

Yoga — for health, longevity and peace

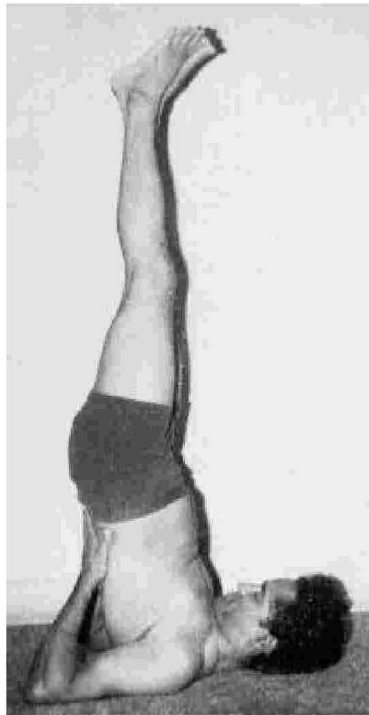
That was centurion Krishnamacharya's mantra. Prime disciple A.G. Mohan echoes it

GEETHA VENKATARAMANAN

Engineer-turned A.G. Mohan and his wife Indra have dedicated themselves to the propagation of authentic yoga. Acknowledged by the late Krishnamacharya as his successor, Mohan has authored several works, which underline the legend's principles. A co-founder of the Krishnamachari Yoga Mandiram, Mohan has been invited to several forums across the world to make presentations. The entire family comprising wife Indra, son Dr. Ganesh and daughter Nithya curated the European Yoga Congress, 2016, which took place at Zinal, Switzerland. Mohan, who co-authors with Dr. Ganesh the fortnightly column, 'Mind Your Yoga,' of this supplement, speaks of the relevance of Yoga and its essence. Excerpts from an interview:

There has been a spurt in the awareness regarding yoga in the past decade. How do you look at this interest?

■ With happiness! When I started studying yoga with my teacher, the great yogi of the last century, Sri Krishnamacharya in 1971, very few were interested. I was an engineer



Postures juxtaposed A.G. Mohan doing Viparitarikarani in 1973 and now. (Below) Mayurasana



and management professional by training, and even my brothers were taken aback that I was devoting myself to yoga studies and teaching! Krishnamacharya, the teacher of BKS Iyengar, and others tried to propagate yoga in the earlier part of the 20th century, but it is only in the 21st century that yoga has become so popular worldwide! I think this is a profound positive development for the well-being of people and for society as a whole.

Is Yoga a panacea for all ailments? From obesity to depression, yoga seems to be prescribed as an answer. Your thoughts on that.

■ Yoga is not a panacea in that it cannot cure all diseases, and especially not acute conditions. But yoga can certainly help with great many chronic diseases, including obesity and depression! It is not just the asanas that are helpful, but the holistic approach of mind-body connection that is in the framework of yoga itself. Yoga incorporates a variety of practices: movement, breathing, meditation, sound, lifestyle changes and more. However, it is essential that yoga should be customised to the need and purpose of the individual.

Breath is the pivot of Yoga. Expand

■ Yoga is a body-mind practice. Breath is the key link between body and mind. Effective breathing brings health to our organs, balances the nervous system, and calms the mind. The traditional practices of yoga lay great emphasis on the importance of breathing in the form of pranayama. The ancient practice of meditation with the Gayatri mantra was traditionally done along with pranayama. In my teacher Krishnamacharya's approach, breathing was a central component in asanas too.

The importance of a guru in the learning

■ The role of the guru is important,

but so is the role of the student. The path of yoga is one of self-transformation. The role of the guru is to provide knowledge, guidance and inspiration. But it is the student, who must create the personal change through his or her own practice and knowledge. All my personal learning with Krishnamacharya was individual, on a one-to-one basis, over two decades (1971-1989). Some theory or philosophy lectures were in a very small group. This would be ideal, but is difficult in today's world. One to one would be best, especially when yoga is used therapeutically. Besides, it is not just about being one-on-one; it is about the teaching being personalised and relevant to each student. A personal yoga class is not just teaching individually the same things that the teacher delivers in a group!

What is the relevance of meditation in the context of yoga?

■ My teacher Krishnamacharya used to say that even the practice of asana should have mental control. Yoga should start with dharana or the practice of keeping the mind steady. In that sense, yoga is inseparable from mindfulness and meditation. Of course, this does not mean that we can do yoga only if we can sit for an extended time in meditation. It means that we must bring stable, calm and comfortable attention in all the practices of yoga, whether it is asana or pranayama. In time, we will be able to sit for longer periods in meditation with a calm and clear mind.

In those days, rishis, who practised

yoga, had a conducive environment to do so. How realistic is it in today's world of pollution and distractions?

■ This is why it is all the more necessary to practice yoga now! Modern life has many conveniences. Though there are many distractions nowadays, the material quality of life we have now has been improving. The distractions we face are often of our own making! If we choose to find quietness in our homes, we certainly can. Yoga is not about retreating from life as an escape. It is about cultivating stillness wherever we are in the best ways we can.

It is worth spending time on calming the mind. We can take our attention away from our phones and place it on our body, breath, and thoughts! The gadgets can actually help us practise yoga. We can set reminders. We can play recordings of our mantra. In fact, I have on my phone the recordings that I did along with Krishnamacharya of Vedic chanting, the Gayatri mantra and more, as far back as 1984 when he was 96 years old! I can listen to them whenever I want, which was very difficult in those days. Opportunities are more in modern times to practise yoga if we choose to and know how to!

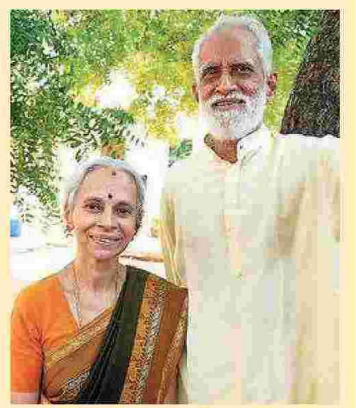
You were close to Sri Krishnamacharya. What was his theory regarding the practice of yoga all those decades ago? For instance, why did he think people should practise yoga? Did he spell out benefits?

■ Krishnamacharya would have been very happy to see the spread of yoga, had he been alive now. He wanted to see yoga taught in schools and in as many places as possible. All that is gradually happening now. I was the convener of Krishnamacharya's 100-year celebration function. Following that, in one of my last classes with him, I asked him privately, "What is important in life?" He replied simply, "Health, longevity and peace of mind." He was always of the opinion that yoga could give us all of them.

Have we come far away from the core? How can we get back?

■ Yoga has spread wide and far, and that is good. But as with many other fields in modern times, yoga has also become a commodity and a marketing buzzword. There are advertisements for yoga classes where you can 'drink' and do yoga at the same time nowadays. How this would lead to the mind being calm and steady is a mystery!

Some yoga classes are just exercise or fitness classes, with not much self-



Where women differ

Indra Mohan says: "The practice of yoga is primarily aimed at steadying the mind. The mind has no form. Therefore, the practice of pranayama and meditation may be similar to man and woman, but the body has a form and it differs according to the gender. Hence the practice of asanas needs to be appropriate for women."

"With the growing popularity of yoga, we find more and more women practitioners of varying age groups worldwide. This is to be appreciated, but at the same time, women need to be aware that the practice needs to be adapted to their age and phase in life. The natural process of growth, change and decline are common to men and women. However, women experience these changes more intensely at times of hormonal changes from menstruation to menopause. For the practice of asana is not just the physical act of the postures but also using them to progress toward a calm mind within. And this can happen only if we cultivate mindful awareness of the body, discrimination on what is healthy and balanced reflection on the bigger picture in the asana practice itself."

awareness or steadiness of mind. At one level, it is still good as people are exercising and that is beneficial to health. At a deeper level, they are missing out on the core integration and steadiness that yoga can bring to their lives if the teachings do not incorporate the holistic approach of the yoga of the ancient sages. It is important to propagate the message of yoga, but it is also important to check that message and see that it is wise and comprehensive. Only then will practitioners see deep and lasting well-being and peace of mind arising reliably in their lives.

What is the connection between yoga and Ayurveda?

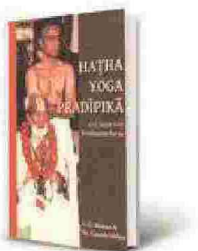
■ Yoga and Ayurveda are founded from the same roots and related in their aims. The goal of ayurveda is the state of svastha – balance in the doshas or body functions, balance in the body tissues, healthy metabolism, clear and pleasant state of the senses, mind, and self. The steadiness of mind and transformation that yoga teaches us is also based on the state of svastha. The healing methods of Ayurveda and self-transformation of yoga are deeply supportive of each other.

Is Yoga related to religion?

■ The yoga of Patanjali is not synonymous with the religion of Hinduism and its many branches. It is a state of absolute calmness of the mind. Yoga can be practised along with any religion. Practise when you understand clearly, says Yogasutra, and your practice will be more effective.

Time with Guru

"I began my study with Krishnamacharya in 1971, which continued till his demise in 1989," says A.G. Mohan. The association opened the door, among many things, to Yoga therapy, Yoga Yagnavalkya, Hatha Yoga Pradipika and the Bhagavad Gita. Vedic chanting, pranayama and Ayurveda were among the many areas master and disciple covered. Regarding hatha yoga, Mohan says, "...this period of study (1981-82) were illuminating years later... at that time I did not understand the nuances, which became clearer." Classes on at least three topics would be going on simultaneously. Krishnamacharya's demise brought a shift in Mohan's approach. Mohan had started compiling key principles from Krishnamacharya's teaching in his book, *Yoga, Body, Breath and Mind*. The preceptor had provided a foreword for it. The book was published in 1993. The translation of *Yoga Yagnavalkya* into English was another landmark in his journey. "This was necessary in order to reach a wider audience," explains the author. He worked with son Dr. Ganesh to bring out a revised edition in 2013. "I still continue to learn, reflect and practise every day. Krishnamacharya said that learning should never stop," says Mohan.



Yoga Knowledge.net is an online learning platform devoted to the dissemination of knowledge of yoga and other related disciplines through short, easy to understand video talks, presented by A. G. Mohan and Indra Mohan. To contact write to info@svastha.net

