

**Subject: September 2010 Newsletter from Srivatsa Ramaswami--Yoga Gymnastique**  
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September 2010 Newsletter from Srivatsa Ramaswami—Yoga Gymnastique

I thought this letter would be short because I am not writing about any program in August, but became longer than the usual long letters.

The month between Aug 15 to Sep 15th is known as Shravana, or we may say veda month. On the full moon day during this month many in India who have been initiated into vedic studies do a ceremony restarting the vedic studies and also chant a “Kamokarshit..” mantra 108 times. It is a mantra asking for forgiveness for the various misdeeds violating the yamas/dharmas of the vedas, due to desire (kama) and anger (manyu), The following day one sits down and does 1008 japa of the famous Gayatri, after doing 10 times of mantra pranayama. In the north on the full moon day sisters tie a rakhi around the wrist of their brothers, strengthening the bondage between the siblings. Aug 25th, 1008 Gaytri Japa with the preliminaries and rituals took about 90 mts. (“We meditate on the orb of the sun, the luster of the Lord. May It kindle/sparkle our intellect” –gayatri mantra). On 24th, shravan day, I chanted a chapter from the Yajur veda, Pravargya Brahmana which took about 75 mts.

Between September 17th and 26th I will be teaching at Suddha Weixler's Chicago Yoga Center. There is a weekend program on Yoga Sutras Ch I and II, a week long Core Vinyasa asana program and a week end of asana, pranayama and meditation, the three pronged yoga sadhana. Here is the link

[http://www.yogamind.com/workshop-ramaswami\\_TT10.shtml](http://www.yogamind.com/workshop-ramaswami_TT10.shtml)

LMU is registering for the December retreat in India (New Delhi and Rishikesh). Here is the link

<http://registration.xenegrade.com/lmuextension/courseDisplay.cfm?schID=724>

Anthony Hall has created a blog Vinyasa Krama Yoga, with his videos of many asana sub-sequences from my book “Complete Book of Vinyasa Yoga”. Thank you very much Tony for your energy, effort, expertise and focus. Here is the link

<http://vinyasakramayoga.blogspot.com/>

I have written earlier requesting the scores of participants to my various programs to make a video of at least one subroutine showing the slow long fine breathing and the sedate, controlled pace at which vinyasakrama is done and load it on to You Tube or somewhere and send me the link. You may perhaps even use a cell phone to record it—may be you could ask your spouse or friend to do a favour of recording a short video for you.

Madhu Berber has started a Vinyasa Krama Yoga School, called Kaivalya nMaui, in Hawaii. I wish him well.

I have confirmed programs to do; a 200 hr Vinyasakrama yoga Teacher Training Program (regd with Yoga Alliance) in June July 2011 at LMU and a one week program at Esalen Institue in May 2011.

If you want to send a message or comment please send it to [info@vinyasakrama.com](mailto:info@vinyasakrama.com) and not use the reply tab.

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Yoga Gymnastique

Some eight years back I wangled a presenter assignment at a Yoga Conference in Texas. I was never invited again because, among all the presenters, I had the dubious distinction of attracting the least number of participants for every one of my presentations.

During one of the breaks a well known Yoga Teacher in US, came and sat by my side and inquired about me, about where I was from etc. I mentioned that I was a student of Pandit Krishnamchary for 3 decades. With a quizzical look he asked, “What were you doing for 30 years with him?’, and with a wry smile he said, “Oh you must have been doing your daily practice at his school”. He left before I could start my long answer. “How can anyone study Yoga for such a long period when there are just a half a dozen sequences or just a little over a score of asanas?” He must have wondered

“Krishnamacharya as I have mentioned earlier was like a many splendoured diamond each facet brilliant in its own way. He taught

yogasanas following the Vinyasakrama, the art form. He also used yogasanas, pranayama and meditation for chikitsa or therapeutic applications. He taught a vast range of Sanskrit chants from the vedas and also from smritis. He taught several traditional texts like the yoga sutras and the sibling philosophies including the several upanishads, following mainly the Visishtadwaita approach. He taught vaishnava religious texts as well to a number of his vaishnava followers. He was a well rounded Yogi and he could make every class absorbing. There would always be something new and insightful. One could never get bored in his classes whether it be the asanas, chanting or textual studies...” I wanted to explain these to my celebrity friend but he was too busy to stay and listen.

Some research scholars have mentioned that Krishnamacharya's vinyasa approach to yoga has a considerable dose of physical exercise systems prevalent at that time in India like the drills and also gymnastics imported into it. But my experience with Krishnamacharya's asana practice is somewhat different. It is true that some of the vinyasas and vinyasa sequences like part of Surya Namaskra, the hand stands, the jump throughs, jump arounds, push ups (utplutis) may appear to mimic floor exercises in gymnastics. Perhaps there are some asanas and vinyasas Sri Krishnamacharya taught that had some resemblance to drills or gymnastics. But he taught to me almost 1000 vinyasas making up close to 150 asana subroutines. The head stand, the sarvangasana, padmasana are distinctly different from gymnastics and each one of them has scores of vinyasas that are uniquely yogic and no other system seems to have anything like that. Further yoga as a physical culture is very old. We may not have records because in ancient times most of instructions were oral and the transmission of knowledge was from teacher to student and the only way to learn was to go to a teacher and learn, practice and internalize. Later on a few texts were written as scripts were developed but they were written in easily perishable palm leaves—like the Yoga Kuranta-- and barely one manuscript, no xerox copies, no electronic books were available. So in these matters we have to rely upon authorities/tradition or as the vedas would call it “aitihya” or firmly held belief. Even from the available texts like the puranas one can glean a lot of reference to yoga practice including asana practice. The Brahma Sutras mention that a seated asana is a necessity for meditation. Works written hundreds or even a thousand years back contain sections on Yoga including asanas. Thirumular, a yogi said to have lived 3000 years back wrote about several asanas in his Tamil classic Thirumandiram. Puranas, smritis and several later day upanishads have sections on asana practice. There is a dhyanasloka pertaining to the Ramayana which mentions that Sri Rama was in Vajrasana while seated in his flowered

bedecked, jeweled throne. In fact from time immemorial many people in India, as a religious practice, have been doing sandhya or morning worship of the sun with specific sun worship mantras and physical movements and gestures. It includes mantras like the gayatri, pranayama and many postures like tadasana, uttanasana, utkatakaasana and danda namaskara and utakatasana are specifically mentioned in the smritis. So in a way we may say that suryanamaskara with mantras and the physical exercise has been a very old practice. The word Yoga is indeed a vedic word. You may check with my book “The Complete book of Vinyasa Yoga” (here no commercial intended) based on my studies with my guru and I do not think it in any way resembles a book of gymnastics. Yogasanas have their own distinct nicety. Gymnastics of course has its own charm. Gymnastics was one my favourite programs while watching the Olympics. I do not know if I would enjoy Yoga Olympiad.

My Guru had mentioned on a couple of occasions that physical yoga had been the core system of physical exercises in India. It had technically influenced several ancient systems like wrestling, archery, fencing etc., very physically demanding disciplines, requiring a high degree of strength, dexterity and focus. Yoga is called a sarvanga sadhana as it is helpful for all parts of the body, including the internal organs. There were other indigenous circus-like practices such as malcam, kazhakkoothu where they use ropes or poles and do routines very similar to asanas. He had also mentioned that almost all the physical systems of the world, including gymnastics, had borrowed heavily from Yoga, because the asana portion of Yoga was the most ancient and developed physical culture system. Therefore it could be that there were a few similarities between asanas and some obscure gymnastic systems in different parts of the world at different times. Then one has to investigate the origin of those obscure systems, whether they were older than Yoga, or if they themselves borrowed from ancient yoga practices. My Guru himself was a passionate researcher. He would always be looking for works on yoga and other systems. He even would advise us to go to different agraharams (small cluster of homes of scholars in certain villages) and look for works on Yoga available with such scholars. He would say that we should visit the hundreds of temples in India, especially South India, and observe the sculptures and idols all over the temples for study of yoga postures. And because of the oral tradition and relying on degradable palm leaves, Yoga itself had a checkered progression, in the limelight during some time in history and obscure at some other times. Then it becomes a futile exercise to try to determine which among the physical exercise regimens came first, the seed or the tree or the better known example of the chicken and the egg.

There are distinct differences between the yoga I learned from Sri Krishnamacharya for a long period of time and some of the aerobic exercises like gymnastics. In the vinyasa krama asana practice, the breathing is synchronized with the movements at the rate of anywhere between 5 to 10 seconds for inhalation and exhalation thereby reducing the breath rate to about 3 to 5 per minute, whereas in contemporary aerobic exercises including gymnastics and gym workouts, the breath rate increases to much beyond the normal breathing rate of about 15 or so. This alone makes yoga practice of Sri Krishnamacharya distinctly different from other drills. The variety of movements in Vinyasa asana practice is said to be designed to exercise all parts of the body including the internal organs. We do not find deep movement, synchronized breathing, and the significantly profound exercises like the bandhas-- which are an integral part of Sri Krishnamacharya's asana practice-- in other forms of physical exercises, especially gymnastics. Look at the 30's videos, the bandhas of my Guru, They are not a gymnast's cup of chai.

When I was young, some exercises were very popular. They were outside the pale of yogasanas. One was known as “dandal”, which would look very much like a repetitive movement between caturanga dandasana and the plank or a simpler version of urdhwa mukha swanasana. The other was known as, if I remember right, 'bhaski'. It involved standing up and doing repeated squats. The first one, 'dandal' looks very similar to part of Surya namaskara. Baski resembles a very popular ritual that is done by thousands even today and is known as “toppukaranam” in Tamil and “dorbhyam karanam” in Sanskrit. One holds the lobes of the opposite ears with one's hands and squats usually in front of the idol of Lord Ganesha. It could be 12 times or 108 times. It is both a good physical exercise and a loving devotional practice to the charming Lord Ganesha. Are these physical drills, yoga exercises or devotional practices? Which came first? God knows, Lord Ganesha knows.

Then there is the question of whether Suryanamaskara is old, from the vedic times. The Surya namaskara can be considered from two views; one is the mantra portion the other is vyayama or the physical part. Certainly Suryanamaskara mantras are from the vedas. In fact there is a complete chapter of Suryanamaskara mantras from the veda which takes about an hour to chant. Again the other important Surya mantra, Gayatri, is also a vedic mantra. The vedas exhort using Gayatri as a mantra to worship the sun daily. Worship of the sun is considered a daily obligatory duty for the orthodox in India. We have a procedure called Sandhya vandana which is supposed to be done thrice a day, but

definitely once a day. This Sandhya procedure is a kind of a worship ritual, towards the end of which one prostrates towards the Sun. While the gayatri japa portion is done sitting in a yogic posture after required number of pranayama, the upasthana or the second part is done standing. Towards the conclusion the worshipper of the sun has to do a namaskara, a prostration. So from the standing position, usually one bends forward, half squats, places the palms on the floor, takes the legs back by jumping or taking one leg after the other and does an saashtanga namaskara or the danda namaskara (prostration). One has to go through these steps (from standing to prostration) and if the steps are properly organized we get the surya namaskara vyayama, a sequence, a vinyasakrama. So, since one has to do sandhya daily and has to do the namaskara startig from standing and since the sandhya is mentioned as an obligatory duty, it will be correct to say that suryanamaskara, both the mantra portion and physical namaskara portion, are from the vedic times. The actual steps may vary but the physical namaskara to the sun is a procedure practiced from ancient vedic times. Further In India you can see many people who do not practice yoga or the formal ritualistic sandhyavandana, standing on the terrace or on the beach, facing East early in the morning, and doing prostrations a few times, returning to the standing position every time. They do not call it Yoga but suryanamaskara. Some of the present day yoga enthusiasts however do the suryanamaskara, probably at night, in any direction or directionless, do not use the mantras or the devotional bhavana associated with it, but as a mere workout.

I had chanted the suyanamaskara mantra almost on every Sunday with my Guru for several years. Namarupa also published my article on Sandhya vandana with pictures of the steps some time back. I also have the one hour long Suryanamaskara mantra chant from the Yajur Veda (which I learned from Sri Krishnamacharya) recorded in mid 80s and the cds are still made available in India.

Sri Krishnamacharya's range of teaching was sweeping. I have mentioned about the asana teaching, his chikitsa krama and vinyasa krama. His chanting of vedas was beautiful and very engaging. I do not know of any yoga teacher during his times who could chant as well as he could from memory. He earned the title "Veda Kesari", or Lion of Vedas. He was a Sanskrit scholar, a Sanskrit Pandit. He taught the vedanta philosophy, the prastana trayas, the upanishads, the Brahma sutra and the Bhagavad Gita in the visishtadvaita tradition. He was given the title "Vedanta Vageesa". He was also quite familiar with the advaitic interpretation. He once said while doing

the sutra on Anandamaya

“Anandamaya abhyasat” in which the two interpretations, advaita and visistadwaita differ from each other, “If you want I can teach you the advaitic interpretation, but advaita may be intellectually challenging but does not give the emotional satisfaction one gets from the visishtadvaitic approach”.

He also taught us several important upanishads. I studied with him several upanishad vidyas from the major upanishads, like Brahadaranyaka, Chandogya, Taittiriya, Kaushitaki and others. Some of the vidyas he taught include Pancha kosa Vidya, panchagni, pranava, madhu, Sandilya, Dahara Pratardana and many others. Once I asked him why if the goal is the same, understanding Brahman the ultimate Reality, then there are so many upanishads, why so many vidyas. He would say that pupils have different questions about the ultimate reality and these vidyas take you from the known to the unknown. Supposing fifty people, strangers from different places go to an unknown country, Pineland, and take a picture with the leader of the country Mr Pineman. Every one sends home a copy of the picture by e mail. The way they would point to the unknown leader, Mr Pineman to those back home would be to start from the known. The known entity in the picture will be the one who sends the picture. He may tell his son/daughter, “the leader is three rows in front and eight to the right of me. Another person would start first by asking his kid to identify him/her first in the picture and may say the leader is three rows behind and five seats to the left. Likewise all the various vidyas of the upanishads try to help the aspirants to realize the ultimate truth, starting from a known tatwa. I had the privilege of studying several upanishd vidyas from my Guru Sri Krishnamacharya.

He also taught many of the sibling philosophies so that one's understanding of Yoga and Vedanta will be on firm grounds. He taught Samkhya philosophy by explaining the Samkhya karika with the commentary of Gaudapada. He also taught Yoga Sutra in considerable detail. He had obtained the titles “Yogacharya” and “Samkhya Siromani”. He also was an expert in another profound philosophy called Nyaya and had been conferred the title “Nyayacharya”. He also taught smaller or easier works like Tarka Sangraha to introduce the difficult Nyaya philosophy.

His religious studies were outstanding. He was such an expert in the Vaishnava philosophy, that he was in consideration to head a well known Vaishnava Mutt. He was truly a devotional person. As he practiced yoga he performed his daily puja with great devotion. He had several students who studied the Vaishnava religion in considerable detail. He could quote from the epics, Ramayana, Mahabharata and several other puranas like Vishnu Purana, Bhagavata Purana etc.

I do not know of any person who was so well versed in the sastras and also at the same time an outstanding practising Yogi. Sri Krishnamacharya is well known, it is almost exclusively due to his yogasana teachings. But his scholarship and teachings were enormous. I feel a bit sad when he is portrayed as a hata yoga teacher who plagiarized some exercises from gymnastics and called it yoga to make a living, and nothing more. Maybe there is some common ground between these two different physical disciplines. I continue to remain in awe of his enormous scholarship, practice and teachings and kindness towards his students. He was a teacher who would uplift you, a true Acharya. When you study with him, you get an unmistakable feeling that his only goal in life was to transmit the traditional knowledge and make it accessible to the student. He was a unique Yogi, a unique teacher, a unique individual. Twenty years after his passing away, I remember him everyday, while practicing, studying or teaching; sometimes in dreams-- fondly.

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What should we call these?

“The outer mind does not know what the inner mind needs. The outer mind is excited about doing hours of alluring asana practice, but how come the inner mind feels very comfortable and serene with an hour 's practice of what appears to the outer mind as insipid, unexciting, monotonous, unvarying yoga practices like pranayama, meditation and chanting? No, no, the outer mind does not know what the inner mind wants.”

“I have attained the highest, the spiritual realization, the hidden treasure in my heart. I move back and forth between samadhi (shyama) and waking state (sabala) with consummate ease. I am like a glorious full moon just coming out of an eclipse; like a horse that shrugs off the loose hair, I toss away the sins (karma bundle) and attain freedom.” Chandogya Upanishad

Bringing under control the breath (pavana) by pranayama and then the senses (indriyas) by pratyahara, one should meditate on the auspicious principle (subhasraya)-- Vishnu Purana

The world talks in admiration of one who helps even those who had harmed him/her. "What is great in I-scratch- your- back, you- scratch- mine kind of help?"--adopted from a Sanskrit proverb

"The help a father can render to his son/offspring is to educate him/her so well that he/she would be in the forefront in an assembly of scholars" Tirukural, a 4th century Tamil classic

The best way to repay the debt of an offspring to one's parent is to make the whole world exclaim in admiration "What good karmas the parent should have done to beget such an exemplary offspring"..Tirukkural a 4th century Tamil classic

The best Gurudakshina a student can offer to the teacher is to make the teacher's teachings known to the world (by practice, adherence and teaching). A Sanskrit saying.

The relationship (bondage) between a wife and husband is considered very sacred. The relationship between a parent and offspring, teacher and student and the devotee and the deity are all considered very special. Any attempt to create a rift in these relationships is considered 'no-good karma'.

The one in this human being and one in the sun yonder, are one and the same -..One who realizes this oneness (of the soul), never fears, never feels sorrow.-Taittiriya Upanishad

Certain days in the month are considered "anadhyayana" days. Some people ask if Yoga should not be done on these anadhyayana days. During my studies with my teacher he did not specify any days when we should not practice Yoga. Anadhyayana is usually associated with study of the vedas and anadhyayana days are days one should not study the vedas, presumably with the teacher. In short we may say that the veda pathasala or veda schools would be closed on these days. I started learning veda chanting (with my father) when I was about 10 years old and I had a teacher who would come to our house at about 5 in the morning to teach vedic chanting. But he would not come on these "anadhyayana" days. The smritis say that vedas should be chanted daily (vedam nityam adhiyetaam). So we may say that the prohibition is with respect to studying, perhaps new lessons but not chanting the portions already learned (swadhyaya). On anadhyayana days like the new moon

day, one may refrain from learning with a teacher new vedic lessons, but may chant what one has already learnt. It is a moot question if this restriction applies to yogasana learning and certainly does not appear to apply to home yogasana practice

If you wish, you may forward to anyone interested, reproduce or quote in your blogs or share with others.

With best wishes

Sincerely  
Srivatsa Ramaswami

PS Please send comments or suggestions to [info@vinyasakrama.com](mailto:info@vinyasakrama.com) and not use the reply tab. Older newsletters may be accessed by clicking on the newsletter tab in my website [www.vinyasakrama.com](http://www.vinyasakrama.com)

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