

## Menaka visits Perth

By Sally Riddell



*“Yoga is not a prescription. It is the sum total of an holistic practice. To say that a particular posture in itself is absolutely useful for a particular condition is irresponsible because it cannot be proved and may in fact not be true for everyone.”*

*Menaka Desikachar*

When the Desikachar family come to Australia we are taught not “how to do”(an action/practice), but “why to do”(it).

Menaka Desikachar (T.K.V. Desikachar’s wife) Radha and Nithya (senior teachers at the Krishnamacharya Mandiram in Chennai) recently came to Perth to conduct a workshop on women. Their approach was not to give prescriptive guidance but rather to encourage us to understand at a deeper level the reasons why particular techniques might be useful. The tools of yoga (asana, pranayama, chanting, visualisation, meditation etc) can then be applied for specific needs or situations. This is the approach that Desikachar’s father, the influential teacher Krishnamacharya, recommended.

With Menaka we learnt the nuts and bolts, the whys and hows. Radha taught us the power of chanting and Nithya served to reinforce and clarify.

Each day with Menaka and Nithya we would look at the various stages that women go through on their journey through life. We would then look at case studies of students who have been to the Mandiram. These provided a wonderful opportunity to discuss various options and so come to an understanding of why particular paths/decisions were chosen. Breaking things down until the central core becomes apparent enables a clear and considered path of action.

This is consistent with the teachings of Patanjali who says that there are three defining considerations along the path of yoga. These are:

Heyam: identifying the problem that needs to be rectified.

Hetu: discerning the cause of the problem.

Hanam: deciding the desired goal and the tools to be used to achieve it.

*Sutras 2.10; 2.11; 2.14; 2.16; 2.17; 2.23; 2.24; 2.25; 2.26.*

While Menaka guided us through problem identifying and solving, Radha taught us the incredible power of chant with reference to the specific ways in which chant can help girls and women. She gave us chant as a practice in itself, as well as part of asana/pranayama practices, as well as a meditative practice. We experienced the feel of chant, the sound of chant and the receptive quality of chant.

In dealing with women, Menaka referred to “the Rahasya of Nathamuni” an ancient text of yoga.

Sloka 14: “more than men, women should take to yoga because their bodies are responsible for progeny.”

Sloka 16: “the body of a woman afflicted by disease will be useless. Therefore all women in the world have a special right to yoga. They should practice to eliminate illnesses that prevent healthy progeny.”

We in the West may want our cake and eat it, but the at a basic level there can be no denying that we are “born to bear”!

These gentle and reflective women guided us through the phases of girlhood, to our reproductive time, to old age, breaking this down to three essential stages with regard to cikitsa krama – the use of yoga as a healing tool.

Siksana: 3–24 years. The learning period

Raksana: Time to protect and sustain that which has been learnt. To sustain health, rejuvenate and relieve stress.

Adhyatmika: Time for reflection and therapy. A time to discover and nurture our spiritual side.

As girls, our needs are to build physical and mental strength and flexibility. Thus, unless there are specific conditions, practices given to young female students can follow a fairly general course. Children need to develop focus and attention, to be constantly challenged and to have fun. By starting with asana we introduce them to the challenge of their bodies. By using breath work we enhance focus

and physical strength. Then by including chant we strengthen and stimulate yet again. A child's practice should always be bramhana (stimulating) to build strength and energy.

When a girl comes to puberty her body changes and with those changes problems may or may not arise. As Menaka so succinctly said "we can't tell what will happen before hand so why worry. Address a problem when it arises." In real terms however puberty and the years of child birth and rearing are a womans most challenging. As such yoga places great emphasis on this period.

During the years of childbirth and rearing our needs become more specific. There will be times in each womans cycle and life cycle when her needs will change. Some will experience little change, others will have problems. In general, practices should aim to increase energy and strength with particular attention to the pelvic floor, and to encourage a balanced emotional state. We all need these things throughout our whole life.

In these teachings pregnancy is regarded as the most important time of a woman's life, and as such most attention is paid with yoga to this phase as a means of physical and emotional support.

Again Menaka referred us to The Rahasya of Nathamuni – Slokas part 1: 18 – 23 and part 3: 3, 13, 15, 16, 23.

With pregnancy women should be healthy and happy so that the baby grows and can be delivered in harmony. Yoga works for pregnant women on a physical level so that she is fit and so able to deliver and care for her baby. It works on an emotional level to keep her focused and content. A physically and emotionally balanced woman can progress through pregnancy, birth, and care of her children with strength and wellness and a positive and balance attitude.

Practices that are highly recommended include pranayama, chanting and visualisation with attention to diet. Asana will depend on the individual. Always progress from one stage to the next respects the individual and follows an appropriate course.

Menopause is an interesting time. As Menaka said, attention prior to menopause on keeping strength through the pelvic floor as well as general physical fitness and strength and a balanced emotional perspective will aid us for whatever comes next.. We cannot however be sure of how hormonal changes will affect us. Again the overall advise was "deal with it when it happens". Probably more than anything emotional balance and clarity help us through this phase. The tools of pranayama, chanting, visualisation along with bandhas in asana all help achieve this state.

Life doesn't end with menopause. Theoretically with old age comes the opportunity for a reflective and gently physically supporting lifestyle. I personally like to think of this as a time to wear purple hats and be just a little wicked. Again we are individuals and our needs will all vary. Our yoga practice must reflect this.

Yoga teaches us to focus and clarify. Being aware of when and how we are changing and which practises/tools are best suited to our requirements is what we aim to achieve through yoga.

We are so lucky that the ancient wisdom of yoga is available to us through teachers of the calibre of Menaka, Radha and Nithya. They guide us to further our comprehension by giving us a very clear and uncomplicated picture of the foundation of our existence. This foundation informs the way in which we choose to live our life. The topic of yoga for women is such a vast one. I hope that this workshop will be one of many to come.