

Chennai, India

By JJ Gormley-Etchells

I visited Chennai (Madras) India this past February at the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram (KYM). The experience so inspired me that I thought I would share it with you. Krishnamacharya was the teacher of Mr. BKS Iyengar, Mr. K.Patabhi Jois (of Ashtanga Yoga fame), Indra Devi, and J. Krishnamurti to name just a few of his most notable students. Together with a staff of over 50 teachers, Krishnamacharya's son and grandson, TKV Desikachar and Kausthub Desikachar, carry out his teachings at the KYM, Some of you may have had the pleasure of studying with Kausthub Desikachar when he has come to Sun and Moon Studio these past two years.

While in India, with Kausthub's consent, I attended two weeks of a month-long training course for teachers. There were five classes each day beginning at 7 A.M. and ending at 6 P.M., with a three-hour break for lunch and the weekends free. Each class lasted- about one hour. The first and last class of the day combined -asana, pranayama and meditation (poses/breathing/meditation).. The second class- focused on Tools of Teaching Asana and Pranayama (Poses & Breath), while the third class turned to -Philosophy with emphasis on the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali (often called the bible of yoga). This class was my personal favorite. In the -fourth class of the day, we turned to -Therapeutic Applications of Yoga. Beyond this daily schedule, we could partake in optional classes on such subjects as Vedic chanting and chanting the Sutras. Several evenings were given

over to lectures and discussions, and Saturday mornings we gathered with Mr. TKV Desikachar for a discussion.

I came away from this two-week experience with a renewed sense of what yoga means to me. I found the one-hour asana/pranayama/meditation classes refreshingly grounding and delightfully set-up to lead one into meditation. The philosophy at the KYM is that all asanas have a vinyasa (flow or coordination with the breath) in and out of them. That is, each pose has a way of moving with the breath to get into the pose and to come back out of the pose. The vinyasa or movement is also repeated a particular number of times during which the teacher can observe the student's alignment, ability to link to their own breath, and their ability to keep their mind on the count (the number of repetitions). There is no better way to focus the mind than by keeping count of each short vinyasa. The linking of one's body together with the breath and the mind is the key to yoga.

I so enjoyed this way of practicing yoga that I've been trying to teach this way since my return from India. I've always enjoyed vinyasa-flow-style classes, but not the way they are taught at Ashtanga or Bikram centers. For my taste, I find Ashtanga centers too competitive and ego-oriented and the Bikram routine boring and not flowing enough from pose to pose. (My apologies to all the Ashtanga and Bikram fans out there—again, this is just my taste.)

The KYM teaches a pattern I'd probably call a short-vinyasa style. Each class we had was made up of short vinyasa sequences which built up to the "peak" pose and then was

followed by short vinyasa sequences to cool back down before the pranayama. The breath linked in the short vinyasas enable the lungs to be prepared well for the pranayama practice that follows the asana. The pranayama practice prepares the mind for meditation, as does keeping the mind focused on the vinyasa count. Each seamlessly leads to the next, preparing the student for each subsequent phase so smoothly in body, mind, and spirit in that one is left delightfully and pleasantly surprised by the experience.

With the exception of the children's or adolescent classes, instruction at KYM focuses on the individual student, not on the group. One's age is also factored into this individualistic approach to teaching. Children's classes are conducted much like the Ashtanga classes here in the west. It was not surprising to find out that K.Patabhi Jois studied with Krishnacharya when he was an adolescent.

An individual's age is a factor because KYM philosophy posits four basic periods of life during which one's practice shifts. Let's assume our natural lifespan is 100 years (to make the math easy). One's lifespan is divided into four parts. During each of these four parts of your life, your yoga changes. During youth, or approximately up to age 25, one practices a more acrobatic-style yoga. This might include sun-salutes along with lots of advanced poses. This phase is very similar to the Ashtanga Series. But during youth, you do not hold the poses for very long and there is very little emphasis on pranayama or meditation because the mind is not ready for these practices yet.

During the second phase of life, some poses are held longer (for a particular number of breaths) and pranayama and meditation are introduced. There is still the vinyasa flow in

and out of each pose linked with the breath, but more poses are held statically and alignment in the poses can therefore be played with. Not surprisingly, Mr. Iyengar studied with Krishnamacharya during this phase of his life (as well as during his youth).

During the third phase of life, more poses are held statically, more seated poses are chosen, while reducing standing poses. More pranayama and meditation are emphasized as well as the reading of scriptures.

During the last phase of life, asana is greatly reduced and the poses chosen are to meant to aid one in sitting longer for pranayama and meditation. Reading of scriptures is also emphasized in this phase.

One can now see why it is difficult to teach group classes with this philosophy. Many students whom I've shared this philosophy with took it as permission to back off and come out of poses when they felt the need. Perhaps others who judge themselves as less fit than their Ashtanga practicing peers will give themselves permission to hold poses longer, to let go of standing poses, or to begin a meditation practice. Still others will wonder how they could fit into this model if they are coming fresh into yoga during, say, the third phase of life. The body is not limber enough to sit for too long, so there is the need for more asana. The KYM philosophy is a trenchant reminder of just how individualistic yoga can be. Each of us is unique and no one class taught to many will be right for every student in that class. This should remind us to give oneself permission to modify or come out of any pose one likes.

To learn more about this style of yoga come see Kausthub Desikachar when he will be at Sun and Moon Yoga Studio this coming December 2005. Flyers with details will be posted during the Fall Session.

Until then, I hope this gives you something to ponder as you practice your yoga.

Namaste,

jj