

*In 1976, yoga legend T.K.V. Desikachar opened*

**YOGA WITH HEART**

*Kate Holcombe, founder of the Healing Yoga Foundation in San Francisco, with Chinna (left) and Geeta (right), found under a fruit cart in India.*



*a healing center in India. Now his “American daughter” is creating the first U.S. offshoot.*

# Healing Yoga Comes to America

By ANNA DUBROVSKY

**Sundar Das disappeared** for a couple of years. He told his yoga teacher, Kate Holcombe, that he was visiting his native India, and he didn't call again until a few weeks ago. Now he's sitting at a Middle Eastern café at the end of her block, dunking a tea bag in hot water. The two were supposed to meet at her azure home near San Francisco's Golden Gate Park, but the steps to her front door might as well be mountains. Das is partially paralyzed on his left side.

Holcombe meets him at the café, and together they shuffle to her house. She carries his cup of tea. He's much weaker and his hair grayer than the last time she saw him. At the steps, he pauses and plots. “My leg isn't as strong as it used to be,” he says. “Let me try.” He hands her his metal cane. Then he turns around and climbs backwards, grasping the railing and her shoulder with his good hand.

Inside, the yoga lesson begins. Student and teacher sit in chairs from start to finish.

This is how Holcombe teaches yoga—meeting the student where he is. It's how she learned from legendary teacher T. K. V. Desikachar and why for many years she balked at being called a yoga teacher. The yoga she discovered in India 16 years ago bore little resemblance to the fitness phenomenon labeled yoga in the United States. “I used to call it the ‘y’ word,” she says. “It took me a long time to be comfortable saying that what I was doing was yoga because what I was studying and learning and seeing and doing in India felt so completely different from what I saw people calling yoga here.”

*Photographed for Yoga + Joyful Living by* JESSE GOFF

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What Holcombe saw in India was yoga as practiced at the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram (KYM), the school Desikachar founded in 1976 to honor his father, Tirumalai Krishnamacharya. Krishnamacharya, who died in 1989 at the age of 100, is the reason a discipline of sages in caves is today practiced by celebrities in spandex. His famous stunts (stopping his heartbeat) and students (B. K. S. Iyengar, K. Pattabhi Jois, and Indra Devi among them) turned the

breathing techniques, chants, meditative practices, and habits to ease their pains and strengthen their psyches. Everybody gets a unique practice. A depressed student might be asked to snap photos of beautiful things. Another might be encouraged to eat papaya.

The Desikachars emphasize that yoga is a complement to medical care, not a replacement. About half of the Mandiram's students are referred by a doctor or other health professional. The head

She put the piece of paper in her wallet.

Healing Yoga Foundation, the nonprofit organization Holcombe founded last year, seeks to replicate in San Francisco what Desikachar built in Chennai. It's the Mandiram's first U.S. spin-off, and both Desikachar and his son Kausthub sit on the board. "We hope that this HYF in San Francisco will basically be the first step into taking this outside India," Kausthub Desikachar says. "We are confident that it will help change

## *Yoga's healing powers reside in the one-on-one relationship between teacher and student.*

masses on to yoga, even as Krishnamacharya stressed that yoga's healing powers reside in the one-on-one relationship between teacher and student.

Desikachar's school is in Chennai, a muggy, conservative city formerly known as Madras. The Mandiram functions less like a yoga studio than a health clinic. There's a waiting area lined with chairs. There's a blue file on each student. The 50 teachers see students one at a time in small rooms with walls of braided palm fronds. An exception is made for couples having trouble conceiving.

Many of the students have no prior yoga experience. They learn movements,

of neurophysiology at Chennai's largest hospital sends his son to the Mandiram for a neurophysiological problem. When Holcombe began teaching a decade ago, she worked in the office of a family practitioner who'd been a longtime Desikachar pupil. She has since taught at physicians' retreats and conferences, and word of mouth has brought her so many students that until this year, she'd never printed a business card.

In 1999, Holcombe was studying with Desikachar when he took a scrap of paper and wrote the words "healing yoga" on it. More people need to know about this, he said to her. Show them.

the way yoga therapy is understood by people. I believe very strongly that yoga therapy will become as respected as medicine or psychoanalysis."

### **YOGA AS TOOLBOX**

Yoga therapy isn't the exclusive domain of the Desikachars. Around the world, yoga teachers see students privately, assigning postures and pranayama to alleviate everything from chronic back pain to constipation. In a May article on the subject, the *New York Times* noted that membership in the International Association of Yoga Therapists has almost tripled in the last three years. "Yoga therapy is at the place in history in the Western world where psychoanalysis was just after Freud," Kausthub says.

Yoga as the Desikachars see it is a toolbox for conscious change. Ancient yoga texts proffer myriad tools—from cleansing rituals to candle gazing to arm balances that evoke Cirque du Soleil. Many yoga therapists, Kausthub says, reach into the toolbox and pull out hammer and nails: asana and pranayama. The rest of the tools go largely unused.

"Most yoga therapy in the West addresses yoga therapy through the body—asanas. Sometimes they include some breathing techniques, but nothing else," he says. "Here, we are including every tool in yoga practice, whether it is asana or pranayama or meditation or chants and visualizations.

"Yoga has been presented in the classical teachings as a holistic discipline. Yoga has not been presented for the



**UNIQUE PRACTICE** *Kate Holcombe, here with Marianne Wilman, works one-on-one with each student.*

body, through the body, by the body.”

When Patricia K. came to Holcombe in 2001, her body was falling apart, despite years of body-focused work. Patricia, 60, teaches Iyengar yoga and Pilates in a small town about 15 miles outside of San Francisco. Like Sundar Das, she could barely walk from her car to Holcombe’s front door. Her knees and back ached constantly. She was still recovering from major abdominal surgery.

“I was desperate,” Patricia says. “This work is different. It is much more subtle, much more precise, physically and mentally. It’s very powerful. You don’t have to run to the gym and the psychotherapist and the physical therapist and the nutritionist. It is beautiful and efficient.”

### GETTING TO THE HEART OF YOGA

Efficiency is a hallmark of this tradition. Holcombe rarely assigns a practice that’s longer than 15 minutes to new students. A few minutes of yoga a day can have profound effects over time, she says. She’d rather her students practice for six minutes every day than for two hours twice a week. This spring, “Patricia was doing an hour-long practice every day, and yet it wasn’t serving her,” Holcombe says. “It was a general class for a general group. Whereas, she can do 15 or 20 minutes that I give her and have strength, stability, stamina, peace of mind, calm—all in less than half the amount of time.”

Holcombe, 36, says the practices she assigns still aren’t as efficient as they could be. When she studies with Desikachar, he challenges her to streamline preparatory sequences and counterposes. Prepare a student for *hanumanasana* (seated splits), he’ll tell her. Now design a practice that includes both *kraunchasana* (heron pose) and *vasisthasana* (side plank pose). Train a student for pranayama with 10-second in-hales, ex-hales, and pauses. On some of her worksheets he scribbles “A+.” On others: “Try again.”

*Anna Dubrovsky writes from Pittsburgh, Pa., where she is receiving yoga teacher training. She recently returned from seven months in India, where she studied at the KYM in Chennai.*

“My perfectionist mind says, ‘What about this? What about that?’ I want to cover all bases,” Holcombe says. “He’s trying to get me to shave it down, shave it down. What’s the essence? What’s absolutely essential? Because people are busy.” Holcombe is married with two sons, ages 5 and 2, and two dogs born under a fruit cart in Chennai. She knows from busy.

### FIRST ENCOUNTER

Holcombe was 19 when she met her teacher, and she was a mess. She’d suffered from chronic headaches and insomnia her whole life, relying on pain and sleeping pills. She had a dysfunctional family and a drinking habit. She also had a passion for social causes; she came to India as part of Colgate University’s study-abroad program with the intention of combating female infanticide. She didn’t know anything about yoga.

The Colgate program’s co-director, Mary Louise Skelton, had studied for years with Krishnamacharya, and so Holcombe and the other students were treated to a daily class on yoga philosophy with his son. That’s as close as Holcombe came to Desikachar until one day, while riding her bicycle through the streets of Chennai, she was mowed down by a motorcyclist.

The accident left her with broken ribs, a mangled right leg, and excruciating back pain. She was in a drug-induced fog when she was taken to see Desikachar. She barely remembers the encounter. But for the next year and a half, she practiced the yoga prescribed by Desikachar and taught to her by Skelton. Slowly, her pain subsided. The headaches she’d endured since childhood disappeared, too. She was able to sleep at night without the aid of pills.

“My very first introduction to yoga was just sort of curiosity, and then very quickly it became this profound experience of healing,” she recalls. “I got to experience firsthand what an incredible, powerful tool yoga is. Back in the States, I would go see the osteopath or the physical therapist or whomever, and they all were amazed at how I was healing. They



**TO INDIA AND BACK** (From top): Kate, 19, and fellow student Chase Bossart, in India for a study-abroad program; students Kate, Chase, and Jen visit Tiruttani Temple, 1991; a family portrait: T.K.V. Desikachar, his wife Menaka, son Kausthub, daughter Mekkala, and “American daughter” Kate in San Francisco; Menaka plays with Kate’s son Hayes; Kate in San Francisco.

From top: 1st, 2nd, and 4th image courtesy of Kate Holcombe; 3rd and 5th image © Scott Peck



**TEACHER AND STUDENT** T.K.V. Desikachar and Kate (holding 8-month-old Hayes) at KYM.

all said: ‘Whatever you’re doing is great. Keep doing it.’”

Holcombe graduated in 1993 and set off for India to study with Desikachar. But it wasn’t until she returned to the States a year later that she received the most illuminating lesson in her yoga education. Skelton, who had become Holcombe’s yoga teacher and surrogate mother, was dying from a cancer that had spread to her spine and liver. The doctors

was completely clear. And I really got it that this was from the yoga. This was from 35 years of work, of practice, of doing this stuff with Krishnamacharya and then later with Desikachar. And I got it that nobody knew this here in the United States.”

**CHANNELING DESIKACHAR**

Holcombe replaced Skelton as co-director of the Colgate program, and the Desikachars replaced Skelton as Holcombe’s family. She has spent more than six years studying with Desikachar in India, including a 20-month stretch from 1998 to 2000. When people who’ve met Desikachar watch her teach, they’re struck by the resemblance. “It’s astonishing,” says Lizzie Nichols, the Healing Yoga Foundation’s programs manager. “It’s as if she’s channeling Desikachar.” It’s as if they’re related. Desikachar often introduces Holcombe as his “American daughter.”

“I’ve learned a ton from him as my teacher, but the real lessons have been knowing him and watching him in his everyday interactions,” Holcombe says. “For me, that’s where I see the yoga com-

midwifery and chiropractic practices. The long-term plan includes a space of their own and a stable of teachers. A training program that started earlier this year will in four years produce about 40 U.S. yoga therapists certified by the Desikachars. In September, Holcombe and Bossart will kick off 500-hour teacher-training programs in San Francisco and New York.

Their greatest challenge may be a cultural difference. In India, a teacher’s word is law. Faith in the teacher buttresses the student’s learning and healing process. “One of the reasons why yoga works is because of this conviction in the teacher,” Kausthub Desikachar says. Americans are trained to question, to challenge, to not take anything at face value. They tend to be twitchy about the concept of faith. “This will be the biggest challenge: how we will inspire faith in the student so that they actually do these practices and benefit from them,” he says.

The elder Desikachar has long insisted that Holcombe adapt what she learns in India to American sensibilities. “He would say, ‘You teach in the States. It’s very different from India. Here in India,

*To model a yoga center on Desikachar’s Mandiram is to hold the Krishnamacharya legacy in one’s hands.*

had given her three weeks to live; she proved them wrong by two years. Holcombe spent much of the final year at her mentor’s side.

“It wasn’t just that she was surviving,” Holcombe says. “She was continuing to study and teach. She was fully living her life.” Just weeks before Skelton died, Desikachar paid a visit from India. Skelton “was in incredible physical pain,” Holcombe recalls. “Her liver had stopped functioning. Her legs were swollen. She could barely move. Then he shows up, and the next morning she’s down in the kitchen, down two flights of stairs, making him warm milk.”

Holcombe was awed by Skelton’s devotion to her teacher and her serenity. “She had such an evenness, despite the intense physical pain and the deterioration of her body. I was just so struck by her state of mind,” Holcombe says. “She

ing out, just in his everyday day-to-day, whatever he’s doing.” Desikachar says the same of his father.

To create a yoga center modeled on Desikachar’s Mandiram is to hold the Krishnamacharya legacy in one’s hands. “The bar is set very high,” says Chase Bossart, a longtime student of Desikachar who moved to San Francisco last year to help start the foundation. “The responsibility is being a representative of the tradition and a representative of Mr. Desikachar and Kausthub. They’re putting their name on it, so that means that what I do has a direct bearing on them. That’s a lot. I have no doubt in my mind that it’s going to be successful, but I feel a lot of pressure to try to be a decent representative of their teaching.”

For now, Holcombe, Bossart, and Nichols work out of Holcombe’s living room or rented space they share with

if I say do this, they do it. They don’t question. If I say go stand on your head, eat five almonds, breathe, do this—they’ll do it. They accept it 100 percent.” Holcombe, on the other hand, must be ready to explain everything she asks of a



**STICK FIGURES** Holcombe uses drawings to describe the prescribed practice for each student.

Upper photo by Kausthub Desikachar.

student, with reference to both ancient texts and modern physiology. “In India, if somebody says, ‘Why is that?’ you say, ‘Oh, my teacher says so.’ He said you can’t say that in the States and don’t ever say that in the States. That’s not okay. You have to know.”

Holcombe rarely volunteers information about yoga theory or philosophy. Her goal is to heal, not to make advanced yoga practitioners out of her students. Didacticism, she finds, can detract from the healing process. “As a culture, we can get away from the experience of something because we want to process it so much, or understand it more, or we’re intellectualizing more than just doing it. I think it can almost be an escape somehow.” She rarely uses the Sanskrit names for yoga postures or their English translations. Instead of asking students to perform *uttanasana*, she asks them to lift their arms, then bend at the waist on an exhale.

For similar reasons, she prefers not to demonstrate poses. “My body is different from theirs,” she says. “I don’t want them to have an image of what it looks like in me. I want them to have an experience of what it feels like in them, which is very different. I would rather have them stay with that—their own experience—than have them thinking, ‘Oh, the teacher did it like this.’”

Like all teachers trained at the Mandiram, Holcombe uses stick figures and arrows when prescribing a practice. She draws stick people touching their toes, stick people standing on their heads, stick people bending over backwards. Arrows guide the student from pose to pose and indicate where inhales and exhales belong. The drawings look like the work of children but are actually precise representations. Desikachar, an engineer-turned-yoga teacher, devised them years ago and doesn’t take the placement of noses and toes lightly. “He would lean over my shoulder and go, ‘What is this? Is this a foot? Is this a leg? Which way is the head pointing?’” she says.

After a handful of lessons, Holcombe’s students can move and breathe in ways they hadn’t before. They feel more positive, less helpless. Some bust

out chants at stoplights. Many stop calling her when they start to feel better.

Sometimes, after months or years, a student resurfaces with new problems or an old one aggravated. Like Sundar Das, 61, whose paralysis resulted from a botched surgery 15 years ago, they return to the place where they experienced relief. They pick up where they left off—or several strides behind. Das, when she last saw him, could lie on his back and lift his legs off the floor. On this day in May, he sits in a chair, breathes, and

massages the fingers of his limp left hand. He chants *Ma* again and again in a rasp that fades to a sigh.

“Yoga’s there all along to meet you where and when you need it,” Holcombe says. “My teacher said early on, yoga is a rope. It’s something to hang onto when you need something to steady yourself, when you need a little extra support.” +

+ For more information about the Healing Yoga Foundation and KYM, visit: [www.healingyoga.org](http://www.healingyoga.org) and [www.kym.org](http://www.kym.org).



**THE TEACHER-STUDENT CONNECTION** For Holcombe, the relationship is at the heart of yoga.