

# MY STUDIES WITH ŚRĪ KRISHNAMACHARYA

SRIVATSA RAMASWAMI



*Śrī Krishnamacharya during class at his residence in R.K. Puram. Photograph by Dr. Radhakrishnan.*



WHENEVER ŚRĪ KRISHNAMACHARYA taught me, prayer came first. Classes started with a meditative prayer (*dhyāna śloka*) to Lord Viṣṇu for the success of the session, followed by prayers to Lord Hayagrīva, the repository of all Vedic knowledge, and to Lord Kṛṣṇa. Next would be a prayer appropriate to the topic at hand—to Patañjali if it was a yoga program, to Bādarāyaṇa for a program on *Brahma Sūtras*, to Kapila for a *Sāṃkhya* class, or the appropriate peace chant (*śānti pāṭha*) for *upaniṣadic vidyās* and Vedic chanting programs. There would always be a *Pūrva-śānti* (beginning peace invocation), and following tradition, class would always end with a peace chant called *Uttara-śānti*, normally the surrender śloka to Lord Nārāyaṇa found in *Viṣṇu-sahasranāma*, and the forgiveness or *kṣamāpana-stotra*, if it was Vedic chanting class. The way my guru maintained *añjali-mudrā* while saying the prayer was a point of study. He said that in this *mudrā* the palms should be slightly cupped while keeping the hands together. There should be a hollow between the palms sufficient to hold an imaginary lotus or your heart in a gesture of loving offering to the *dhyeya*, the object of your meditation.

The arms should be close to the body but not touching the body, and the folded hands, inclined by about thirty degrees, should be held in front of the heart or the sternum. With a straight back and head slightly bowed, Śrī Krishnamacharya would be a dignified picture of peace and devotion.

In this article I would like to focus on what I studied with my guru, Śrī Krishnamacharya, rather than writing a historical account of him. Enough articles and books have been written about his greatness; I think it is important to know what he taught. It is clear that he taught different subjects to different people differently at different times. Here is an account of what I learned from him.

I studied with Pandit Krishnamacharya (as he was known in Madras at that time) from 1955 to 1988. Of course there were a few breaks, many times brief, sometimes longer, but on the whole my study with him was nearly continuous for that entire time. After every break I would go back to him and, without hesitation, he would give me time to continue with the studies. Normally, I had two to three sessions per week, but there were occasions when I had the privilege of going to him twice a day—

for *āsana* practice in the morning and for chanting or the study of texts in the evening. I never got bored. Every class was unique; there was always something interesting, something profound.

My studies with Krishnamacharya can be broadly classified into three groups. There was a longish study of Haṭha Yoga, following his now famous *Vinyāsa Krama*, including individual and specific therapeutic applications. I learned several hundred *vinyāsas* built around very important classic poses. There were preparatory *vinyāsas*, then movements within the *āsana* itself, and *pratīkriyās* or counter poses. My first few years of study were focused on general *āsana* practice. I studied in a small group made up of the members of my family gathered in a large room in our house. Śrī Krishnamacharya came to our house in the morning almost daily to teach. He taught different *āsanas* to different members of our family, depending upon the age and condition of each individual. There was my eight-year-old kid sister, energetic and supple. I was about sixteen. My brother was around twenty and, at that time, in need of particular attention. Śrī Krishnamacharya gave him special assistance. Then there were my thirty-five-year-old mother and my forty-five-year-old father to complete the group. While there were some *āsanas* and movements that all of us practiced, there were many that were different—particular and appropriate to each individual. Śrī Krishnamacharya had great skills of observation. He had a booming voice and a certain firmness and authority in his instructions. It was always fascinating to see him teach so many people differently at the same time, a feat in itself.

My father had my *upanāyanam*, a ceremony for initiation into Vedic studies, performed when I was ten. At that age, I learned some *āsanas* at school, well-known postures such as *sarvāṅgāsana*, *padmāsana*, *matsyāsana*, and a few others. But on the very first day of my study with Śrī Krishnamacharya, I learned a yoga practice so different from what I had been taught and how I had seen others in India do yoga. He asked us to stand in *tadāsana*—standing with

both feet together. After some wait in the pose, he asked us to keep our heads down and slowly raise our arms, inhaling slowly with a “rubbing sensation” in the throat. “Inhaaaaaaaaaaale,” he said, “raise your arms slowly overhead; interlock your fingers and turn them outward.” To this day, that is how I start my āsana practice and how I teach a class. It was the first time I had ever heard someone instructing to move the limbs with the breath. “Exhaaaaaaaaaale,” he said, “lower the arms with a hissing sound in the throat. The hands should touch the sides as you complete your exhalation.” It was so new and exciting. The seeds of Vinyāsa Krama were sown in me on that day with that movement.

Learning the various vinyāsas was a lot of fun. Because I had done āsana practice when I was even younger, the learning was smooth. Integrating the breath with movements and keeping the mind closely following the breath made a profound impact on the practice. If yoga meant union, then the union of mind and body was easily achieved by using the breath as the harness to unite them. In addition, this initial training got one comfortable with the breath in preparation for more involved *prāṇāyāma* and sowed the seeds of *dhāraṇā*, or meditation, with the breath spot (*prāṇa-sthāna*) as the focus of attention.

In the summer of 1958 or so, I went with my parents to Śrī Krishnamacharya’s house in Gopalapuram. My guru’s family had just moved to Madras from Mysore. We met his gracious wife, his eldest son, Srinivasan, his younger son Sribhashyam, and the last daughter, Shobha. His second son, Śrī Desikachar, had come for summer holidays from Mysore, where he was doing undergraduate study in engineering. His father introduced me to him.

My father developed a particular liking for Srinivasan. One day, in his father’s presence and at his request, Srinivasan showed us *śīrṣāsana*. He stood in the pose for well over fifteen minutes, absolutely motionless, with exceptionally slow breathing. It was perhaps two breaths per minute for the entire duration, instead of the

normal fifteen to sixteen breaths per minute. My father used to like talking to Srinivasan; one day, after conversing with him, my father mentioned that he was a worthy son of the great yogi Śrī Krishnamacharya.

I COMPLETED MY UNDERGRADUATE work in electrical engineering in 1960. By then I had been Śrī Krishnamacharya’s student for about five years. I had learned many of the important poses such as *sarvāṅgāsana*, *padmāsana*, *vajrāsana*, and *dhanurāsana* plus several *prāṇāyāma* methods. But it was time to take a job. As an electrical engineer, I got offers to work as a trainee in a government-owned, lignite-based electric-generation company about 150 miles from Madras or in a hydroelectric plant in the hilly regions of Nilgiris, about 350 miles from where I lived. One day as my teacher was leaving for home after teaching classes in our house, I told him that I was leaving Madras to take a job. He immediately turned to my father and asked if he would find a job for me in Madras itself. He indicated that his son Desikachar had also graduated in engineering and would probably find a job in Madras. My father, who was a founding partner in a leading stock brokerage firm, talked to some of his friends and arranged a few interviews for me. I took a job in a motorcycle company. But for my guru’s timely intervention, I would have missed a lifetime opportunity of studying with a great soul.

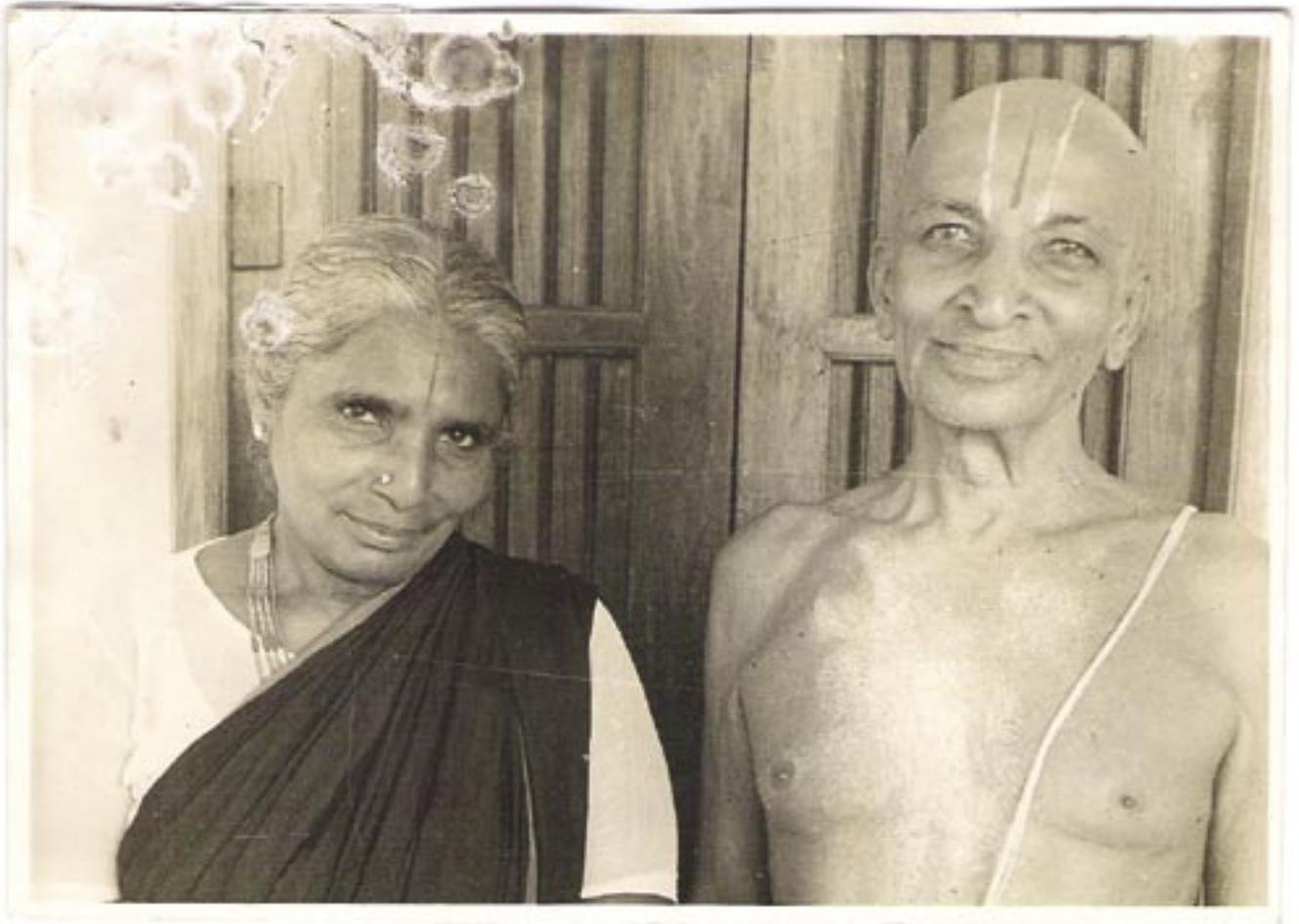
Śrī Desikachar’s arrival in Madras brought about a few momentous changes. He soon started teaching, still working as an engineer in his outside job. One day, in a dramatic development, Śrī Krishnamacharya told my father and me that he was stopping teaching (he was in his mid-seventies at that time) and that we could study with his sons. I was sent to Desikachar and my father became Sribhashyam’s student. It was a different experience studying with Desikachar, who was more or less my own age. It soon became apparent that he was going to become an extraordinary teacher. Even as he stuck to the basics of Krishnamacharya’s



Śrī Krishnamacharya.  
Photograph by Srīvatēa Ramaswami.

teaching—the vinyāsas, the breathing, the counter poses, and rest pauses—he was more accessible and communicative. It was a great experience studying āsanās and vinyāsas and *prāṇāyāmas* to my practice.

After a while, another dramatic change took place. Desikachar asked me if I was interested in learning Vedic chanting from his father, as he was going to start studying with him. Before meeting Śrī Krishnamacharya, I had studied Sanskrit and Vedic chanting for almost four years with a Vedic scholar in my house. With this scholar I used to learn chanting with my father almost every morning before dawn. We learned to chant the entire *Sūrya-namaskāra*, taking about an hour, and the *Rudram Camakam*, the Vedic prayer to Śiva. And there were the *Sūrya-namaskāra*, *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, and *Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad*. Yes, I was interested in chanting with my guru, but I was surprised. How could a yoga teacher teach Vedic chanting? I had always found that Haṭha Yoga teachers had no background at all in chanting or old texts, but had expertise only in the physical aspects of yoga. Anyway, I said that I was interested, and the next day Desikachar told me I could join him on an auspicious day chosen by his father. Desikachar also said that henceforth I would study both chanting and yoga with his father, as Śrī Krishnamacharya said that he did not want me to have two teachers. He himself would teach me both āsanās and Vedic chanting. Desikachar and I learned chanting together for several years, but my āsana classes with my guru were one-on-one.



*Śrī Krishnamacharya and his wife after class at his Mandavelli residence in the late 1960s. Photograph by Srivatsa Ramaswami.*

THE CHANTING EXPERIENCE WITH MY guru was extraordinary, even though previously I had had considerable chanting practice. The clarity and depth he brought to his chanting were unique. We learned chanting the traditional way. He would teach one phrase that was then repeated twice by the student. Then on to the next phrase, and so on. This process would go on for an hour or so. Any correction required by way of pronunciation or *svaras* (notes) would be given right away. The same material was repeated for several days, maybe fifteen to twenty times. Then the teacher and the student would chant the entire portion several times. The next portion was then taken up for study. It normally took about one hundred hours of learning and practicing to complete one hour of chanting. If the student then wanted to memorize the portion, he would chant it another hundred times; this is how chanting is taught in *Veda pāṭhaśālas*, or Vedic chanting schools. I do not now remember the chronology of the chants I learned from my guru.

One of the first chants was *Sūrya-namaskāra*, or *Sun Salutation*. It is the first chapter in the *Āraṇyaka* (forest) portion of *Kṛṣṇa Yajur Veda*. Both my teacher's and our family tradition was the same—*Kṛṣṇa Yajur Veda*—and that certainly helped.

*Svādhyāya*, or, according to my guru, study of one's own Veda, is an important ingredient of yoga. The word *svādhyāya* itself is a Vedic term. There is a chapter called *Svādhyāya-prakarāṇa* in *Yajur Veda* that tells about the efficacy of study and chanting of the Vedas, including the chanting of the great *Gāyatrī-mantra*. Reference to *svādhyāya* as a duty can be found in *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*—“*svādhyāyāt mā pramādaḥ*” and “... *ca svādhyāya-pravacane ca*”—indicating that one should chant and study the Vedas and also teach how to chant the Vedas. The most important chant that Krishnamacharya taught was the famous *Sūrya-namaskāra*, also known as *Arūṇa Prapāṭhaka*. It consists of 132 paragraphs in thirty-two sections and is said to be the longest chapter

(paragraph wise) in the Vedas. It is chanted mostly on Sundays, early in the morning around dawn and takes about one hour to chant. I had the privilege of studying and chanting with my guru on innumerable Sundays at his house. In my last class with him, in 1988, we chanted *Sūrya-namaskāra* together. He was in bed, incapacitated after a fall, but with a booming voice he chanted the entire chapter from memory. That day he blessed me and wished me well. Since that time I have chanted these mantras almost regularly.

I have chanted this Vedic portion in several Hindu temples in the U.S. and at public places in Austin and Houston, Texas. I would chant one section, at the end of which many participants would physically do one *sūrya-namaskāra*, as they had learned it. One by one every section is chanted, followed by a *namaskāra*. In all there are thirty-two *namaskāras* interspersed with the mantras. For health it is recommended to turn toward the sun deity (*ārogyam bhāskarāt icchet*) while doing the *sūrya-*

*Śrī Krishnamacharya chanting.*



namaskāra. These mantras, when chanted aloud and with understanding, cleanse the body and the mind internally. There are some beautiful passages—poetic and profound—in this *prakaraṇa*. The famous *Gāyatrī* and the declaration of the immortality of the soul (*amṛtam puruṣa*) are some of the mantras found in it.

MY GURU TAUGHT SEVERAL OTHER sections of Vedic chanting: *Svādhyāya-prakaraṇa*, also known as *Kuṣmāṇḍa-homa*, extols the efficacy of Vedic mantras; *Citti-sruk*, a chapter containing a beautiful meditation on “the light,” *tattva*; *Pravargya-brāhmaṇa*, the three chapters of the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, followed by *Mahānārāyaṇa Upaniṣad*. He also taught three chapters of the *Taittirīya Kāthaka*, the source of the famous *Kāthopaniṣad*. It would take about ten hours to chant it all. I think I have spent more than 1,500 hours learning and chanting these mantras with Śrī Krishnamacharya.

I also learned to chant the *Yoga Sūtras*; I like to chant the *Sūtras*. One day I was chanting the *Sūtras* and also a Vedic Śiva chant when a Sanskrit scholar told me that my chanting was very good. I then bought my first tape recorder and taped the *Sūtras*; I used the recordings to make improvements. Then I had a final version. A friend of mine suggested that, since yoga was becoming popular, I should explore the possibilities of making an audiocassette, and then took me to a leading recording company. They heard the tape and appeared impressed, but the marketing department poured cold water on our enthusiasm, saying that because I was an unknown entity, marketing was going to be a problem. They then suggested that I might try to do some programs over the national radio station so that people would get to know about me. I got the opportunity to give a talk in the Sanskrit program slot on *Yoga Sūtras*. I mentioned this to my guru and sought his blessings. He asked me to close the door of his room, listened to my tape of the *Sūtras*, and blessed me, saying that it was very good. The program, broadcast over the national radio station

in Madras at prime time, went well. The station then offered me more programs. In the course of the next ten years I did almost thirty programs in Sanskrit. I would consult my guru before several programs, and he was always enthusiastic and encouraging. For some talks he would dictate a lot of material. For a program on *Upaniṣad Kāvya*s he dictated an entire talk in Sanskrit. Other programs I did included *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā*, Sun Salutation, wedding vows, *prāṇāyāma*, meditation, and *Sad-vidyā* from *Chāndogya Upaniṣad*.

After all these efforts, a fledgling record company offered to produce an audiocassette on the *Yoga Sūtras*—which did not do well in the market. The company, however, offered to do another recording, as they liked my chanting. They asked me to recite *Lalitā Sahasranāma*, a very popular purāṇic prayer. There are thousands of devotees who recite this prayer every day in South India. Since I was not familiar with the text, I took a few months to study it and record it. The recording had a very good response, and from then on, for the next twenty years, I recorded all the chants I had learned from my guru, such as *Sūrya-namaskāra*, *Svādhyāya Prakaraṇa*, *Taittirīya Upaniṣad* and other prayers, including the *sahasranāmas* of different deities like Viṣṇu, Śiva, Gaṇeśa, Subrahmaṇya, Durgā, Gāyatrī, Añjaneya, Rāghavendra, and Hariharaputra. I also recorded the complete *Sundara Kāṇḍa* (in ten volumes!) of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, running close to about 3,000 śloka. In all I made about forty recordings, several of them still selling about twenty years after they were produced. This was all possible because of the excellent grounding and encouragement given to me by my guru, Śrī Krishnamacharya.

Mantra yoga was a very important and integral part of Śrī Krishnamacharya’s yoga. Chanting, or *mantra parāyāna*, especially of Vedic and other purāṇic mantras, is practiced by hundreds of thousands of Bhakti Yogīs. When Sanskrit mantra portions are recited with an understanding of their meaning, the mind achieves an excellent one-pointedness, called *ekāgratā*, an

important goal of Rāja Yoga. *Mantra Japa*, or repetition of the same short mantra such as the *Gāyatrī* or *Prāṇava*, the Śiva or Nārāyaṇa mantras, over and over again, helps to reinforce devotional fervor and the *ekāgratā* in the yogī. *Mantra Dhyāna* has similar effects. Mantra Yoga and Bhakti Yoga were very important ingredients in Krishnamacharya’s yoga; every yoga school would do well to add this dimension to the yogic topics they teach. Vedic chanting or *svādhyāya* continues to be an important part of yoga practice.

DURING THE LONG, LONG YEARS OF MY study with my guru, he seldom made any mention of his past, his family, his studies, his experiences, or his former students. Except for a rare mention of his brother-in-law, he did not refer to any earlier students. Hence, I was completely unaware of his background. There is a saying in India, “Never investigate the origin of a sage (*ṛṣi*) or a river.” I was happy simply to attend his classes, listen to him, and learn. I did not know for a very long time what his credentials were. But when, soon after the chanting classes started, he indicated that we should study the texts of yoga and related subjects, I immediately grabbed the opportunity, not even wondering what he was going to teach.

Coming from a *smārta* brahmin family, I had a rudimentary familiarity with the *Upaniṣads* and the advaitic approach to Vedānta. So when Krishnamacharya started teaching some of the *Upaniṣad vidyās* he thought I should know, I was thrilled. He started with *Sad-Vidyā* (*Study of the Reality*), a chapter from the *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* of *Sāma Veda*, and navigated through the entire text. It is about the source of everything, knowing which everything becomes known. It is Brahman, the ultimate, non-changing principle and hence the only reality. The *vidyā* also emphasizes that the individual Self and the Brahman are one and the same (*Tat Tvam Asi*). Of course, being an exponent of *Viśiṣṭādvaita*, his interpretation of the *Mahāvākya*—the Great Saying—was

somewhat different from the advaitic interpretation, but that there is one and only one ultimate reality is an assertion common to both interpretations, in contrast to the dualism of Yoga and Sāṃkhya.

Subsequently, other *Upaniṣads* were taught. *Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad* of the *Atharva Veda* was taught in detail. The four stages of individual consciousness as the manifestations of the only Self was emphasized, and the four aspects of Praṇava—the ‘a,’ ‘u,’ ‘m’ and finally the fourth stage, the stage of immortality represented symbolically by the mantra *Om*—were explained. The terms used in the text—*vaiśvānara*, *taijasa*, *prājña* and the *turīya*—were considered identical with *Aniruddha*, *Pradyumna*, *Sankarṣaṇa* and finally *Paravāsudeva*, the ultimate reality, following the *Bhāgavata* or *Vaiṣṇavite* approach. I learned a lot comparing the *Advaitic* and *Viśiṣṭadvaitic* interpretations, seeing their similarities and the differences between them.

Similarly, when he taught the *Taittirīya Upaniṣad*, the difference in interpretation of *ānandamāya* was very interesting.

He also taught me the first eight *sūtras* of *Brahma Sūtra*. One day he mentioned that he would teach the whole Vedānta from the advaitic point of view if I wanted, but added that, while the advaitic view might be intellectually challenging, it could never be satisfying. He taught *Praśna Upaniṣad*, *Muṇḍaka Upaniṣad*, *Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad*, and certain important vidyās from *Chāndogya* and *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣads*, such as *Pañcāgni Vidyā*, *Prāṇa Vidyā*, *Bhūma Vidyā*, *Dahara Vidyā*, *Śāṇḍilya Vidyā*, *Pratardana Vidyā* and several others. He covered several chapters from the *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Śvetāśvatara Upaniṣad*, and *Kauṣītaki Brāhmaṇa Upaniṣad*. All these studies took several years. My guru said that to understand Vedānta, one should study several of the *Upaniṣad* vidyās, as they answer different questions that arise about the same ultimate reality.

ŚRĪ KRISHNAMACHARYA WANTED SOME of us to study yoga texts in considerable depth as well. The *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali was the centerpiece of our yoga studies. Anything said or practiced that is inconsistent with the teachings of the *Yoga Sūtras* should be rejected, he said. He first taught us to chant the *Sūtras* correctly and then went on to teach them, word by word, giving the meaning and nuance of each word, its derivation, the generic and the contextual meaning, and then the concept behind each of the *sūtras*. This took a considerable amount of time. He said that the *Yoga Sūtras* address three different levels of yogis: the highest, the mid-level, and the beginner.

The first chapter is for the most evolved yogi, someone on the level of a *Yogārūḍha* of the *Bhagavad Gītā*, a yogi who can get into *samādhi* by dint of the yoga *sādhana*s of his previous birth. Such a yogi is in the final stages of his yogic journey, riding on the back



Śrī Krishnamacharya being honored by Srivatsa Ramaswami's father at his house on the occasion of his sixtieth birthday.

of the yogic horse on the royal path to ultimate salvation.

The beginning-level yogī, the *manda adbhikārī*, would do well to start with Patañjali's Kriyā Yoga as explained in the beginning of the second chapter. This Kriyā Yoga by itself does not lead to *kaivalya*—true freedom—but prepares the yogī to be able to get into *samādhi*, the condition necessary for yogic achievement. He can be compared to a beginning rider who wants to mount a horse—here the horse of yoga. Such a person is described as “*yogāruruksu*,” one who is desirous of doing yoga.

The intermediate-level yogī does the more involved Aṣṭāṅga Yoga, the more comprehensive eight-limbed yoga. Aṣṭāṅga Yoga not only prepares the yogī but also leads him through the various *siddhis*, up to and including up to the understanding of the Self, the mother of all *siddhis*.

Śrī Krishnamacharya would point out that, in Kali Yuga, the main or the only means of spiritual salvation is surrender to the Lord, or *Īśvarapraṇidhāna*. He remarked that *Īśvarapraṇidhāna* is mentioned in all the three levels of yoga, viz., *Nirodha* Yoga of the first chapter; and Kriyā Yoga and Aṣṭāṅga Yoga of the second and the third chapters. Surrender to the Lord, or the appropriate *Īśvarārādhana* (worship of the Lord), such as *pūjā* in Kriyā Yoga, doing Aṣṭāṅga Yoga with a sense of total surrender to the Lord, or constant meditation on *Īśvara* with a sense of devotion for the highest level—each forms a complete *Īśvarapraṇidhāna* practice in yoga.

As a Bhakti Yogī, my guru was not particularly in favor of some of the *samādhis*, such as *asamprajñātasamādhi* (*samādhi* without qualities). “What is there in *asamprajñātasamādhi*?” he would ask. He implied that the idea of salvation during one's lifetime, like the *advaita vedāntin's jīvanmukta* stage or the similar *asamprajñāta* stage of the yogī, were not goals that would interest a yogī like himself. Rather what was meaningful was to meditate on the Lord (*Bhagavad-dhyāna*) all one's life, so that the yogī, when he passes away, reaches *Vaikunṭha*, the abode of the Lord, and transcends the cycle of *samsāra*.

It was his opinion that in Kali Yuga the most important *yama* was *brahmacārya*. However, here the interpretation of *brahmacārya* is not complete celibacy, but sex within the bounds of marriage, as propounded in several texts like *Sūta Saṁhitā* of *Skanda Mahā-Purāna*. For a *brahmacārī*, or one in the student stage of life, complete celibacy should be practiced. But there are many yoga practitioners who wish to be celibate all their lives, but it is just that—a wish. They are attracted by the ultimate goal of yoga like *Kaivalya* and, following the yoga theory of Patañjali, would like to be total celibates all their lives. But a mere wish is not sufficient grounds to remain without marriage, according to my guru, quoting the *Dharma Śāstras*. Everyone should marry after the student life. Only one who is spiritually evolved and is a *naiṣṭhika brahmacārī*—a complete celibate—can take to *sannyāsa*, the celibate life of a renunciate. A *naiṣṭhika brahmacārī* is one who is a celibate in “thought, speech, and deed.” Thus mere abstinence is not sufficient cause to remain unmarried. Several religions induct many youngsters into celibate orders. Even though, through strict practice and discipline, many manage to practice abstinence all their lives, they cannot be called *naiṣṭhika brahmacārīs*, a prerequisite for *sannyāsa*—lifelong celibacy. Only a person who does not even dream of sex can qualify for a celibate life. According to my guru, this is almost impossible in Kali Yuga, so all *yogābhyaśīs*—yoga practitioners—should get married and live within the bounds of a wedded life.

There is an interesting story about *naiṣṭhika brahmacārya*. Sage Śuka, the son of Vyāsa and a *Brahmajñānin*, was walking along the banks of a river. At a bathing ghat, several women were in the river. Śuka passed by. A few moments later Vyāsa was passing by and immediately all the women rushed to grab their clothes to cover themselves. Vyāsa stopped and asked them why they were unconcerned when the young man Śuka passed by, but not so when the older man passed. The women replied that they knew Śuka was an absolute *naiṣṭhika brahmacārī* and never had any thought of sex.

My guru thought that the practice of inducting young men into the celibate orders in monasteries and *mutts* was fraught with dangers and is unworkable in Kali Yuga. According to *Dharma Śāstras*, only the *kramasannyāsa* progression—*brahmacārya*; then *gṛhastha* (family life), then *vānaprastha* (retired life), and finally *sannyāsa*, if one is really evolved—is practical in this Kali Yuga.

After completing the *Sūtra* study, Śrī Krishnamacharya began it again, covering the entire text of the *Yoga Sūtras* along with the commentary of Vyāsa, which took over two years to complete. *Yoga Sūtra* is a profound text, logically composed, dense with information. Every yoga student, and especially every yoga teacher, should study the *Sūtras*. There now seems to be more interest among yogīs in studying it.

AS READERS MAY KNOW, MY GURU'S range of studies and scholarship was not confined to yoga. He wanted to equip his student with adequate knowledge of other sibling philosophies. He taught *Sāṁkhya Kārikā*, said to be one of the best-composed philosophical texts. Its author, *Īśvarakṛṣṇa*, is considered to have been an incarnation of the famous Sanskrit poet *Kālidāsa*. Profound and succinct, this text has become the standard work on *Sāṁkhya* (one of the six schools of classical Hindu philosophy). My teacher taught the entire *Sāṁkhya Kārikā*, along with the commentary of *Gauḍapāda* and also occasionally that of *Vācaspati Miśra*. Actually, the theoretical basis of yoga is *Sāṁkhya*. The *Bhagavad Gītā* starts with the discussion of the *Sāṁkhya* philosophy. It is the first Vedic philosophy that talked about the Self as the observer and hence distinct from everything experienced. It is the constant observer, non-changing, hence eternal and immortal.

Another philosophy he was keen to teach was *Nyāya* and the later version, *Tarka*. He started teaching *Tarka Saṁgraha*, a compact text on Vedic logic. With *Tarka/Nyāya*, *Sāṁkhya*, *Yoga* and *Vedānta*, Śrī Krishnamacharya gave his student a well-rounded education in different Vedic *darśanas*.

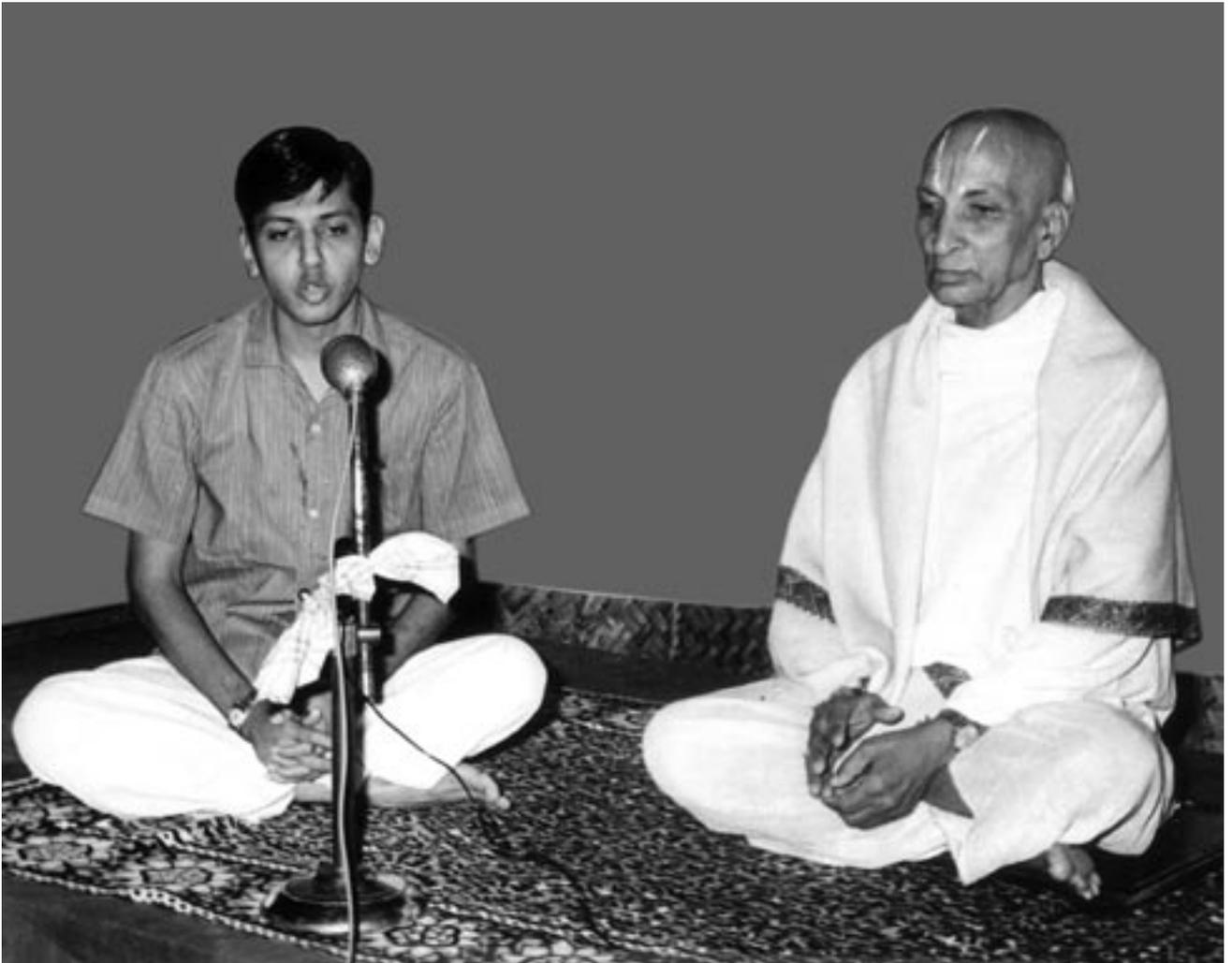
He was keen to impart knowledge contained in Haṭha Yoga texts. He taught *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā* in detail, except portions of the last chapter and some of the third, which he said contained obnoxious practices inconsistent with the teachings of *sāttvika* yoga and the *Yoga Sūtras*. He said this text contained considerable technical detail but very little *tattva*, or philosophical consideration. I thought he indicated that some claims of this text were exaggerated. For a particular procedure, the author Svātmārāma claimed immortality (*chirañjīvitva*) as the benefit. My guru then asked, “Where is Svātmārāma now?” indicating that some of these claims should be taken with a grain of salt. He also taught *Yoga Yājñavalkya* in detail. It contains some wonderful insights into the practice of Haṭha Yoga and gives the definition of yoga as the union of the individual soul (*jīvātmā*) and the Supreme Being

(*paramātmā*). Some of the other texts that he referred to and taught in portions included *Gherāṇḍa Saṁhitā* and *Śiva Saṁhitā*. When I was studying with him, Nāṭhamuni’s *Yoga Rahasya* was not published, but he frequently quoted from the text and after a while taught a few chapters from it. He quoted portions about āsanās that are helpful during pregnancy and yogic procedures helpful for contraception and family planning (*mīṭha santana*). Several of these ślokas were found in the version of *Yoga Rahasya* published later, but many of the ślokas he quoted in class were missing from the final published version.

I thought that, since yoga is an ancient subject, the nuances of the system could be understood by studying the old texts. Nowadays yoga students seem to spend very little time studying the texts; they appear to be reinventing yoga by drawing inspiration from other physical training

systems, such as gymnastics, martial arts, or even performing arts. Some of the basic tenets, like slow breathing and mind focus, are being put aside. People breathe heavily, sweat profusely, do no breath work at all, and call it modern yoga, sometimes even under the banner of Krishnamacharya’s yoga.

SOMETIME IN THE 1960S OR 70S, Maharshi Mahesh Yogī came to Madras, before his TM became popular in the West, and gave a talk about TM. There was a large gathering, and I attended the program with my father. My guru came to know of my attendance. When I went to his class the next day, Śrī Krishnamacharya told me at the outset that he believed he had enough resources to teach me and take care of me. He said that I needed to cooperate with him. If I went out and listened to different versions and interpretations of the śāstras, I was more likely to be confused



Śrī Krishnamacharya being introduced by a young Sriyatsa Ramaswami at a public lecture.

and perplexed than better informed. And it would then be more difficult for him to remove my doubts. I stopped shopping around then and there.

Śrī Desikachar founded the now famous Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram sometime in the 1970s, I think, with the blessings of his father. Since it was founded as a charitable trust, it required three trustees. A close friend of Desikachar's and I joined as trustees, with Desikachar taking the chair as the managing trustee. After few months, once the organization was in place, I left the trust. During my short tenure, there was a request from a hundred-year-old English magazine called *India Review* to write a series of articles on yoga. The magazine was struggling financially, and some philanthropists were trying to revive it in consideration of its great role during the Independence movement. I was asked to write articles for it, so I began writing one article a month, as a trustee of the Mandiram. I wrote on one sequence of āsanās every month based on my studies with my teacher. I would write the article, then get photographs of me doing the poses. I would give the articles and the photographs to my guru for approval. With Desikachar he would go through the article and approve it. It was then forwarded to the magazine.

Even after I left the Mandiram, I continued to write for the magazine, submitting about forty articles in all. Several sequences were covered, with the correct breathing for each and every vinyāsa.

By that time—after twenty years of studying with my guru—I was teaching yoga at Kalakshetra, a well-known Indian arts college, teaching South Indian Bharatanatyam dance and Carnatic music, boutique painting, dance, drama, etc. The students were young, in their teens and early twenties. They were highly talented, and a challenging group to teach. Each student was required to study yoga twice a week for two years. In about six months I realized that I had taught them virtually everything I had learned, some 200 to 300 vinyāsas and several breathing exercises! I turned to my teacher and explained my predicament to him. Is there anything more I can teach? I had read in his book *Yoga Makaraṇḍa* that he had learned

about 700 āsanās. With infectious enthusiasm he started teaching me more vinyāsas and āsanās. “Have you taught this āsana, this vinyāsa?” he would ask. Over a long period thereafter, he taught me more and more vinyāsas. I would practice them, then go and teach them in the class. It was wonderful to learn and teach at the same time. In the course of the next few years I learned about 700 vinyāsas in about ten major sequences. This formed the basis of my teaching Vinyāsa Krama.

My personal life required that I stay in Madras, so it was convenient for me to do my work, study with my guru, and teach at Kalakshetra. I taught at other places in Madras, the public health center, the yoga brotherhood, and so on, teaching patients and medical personnel, middle-aged and older people. By teaching different populations, I was able to adapt the Vinyāsa Krama to meet the requirements of people of different ages and conditions. But I had no idea what was happening in the outside yoga world.

I stopped teaching at Kalakshetra by 1995. I had started coming to the U.S. for brief periods to visit my sons, who were working here. I did a few workshops here and there, teaching Vinyāsa Krama. Many liked it, but since they were short-term programs without an established procedure to follow, it did not stick. By 2000 I submitted a manuscript titled, “Yoga: An Art, A Therapy, A Philosophy” to give as much coverage as possible to what I had studied with my guru. I followed the thought process contained in Patañjala *Yoga Sūtra*, explaining the *Samādhi Pāda*, then the Aṣṭāṅga Yoga. In the āsana section, I included about 200 vinyāsas very similar to what I had published through *India Review*. It contained considerable information about yoga as therapy as well. When the book was published with the title *Yoga for the Three Stages of Life*, many felt it was rather dense and heavy, and since many were not familiar with vinyāsa as I portrayed it in the book, there were not many buyers. I also found that people were not interested in my vinyāsa program of Krishnamacharya because the system was well known through other famous students of my guru. But I found that

there were significant differences between what I had learned from him and other established teachings. I thought I might never get the Vinyāsa Krama across, even though my teacher had become a legend in the yoga world. I decided to write another book, giving all the vinyāsas I had learned from my guru and their sequencing, along with the equally important breathing aspect of each and every vinyāsa. Once I had the book ready, with about 1,100 color pictures, it was difficult to find a publisher. My agent told me that there was a general perception that there were enough of Śrī Krishnamacharya's well-known students teaching his complete system. He asked me to write a page about how what I taught was different, why it was unique, and how it might be a better system. So I wrote a page explaining the unique features of the Vinyāsa Krama system as I had learned it from my guru. The book was published by Marlowe and Company, titled *The Complete Book of Vinyāsa Yoga*.

SO WHAT ARE THE ESSENTIALS OF VINYĀSA Krama that I teach, based on the teachings of my guru?

1. Do āsanās with a number of vinyāsas, or variations, in succession. It is the art form of yoga practice. Vinyāsa means art, and it involves aesthetic variations within the specified parameters.

2. The basic parameters used in Vinyāsa Krama are steadiness of the posture, a calm mind, synchronizing the breath with slow movements of the limbs, and, while in the postures, having the mind closely following the breath.

BUT YOU MAY ASK, “IF YOU SAY THIS is an ancient system, where are the references to these ideas in the old texts? Where did Śrī Krishnamacharya find these methods? Don't say *Yoga Kurunta*; we know about it. Where else can you find references to these concepts?”

Vinyāsa Krama was the mainstay of Krishnamacharya's teaching of Haṭha Yoga. The word vinyāsa is used to indicate an art form of practice. This word is used in several arts, especially in South Indian Carnatic music, a fully evolved classical music system. Vinyāsa

Krama indicates doing āsana with multiple aesthetic variations within the prescribed parameters. Yoga was considered one of sixty-four ancient arts. Hence if you approach yoga āsana practice as an art, that methodology is Vinyāsa Krama. The beauty and efficacy of yoga is eloquently brought out by Vinyāsa Krama.

What about breath synchronization, another important ingredient of Krishnamacharya's Vinyāsa Krama? What about mental focus on the breath while doing āsana practice, central to vinyāsa yoga? None of the yoga schools teaches yoga in this manner and no classic Haṭha Yoga texts mention breath synchronization in āsana practice. Where can one find references to these?

This was one of the few questions I asked my guru: Is Vinyāsa Krama an old, traditional practice? Śrī Krishnamacharya quoted a verse indicating that reference to this practice can be found in a text called *Vṛddha Sātāpata* and also in the *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali. There was no point in looking for an obscure text like *Vṛddha Sātāpata*, but *Yoga Sūtra* was at hand. But where is the reference? There are hardly two Sūtras explaining āsana, and there is no reference to breath in them—or is there?

Going back to my notes on *Yoga Sūtra* classes with my guru, I found a very interesting interpretation of the sūtra, *Prayatna-saithilya anantasamāpattibhyām*. The word *prayatna*, very commonly used in India, basically means “effort.” *Saithilya* indicates “softness.” So *Prayatna-saithilya* could mean “mild effort”; hence you find that many writers on the *Yoga Sūtras* declare that the way to achieve perfection in a yoga posture is to “ease into the posture effortlessly.” This is easier said than done. There are hundreds of practitioners who cannot relax enough to be able to easily get into a posture like the Lotus, for example. So we have to investigate the meaning of the word *prayatna* as used by the *darśanakāras* in those days. *Prayatna* according to Nyāya, a sibling philosophy to yoga, is a bit involved. Nyāya explains *prayatna* of three kinds (*prayatnam trividham proktam*). Two of them are the effort put

in for happiness (*pravṛtti*) and the effort to remove unhappiness (*nivṛtti*). Every being does this all the time. One set of our efforts is always directed toward achieving happiness and the other toward eradicating unhappiness. But the third type of effort relevant here is the effort of life (*jivana-prayatna*). What is effort of life? It is the breath or breathing. Now we can say that *prayatna-saithilya* is to make the breath smooth. Thus in āsana practice according to Vinyāsa Krama, the breath should be smooth and by implication long (*dīrgha*).

The other part of the sūtra refers to *samāpatti*, or mental focus. Where or on what should the mental focus be? It is to be on *ananta* (*ananta-samāpatti*). Now we have to investigate the contextual meaning of the word *ananta*, translated as “endless” or “limitless,” which many writers equate with infinity. So some schools tend to say that while practicing āsanās, one should focus the attention on infinity, which is inappropriate—and impossible, at least for the vast majority of yogīs. *Ananta* also refers to the serpent, Ādiśeṣa, whose incarnation Patañjali is believed to be. So some schools suggest that one should focus on a mental image of Ādiśeṣa or Patañjali. It may be possible, but it is uncomfortable to think that Patañjali would write that one should focus on his form for the success of āsana practice. So what might *ananta* symbolically signify? The word *ananta* can be considered to be derived from the root, “ana”—to breathe (*ana śvāse*). We are all familiar with the group of words *prāṇa*, *apāna*, *vyāna*, etc., names of the five *prāṇas* derived from the root “ana.” So in the sūtra, *ananta* could mean “breath”; *ananta-samāpatti* is then translated as “focusing the mind on the breath.” In fact *Ananta*, or the serpent king, is associated with air. Mythologically the cobra is associated with air; there is a common mythological belief that cobras live on air. If you look at the icon of Naṭarāja (the dancing Śiva), you will find all five elements of the universe (earth, water, air, fire, and space) represented symbolically in Śiva. The matted red hair represents fire, the Gaṅgā in his tresses, the water element; the air element is said to be represented

by the snake around the lord's neck. So *ananta-samāpatti* would mean focusing the attention on the breath or *prāṇa*.

Thus this sūtra means that while practicing āsana, one should do smooth inhalations and exhalations and focus the attention on the breath. Since Vinyāsa Krama involves several aesthetic movements into and within yoga postures, to achieve the coordination of movement, breath, and mind, one should synchronize the breath with the movement with the help of the focused mind. By such practice, slowly but surely, the union of mind and body takes place, with the breath acting as the harness.

But why don't other texts talk about it? There is a saying, “*Anuktam anyato grāhyam*.” If some details are missing from one text, they should be gathered from other complementary texts. *Haṭha-yoga-pradīpikā* explains a number of āsanās but does not mention breath synchronization and other basic parameters. But *Haṭha-yoga-pradīpikā* proclaims that its instructions are like a prerequisite for the Rāja Yoga practice of Patañjali. These two texts are therefore compatible. Thus we can conclude that Patañjali gives the basic parameters of āsana practice (and also of the other *aṅgas* like *Prāṇāyāma*), but for details we have to refer to compatible texts like *Haṭha-yoga-pradīpikā*, *Yoga-Yājñavalkya* and others.

MY GURU ŚRĪ KRISHNAMACHARYA WAS like a many-faceted diamond, each side brilliant in its way. Different individuals saw different sides of him in different ways and took whatever appealed to him or her. I was fascinated by whatever he thought I should know and therefore taught me, and I found that in āsana practice, the Vinyāsa Krama method was most beneficial and satisfying. I am sure a few others also find it so. With his deep scholarship, immense wisdom, and abundant compassion, Śrī Krishnamacharya reveled in making the ancient benevolent teachings accessible to ordinary mortals like us. ▲