



YOGA T.K.V. DESIKACHAR

# Master of the Mat

TEXT: NINA MUKHERJI

**The teacher spreads the belief that yoga is not merely a set of exercises for physical fitness**

Founder of the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram (KYM) in Chennai, T.K.V. Desikachar is one of the world's foremost yoga teachers and a renowned authority on the therapeutic uses of the discipline. It is difficult to believe that the master was once a reluctant student, going as far as to hide in a tree to avoid classes with his teacher and father Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, who was a strict disciplinarian and a demanding task master. No surprise then that the young Desikachar was glad to get away from home to pursue a degree in engineering.

He graduated at the top of his class and landed a good job. But before he could embark on his new career, an incident changed the course of his life. It was 1961, Desikachar was reading the newspaper sitting in the balcony of his home when he espied an elegantly

dressed woman stepping out of an expensive car in front of his house. Sounding very excited she called out to Desikachar's father. The moment she spotted Krishnamacharya, she hugged him and exclaimed, "Thank you! Thank you very much!" The yoga guru smiled and led her inside. Desikachar wondered why a Western woman was hugging his extremely conservative father.

Soon Desikachar would learn that the woman was a chronic patient of insomnia and was being treated by his father. The night before the visit was the first time in years that she had had a restful sleep without any medication. The relief was so great that she had rushed to thank Krishnamacharya. This was an eureka moment for Desikachar, in that instant he understood the value and importance of his father's work; that yoga was not an esoteric philosophy or about dogmatic rituals, it was about transforming lives. "I realised how great my father was, and how much he had to share with people. I decided to give up my career and become a



PHOTO: KANISHK DESIKACHAR

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PHOTO: KAUSTHUB DESIKACHAR

yoga student," says Desikachar. "It was a time when yoga was not popular and such a decision from a young engineer with a secure job was extremely unusual."

The son quickly turned disciple and asked his father to become his guru. Together they worked to give a fresh impetus to the spread of yoga in its pure form. If today yoga is a part of the lives of millions across the world, it is due in large measure to the efforts of Krishnamacharya. While preserving ancient wisdom and reviving lost teachings, he developed and adapted yoga practices that would offer health, mental clarity and spiritual growth to an individual. His knowledge of yoga was so vast that he taught each student differently, refusing to standardise the practice and teaching methodology. "We still adhere very strictly to our teacher Krishnamacharya's philosophy of teaching yoga as it applies to the other. So each individual is given a specific set of *asanas* pertaining to his or her needs and requirements," says Geetha Shankar, a senior member of the faculty at KYM.

Some of the world's best minds like Jiddu Krishnamurthy, a well-known writer and speaker on philosophical and spiritual issues, studied under Desikachar and his father. It was the meeting with Krishnamurthy that helped Desikachar take yoga beyond the shores of India. "My father's pioneering

effort in bringing different healing traditions of the world together has resulted in KYM becoming one of the best known yoga therapy and research centres of the world. He has popularised yoga in many countries across Europe and America," says Kausthub Desikachar, who is CEO of KYM. Krishnamacharya passed away in 1989, in 2006 Desikachar, along with Kausthub, founded the Krishnamacharya Healing and Yoga Foundation (KHYP), which is committed to spreading the holistic yoga teachings of T. Krishnamacharya.

Desikachar has authored many publications, including *Health, Healing and Beyond* and *The Heart of Yoga: Developing a Personal Practice*. Today, KYM, a registered public charitable trust, is a multi-departmental institution which employs over 30 teachers. His entire family, his wife, Menaka, sons, daughter and daughter-in-law are involved in one way or the other with the running of the place. The institute, which has over a thousand students on a monthly basis, offers courses in yoga studies and yoga therapy. Vedavani, a unit of KYM, also researches and teaches Vedic chanting while KYM-Mitra is an outreach programme that gifts yoga to the underprivileged and differently abled. Krishnamacharya had said, "Yoga is about life," and Desikachar and KYM continue to spread his message. ■

More on T.K.V. Desikachar at [www.kym.org](http://www.kym.org)