnamacharya followed the traditional Vaishnavite lifestyle, which included rituals and worship, throughout his life. After his early morning asana practice and bath, he would perform his rituals, which included pranayama. Then he would do the *pug* (worship), directed at Vishnu’s avatar, Hayagriva. As part of the puja, he would ring a bell that weighed a kilogram or two, sometimes waking his family members!

Krishnamacharya sometimes expressed sadness over the decline of ancient practices and authentic dedication to the deeper practices of yoga. “So much of the traditional knowledge we had, even what I have seen in my early days, is now gone, lost....”

In one class, when discussing the Yoga Sutra, Krishnamacharya noted that *punaranveshana* (literally, “to re-search,” or “to search once more”) was needed now. He felt the ancient practices that had declined over time needed to be explored once more and their value brought out.

“Subjects are of two categories,” he said. “One category can be learned merely through words, by listening and understanding—these are theoretical subjects, like the rules and analysis of grammar. The other category needs to be practiced, like music, cooking, martial arts, and yoga as well. Nowadays, the practice of yoga stops with just asanas. Very few even attempt *dharana* and *dhyana* [deeper meditation] with seriousness. There is a need to search once more and reestablish the practice and value of yoga in modern times.”

Excerpted from *From Here Flows the River: The Life and Teachings of Krishnamacharya*, by A. G. Mohan with Ganesh Mohan.