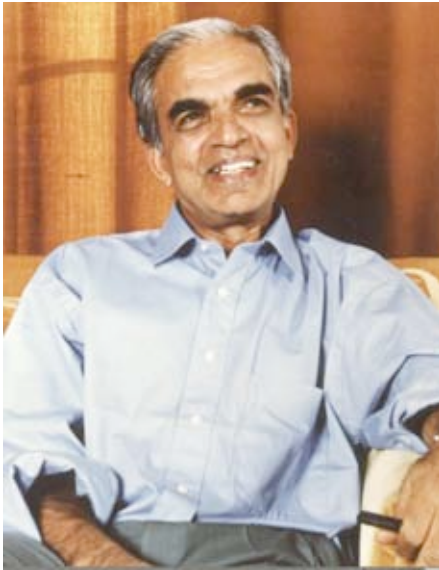


My Father's Yoga

By T.K.V. Desikachar



Shri Krishnamacharya, the oldest and arguably most famous among the great yogis still alive, lives in Madras and next year will be 100 years old.



He cites, as a source of his teaching, the Yoga Rahasya by Nathamuni (the silent sage), who lived in the south of India in the 7th century and played a predominant role in the definition of Yoga as the western knows it today.

Shri Krishnamacharya is the guru of his son, Shri Desikachar, and of his brother in law, B.K.S. Iyengar. He has been the teacher of several westerners whose first steps he guided

(among them are Yvonne Millerand and Gerard Blitz).

I feel a little uneasy about the term yogin and I would like to say a few things about it before talking about Krishnamacharya. This word is almost part of the English language; most of the time, when somebody says: "I am a yogin", it is almost as if he has said "I am a Hindu". And the only requirement to become a yogin, is to add it to your name. That is the first problem. As for the second problem: Who am I to decide whether Krishnamacharya is a yogin or a bhogi (sensualist)? We must remember that a minor is incapable of telling whether a gem is precious or not, and, as far as I am concerned, I am only a minor. The word yogin, in the Bhagavad Gita has two meanings. The first meaning refers to the person who is preparing to start what we call the yoga sadhana. He still has a lot of problems but he persists in his desire to do something about them. The second meaning refers to the person who is above any worry, who shuns any activity because he is totally immersed in Yoga, and means that he becomes divine or that he is at one with the divine.

Then, Patanjali goes much further when he says that yogin is one who has achieved the highest state of vairagya. The yogin Nathamuni was of the old south of India, from the region south of Madras, and is said to be responsible for two remarkable works – the Yoga-Rahasya and the Nyaya Tattva. The Yoga-Rahasya has unfortunately never been published but there is enough proof to be sure that Nathamuni is definitely the author. I was very lucky insofar as my father kindly explained to me the four sections of Yoga-Rahasya which he knew by heart. A number of characteristic elements of Krishnamacharya's teaching seem to find their roots in this text, for example the use of breath in the asana.

My father tells of his seven and a half year stay in the Himalayas, at Kailasha, after he had received his education in the north of India. He says that his master's name was Rama Mohana Brahmachari. The word Brahmachari was part of his name and had no other meaning as he was married and had a great number of children. The great yogin instructed my father in the use of asana and pranayama for ill people. Afterwards, as my father's great

grandfather was a kind of acharya with the system we call the Shri Vaishnava Sampradaya and which assembles Narayana's faithful – those who bear the distinctive vertical mark on their forehead – my father was able to study in detail the different interpretations of the vedanta. I ought to tell you that since he finished his studies, now almost sixty years ago, he has never stopped teaching all that he had learned.

Since the proof of the pudding is in the eating, we will then have to find out whether he possesses certain qualities of the yogin. He is now 99 and is capable of practising the headstand and can remain for a long time in this position, which is quite remarkable, or in mahamudra, or sitting in padmasana for the practice of pranayama. He manages then to keep in good shape even at his age, through the practice of asana. There are three possible directions in the practice of Yoga. In the first one – the one we call shakti krama – both mental and physical strength and resistance are important. I remember, when I was in secondary school, having spent one or two months with him in the state of Hyderabad, in a small town where the water was rationed. I still remember this old man with a big container full of water on his head, holding a bucketful in each hand, carrying this load every day from a well nearly 5 kilometres away.

A DAY IN THE LIFE

Let us now consider one of my father's extraordinary days, in the course of which he has to carry out a certain rite. It is the detailed ritual by which many Indians celebrate the anniversary of their parents' death. We call it Shraddha. The man must not take any food the previous evening, and then, in the morning he carries out the puja, as usual. He then must practice vedic chant for three or four hours non stop, depending on his cast. Then the priest comes and must be given everything that the rule prescribes; so my father literally remains sitting for three hours, without missing a single phase of the ceremony. Finally, the brahman sits at the table and my father continues with the vedic chant, stopping only when the other has finished eating, because this braham symbolizes the ancestors. It is hard to believe that at the age of 99 this old man has the

mental strength to remain without eating anything and still keep his tone of voice entirely clear, and that he can remain affable towards the priests and carry out all the rituals.

Let us now examine how he teaches. He sits throughout, without ever changing position; this may last from 60 to 90 minutes. His back is straight and his memory is so good that I, being much younger, feel ashamed. The way he remembers this or that passage of the Ramayana, in such and such section or verse, is really remarkable and it is absolutely surprising at his age to possess such power of memory. If you were to ask me which is the thirteenth sutra of the third chapter of Patanjali's Yogasutra, I would need to think, even though I often teach this chapter.

Krishnamacharya's religious behaviour is another interesting aspect. For each action he firmly believes that it is God who asks him to act and that the fruits belong to God only. Here is the Shri Vaishnava Sampradaya main article of faith; everything comes from God and returns to God. For example, when the priests come, he makes sure that he gives them more than anyone else because, he says, they are not merely priests but God himself and one must therefore seek to make them happy. And these are not merely words; he painstakingly carries out his daily rituals, preparing himself the lustral water with saffron, camphor, etc... and taking much more care over it than I have ever seen in the temples. He thus does justice, as well as he can and through his own example, to the Shakti krama as well as to the adhyatmika krama.

ADAPTATIONS

I shall now turn to his contributions to Yoga. Since 1934, my father has been saying that Yoga had to be adapted to the individual and not the individual to Yoga. The adaptation is based on differences of culture, age, sex, illness, interest, profession, etc... If somebody feels unable to adapt to a particular situation, he should not insist. My father told me that one of the reasons why he decided to stay in India was that he would be incapable of understanding other cultures. The other reason, of course, is that normally, a brahman from India must not cross the ocean. Through adapting he has highly stressed the validity of individual teaching. As there are not two

identical beings, we must respect every individual's requirement.

He has developed very important principles for the practice of asana. He is still discovering new postures – to such an extent that I am not able to keep track of his new discoveries. One day, he asked me whether I had tried Khagasana. I had never heard of the term before. Moreover, he changes the postures. It is he who taught me how to vary the postures, how to bend my legs, turn my head, who taught me all the simple or complicated variations. Which may prove necessary. It is important to modify every posture according to individual requirements. Furthermore, it is he who introduced the use of supports or aids, so that the person may benefit from a posture when unable to practice without those aids. This includes, for example, the use of a chair to sit down upon, of a rolled-up cloth, of certain supports, etc. He explored the limits of the use of breath in the postures, which is even more important. He has discovered and stressed the fact that breathing is an essential part in the practice of asana. Through changing the way and length of breathing, by using combinations of postures and of different respiratory rhythms, he has proved that it is possible to modify the postures in order to meet individual requirements. For him, breathing is like the wheel in a car.

LINKING ASANAS

He has understood something else which is important; we must not view asana alone but within a group or a combination of asanas. This means that we are not going to practise the headstand on Monday, the shoulder stand on Tuesday, etc, but that we link the asanas together, like the words of a sentence. He has also passed on to us the concept of pratikriyasana, of compensation or counter-posture. As every action creates reactions, we have to find a compensation to those reactions. Lastly, he has conceived the idea of vinyasa; in fact, since the beginning of his teaching, around 1932, he has given a list of postures which either lead into, or out of a particular posture. That is the idea of linking different asanas together within a structure so that each posture leads to the following one. And this structure itself is quite important especially for children who find it particularly

interesting. He still trusts it, although it is a structure which cannot be practised by adults or by sick people often. However, the idea of vinyasa remains valid: to start from where we are, reach a certain point and then come back to where we should be.

He also put forward the idea that the asana is svadhyaya; that is to say it allows us to understand something about ourselves. He strongly believes that the beginning of pranayama is in asana, if we use particular breathing techniques. Asana, and asana only, accompanied by the adequate breathing techniques, leads us to pranayama. In pranayama as such, he puts into practice the different types such as vaikhari, the different vrittis, the different karmas I would say that Krishnamacharya's major contribution to the practice of pranayama, is the use of Bahya Khumbaka and the stressing of rechaka, or breathing out. Because of his own knowledge of the ayurveda, he has conceived pranayama as a bramhana or as a langhana kriya. The use of the bandhas is one of the most complex aspects in the practice of Yoga. He could correctly link together several ideas on the bandhas scattered throughout many texts, and he could indicate which bandhas could be introduced in certain parts of pranayama. I must furthermore add that nobody is as clear as he is about the mula bandha.

INSPIRATION

Moreover, he added the idea of Bhavana to the practice of pranayama a long time ago. A long, long time ago, he said that breathing in and out, and the retention of breath, are related, in a way, to the supreme power, the Lord 'Narayana. Breathing in is like an inspiration of God Himself. Retention is thus a kind of meditation because you are near Him; breathing out is like a movement towards God, and retention at this point is like giving oneself to God. He made the use of the Mahamudra simple and practical too. Although it is today a very well-known posture, when you look in the texts, you find no clear explanation at all. He included the asana aspect, the breathing aspect and the mudra aspect; he thinks that, when practised daily, the mahamudra gives protection from illness.

The practice of Yoga is related to the nadi – the pulse, and therefore he still thinks that the heartbeat indicates whether the practice has

been correctly followed. He suggests the possibility of measuring out our existence with the frequency of the heartbeats. If we want to live well and for a long time, we have to make the effort of slowing down the pulse rate. This is, of course, relatively different from the opinion of the aerobic (progressive programme of physical exercises) adepts who think one should bring one's heart beat up to 130/140 pulses per minute. The way he uses the teaching of the Yogasutra in the practice is, I believe, another of his contributions. I remember at the time of Zinal's first meeting, when I used this word Yogasutra I understood that participants believed I was discussing an aspect of Greek civilisation or something like that. I myself would have thought this book useless, just as many others in India, had I not studied it with him. He could link each sutra to the practice.

UPDATED VIEWS

Let us now study his ideas on certain important points. He thinks that the only text that presents Yoga clearly is Patanjali's yogasutra. He adds that Raja Yoga consists of mere words with sadhana; was I not reading the other day that philosophy is much more interesting for itself than for the results that may ensue from it? On the other hand, when there is sadhana, Raja Yoga becomes identical to Bhakti Yoga. As for yamas and niyamas, he thinks that, except for two of them, today they are no longer of any value. The first one is called satya niyama (knowing what to say, what not to say, to whom, how to write and how not to write). This is the satya niyama, the correct use of words. The other niyama that one must respect is the ahara niyama – what to eat, in what quantity, depending on which age, profession, etc... The ancients, believed that a young boy could eat as much as he liked. But a sannyasin must take only eight handfuls of rice a day not one more.

My father's attitude concerning the Shat-kriya and the mudra is perfectly clear. He thinks that when somebody practises the asana correctly, along with proper breathing and certain food restraint, there is no need for those kriyas. Moreover, the use of the kriya when one does not know the individual's dosha, could do more harm than good. Dosha, to be brief, means the individual's constitution; one may be fat, or may catch cold easily; we

may well have problems of acidity or else be nervous. There is a dominant trait in every human being's dosha, and the kriya must be considered according to the different constitutions. He then adds this; vedanta sometimes condemns Yoga, here or there, because of the propagation of a mudra like the khechari, the vajroli or the amaroli.

He has certain ideas about the Kundalini too. This energy is the prana; we call this strength Shakti or Kundalini, but it is in fact the prana. Pranayama, through stressing breathing out and the bandhas, and backing this up with devotional chants, is the only efficient method of action. The evolution of kundalini, on the other hand, depends a lot on the follower's state of mind and on his vairagya.

CERTAIN FORMS

Then he has his opinions about dhyana. Since the dhyana is one characteristic state of mind, and since the mind is limited in its form and cannot grasp what is beyond form, the desha, or object of meditation, must be saguna and not nirguna. Ordinary human beings need certain forms, certain visualisations for the dhyana and therefore, any dhyana that is nirguna is only vikalpa.

He stresses the fact that it is essential for every human being to experience family life. It is only through a profound understanding of family life that one can transcend it. He himself was offered twice the important position of acharya and refused it in order to stay with his family.

It is he who made it possible to say that there are differences between Yoga and Hinduism. There are fundamental differences between Yoga and the vedanta. And, if we must really link them together it shall be as follows: Yoga is the way that leads those interested to vedanta. Vedanta implies much investigation and much reflection; it also requires one to develop one's bhakti, and Yoga leads both the mind and the individual to the bhakti. Vedanta, finally, is a jnana marga and it is only through ashtanga that the state of mind required for the jnana can be developed.

This concludes our brief account of Krishnamacharya and his Yoga. It is up to you, however, to judge the master and the teaching for yourselves.