

## Memories of a Great and Revered Master



### The King and the Young Man

**Rajah:** You must come with me to Mysore!

**Young Man:** Why? For what purpose?

**Rajah:** It is the duty of a Rajah to help bright young men who will bring fame to our country. Come to the Palace to live. I'll give you something to do to match your qualifications.

**Young Man:** Oh! You want me to work at the Palace? Why? It's not my way to work for somebody else and take pay! I hope to live free, not as a slave, Sire!

**Rajah:** You can live as freely as you want. Just come with me to the Palace.

**Young Man:** Money and status mean nothing to me. What I seek is knowledge. I will serve only my Guru. In this world I will be a slave to nobody, work under nobody! The Rajah is impressed by the self confidence and self assurance of the youth, and promises, "You may live an independent life in the Palace". They go off together.

### SIXTY YEARS LATER

The above incident occurred some sixty years ago. The youth has now completed ninety six years. Today he is at the heart of Indian culture, indeed, he is that heart. He lives quietly, like a full pot (empty pots are

proverbially noisy), shines steadily like a bright lamp of knowledge. Working daily at his pursuit of knowledge, he lives the life of a rshi of old, though he lives in his home with his wife and family.

After a lifetime of acquiring knowledge, today, at 96, his wisdom encompasses not only such subjects as Sastra, Tharkam, Vyakaranam, Yoga, but all aspects of daily life and how one can be constantly aware of the presence of God. He never learned how to earn a living in the ordinary way, but sought wise men, pandits, on his own, to argue with them, and arguing, learn, and become himself a pandit of universe-encompassing Veda.

Today we not only feel his wisdom, but are caught and held by the confidence and enthusiasm that springs from his knowledge. We are amazed, overawed by the fluency of his discourse and by the multitude of illustrations and quotations from the Sastras. We sense how the guiding principle of his life, his independence from all but his studies, has grown along with his age.

Today his greatest pride lies not in the awards he received from the Rajahs of Dharbanga, Dikkanghat, and Mysore; rather he is proud, these many years later, of the teachers he has had such as Vamadeva Bhattacharya and Rama Mohana Brahmacharya. He did his gurukulam without any of the usual ado as to where he was to study and who his masters were to be in the various Sastras. He spent nearly twenty years in North Indian Vidya Peetams (places of philosophical study).

This sage of the Vaishnavas, Sri T. Krishnamacharya, lives in a house, a home, though traditionally sages have spent their later life living in the forest, forsaking all attachments of Earth. His purpose is to be a living example of the principle that one can live with the family while still maintaining the tradition of the forest sages, just as the leaves of a lotus plant may live in the water yet never get wet. Because of his disciplined living, the signs of his great age cannot be seen on him. He makes good use of his education, his experience, and his knowledge of Yoga exercises to cure the physical and mental ills of humanity. Let us hear the story of his youth in his own words:

## SRI KRISHNAMACHARYA SPEAKS

"My father was my first Guru. He was known as Ganapati Srinivasa Thathachariar. Kannada was our mother tongue. My father was a well-known Veda pandit. I was invested with the sacred cord at age five. From then on I studied the Sastras with my father. He would wake me up at two o'clock in the morning and ask me to chant the Vedas by memory a given number of times. If I didn't respond immediately, he would gently drip water in my ear to awaken me. He was very strict. If I made a mistake, not only would he correct the error, he would punish me sharply. He would join me in the chanting. It is very sweet and moving to hear the deep-toned chanting in the still hours of the night.

"In those times there was a college known as Chamaraj Sanskrit College in Mysore. I took the examination in Sastras and Purva Mimamsa at the Vidvan level. I was sixteen years old. I made a practice of debating on the subjects of the Sastras with the professors of that college and with any pandits who came to visit. I would even argue with them! That was how I found out that there were many things I still had to learn! I became thirsty for more knowledge. All binding commitments and involvements such as family and parents disappeared before this thirst, this ambition. The desire arose in me to study other systems such as Tharkam, Vyakaranam, Samkya.

"One day my father was giving a discourse on Patanjali's Yoga Sutra. As he was discoursing on Parinamatraya, Samyamath, Atheetha and Anahatha Jnana, I fell to wondering about these terms and asked him, 'What are Atheetha Nyana and Anahatha Jnana?' In reply he suggested that I learn Patanjali's Yoga Sutra. That planted in me the hope that I might learn the Yoga Sutra from a qualified yogacharya.

"After completing my Vidvan examination in Mysore, I studied Vedanta Kalakshepa ( religious discourse on the Vedanta) and served in the Parakala Mutt for two years. This was not at all what I wanted. Day by day as my thirst for learning grew I became more uncomfortable with my situation. During these days, about 1905, there were good Vedic pandits in Kasi. The head of the Kasi Sanskrit Vidya Peetam was the Mahamahopadyaya

Ganganath Jha. My father, understanding my impatience for more learning, gave me permission to go to Kasi. About ten of my colleagues at the Mysore College joined me there, but, to the best of my knowledge, none stayed for the full course. I learned Tharkam from Vamadeva Shattacharya. I stayed for eleven years in Kasi where I met and became friends with many pandits. At that stage I knew nothing but studies and the Gayatri Mantra. My acquaintance with Mahamahopadyaya Ganganath Jha formed a turning point in my life. A strong love grew up between us. Later he requested me to teach his own son, Amarnath Jha.

"At that time, there was a famous university at a place called Navadvipam. The institution was completely staffed by learned pandits. They called it Nadiya University. I wanted to go there and graduate in Darsana Sutras. This would mean staying there for an entire year. But my teacher's son, Devendra Bhattacharya ( a medical doctor in the military service) told me that it would be difficult to study while living there, and I would be better off studying in Kasi and taking the exam at Navadvipam. He made arrangements for this. When I was ready I went and stayed in Navadvipam eleven days for the examinations. I was given the title Nyaya Ratnam, which means 'Jewel of Understanding.' At that time the throning ceremony of the Rajah of Dikkanghat (a principality within Darbhanga) was taking place. I received an invitation, and attended. I had a public debate with a pandit named Bihari Lal and defeated him. The Maharajah of Darbhanga, impressed by my exhibition of learning, invited me to his palace and gave me a reward and honors."

## YOGA: THE FINAL GOAL

It was surprising to listen as Krishnamacharya recalled these memories of names and places without the slightest hesitation. But how did he master the Yoga Sutra of Patanjali and the Yoga Rahasya of Nathamuni? How is it possible that still today he is a wonderfully expert teacher of Yoga? When asked these questions he answered simply, "For this also Mahamahopadyaya Ganganath Jha has my lasting gratitude."

Ganganath Jha had the title of Yogacharya (Teacher of Yoga). When Krishnamacharya

sought his guidance, Jha asked him if he was sure he had a serious inclination to learn Yoga. Krishnamacharya was still hungry and thirsty for more knowledge. He told Ganganath Jha that this indeed was his ambition. It was, after all, his father who had first advised him to master the Yoga Sutra. He recalls today that Ganganath Jha said to him, "If you really want to master Yoga you must travel beyond Nepal for that is where Yogeswarar Rama Mohana Brahmacharya is living. In the Gurkha language there is a book called 'Yoga Gurandam'. In that book you can find practical information such as Yoga practices which give health benefits. If you go to Rama Mohana you can learn the complete meaning of the Yoga Sutra." When he heard this, Krishnamacharya was eager to attain this new goal. He wanted to travel with the speed of thought, but there was to be a delay.

It happened that at that time Lord Irwin was Viceroy. His Headquarters were in Simla. Ganganath Jha wrote to the Viceroy recommending his young friend Krishnamacharya for his proficiency, ambition and knowledge of the Sastras as well as for his personal qualities. He requested the Viceroy's help in obtaining the necessary documents to travel into Tibet. But, as luck would have it, the Viceroy was ill with diabetes. The military doctor, Devendra Bhattacharya, was in charge of the case, but could not bring about a complete recovery. This doctor was, as we have seen, the son of Krishnamacharya's teacher at Kasi, Vamadeva Bhattacharya.

One day Krishnamacharya was surprised to be visited by an aide of the Viceroy hand-carrying a letter from the Viceroy to him, and requesting him to come to Simla. He stayed in Simla for six months teaching the Viceroy yogic practices. The diabetes was largely controlled. The Viceroy was extremely pleased and developed respect and affection for the young man. He was happy to make all the necessary arrangements for Krishnamacharya to cross the Himalayas, out of India, across Nepal, and into Tibet. Here is the story of that voyage as retained in Krishnamacharya's memory:

"The Viceroy sent three aides with me. This was some time in 1919. The expense of the

journey was covered by the British government. Clothes of leather were made to order to protect us from the cold. On the trail we came across a recluse named Pilmugi living in a cave. We stayed in the cave with him for several days, and then continued on our journey. We reached Manasarovar and from there went on to Mela Parvatham. We had dharsan of Thirayambaka Narayana and finally reached the dwelling place of Rama Mohana Brahmacharya who was to be my Guru. We had been walking for two and a half months.

"On meeting my Guru I prostrated myself before him. It was evident that Ganganath Jha had written to him about me. He received me with great love and kindness. I noted that even though he was called 'Brahmacharya,' he was living with his family. His eldest son, Ramachandra Brahmacharya, is still alive today, about eighty years old. Our food was puri (Indian bread), halwa (a paste of vegetables or fruits with sweetening and ghee) and tea. My period of gurukulam here in Tibet lasted for seven and a half years. Rama Mohana made me memorize the whole of the Yoga Gurandam in the Gurkha language. The various stages of Patanjali's Yoga Sutra are dealt with in that book in a very precise but extensive commentary. That is necessary because Sutras are by definition very concise. In the Yoga Gurandam, the various kinds of Yoga poses and movements are described with great clarity. Only after studying this book can one understand the inner meaning and science of the Yoga Sutra of Patanjali."

After Krishnamacharya's return to Kasi as an outstanding scholar and Yoga expert, the Maharajah of Jaipur called him to serve as principal of the Vidya Sala (Centre for instruction in philosophy and Yoga) in Jaipur. This situation, with its regular schedule of classes and the requirement of being answerable to various people, did not suit the free-spirited Krishnamacharya. The Sradha (annual homage) of his father was approaching, so, with this pretext, he returned to Kasi. He enjoyed meeting and holding conversations with the various pandits who had studied with him in Kasi. Impressed by Krishnamacharya's newly mastered techniques, Amarnath Jha, the son of Ganganath Jha, introduced him to various monarchs and he was widely honored.

At this time the Maharajah of Mysore, Krishnaraja Wadiyar, appeared in Kasi to celebrate the Shastiabdapurthi (60th birthday) of his mother. On hearing of Krishnamacharya, he invited him to come to the Palace at Mysore. The Maharajah was greatly impressed by the young man's demeanor, authority and scholarship.

In Mysore, Krishnamacharya was given quarters within the Palace and, as he desired, Yoga studios were constructed. He went to teach Yoga asanas once or twice each week and within three years seven or eight students were ready to teach and the King built three more studios at a total cost of two hundred thousand rupees, a great investment at the value of currency in those days.

Krishnamacharya became the Maharajah's most valued counselor and was given the use of the Jayanmohan Palace. At the Maharajah's request, he wrote several books including Yoga Magarondam, Yoganjali, and Yogasanalu. These books were all published by the Palace and by Mysore University. With the support of the Maharajah, the Yoga teaching continued with great success for about sixteen years, until 1946.

## A TIME OF CHANGE

The Congress Party Movement got under way and when a temporary Ministry, or Cabinet, was formed, K. C. Reddy became Chief Minister of Mysore. It was his responsibility to prune government spending in Mysore. In his view, the Yoga School was not very important. By this time Krishnaraja Wadiyar had died and his nephew, Jayachamaraja Wadiyar had become Maharajah.

Chief Minister Reddy sent a message to Krishnamacharya asking him to come to his office. Krishnamacharya sent back a message with the same messenger: "I am independent. I am no one's slave. If you want to see me, you may come to the Yoga School and meet me here."

The Chief Minister replied with an order: The Yoga school must be closed within three months.

But the students of Yoga would not accept this order. They staged a demonstration in front of the Chief Minister's bungalow. Rushing to reprimand the students, he fell down stairs

and hurt himself badly, breaking several of his teeth. After hearing from various people about Krishnamacharya's expertise in the field of ayurvedic medicine, he sent his secretary, Venkatasami, to Krishnamacharya to make an appointment. The Maharajah was amazed at the success of the treatment, and awarded Krishnamacharya five thousand rupees.

Krishnamacharya replied, "I do not work for money. I don't need money. Give it to the poor students of the Yoga school."

In 1937, at the time of the early fame of the Yoga School in Mysore, Krishnamacharya had been invited to give the Commencement Convocation Address at the University of Madras. That occasion marked the origin of his lasting friendships in Madras among whom were Alladi Krishnaswamy Iyer, T. R. Venkatarama Sastry, V. P. Ramesan, M. K. Nambiar and other important leaders. After Independence, when the power of the rajahs and maharajahs was reduced, these friends invited him to Madras. On the insistence of his friends, he immediately took over the Yoga classes taught in Vivokananda College in the evening.

### Question:

Does the Yoga Sutra contain specific asanas as remedies for specific ills?

### Krishnamacharya's reply:

*"One must study carefully and ascertain the source of the ailment. The ailment may come from a change in food. There are individual differences in karma. The Sastras mention the relationship between food and life-style suited for each season. If you are prudent in your food habits, you will be free of disease. In the Bhagavad Gita the Lord has admonished us to eat nothing but sattvika food (neither too spicy nor too sweet). Vyasara, Shankara and others have written commentaries to help us understand Patanjali's Sutra. Several of the asanas are accurately described in Nathamuni's Yoga Rahasyam."*

### Question:

"We cannot live the kind of life that is envisioned in the Sastras. There have been too many changes in manner of life. In view of these changes, do you think the practice of Yoga asanas is out of date or out of place?"

## Krishnamacharya's answer:

*"Whatever place, whatever time, the ancestors have framed the Yoga practices to suit them all. Only the attitudes and circumstances of human beings change. Time and space does not change. The same sun shines as always! The moon too! Remember the conversation between Rama and Sugreeva in the age-old epic of Ramayana? Vybushana comes to Rama asking for asylum. Sugreeva and Hanuman urge Rama not to accept him in the circumstances (the circumstances being that Vybushana is the brother of Rama's arch-enemy Ravana). Rama replies, 'Forget the circumstances, forget the times, no one who approaches me for help shall be turned away.'"*

With the intention of preserving the benefits of Krishnamacharya's experience and achievements for humanity, T. K. V. Desikachar, his son, has established the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram. Yoga asanas are taught here on a scientific basis. Many graduates of the Mandiram have founded Yoga study groups and schools all over the world to help humanity live in good health. As for the ninety-six year old Krishnamacharya himself, his tuneful, steady, and authoritative voice as he chants the Vedic mantras fills the listener with a strong resonance. The Government of Tamil Nadu (Madras State) has acknowledged the exceptional value of these exercises, and also the Minister of Health of Tamil Nadu, Dr. Hande, has ceremonially honored the work of this new organisation, with special praise for the brilliant achievements of Krishnamacharya.

The life of Krishnamacharya serves as an example of the principle that family living does not stand in the way of leading the true life of a yogacharya.

Krishnamacharya's wife, Srimathi Namagiriyammal, is over twenty years younger than he. It is inspiring to hear her tell of his independent ways, and the many debates he has won over great pandits.

For one really enlightened, the presence of the family will not be a burden.

Krishnamacharya lives among us in the same state of consciousness that illuminates the sages who dwell in the Himalayas. He lives among us and not in some remote forest

because of his principle that the devout and healthy life that he lives should become a natural mode of living to all humanity. Today he is the living example of the bright consciousness radiating from the ancient sages enriched with the wisdom of solitude and penance. To meet with him, to have his darshan, is to know the satisfaction of having seen the personification of Indian culture.

by "Hastam" in Kalaimagal, Pongal, 1984

(translated by Bert Franklin with S. Venkataraman)