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Yoga as a state of mind

Though many in the West associate yoga with exercise, ancient texts reveal it was very like psychotherapy

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If yoga has relieved a nagging pain in your back, improved your mental clarity or helped you find a new sense of your spiritual self, you have Krishnamacharya to thank.



STEVE RUSSELL/TORONTO STAR

Yoga teacher Kausthub Desikachar recently led a three-day workshop at Toronto studio YogaSpace and introduced *The Yoga of The Yogi: The Legacy of T. Krishnamacharya*, his biography of his grandfather, who brought the ancient teachings of yoga into modern times.

"Today, we're lucky. Everybody knows about yoga, and we can just jump on the bandwagon," says Kausthub Desikachar, a yoga teacher from India and grandson of the famed Krishnamacharya, whose teachings were seminal to the many forms of yoga now practised in the West.

"My grandfather had to create the bandwagon," says Kausthub, in town recently to teach a three-day workshop at a west end studio, YogaSpace, and to introduce his book about Krishnamacharya's life and teachings, *The Yoga of The Yogi: The Legacy of T. Krishnamacharya*.

It's the first complete biography of a man who is regarded as the one who brought the ancient teachings of yoga into modern times.

"He came at a time, in the '20s and '30s, when yoga was not known, not respected," says Kausthub. "He came at the peak of the British Empire and many of the ancient teachings had been suppressed (in India). My father revived yoga in such a way that it is still continuing. He created the revolution."

The revolution began when Krishnamacharya, who had studied Sanskrit and yoga philosophy at university, then learned yogic practices from a guru in the Tibetan Himalayas, began lecturing in Indian cities in the 1930s. To demonstrate the power of the practices for dubious audiences, he is said to have stopped the beating of his own heart for up to two minutes at a time.

It was a turning point in the history of yoga.

"People would come in large numbers to see the attraction, and then he would teach them how to heal themselves. After a while, they didn't need the gimmicks," Kausthub says, explaining that his grandfather never taught the heart-stopping practice to his students, considering it potentially dangerous.

Over his 100-year lifetime, Krishnamacharya transferred yoga's ancient teachings from a select few ascetics who had dedicated their lives to it, into the hands of everyday people. He helped many sick people heal themselves through yoga. He became a guru to Indian royalty. He taught women the practices when many believed yoga should only be done by men.

He also introduced yoga to teachers who, in turn, brought the practice to the Western world. B.K.S. Iyengar and Patthabi Jois, whose teachings have been the major influences in the West, studied with Krishnamacharya in their teenage years. Because they were healthy young men, Krishnamacharya taught them flowing sequences of challenging poses. They went on to develop their own styles, both of which focus mainly on physical poses.

Before he died in 1989, Krishnamacharya spent 30 years passing his knowledge to his son, T.K.V. Desikachar, who founded a yoga school in Chennai, India, in 1976, where he, his family and a staff of 30 continue to teach yoga in the Krishnamacharya tradition to more than 2,000 students each year.

Their approach is radically different from the kinds of classes taught in many gyms and fitness centres in North America. Krishnamacharya's yoga is all about the mind.

"A lot of people now associate yoga with a form of exercise, a way to stay fit," says Kausthub. "But if you look at the ancient texts about yoga, it's defined as a state of mind. Yoga was almost like psychotherapy or psychoanalysis. Freud was a little bit late," says Kausthub, a senior teacher at the yoga school in Chennai and a Ph.D. student in the psychology department at Madras University, where he is studying the effects of yoga on the mind.

To provide an example, Kausthub, a jolly 29-year-old, tells a story about how yoga affected his wife. "When I was first married, my wife was very shy. She wanted to start a yoga practice, so my father gave her some chants that would create confidence ... Today, I sometimes wish she had never started

chanting," he jokes. "She is a tigress!"

Yoga can also heal depression, Kausthub adds, telling a story about one of his father's students, a surgeon, who was plagued by a negative attitude. Desikachar prescribed an unusual practice for this student, giving him a camera and advising him to go out and take pictures that showed symmetry.

"Three months later, he returned," remembers Kausthub. "His posture had changed. He brought huge black and white photographs, all of them representing symmetry ... He quit his job as a surgeon and has become a top-class art photographer with exhibitions all over the world."

At the school in Chennai, each student meets privately with a teacher, who constructs an individualized yoga practice for him or her, depending on age, health concerns and spiritual goals. The daily practice may include specific instructions for chanting, meditation, visualization and the study of ancient yoga philosophy texts. It might include physical poses, or it might not.

"Sometimes, we work with the mind to heal the body," says Kausthub. "Other times, we work with the body to heal the mind."

"When we deal with someone who is immobilized, how can we teach postures?" asks Kausthub, recounting a story of a 38-year-old man who had had a stroke and was confined to a hospital bed. His healing practice involved breathing exercises, and meditation.

"Slowly, he became better and better," says Kausthub. "Now he's back at his job working an eight-hour day."

Contrary to popular misconception, yoga has nothing to do with religion, notes Kausthub, pointing out that students of all faiths come to the yoga school for healing.

"Yoga is a spiritual practice, not a religion. There are mantras which worship the sun and the moon and Mother Nature. And sometimes we ask people to use their own mantras," he says, explaining that a Muslim student might be advised to chant the words "Allah Akbar" as part of her practice.

This highly individualized approach to yoga is just now spreading to the West through teachers who trained with Desikachar and his family in India and have returned to their home countries to pass on the knowledge.

Daniel Pineault is one such teacher. The Montrealer has travelled to Chennai twice a year since 1999 to learn more about the Krishnamacharya tradition, and was part of a group of international students who encouraged Desikachar and Kausthub to do a 10-city world teaching tour this summer.

Featuring also Desikachar's wife Menaka and daughter Mekhala, the tour is set to start in Germany next month and will cross four continents, touching down in Montreal in May for a three-day workshop on pranayama, or breathing practices. (See <http://www.worldofyoga.org> for registration information.)

With a different workshop planned for each city on such topics as the use of mantras as a healing tool, and only one workshop on the study of physical poses, the tour will emphasize that yoga is more than just a form of exercise.

It's what modern yoga students want, says Kausthub. "Many of our students were inviting us and asking us to share the idea of yoga as healing," he says. "It's happening because people are fed up, they're bored with postures. They're seeking something deeper. You see, the world of yoga is growing up."

★For information about future workshops with the Desikachar family in Toronto, including a weekend

(Sept. 17 and 18) of chanting with Menaka Desikachar, contact Ante Pavlovic at YogaSpace, 416-516-9940 or ante@yogospace.net.

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