YOGA BODY

THE ORIGINS OF MODERN POSTURE PRACTICE

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T. Krishnamacharya and the Mysore *Āsana* Revival

> You may ask, "It may be true for Indians, but what about foreigners who are healthy, long-lived, and do not practice yoga: are they not intelligent? Are they not happy?" You are right, but you should realise that God has created an appropriate system of educational activity for the geographical condition, the quality of the air and the vegetation of the country. . . . It is not true that the physical exercises practiced by such people are not in conformity with our Yoga system. We don't know what they were practicing in the past, but at present all of you should know for sure that they are practicing the same Yoga *sādhana* as us.
>
> (Krishnamacharya 1935: 22)

> For your own sakes, for the sake of the world in general, and for the sake of the youth of Mysore in particular, I wish you all possible success in your endeavours to give direction to a civilisation that has lost its way. And I suggest that the signposts are to be found . . . in the simple truths that lie at the base of all religions and in their application, by the aid of the great discoveries of science, to the needs of the present day.
>
> (Maharaja Krishnaraja Wodiyar IV, Opening Address, 1937 YMCA World Conference, Mathews 1937: 90)

The legacy to contemporary transnational yoga of T. Krishnamacharya (1888–1989) is second to none, largely due to the propagation and development of his teachings by well-known students such as K. Pattabhi Jois, B. K. S. Iyengar (brother-in-law), Indra Devi, and T. K. V. Desikachar (son). In recent years Krishnamacharya has posthumously attracted the reverence of thousands of practitioners worldwide and has been the subject of two biographies by his disciple Mala Srivatsan (1997) and his grandson (and son of T. K. V.) Kausthub Desikachar (2005). Also important in this regard is T. K. V. Desikachar's *Health, Healing and Beyond* of 1998, which

combines biographical stories with lessons on yoga's healing power. Finally, we must note Kausthub Desikachar's recent "family album" of Krishnamacharya and others, *Masters in Focus* (2009), conceived as a photographic tribute to the major figures of twentieth-century yoga.

Although Krishnamacharya's teaching career spans almost seven decades of the twentieth century, it is the years spent in Mysore, from the early 1930s until the early 1950s, that have arguably had the greatest influence on radically physicalized forms of yoga across the globe. During this period, Krishnamacharya elaborated a system whose central component was a rigorous (and oftentimes aerobic) series of *āsanas*, joined by a repetitive linking sequence. The highly fashionable Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga of Pattabhi Jois is a direct development of this phase of Krishnamacharya's teaching, and the various spin-off forms (like "power yoga," "vinyasa flow" and "power vinyasa") that have burgeoned, particularly in America, since the early 1990s derive often explicit inspiration from these forms. The clearest example may be Beryl Bender Birch's *Power Yoga* of 1995. Birch, along with Larry Schultz (a long-term student of Pattabhi Jois), were two of the earliest innovators of the American power yoga craze. B. K. S. Iyengar, who has perhaps done more than any other individual to popularize a global *āsana*-based yoga in the twentieth century, similarly developed his method as a result of his early contact with Krishnamacharya in Mysore. Although the aerobic component of Iyengar's teaching is greatly diminished, it remains heavily influenced by the *āsana* forms that he learned from his guru.

I have been considering the growth of postural yoga as a function of a worldwide revival of physical culture. Here I focus on a single school of postural yoga—the Jaganmohan Palace *yogaśālā* of T. Krishnamacharya—arguing that *it is only against this broader backdrop of physical education in India that we can fully understand the historical location of Krishnamacharya's* haṭha *yoga method.* The style of *yogāsana* practice that has come to prominence in the West since the late 1980s through Pattabhi Jois's Ashtanga Vinyasa (and its various derivative forms) represents a unique and unrepeated phase of Krishnamacharya's teaching. After he left Mysore in the early 1950s, his methods continued to evolve and adapt to new circumstances, and it is telling in this regard that the teaching style of his later disciples in Chennai (such as son T. K. V. Desikachar and senior student A. G. Mohan) bears little resemblance to the arduous, aerobic sequences taught by Pattabhi Jois. If we are to understand the derivation and function of modern forms of "power yoga" we must first enquire why Krishnamacharya taught this way during his years in Mysore.[1]

Initially, I will look at the circumstances surrounding Krishnamacharya's employment as a yoga teacher in Mysore. Thanks largely to the efforts of the Maharaja Krishnaraja Wodiyar IV, Mysore had, by the time Krishnamacharya

arrived, become a pan-Indian hub of physical culture revivalism. Krishnamacharya, working under the personal direction of the Maharaja, was entrusted with the task of popularizing the practice of yoga, and the system he developed was the product of this mandate. Basing my argument on the administrative records of the Jaganmohan Palace where Krishnamacharya opened his *yogaśālā* in 1933, and on oral and textual testimonies of the few surviving students from those years (mainly gathered during the summer of 2005), I contend that this system, which was to become the basis of so many forms of contemporary athletic yoga, is a synthesis of several extant methods of physical training that (prior to this period) would have fallen well outside any definition of yoga. The unique form of yoga practice developed during these years has become a mainstay of postural modern yoga.

Born in Muchukundapuram, Karnataka State, Tirumalai Krishnamacharya was the eldest child of a distinguished Vaiṣṇava Brahmin family. His great-grandfather had been head of the Śrī Parakālamaṭha in Mysore, which was, according to T. K. V. Desikachar, the "first great center of Vaishnavite learning in South India" (1998: 34). From a young age his father began to initiate him into this culture and to instruct him in the bases of yoga. He divided his early studies between Benares and Mysore, mastering several of the orthodox *darśana* (philosophical systems). In 1915, eager to learn more about the practice of yoga, he set out to find one Rāmmohan Brahmacāri who was, according to Krishnamacharya's preceptor in Benares, the only person capable of teaching him the full meaning of Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* (Desikachar 2005: 54).[2] After seven years under his tutelage at Lake Mansarovar in Tibet, Krishnamacharya had absorbed "all of the philosophy and mental science of Yoga; its use in diagnosing and treating the ill; and the practice and perfection of *asana* and *pranayama*" (Desikachar 1998: 43). At the end of his apprenticeship, his guru instructed him to go back to India, start a family, and teach yoga. In accordance with these instructions he returned to Mysore in 1925, married a young girl called Namagiriamma, and for the next five years toured the region promoting the message of yoga (Chapelle 1989: 30).

According to Pattabhi Jois, he was sponsored during this period by an influential Mysore official, N. S. Subbarao, who paid Krishnamacharya to lecture on yoga in the various districts of the state (interview, Pattabhi Jois, September 25, 2005). Then in 1931 he was invited by the Maharaja to teach at the Sanskrit Pāṭhaśālā in Mysore, and two years later he was given a wing of the Jaganmohan Palace for a *yogaśālā*. It was during this time that two of his most influential disciples, B. K. S. Iyengar and Pattabhi Jois, studied under him. Patronage, however, came to an end soon after Independence and the *yogaśālā* closed forever. In 1952 he was invited to Chennai by a leading jurist and took over the evening yoga classes at the Vivekananda College there (Chapelle 1989: 31). He would remain in Chennai until his death in 1989. In 1976 his son T. K. V. Desikachar

established the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram in his honor, and it remains the principal organ for the dissemination of Desikachar's vision of his father's teaching.

The Maharaja and the Mysore Physical Culture Movement

The Maharaja Krishnaraja Wodiyar IV (1884–1940), ruled the state and city of Mysore from 1902 until his death and was "by all accounts a gentle person, a reflective man of great sensitivity who lived a reclusive life within his palaces" (Manor 1977: 14). In spite of his naturally introverted nature, however, during his thirty-eight-year rule he tirelessly promoted a wide range of cultural innovations, financed scientific and technological experimentation, revolutionized education in the region, and implemented an array of political reforms, including early experiments with democracy. His reign is remembered by many as "the best and most significant period in the history of Mysore" (Ahmed 1988: 4).

One of the principal arenas of revitalization during his reign was physical education, a subject close to the Maharaja's heart. Throughout his life he promoted physical culturalism in various ways, such as his hosting in January 1937 "the first and only World Conference in the hundred year history of the Indian YMCA" and giving a large parcel of land for the new Bangalore YMCA (David 1992: 306; Matthews 1937). Always a champion of Indian cultural and religious expression, Krishnaraja Wodiyar was nonetheless enthusiastic in embracing positive innovations from abroad and incorporating them into his programs of social betterment. As John R. Mott—World Committee president and later Nobel Peace laureate—puts it in his opening address to the conference, the Maharaja was a man with

> reverential regard for the great traditions of ancient India, and yet with up-to-date contacts with modern progress the world over, and responsiveness to new visions and plans; one, therefore, who has successfully blended the priceless heritage of the East with much that is best in the Western world. (Mathews 1937: 90).

We will remember that the Indian YMCA sought to revitalize the moral mettle of the populace through indigenous and foreign physical culture, and that *yogāsana* was one of the components of this project. It is significant for what follows, indeed, that B. K. S. Iyengar recalls demonstrating *āsana* before the Maharaja and the YMCA delegates (1987 [1978]).

The Maharaja was an early advocate of the YMCA's mission; the Mysore government was "the first to take up the cause of indigenous physical culture as

early as 1919,"[3] with a full-time organizer, Professor M. V. Krishna Rao, appointed to oversee its development (Kamath 1933: 27). Rao's mission was to popularize Indian exercise and games throughout the state and "was of great value in resuscitating the indigenous system" (27). Importantly, as we saw in chapter 5, Rao is also credited with being one of the early proponents of the synthesis of physical culture and *āsana* (Ghose 1925: 25). As a result of his efforts, "the message of the indigenous system had spread far and wide and public interest was effectively enlisted in its cause and several institutions of a similar nature have grown up in Bangalore under Prof. K. V. Iyer, Prof. Sundaram and others." (Ghose 1925: 25)

The Maharaja actively fostered a climate of eclectic, creative physical culture in Mysore State, establishing the material and ideological conditions that would directly facilitate the synthetic *haṭha* experiments of his beneficiary Iyer, Iyer's student and collaborator Sundaram, and others (see chapter 6). The vital point here is that physical culture in Mysore during the 1920s and 1930s was based on a spirit of radical fusion and innovation promulgated by the Maharaja (via Krishna Rao) and in which *yogāsana* played a major role. As Manor points out, the Maharaja's authority over government exceeded that of any official of British India and "was essentially *personal* in nature" with "ultimate power flowing from the Maharaja himself" (1977: 15). The physical culture experiments that burgeoned in the state during this period should therefore be understood as being in accord with his wishes and with the combined expertise in *āsana* and physical culture of lieutenants like Krishna Rao. It was within this milieu that another of the Maharaja's donees, Krishnamacharya, would develop his own system of *haṭha* yoga, rooted in brahminical tradition but molded by the eclectic physical culture zeitgeist.

Sūryanamaskār and Palace Physical Education

The administrative reports of the Jaganmohan Palace, where Krishnamacharaya was to open his *yogaśālā* on August 11, 1933 (Krishnamacharya c. 1941, Introduction), show a marked emphasis on physical attainment. Gymnastics, military exercises, and all manner of Western sports and games were a major part of the daily life of the royal guards and the extended maternal royal family, the Arasus (or "Ursus" as the name appears in the records). The first reference to Krishnamacharya in these reports comes in the year 1932–1933, when he is mentioned as an instructor at the palace boy's school:" The Physical Instruction Class was under Mr. V. D. S. Naidu, and during the latter part of the year Mr. Krishnamachar was appointed to teach the Yogic System of exercises to the Prince" (n.a. 1931–1947, Year 1932–1933: 33).

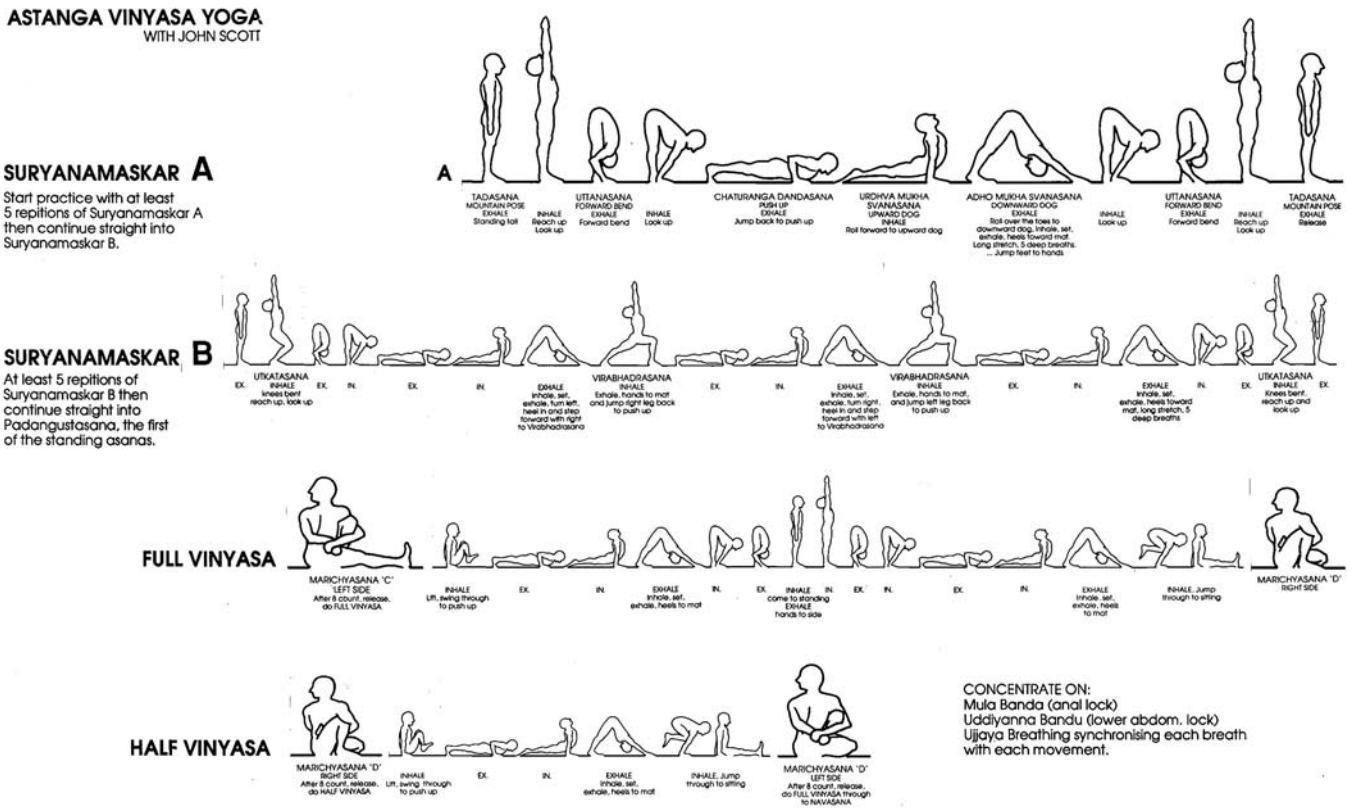
Jaganmohan Palace, Mysore (photo by author)

Throughout these palace records, Krishnamacharya's yoga classes are categorized as "physical culture" or "exercise" and are often mentioned in conjunction, as they are here, alongside other, non-yogic physical activities, such as those of his colleague V. D. S. Naidu. In the 1934–1935 school report, for example, we read under the heading "Physical Culture" that "thirty-two boys attended the Yogasana Classes and a large number of boys attended the Suryanamaskar Classes" (n.a. 1931–1947, Year 1934–35: 10). The entry is also significant as it suggests (once again) that at this time *sūryanamaskār* was not yet considered part of *yogāsana*. Krishnamacharya was to make the flowing movements of *sūryanamaskār* the basis of his Mysore yoga style, and Pattabhi Jois still claims that the exact stages of the sequences ("A" and "B"), as taught by his guru, are enumerated in the Vedas. As noted in the introduction, this last claim is difficult to substantiate.[4] What is important for our purposes, however, is that in those days it was far from obvious that *sūryanamaskār* and yoga were, or should be, part of the same body of knowledge or practice. As Shri Yogendra insists, "s*ūryanamaskāras* or prostrations to the sun—a form of gymnastics attached to the sun worship in India—indiscriminately mixed up with the yoga physical training by the ill-informed are definitely prohibited by the authorities" (Yogendra 1989 [1928]).[5]

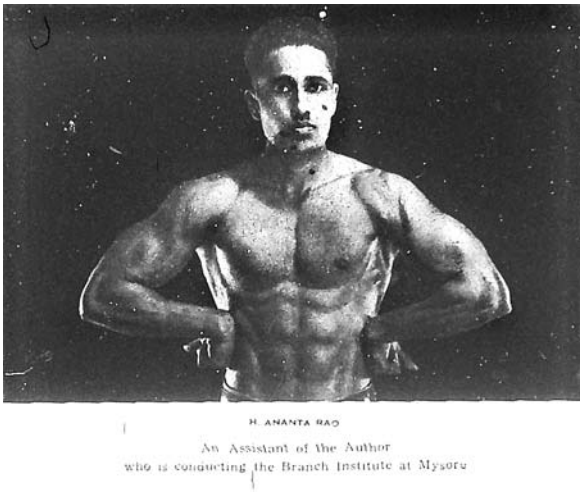
Goldberg (2006) believes that that *sūryanamaskār* became a part of Krishnamacharya's yoga system during these years due to the influence of K. V. Iyer and his senior student Anant Rao, who taught Iyer's method only meters away from Krishnamacharya's *yogaśālā*. T. R. S. Sharma who, as a boy, was a student at the *śālā*, confirms the close proximity of the venues and adds that these bodybuilding classes happened at the same hour as Krishnamacharya's evening classes (interview, T. R. S. Sharma, August 29, 2005). K. V. Iyer's son, K. V. Karna in fact stated to me that Iyer and Krishnamacharya would occasionally meet socially, and that Iyer, as a nationally admired physical culture celebrity and favorite of the Maharaja, would offer the yoga teacher advice on his classes at the palace (interview, K. V. Karna, September 17, 2005; Goldberg (2006) uses Karna's assertion in this interview as evidence that Krishnamacharya introduced *sūryanamaskār* under Iyer's influence. While this may be possible, it should probably be taken with a grain of salt. A sounder and more compelling explanation may be that Krishnamacharya's addition of *sūryanamaskār* to his *yogāsana* sequences was simply in keeping with a growing trend within postural modern yoga as a whole (as evidenced by Yogendra's admonition, above).

The 1933–1934 Palace report, under the heading "Farashkhana Department," announces the opening of a new *yogaśālā* "(in one of the rooms attached to the departments) under the guidance of Br. Sri Krishnamachari" (n. a. 1931–1947, Year 1933–34: 24). Each year thereafter, until 1947 when the records end, a brief note is made of its good progress.[6] The report makes explicit that the *śālā* has been established "to promote the physical well-being of Ursu Boys" (24). These boys were pupils at the Sri Chamrajendra Ursu Boarding School and seem to have trained with Krishnamacharya and his assistants at the *yogaśālā* as part of their physical education program, with certificates being awarded for achievement in *āsana* (n. a. 1931–1947, Year 1934–1935: 20). This is confirmed by T. R. S. Sharma, who was himself awarded such a certificate (interview, Sharma, August 29, 2005). In the palace report of 1938–1939, for example, we read, "Sports, games and scouting continued to receive considerable attention. The boys entered for the Dasara and other athletic Tournaments. A batch of students attended the "Palace Yogasala" (n. a. 1931–1947, Year 1938–1939: 9).

These reports strongly suggest that the *yogaśālā* was principally conceived as a forum for developing the physical capacities of the young royals, with Krishnamacharya's classes seemingly functioning as an optional counterpart to physical education lessons. This conceptual melding of *āsana* and exercise was not confined to the royal classrooms of the Jaganmohan Palace, however, but was widespread in the schooling systems across Mysore State: we will examine the particularities of this in more detail below. Suffice it to note for now that



Sūryanamaskārs A and B, and *Vinyāsa* sequences of Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga (drawings reproduced with permission of John Scott)



H. ANANTA RAO

An Assistant of the Author
who is conducting the Branch Institute at Mysore

Anant Rao in K. V. Iyer's *Perfect Physique* of 1936

Anant Rao in 2005, aged 100 (photo by author)

Krishnamacharya's teaching seems to have been based on certain of the predominant popular styles of children's physical education in 1930s India, with significant personal innovations and synthesis.

We should also note that, at least in the early years, there were but a handful of nonroyal students at the *yogaśālā*. As B.K.S. Iyengar notes:

> The *Yoga Shala* was meant only for the members of the Royal Family. Outsiders were permitted on special requests. Therefore, it was a formidable task for an outsider to get entry into the *Yoga Shala. Guruji* used to have only a few select outsiders with him apart from the Royal Family. (B. K. S. Iyengar, in Desikachar 2005: 188; see also Iyengar 2000: 53)

Some of these outsiders, like Pattabhi Jois, came from the Sanskrit Pāṭhaśālā where Krishnamacharya also taught *āsana*. T. R. S. Sharma attributes his membership in this closed circle to the intercession of his father, who was, like Krishnamacharya, a Vaiṣṇava Brahmin: on seeing each other's religious markings, the two men "recognized each other" and the young boy was welcomed into the *śālā* (interview, Sharma, August 29, 2005). This group also included T. R. S. Sharma's cousin Narayan Sharma, Mahadev Bhat, and Śrīnivāsa Rangācar (see section "Dissent" below).

Yoga Kurunta and the Origins of *Ashtanga Vinyasa*

In the official history of Ashtanga Vinyasa (as sanctioned by Pattabhi Jois), Krishnamacharya learned the system from his Himalayan guru Rāmmohan Brahmacāri on the basis of a five-thousand-year-old text by Vamana Rishi, called *Yoga Kurunta*. On his return to India from Tibet, Krishnamacharya "discovered" the text in a Calcutta library, transcribed it, and then taught it verbatim to his student Pattabhi Jois (for an account of this story by one of Pattabhi Jois's most senior Western students, see Eddie Sterne's introduction in Jois 1999: xv–xvi). According to some older students of Ashtanga Vinyasa, Pattabhi Jois has also related that he was in Calcutta with Krishnamacharya when he discovered the text (author's fieldwork data). He insists that the text describes in full all the *āsana*s and *vinyāsas* (or steps) of the sequences and treats of nothing other than the Ashtanga system (interview, Pattabhi Jois, September 25, 2005). Unfortunately, the text of the *Yoga Kurunta* is said to have been eaten by ants, and no extant copy appears to exist, so it is difficult to verify the truth of such assertions. It is, however, surprising that the text does not seem to have been transcribed by Pattabhi Jois (or another close disciple of Krishnamacharya), nor passed on to a disciple, as the traditional brahminical oral transmission would require. It is also surprising that the text is not (even partially) recorded in either of Krishnamacharya's books of this period—*Yoga Makaranda* (1935) and *Yogāsanagalu* (c. 1941)—nor as far as I know in any other of his writings. It does not even feature among the twenty-seven cited sources for *Yoga Makaranda*.[7]

Whether the text ever did exist is a topic of much controversy among Jois's students.

Yoga Kurunta is one of a number of "lost" texts that became central to Krishnamacharya's teaching; Śrī Nāthamuni's *Yoga Rahasya*, which Krishnamacharya received in a vision at the age of sixteen, is another. Some scholars are of the opinion that the verses of *Yoga Rahasya* are a patchwork of other, better-known texts plus Krishnamacharya's own additions (Somdeva Vasudeva, personal communication, March 20, 2005), while even certain students of Krishnamacharya have cast doubt on the derivation of this work. For instance, Srivatsa Ramaswami, who studied with Krishnamacharya for thirty-three years until the latter's death in 1989, recalls that when he asked his teacher where he might procure the text of the *Yoga Rahasya*, he was instructed "with a chuckle" to contact the Saraswati Mahal library in Tanjore (Ramaswami 2000: 18). The library replied that no such text existed, and Ramaswami, noticing that the *Ślokas* recited by Krishnamacharya were subject to constant variation, concluded that the work was "the masterpiece of [his] own guru" (18). It is entirely possible that the *Yoga Kurunta* was a similarly "inspired" text, attributed to a legendary ancient sage to lend it the authority of tradition.

Moreover, Krishnamacharya's grandson, Kausthub Desikachar, refers to writings by his grandfather that "contradict the popularly held notion that the *Yoga Kuranta* [*sic*] was the basis for *Astanga Vinyasa Yoga*" (Desikachar 2005: 60). Since nobody has seen this text, such statements can be more profitably interpreted as an indication that the "content" of the work changed as Krishnamacharya's teaching changed (and perhaps also as another symptom of the struggles to manage the memory and heritage of Krishnamacharya). That is to say, during his time in Mysore with Pattabhi Jois, Krishnamacharya may have invoked the text to legitimize the sequences that became Ashtanga yoga, but in later life he used it to authorize a wider set of practices.

The elusive manual is also today commonly elicited as a practical elaboration of Patañjali. In one version of Krishnamacharya's biography, the *Yogakurunta* is said to have combined in one volume Vamana's "jumping" system of Ashtanga yoga and the *Yogasūtras* with Vyāsa's *Bhāṣya*, and is therefore taken to represent one of the few "authentic representations of Patanjali's sutra that is still alive" (Maehle 2006: 1). Hastam (1989) attributes a similar view to Krishnamacharya himself. As I argue elsewhere (Singleton 2008a), such assertions can be better considered as symptomatic of the post hoc grafting of modern *āsana* practice onto the perceived "Pātañjala tradition" (as it was constituted through Orientalist scholarship and the modern Indian yoga renaissance) rather than as historical indications of the ancient roots of a dynamic postural system called Ashtanga Yoga. In accounts such as these, a talismanic Patañjali

provides the source authority and legitimation for the radically gymnastic *āsana* practices that predominate in modern yoga today. Indeed, it is telling that according to one Mysore resident who studied these practices with Pattabhi Jois in the 1960s (and who preferred to remain anonymous), the name "Ashtanga Vinyasa" was applied to the system only after the arrival of the first American students in the 1970s. Prior to this, Jois had simply referred to his teaching as "*āsana*."

Krishnamacharya, then, was a major player in the modern merging of gymnastic-style *āsana* practice and the Pātañjala tradition. Peter Schreiner (2003) has suggested that for Krishnamacharya, "the *Yogasūtras* are an authority which overrules the textual tradition of Haṭhayoga" and that it is for this reason he could countenance the practice of *āsana* (even in radically modernized form), but did not generally teach *haṭhayogic* techniques such as the *ṣaṭkarmas* (see chapter 1). As we read in Krishnamacharya's *Yogāsanagalu* of c. 1941,

> A number of people think that the *yogakriyās* [i. e. the *ṣarkarmāṇi*] are part of yoga, and they will argue as such. But the main source for yoga, Patañjali Darśana [viz. the *Yogasūtras*] does not include them . . . It is gravely disappointing that they defile the name of yoga. (Jacobsen and Sundaram [trans.] 2006: 18)

Given Krishnamacharya's commitment to the "Pātañjala tradition," and his uncompromising rejection of the *ṣaṭkarmas* because they do not appear in the *Yogasūtras*, it may seem quite a stretch to promote a form of aerobic *āsana* practice that has such a tenuous link to this tradition. Ultimately, Krishnamacharya's sublimation of twentieth-century gymnastic forms into the Pātañjala tradition is less an indication of a historically traceable "classical" *āsana* lineage than of the modern project of grafting gymnastic or aerobic *āsana* practice onto the *Yogasūtras*, and the creation of a new tradition.

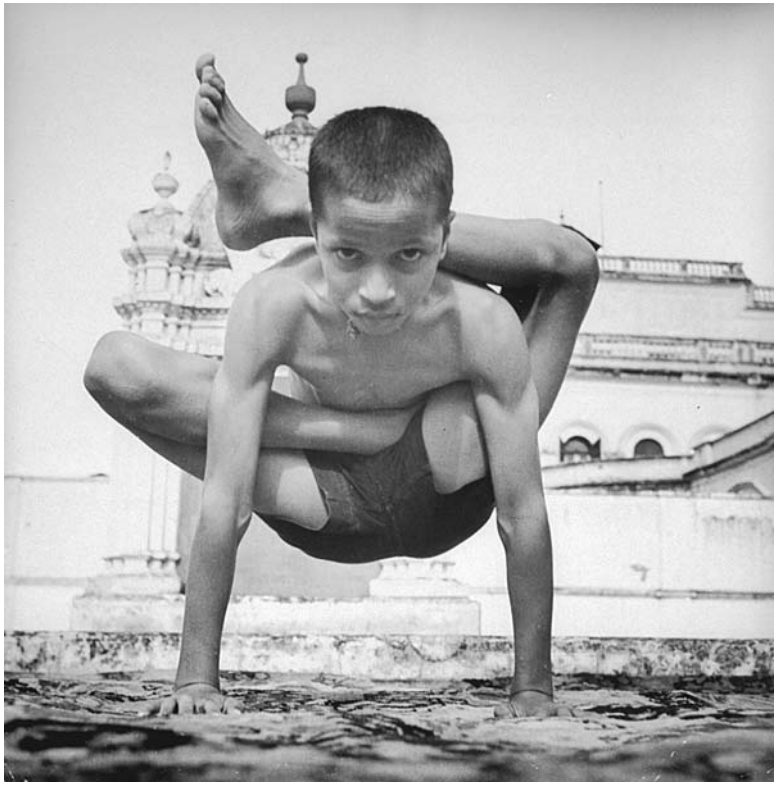
Skilful Means: Pragmatism in Krishnamacharya's Yoga

In his introduction to Krishnamacharya's *Yoga Makaranda* of 1935, the de facto "Reader in Philosophy" to the Maharaja of Mysore, V. Subhramanya Iyer (cf. Wadia 1951) states that the book is "a result of the many tests conducted under the special orders of the Maharaja of Mysore" (Krishnamacharya 1935: v). As well as indicating the keen interest that the Maharaja took in *yogaśālā* activities and his ultimate authority in its affairs, Iyer's statement also suggests the "pilot" status of the work conducted there: Krishnamacharya's teaching was intended to be, and in practice was, *experimental*. This is confirmed by

T. R. S. Sharma, one of a group of students at the *yogaśālā* not of royal descent. Sharma affirms that during the yoga classes, Krishnamacharya

> was innovating all the time in response to his students. He would make up variations of the postures when he saw that some of his students could do them easily. "Try this, try putting this here, and this here." He was inventing and innovating. Krishnamacharya never emphasized a particular order of poses, there was nothing sacrosanct about observing order with him. He would tell me "practice as many as you can." (interview, T. R. S. Sharma, September 28, 2005)

Sharma is emphatic that Krishnamacharya's teaching did not necessarily conform to a fixed or rigid order of postures but was undertaken in a spirit of innovation and investigation—an assessment that clearly contradicts Pattabhi Jois's presentation of these years but which corroborates T. K. V. Desikachar's



A young T. R. S. Sharma performing Vīrancyāsana outside the Mysore Palace (*Life Magazine*, Kirkland 1941, ©Getty Images)

T. R. S. Sharma in 2005 (photo by author)

observation that at this time Krishnamacharya would modify postures to suit the individual, and would create (or "discover") new postures when needed (Desikachar 1982 :32). In the mid-1950s, after Krishnamacharya's departure for Chennai, T. R. S. Sharma spent two more years studying with the already world-famous Swami Kuvalayananda in Lonavla (where he also participated in J. B. S. Haldane's experiments on the physiological effects of yoga practice).[8] Significantly, he found the instruction at Kaivalyadhama far more systematized and ordered than Krishnamacharya's "rough-hewn" teaching at the Mysore *yogaśālā* (interview, T. R. S. Sharma, September 28, 2005).

Although Krishnamacharya did eventually systematize his Mysore teaching—as evidenced by his book *Yogāsanagalu* (c. 1941), which contains tables of *āsana* and *vinyāsa* comparable to Pattabhi Jois's system—it seems clear that the kind of "jumping" yoga propagated at the Jaganmohan Palace was in a near constant state of flux and adaptation. This conforms, indeed, to the fundamental principle of Krishnamacharya's long teaching career that the yoga practice must be adapted to suit the period, location, and specific requirements of the individual (Desikachar 1982: 10). The age and the constitution of the students (*deha*), their vocation (*vṛttibheda*), capability (*śakti*), and the path to which they feel drawn (*mārga*) all dictate the shape of a yoga practice (ibid.). This, continues Desikachar, "is the basis of [Krishnamacharya's] teaching" (1982: 13).

Similarly, another senior Mysore resident who was personally acquainted with early yogaśālā students Śrīnivāsa Rangācar, Mahadev Bhat, Keshavamurthy,

Pattabhi Jois and others, insists that even at that time Krishnamacharya's teaching was "based on the constitution" of the particular student, and that,

> . . . there was no such concept as the Primary Series, etcetera. If [Krishnamacharya] saw that a student had good backbends, he used to teach some backward bending postures. If he saw the body was stiff, he would teach *mayūrāsana* . . . there was no such series. (Anonymous interviewee, September 2005)

The various sequences of Ashtanga Vinyasa are, he asserts, the innovation of Pattabhi Jois, and do not reflect how Krishnamacharya was teaching at this time. In his opinion Pattabhi Jois' system may even prove harmful in so far as it "continues without any consideration of the constitution [of the individual]."

Now, while this certainly supports T.R.S. Sharma's memories of the *yogaśālā* style of teaching, the ascription of the Ashtanga Vinyasa series to Pattabhi Jois is probably mistaken, not least because Krishnamacharya published a list of the series in *Yogāsanagalu*. Furthermore, according to B. K. S. Iyengar, Pattabhi Jois was deputed by Krishnamacharya to teach *āsana* at the Sanskrit Pāṭhaśālā when the *yogaśālā* was opened in 1933, and so was actually "never a regular student" there (Iyengar 2000: 53). This in itself would account for why Jois's system differs from what Krishnamacharya appears to have taught to others at this time. It may well be the case, then, that the aerobic sequences which now form the basis of Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga represent a particularized method of practice conveyed by Krishnamacharya to Pattabhi Jois, but are not representative of Krishnamacharya's overall yogic pedagogy, even during this early period.

It also seems likely, given Krishnamacharya's commitment to the principle of adaptation to individual constitution, that these sequences were designed for Pattabhi Jois himself and other young men like him. Since Pattabhi Jois's duties at the Pāṭhaśālā prevented him from being exposed to the kind of instruction in *āsana* given to T.R.S. Sharma and others, his teaching remained confined to the powerful, aerobic series of *āsana* formulated for him and his cohort by Krishnamacharya. These series would eventually form the basis of today's Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga. What is more, a prescribed sequence where each *āsana* is part of an unchanging order, performed to a counted drill, would have offered a convenient and uncomplicated method for a novice teacher like Jois (who was then eighteen years old). Such a schema would have avoided the considerable complexities inherent in designing tailored sequences according to an individual's *deha, vṛttibheda*, and *mārga* etc. and would have provided a serviceable teaching format for large groups of boys. While this last reflection is partly supposition, it does offer a plausible explanation of the relative lack of attention to individual constitution in Jois's system (at least in comparison to the teachings of T.K.V. Desikachar, and other Krishnamacharya disciples

such as A.G. Mohan and Srivatsa Ramaswami) and is certainly consistent with the perceived advantages of nineteenth-century drill gymnastics with which Ashtanga arguably has a close genealogical affiliation (of which more below).

Indeed, Krishnamacharya himself indicated to Ramaswami that such dynamic sequencing, called "vṛddhi" (lit. *growth, increase*) or "śruṣṭikrama" (from *śruṣṭim-kṛ*, lit. *to obey*), is "the method of practice for youngsters," and is particularly suited to group situations (Ramaswami 2000: 15). In such a system, "one will be able to pick and choose some of the appropriate *vinyāsa*s and string them together" (ibid.). Could it be that what has come to be known since the 1970s as "Ashtanga Vinyasa" represents the institutionalization in transnational anglophone yoga of a specific and localized *vinyāsa* bricolage designed by Krishnamacharya in the 1930s for South Indian youths, but transmitted subsequently by Pattabhi Jois to (mainly Western) students as the ancient, orthopractic form for *āsana* practice, delineated in the Vedas and the lost *Yoga Kurunta*?

Clearly a lot hangs on the usage of the term "*vinyāsa*." In Pattabhi Jois's system, it is used to indicate the repeated sequence of "jump back," partial or complete *sūryanamaskār* (viz. "half" or "full" *vinyāsa*), and "jump forward" which link the postures of each series. In Krishnamacharya's later teachings, however, the term simply designates an appropriately formulated sequence of steps (*krama*) for approaching a given posture, and not necessarily the fixed, repetitive schema of Ashtanga Vinyasa. T.K.V. Desikachar writes "In the beginning of [Krishnamacharya's] teaching, around 1932, he evolved a list of postures leading towards a particular posture, and coming away from it" (1982: 33), initial experiments in sequencing which are at the origin of Pattabhi Jois's system. The narrowing of the semantic range of the term *vinyāsa* to refer exclusively to the repetitious linking movements of Ashtanga Vinyasa once again suggests the particularity of this approach to *āsana* practice, as well as the preliminary and marginal nature of Ashtanga in terms of the fuller evolution of Krishnamacharya's teaching.

The question remains, however, as to the specific historical reasons that Krishnamacharya developed the repetitive, aerobic jumping sequences of Ashtanga *vinyāsa*, and the unique "count" format of the modern "Mysore class." This will be considered in more detail below.

Demonstrations: Yoga as Spectacle

> Watching Norman do his practice was like watching an Olympic gymnast work out.
>
> (Beryl Bender Birch on first witnessing Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga, Birch 1995: 19)

> The purely spiritual achievements of the man devoted to Yoga, or Yogin, present no features of interest to the gazer or the tourist photographer. On the other hand, the more obvious outward manifestations of Yoga-practice are so striking and often so sensational, that they have attracted the notice of the casual observer, from the days of Alexander even to our own.
>
> —(Lanman 1917: 136)

The rhythm and fluidity of Ashtanga yoga's advanced contortions carries an undeniably aesthetic appeal. The smoothly executed movements of accomplished practitioners appear to defy gravity and suggest the physical mastery of a professional gymnast. In 1930s India, however, yoga lacked the celebrity luster that it enjoys in the West today and was subject to ridicule and scorn (Iyengar 2000: 60). T. R. S. Sharma relates that while it was fashionable among Mysore youth to attend K. V. Iyer's gymnasium a little farther along the palace corridor (directed by Anant Rao), Krishnamacharya's *yogaśālā* was considered distinctly *démodé*. Sharma recalls being made fun of by a friend who was a bodybuilding student there: yoga was for weaklings, a feminizing force in contrast to Iyer's manly muscle building, and was moreover the preserve of Brahmins (interview September 29, 2005). It was considered "the poor man's physical culture because it was available free of cost" and some of the young boys would "feel even apologetic that we took to *yogāsana* rather than K. V. Iyer's bodybuilding" (personal communication, T. R. S. Sharma, January 3, 2006). Alter notes that "yoga's association with asceticism and world renunciation, as well its primary concern with restraint, can easily be interpreted as effete and the very antithesis of muscular masculinity" (2007: 22). Sharma's account illustrates how such a state of affairs still obtained in 1930s Mysore. Sharma qualifies his statements by noting that the brahminical and vedic associations of yoga were in fact a draw to the more tradition-minded youth (personal communication, January 3, 2006).

Indeed, some of Krishnamacharya's yoga students at this time appear to have studied concurrently with K. V. Iyer. B. N. S. Iyengar, for example, was among the last batch of Krishnamacharya's Mysore students in the early 1950s and still teaches *vinyāsa* yoga in a room of the Parakālamaṭha once frequented by his guru. He recalls traveling to Iyer's gymnasium in Bangalore to learn dumbbells and barbells with the famous bodybuilder, but in the end he chose yoga "because it is more cultural" (interview, B. N. S. Iyengar, September 23, 2005), echoing Professor K. Ramamurthy's early appeal to reshape Indian physical culture along "cultural lines" (chapter 5). For a young man in Mysore, Krishnamacharya's yoga represented an alternative to Western bodybuilding and gymnastics but had the advantage of being an indigenous, "cultural" form of exercise.

It is intriguing that in the English preface to Krishnamacharya's *āsana* primer *Yogāsanagalu*, commissioned for use by students at Mysore University, T. Singaravelu Mudaliar makes reference to an article in Bernarr Macfadden's *New Physical Culture Magazine* that "describes how the famous Film Star Acquanetta of Hollywood practices Yoga Asanas and the benefits she has derived from these Yoga Asanas" (Krishnamacharya c. 1941: iii). The allusion suggests an appeal to those sections of Mysore youth who were attracted to the Western-style, Macfadden-inspired fitness programs such as Iyer's and Rao's, as well as an attempt to invest yoga with some of the glitter that it lacked in the popular imagination. The preface largely treats of the "scientific" health benefits of yoga and argues for the superiority of the "Yogic system" over the "ordinary systems of Physical Culture now in vogue" (iv), much in the manner of Sundaram and others examined in chapter 6.

The Maharaja's state-of-the-art *yogaśālā* functioned to a large extent for the promotion of yoga as a respectable form of indigenous exercise that could challenge the prevalent imported gymnastics and the cultural stereotype of the effete Indian (see chapter 5). The regular demonstrations conducted by Krishnamacharya and his troupe at Mysore University were intended to "drum up trade" for yoga (interview, Sharma, September 29, 2005) and to attract students who might otherwise have gone the way of Western-style gymnastics. A significant part of Krishnamacharya's mandate at the palace, indeed, seems to have been to develop a spectacular form of *āsana* practice that could then be showcased by the Maharaja—partly to rescue yoga's tainted reputation and partly for sheer entertainment. As B. K. S. Iyengar has noted,

> It was my guru's duty to provide for the edification and amusement of the Maharaja's entourage by putting his students—of whom I was one of the youngest—through their paces and showing off their ability to stretch and bend their bodies into the most impressive and astonishing postures. (2005: xix)

A rare film clip from 1938 depicts Iyengar himself effortlessly demonstrating several series of advanced postures in linked, flowing sequences reminiscent of, though not identical with, Pattabhi Jois's Ashtanga Vinyasa (Iyengar 1938). It seems reasonable to assume that this is the kind of dynamic performance that Iyengar and his peers were called on to give before the Maharaja and other dignitaries, as well as in the innumerable lecture tours. If we are to believe Iyengar's twenty-first-century reminiscences of this period, one of the rationales for the arduous, spectacular system of *āsana* that emerged from the Jaganmohan Palace was to please the royal patron. In other words, the flowing sequences similar to the ones seen today in Ashtanga yoga were conceived at

least in part as performance pieces in a modern Indian court as well as spectacular enticements to draw the people (back?) to yoga.[9] Although this can never be a complete explanation, it is a compelling one and is in accord with Krishnamacharya's oath to his guru to spread the message of yoga, as well as with his previous employment in yoga public relations under the sponsorship of N. S. Subarao.

We should also note here the account given of the lean pre-*śālā* years by Fernando Pagés Ruiz in the pages of *Yoga Journal*, during which Krishnamacharya sought to popularize yoga and "stimulate interest in a dying tradition" by demonstrating extraordinary feats of strength and physiological control, such as suspending his pulse, stopping cars with his hands, performing difficult *āsana*s, and lifting heavy objects with his teeth (Ruiz 2006). As Ruiz comments, "to teach people about yoga, Krishnamacharya felt, he first had to get their attention" (Ruiz 2006). It seems eminently possible that the advanced *āsana* extravaganzas performed in later years by his senior students had a similar function and shared in a common "modern strongman" discourse. As we saw in chapter 5, such feats of strength are common in modern Indian physical culture literature, where they are often (at least nominally) associated with *haṭha* yoga. We recall, for instance, the case of the bodybuilder and physical culture luminary Ramamurthy, who regularly performed stock feats of strength such as Krishnamacharya's. These demonstrations, in other words, were leitmotifs that straddled the worlds of modern bodybuilding and yoga.

Another example of this overlap comes from within the walls of the Jaganmohan Palace itself. The previously mentioned palace physical instruction teacher V. D. S. Naidu—entrusted, like Krishnamacharya himself, with the fitness of the Arasu boys—was a prominent Mysore physical educationalist and strongman. Pattabhi Jois relates that as a boy, he and a group of friends one day attended Naidu's class. Seeing the physical prowess of these youngsters on gymnastic equipment like parallel bars, Naidu asked them how they had gained such bodily control. When they told him they were students at Krishnamacharya's *yogaśālā*, he said "go back there then. Yoga is much better than this kind of exercise." Naidu was renowned for his feats of strength, such as hauling cars, and letting trucks roll over his body. In one fateful demonstration, he had a student jump from a height of eighteen feet onto his chest. However, the boy jumped before Naidu was ready, and he died five days later in hospital from ruptured organs (interview, Pattabhi Jois, September 25, 2005). The same story of Naidu's demise was related to me by Iyer student and Krishnamacharya's bodybuilding neighbor at the Jaganmohan Palace, Ananta Rao (interview September 19, 2005). What is important about this story is that while Naidu acknowledges the superiority of Krishnamacharya's

system over his own, it is nevertheless perceived as essentially a *kind of exercise* and thus comparable in form and intent to the Krishnamacharya's regime. We should understand Krishnamacharya's strongman demonstrations in this light. That is to say, Krishnamacharya arrived at the *yogaśālā* with a charge similar to Naidu's: to ensure the physical fitness of the royal youth and to popularize their respective forms of physical culture. What is more, both men were adept at the kind of strength exploits standardized by earlier bodybuilders like Ramamurthy. It is in this sense that the Krishnamacharya of this period must be considered (among other things) as an inheritor of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century physical culture lineages that are the topic of this book's foregoing chapters.

A common refrain among the first- and second-generation students of Krishnamacharya whom I interviewed, as well as others who knew him during his Mysore days, is the association of his teaching with the circus. For example, the bodybuilding and gymnastics teacher Anant Rao, who for several years shared a wing of the Jaganmohan Palace with Krishnamacharya, feels that the latter was "teaching circus tricks and calling it yoga" (interview, September 19, 2005). T. R. S. Sharma considers the yoga he learned at Kaivalyadhama to be "more rounded" than Krishnamacharya's approach, which "was more like circus" (interview, September 29, 2005) but nonetheless feels that it is inappropriate to call the postures "tricks" (personal communication, February 3, 2006, after reading a first draft of this chapter). And Śrīnivāsa Rangācar (one of Krishnamacharya's earliest students, about whom more shortly) similarly deemed the *āsana* forms he learned "circus tricks" (interview, Shankara Narayan Jois, September 26, 2005). A later student of Krishnamacharya, A. V. Balasubramaniam, states in a recent film documentary on the history of yoga:

> In the thirties and forties when he felt that yoga and interest in it was in a low ebb, [Krishnamacharya] wanted to create some enthusiasm and some faith in people, and at that point in time he did a bit of that kind of circus work . . . to draw people's attention. (Desai and Desai 2004)

The *āsana* systems derived from this early chapter of Krishnamacharya's career dominate the popular practice of yoga in the West today, and yet it is largely overlooked that they stem from a pragmatic program of solicitation that exploits a long theatrical tradition of acrobatics and contortionism. This is not to say, of course, that Krishnamacharya approached his demonstrations like sideshows at a *mela*, but merely that audiences would have recognized the performances as belonging to a well-established topos of *haṭha* yogic fakirism and circus turns (see chapter 3 above). The demonstrations were a "hook" to grab

the attention of an audience who might otherwise have had little interest in the arche arcane topic of yoga. Shankar Narayan Jois, a disciple of early *yogaśālā* student Śrīnivāsa Rangācar, summarizes as follows:

> Krishnamacharya had an interest in body-oriented sciences by nature, and because of this interest, he gathered different postures from places (like Northern India) and evolved them.[10] He started teaching like that because it can be taught easily to many, like a drill. Some of the higher yoga techniques are hard to understand and to teach, so he used that as a simple device to commence something. It was a way of bringing people in. (interview, September 29, 2005)

Krishnamacharya was sent all over south India by the Maharaja on what was candidly called "propaganda work" (Sjoman 1996: 50). One such tour to Pune, recorded in the Jaganmohan Palace administrative records, was conducted in the summer of 1938 (n. a. 1931–1947, Year 1938–1939: 9). T. R. S. Sharma, who was one of the four boys chosen to represent the *yogaśālā*, remembers a demonstration in a large hall there, where he and his friends performed *āsana* to thunderous applause. Krishnamacharya would pick the young boy Sharma up while he performed a difficult pose and display him to the audience (interview, September 29, 2005). Sharma also remembers being impressed at the time that Krishnamacharya lectured in fluent Hindi.

Pattabhi Jois also participated in a large number of demonstrations, along with senior Pāṭhaśālā students like Mahadev Bhat and a number of Arasu boys. The *āsanas* were distributed beforehand into primary, intermediate, and advanced categories, with the younger boys performing the easiest poses while Jois and his peers demonstrated the most advanced (interview, Pattabhi Jois, September 25, 2005). These sequences were, according to Jois, virtually identical to the aerobic schema he still teaches today: that is, several distinct "series" within which each main *āsana* is conjoined by a short, repeated, linking series of postures and jumps based on the *sūryanamaskār* model. Although he would never endorse such an interpretation himself, his description suggests that the three sequences of the *Ashtanga* system may well have been devised as a "set list" for public demonstrations: a shared repertoire for student displays.

The need for a coordinated, high-speed showcase might also explain why, in Jois's system, postures are usually held only for five (but up to a maximum of eight) audible "ujjayi" breaths: this would not only allow the models to perfectly synchronize their entry and exit from a pose but would also provide enough time for Krishnamacharya to explain the significance of a posture without taxing the attention of the audience. Significantly, Krishnamacharya's *Yoga*

Makaranda of 1935 advocates long timings for most poses, generally from three to fifteen minutes, suggesting that the relatively rapid-fire *āsana* sequences inherited and developed by Pattabhi Jois represent a very particularized and specific approach within the broader scheme of Krishnamacharya's teaching, even at this time (Narasimhan [trans.] 2005 [1935]). Although this explanation of the five-breath system is speculation on my part (and bound to be contentious insofar as it elides other reasons for this format, such as buildup of heat; see Smith 2008), it *was* independently suggested by Krishnamacharya's Mysore student B. N. S. Iyengar and was considered to be a distinct possibility by T. R. S. Sharma, who does not remember any "five breath" format being taught in the *yogaśālā*. On the contrary, Krishnamacharya taught him that "you should gradually stay in the pose for up to three minutes" (interview, September 29, 2005), a scheme that seems more in line with Krishnamacharya's intention in *Yoga Makaranda*. That said, the Ashtanga practice always concludes with a "finishing sequence" that usually does include longer stays in the shoulderstand (*sarvāṅgāsana*) and its variations, headstand (*śīrṣāsana*) and its variations, a seated "bound" lotus (*baddhapadmāsana* and *yogamudrāsana*), twenty-five deep breaths in lotus pose, and a supine relaxation (*śavāsana*). This part of the sequence is generally conducted in a separate room from the main *vinyāsa* section, thus marking it as a different phase of the practice. This does not, however, help to explain the unique format of the main part of each "series."

Dissent

At the time (even as now) Krishnamacharya's gymnastic Mysore style came in for criticism. One of his earliest students was Śrīnivāsa Rangācar (later known as Śrīrangaguru) who, like Pattabhi Jois and many of the Pāṭhaśālā students, was from a poor village in an outlying district of Mysore. Rangācar was naturally predisposed to *āsana*, quickly mastering the difficult poses and becoming an assistant teacher at the *yogaśālā* (Chanu 1992: 6).[11] However, Rangācar became disgusted with the methods taught there, concluding that "but for Yogic exercises [Krishnamacharya] had no idea of the real inner bases of [yoga]" (18). He had, by 1938, attained his own profound yogic realization but was discouraged and obstructed by Krishnamacharya in his ambitions; according to Chanu, when he expressed the wish to present his *āsanas* to the Maharaja, Krishnamacharya blocked his access (1992: 18). Rangācar then returned to his own village to live a solitary life of contemplation. Three decades later he was to found his own school in Mysore named, pointedly, "Aṣṭāṅga Yoga Vijñāna Mandiram."

Despite the generally hagiographic presentations of the "Krishnamacharya industry" (such as T. K. V. Desikachar 1982 and 1998; Srivatsan 1997; and K. Desikachar 2005 and 2009) it seems difficult to square Rangācar's summary dismissal of his teacher's worth with the genius usually presented. How is it possible that a long-term, dedicated student like Rangācar, a member of the select inner circle of palace yoga students—deemed proficient enough, moreover, to teach in Krishnamacharya's stead—could fail to recognize the profundity of his master's learning or the inner logic of his method? It would be easy to simply dismiss Rangācar's criticism of Krishnamacharya as the petulance of youth, but as we have seen, the evidence from the period, and oral testimony, suggests that in his role at the *yogaśālā* Krishnamacharya did certainly focus almost exclusively on the external, physical exercise component of yoga. T. R. S. Sharma states that Krishnamacharya's nightly teaching at the *śālā* was concerned uniquely with *aṅgalāghava* ("lightness of limb" see the section "Haṭha Yoga" in chapter 1) and that "the spiritual aspects of yoga like *dhyāna*, *dhāranā* and the *samādhi* states were rarely talked about" (interview, August 29, 2005). B. K. S. Iyengar remarks dryly of his *āsana* regime prepared by Krishnamacharya: "If my brother-in-law also had an eye to my deeper spiritual or personal development, he did not say so at the time" (2005: xix).[12]

B. K. S. Iyengar also notes that at the beginning of his royal employ, Krishnamacharya had originally been engaged to teach *mīmāṃsā* at the Pāṭhaśālā, but was reassigned to the *yogaśālā* when the students complained to the Maharaja that the lessons were too difficult (Iyengar 2000: 53). This anecdote once again suggests the ultimate authority of the Maharaja over what and where Krishnamacharya was to teach and the role the Maharaja played in directing the curriculum of the *yogaśālā*. Despite his reputation as a fiercely independent man who did as he pleased and spurned royal largesse (Desikachar 2005: 97), Krishnamacharya remained, in administration if not in spirit, an employee of the Maharaja with a family to feed. After his marriage, indeed, Krishnamacharya had been forced by circumstance to work in a coffee plantation in the Hasan district of Karnataka (Iyengar 2000: 52), a fact that is often eliminated from "official" biographies. During this time (from 1927 until 1931?),[13] he wore "half-pants and half-sleeved shirt, socks and shoes, a hat on his head and a stick in his hand" (52) rather than the dress of the orthodox Brahmin. As Iyengar remarks, "destiny had played its trick on him even" (52). It was only after a lecture on the Upaniṣads in Mysore town hall in 1931 that Krishnamacharya began to attract the attention as a learned scholar that eventually led to his employment at the palace. If Krishnamacharya was to keep his position at the *yogaśālā*, he would have to conform to the Maharaja's mandate. And this mandate seems to have been that he teach *āsana* in keeping both with the strong gymnastic tradition of the palace

itself and with the changing face of indigenous physical education programs across the region.

Gymnastics Indian and Foreign: The Derivation of the Mysore Style

> The treatise before us is however confined to that part of [Yoga] that deals with the training of the Body. But this should not be confounded with what is generally known as physical culture or manly games with which it is often compared, though by mistake. The Yogic descriptions of the body chiefly aim at the preservation of health and not at the development of the muscles or of the skill and courage of the field. It has been rightly characterized as "a system of hygienic practices." Modern conditions demand a judicious combination of all these different items.
>
> From V. Subrahmanya Iyer's Preface to *Yoga Makaranda* (Krishnamacharya 1935: iii)

John Rosselli notes that from the 1870s onward, gymnastics taught in Indian government schools "often had a strong element of individual body-building or acrobatics" (1980: 137). The method that Krishnamacharya taught the children at the palace invites comparison to a number of these educational disciplines, particularly several that rose to prominence in Indian education establishments during the second and third decades of the early twentieth century. Although not necessarily conceived within the rubric of yoga, these regimens of pedagogical gymnastics, I contend, create the context for understanding the otherwise anomalous athletic systems of Krishnamacharya's Mysore years. The 1930 physical education report of Mysore's Department of Public Instruction, for example, recommends that school children be instructed in "Gymnastics, Indian or Foreign" (n.a. 1930: 10) and Krishnamacharya's teaching evinces a clear permeability to such trends of physical education in Indian schools. His system can be fruitfully considered *a synthetic revival of indigenous exercise (comprising* yogāsana *alongside other types) within the context of Westernized curricular physical education in late colonial India*.

Norman Sjoman's study of the Mysore yoga tradition points out that there was a long-established tradition of royal gymnastics at the palace and that the Maharaja himself had followed a regimen of gymnastic exercise as a child (Sjoman 1996: 52). He makes the case that Krishnamacharya drew freely on the gymnastic texts that he found there in the elaboration of his own teaching system (Sjoman 1996) and moreover, that he inherited "the old gymnastics hall containing gymnastic apparatus and ropes hanging from the ceiling as his

yogaśālā" (Sjoman 1996: 53).[14] Indeed, Śrīnivāsa Rangācar related to one of his senior students that during his time as a student-teacher at the *yogaśālā* Krishnamacharya used "all kinds of gymnastic equipment" in his teaching (including rope climbing apparatus) and that in those days, Krishnamacharya's teaching "was considered gymnastics alone" (interview, Shankara Naryan Jois, September 26, 2005). T. R. S. Sharma, who entered the *yogaśālā* after Rangācar departure, does not remember any such equipment, which suggests that it was not a prominent feature of Krishnamcharya's teaching there except in the early years of his tenure (interview, September 29, 2005). It might also be worth noting that with Anant Rao's departure as the principal teacher at K. V. Iyer's Mysore *vyāyamśālā* in 1941, a large quantity of gymnastic equipment was just left "lying around" the wing of the Jaganmohan Palace where Krishnamacharya also taught (interview, Anant Rao, September 29, 2005).

This passage from equipment-based gymnastics to a nonapparatus regime would mirror the more general and pervasive trend in Indian physical culture away from costly installations—like the once-popular Maclaren gymnasiums—and toward more economically accessible routines drawn from European free-hand gymnastics and indigenous exercise (see chapter 4). Prior to and during Krishnamacharya's time in Mysore this physical education zeitgeist was being given official form in government school syllabi (as the Mysore Department of Public Instruction report suggests) and by the end of the decade it had been concretized into fairly standard format across the nation.

I wish to consider briefly two examples of physical education regimens that enjoyed widespread popularity in 1930s India: the first drawn from an imported, European system, and the other from a government-endorsed compilation of "homegrown" exercises. These concrete details concerning technique will, I hope, show that Krishnamacharya's "Mysore style" was far from out of step with the dominant forms of physical education in late colonial India and was in fact a variant of standard exercise routines of the time.

Foreign

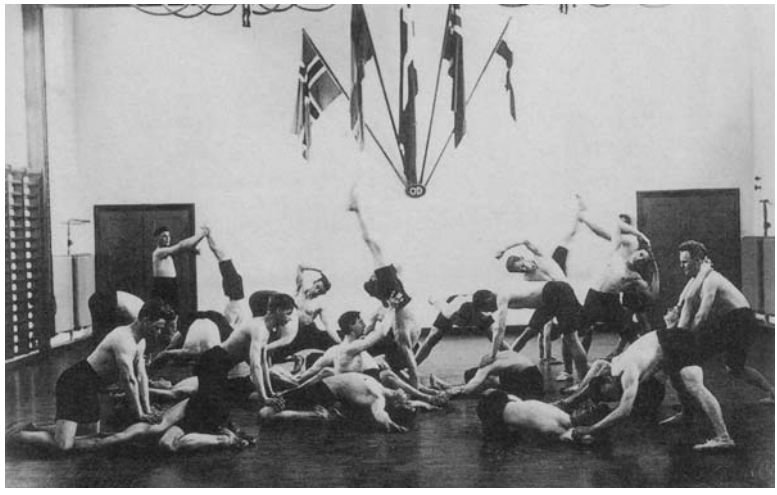
As we saw have seen, the modern Indian physical culture movement grew up in reaction to foreign, colonial forms of body discipline such as Maclaren and Ling. However, these systems of exercise were generally not rejected wholesale but incorporated into a broad syncretic scheme that eventually gave more weight to revived indigenous practices. The system called Primitive (or "Primary") Gymnastics, developed by the Dane Niels Bukh (1880–1950), was one such European system that came to occupy a central position in the Indian physical education scene. Through the first decades of the twentieth century,

Ling's hitherto dominant system was increasingly deemed insufficient for creating able-bodied men (we remember that K. V. Iyer criticizes it on precisely these grounds), and a more vigorous Danish gymnastics gained popularity. In 1906, Danish gymnastics even became part of the official British army training program (Leonard 1947: 212). Bukh's system, which "emphasized continuity of movement, rhythmic exercise, and intensive stretching to seek elasticity, flexibility, and freedom" (Dixon and McIntosh 1957: 101), attained such exponential popularity from the early 1920s onward that by 1930, YMCA National Physical Director Henry Gray could rank it as second only to Ling in terms of "full national approval or . . . general recognition" among exercise regimes in India (Gray 1930: 7).

To indicate the extent of overlap between the two systems, let us consider briefly some of the particulars of Bukh's system in comparison with *yogāsana*, as taught by Krishnamacharya in Mysore during the 1930's (see figures below). Bukh's *Primary Gymnastics* (first English edition 1925, completely revised in 1939) offers a complete course of stretching and strengthening exercises—graded, like the Ashtanga Vinyasa system, into six progressive series. The exercises are aerobic in nature and practiced in a "vigorous rhythm" (Bukh 1925: 8) so that heat is generated in the body (8). All movements are accompanied by deep breathing. The same is true for Ashtanga, in which one of the main rationales for the intensely aerobic posture work and the deep *ujjayi* breathing is the heat that it generates in the practitioner.[15] At least *twenty-eight* of the exercises in the first edition of Bukh's manual are strikingly similar (often identical) to yoga postures occurring in Pattabhi Jois's Ashtanga sequence or in Iyengar's *Light on Yoga* (Iyengar 1966). There are several more in the second edition of 1939. Not only do Bukh's positions suggest modern yoga postures but the linking movements between them are reminiscent of the jumping sequences of Ashtanga Vinyasa.

Bukh's American student, Dorothy Sumption, summarizes the underlying principles of the maestro's work as follows: "Advanced work in Fundamental Danish Gymnastics consists of the harmonious combination of exercises into a unified whole. . . . The main idea in combining is to make the work continuous without distinct pauses, which are superfluous and a waste of time" (1927: 169).

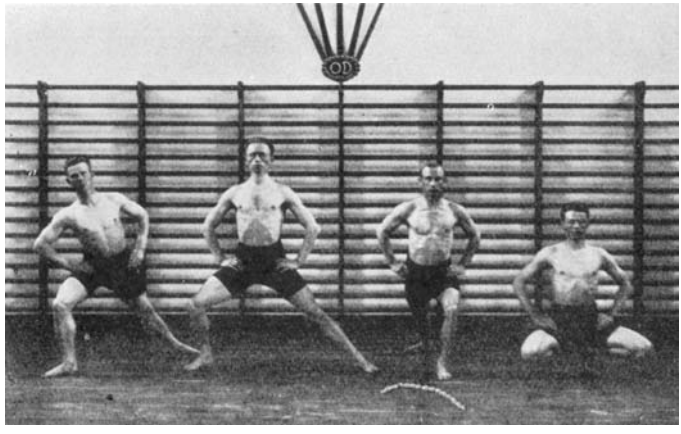
For example, one sequence begins with "Long Sitting," a position comparable to Krishnamacharya's *daṇḍāsana*, from which the student jumps back into a plank-type pose ("prone falling (front hand lying)"), then turns and balances on one hand and one foot ("side falling (side hand lying)"), taking a position reminiscent of *vaśiṣṭāsana*. From there he or she jumps into "Hand Standing" (*adho mukha vrkṣāsana*) and then lies down (*śavāsana*) (Bukh 1925: 27–29). These linking movements, as well as the positions themselves, strongly suggest Ashtanga Vinyasa's system in which, between poses, the student jumps from

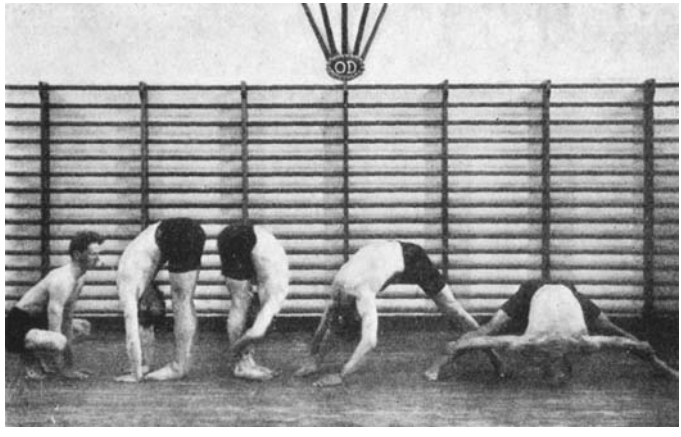


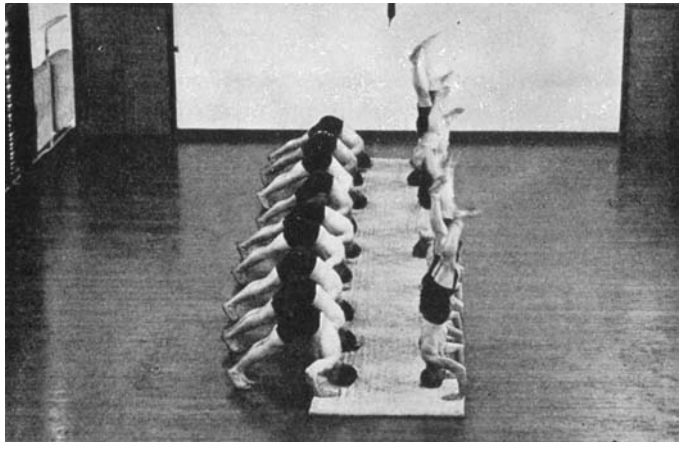
Bukh's gymnasium in Ollerup, Denmark (postcard)

sitting into a push-up position, and then (with some variation) jumps into the next successive pose. Bukh's "athletic" or "serial" gymnastics were performed, like Ashtanga, to a count, with each posture (as in Ashtanga) being called out while the previous sequence was finishing, reflecting a modernist fascination with dynamic movement (Bonde 2000: 107; Sumption 1927: 7). As for many forms of postural modern yoga, including Ashtanga, "the drive-shaft of Bukh's system was suppleness" (Bonde 2006: 33). The functional/descriptive names given to Bukh's exercises are also mirrored in the functional/descriptive names that characterize what Sjoman postulates are late *āsanas* (in contradistinction to the symbolic objects, animals, sages, and deities that gave their name to earlier postures, Sjoman 1996: 49).

I point out these similarities not to suggest that Krishnamacharya borrowed directly from Bukh but to indicate how closely his system matches one of the most prominent modalities of gymnastic culture in India, as well as in Europe. And as we saw in chapter 4, Bukh-influenced gymnastics were, by the mid-1930s, a standard choice for children's physical culture in popular publications like *Health and Strength*. While this notion challenges the narrative of origins commonly rehearsed among Ashtanga practitioners and teachers today, it is really hardly surprising, given the context, to see elements of Danish children's gymnastics emerge in Krishnamacharya's pedagogy in Mysore. Sjoman inquires with regard to Krishnamacharya's system, "are the asanas really part of the yoga system or are they created or enlarged upon in the very recent past in response to modern emphasis on movement?" (1996: 39–40). Given the similarities







Exercises from Bukh 1925

between Bukh's Primitive Gymnastics and these dynamic yoga sequences, it is the latter scenario that seems more compelling.[16]

Indian

During the first year of his tenure at the palace, Krishnamacharya was sent by the Maharaja to Kuvalayananda's pioneer research institute, Kaivalyadhama, to observe the work carried out there.[17] Gharote and Gharote point out that "one of the ideals of Kaivalyadhama was to evolve a system of physical culture based on Yoga and to take steps to popularise that system" (1999: 37). Many went there to seek advice and assistance "in organising physical culture courses based on Yoga" (37), and Krishnamacharya, we can say with some certainty, was among their number.

From 1927, Kuvalayananda sat on a committee on physical training in the Bombay presidency, the goal of which was to build an ideal of physical education that would "foster those personal and civic virtues in pupils which would make them better citizens" (Gharote and Gharote 1999: 105). By 1933 Kuvalayanda's curricula of "Yogic Physical Education" had been introduced into education establishments across the United Provinces (Gharote and Gharote 1999: 38; Kuvalayananda 1936: ii). By the time of Krishnamacharya's visit, Kuvalayananda's *āsana* regimes were *the* paradigm of pedagogic yoga instruction in India, and it is reasonable to suppose that Krishnamacharya absorbed some of their core elements and applied them to his work with the children in Mysore. Kuvalayananda's syllabi are recorded in his *Yaugik Saṅgh Vyāyam* ("Yogic Group Exercise") of 1936,[18] a book originally written for the Education Commission of the United Provinces (1936: ii). These mass exercises, states Kuvalayananda, are based on the drill techniques (*huku-mo* in Hindi) popularized by his guru Manick Rao (ii; see also Mujumdar 1950: 450), a figure we also previously encountered as the physical culture preceptor of the revolutionary yogin Tiruka (chapter 5).

As we have seen, drill was the standard form of instruction in physical education after the introduction of Ling gymnastics (see chapter 4), and the instruction format does not differ greatly here. First, the posture is named by the instructor, after which the students are counted through the three phases of the *āsana* (entry, posture proper, exit). This is of course precisely the format adopted by Krishnamacharya in his early school teaching and which has been transmitted into postural modern yoga as the "count class" or "led practice" format of Ashtanga Vinyasa. These influences provide a more satisfying explanation of the count sequence of Ashtanga Vinyasa, perhaps, than the "official" version examined above, wherein the exact counts are said to be specified in the five-thousand-year-old lost text, *Yoga Kurunta* of Vamana, or in the Yajur and Ṛg Vedas. While

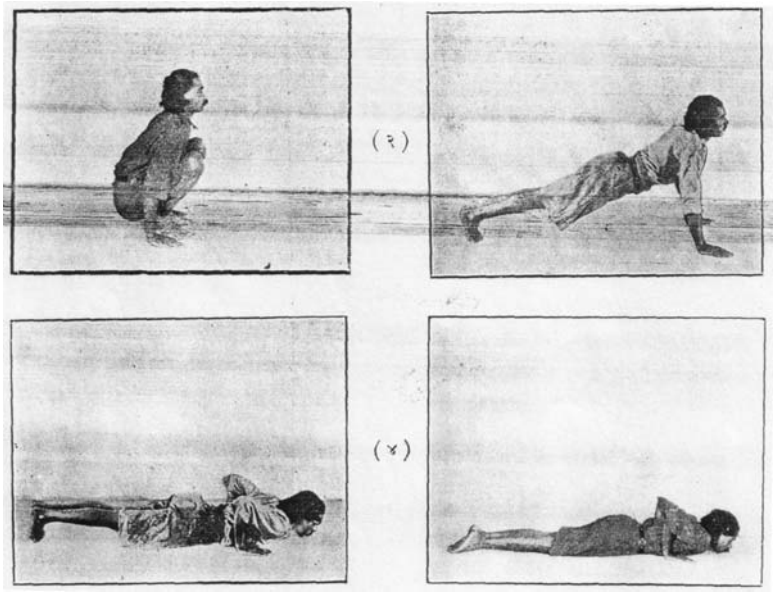
Kuvalayananda limits himself in *Yaugik Saṅgh Vyāyam* to simple, dynamically performed callisthenic postures and some easy *āsanas* (referring the interested reader to his *āsanas* of 1933), it would seem clear that Krishnamacharya adopted this format and wove in other, sometimes advanced, yoga postures, much as Kuvalayananda himself would do.

In practice, such syntheses, built on this increasingly conventional format, were not unusual. To take an example, the Bombay Physical Education Committee syllabus—based on Kuvalayananda's work, and compulsory in the province's schools from 1937 (Old Students' Association 1940: iii)—shows striking similarities with the system enshrined in postural modern yoga as Ashtanga Vinyasa. The drills often closely match the "*vinyāsas*" of Krishnamacharya's method, such as in the "Calisthenics" section, which contains a drill called "Kukh Kas Ek," close in form and execution to Ashtanga yoga's *utthita trikoṇāsana*.[19]

Many other such suggestive correspondences can be found in this section. However, it is chapter 10, devoted to "Individualistic Exercises, Dands, Baithaks, Namaskars and Asanas,"[20] that makes clear the functional position occupied by *āsanas* in educational programs. Although *āsanas* are presented separately from the other exercises, it is clear that they belong here unequivocally in the category of fitness training and that they are blended with aerobic exercises from outside any known yoga tradition.

At the time, it seems that this was a widespread and perfectly acceptable practice: *āsanas were there to be pragmatically utilized in gymnastic bricolage*. The *āsanas* described in this chapter all originate and finish with the fundamental standing position known as "Husshyar" or "attention" (Old Students' Association 1940: 206), just as the full Ashtanga Vinyasa sequence begins and ends each pose in *samasthiti* (also known as *tadāsana* in some modern postural systems). From here, the student bends forward, places the hands, and jumps back to a "prone support position" before lowering into a push-up (207). He or she then executes one of a number of "dands," whose movements correspond to the central Ashtanga "*vinyāsa*" sequence: *caturaṅga daṇḍāsana, urdhva mukha śvanāsana*, and *adho mukha svanāsana* in Ashtanga nomenclature (see figure on page 182). The dand position corresponding to this last posture (popularly translated as "Downward Facing Dog") and described earlier in the book, appears to describe the use of the *jālandhara* and *uddiyāna* bandhas ("locks") in a manner characteristic of the Ashtanga *āsana* system: "at the same time, take the head in, chin touching the chest, draw the abdomen in" (195).

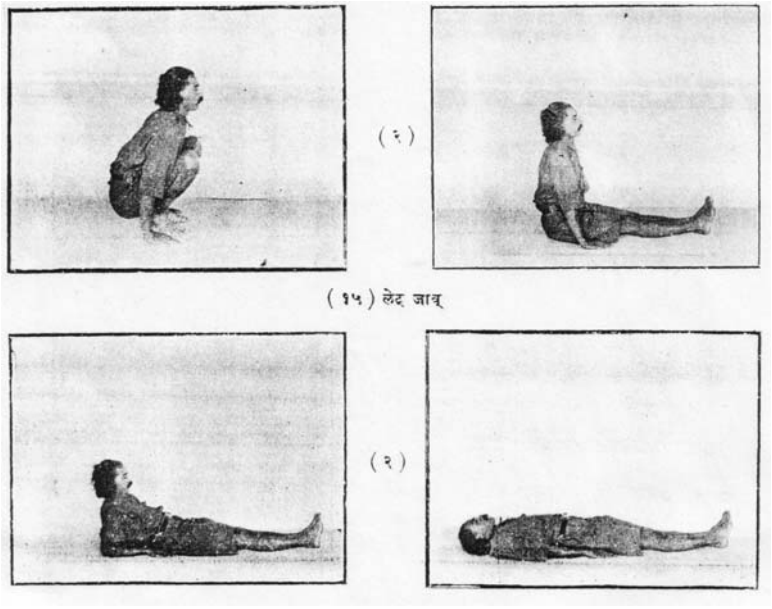
Once again exactly matching the Ashtanga sequence, the student then *jumps through* his or her arms to a sitting position with the legs stretched out straight in front (207). This commonly occurring movement is known as "Saf-Suf Do" in the dand section and "Baith Jao" in the *āsana* section and corresponds



"Jumping back" sequence in Kuvalayananda's *Yaugik Saṅgh Vyāyam*, 1936 (with permission of Kaivalyadhama Institute)

to the "jump through" to *daṇḍāsana* in Ashtanga Vinyasa. From here, the student assumes the *āsana* itself, which is held *for five breaths*. Thereafter he or she lifts the legs through the arms without touching the floor (known as "Khade Ho Jao") to a press-up position and reverses the previous movements to a standing "attention." The form corresponds in every detail to the dynamic aspect of the Ashtanga system, even down to the standardized number of breaths for each posture.

It is significant that the "s*ūryanamaskār*" sequence (which is itself nothing more than a particular arrangement of dands) is in this book known as "Ashtang Dand" (205), probably with reference to the position known in certain quarters as "*aṣṭāṅga namaskāra*," in which eight parts of the body (feet, knees, hands, chest, and chin) touch the ground simultaneously. Although this position is replaced in Krishnamacharya's sequence with the "push-up" posture known as *caturāṅga daṇḍāsana*, it is not unreasonable to speculate that the appellation "ashtanga yoga" may indicate the system's foundations in dands (reformulated as *āsana*) rather than any genealogical relationship with Patañjali's eightfold yoga. Mujumdar's *Encyclopedia of Indian Physical Culture* of 1950 states that *sūryanamaskār* is also known as "sashtanga namaskar" (456), with reference to the same central posture. In this view, *sūryanamaskar* is a modern, physical



"Jumping through" in Kuvalayananda's *Yaugik Saṅgh Vyāyam*, 1936 (with permission of Kaivalyadhama Institute)

culture–oriented rendition of the far more ancient practice of prostrating to the sun (see also De Maitre, 1936: 134, on *aṣṭāṅga dands* used as prostrations during pilgrimage). And Ashtanga Vinyasa is a powerful synthesis of *āsanas* and *dands*, after the manner of Kuvalayananda's national physical culture programs.

It is clear that these sections of the syllabus represent a fusion of popular "indigenous" aerobic exercises with *āsana* to create a system of athletic yoga mostly unknown in India before the 1920s. This was partly a response to the influence of the rhythmic acrobatics of Western gymnastics. Krishnamacharya's dynamic teaching style in Mysore is of a piece with this trend, and his elaborate innovations in *āsana* represent virtuoso additions to what was, by the time he began teaching in Mysore, becoming a standard exercise format across the nation. Although the evident proficiency of his young troupe was probably unsurpassed at the time, the *mode* of practice was in itself by no means exceptional.

Modernity in Tradition

An attempt to exhaust the possible influences that may have given rise to Krishnamacharya's *āsana* system would be fruitless and dull. It has rather been my intention in this chapter to establish that Krishnamacharya was not working

within a historical vacuum and that his teaching represents an admixture of cultural adaptation, radical innovation, and fidelity to tradition. This is *not* a particularly contentious assertion. The attribution of all his learning to the grace of his guru and to the mysteriously vanished *Yoga Kurunta* can be understood as a standard convention in a living (Sanskritic) tradition where conservation and innovation are tandem imperatives. As Pierre-Sylvain Filliozat explains,

> The orthodox pandit is not in the least concerned to restore an ancient state of affairs. If he were to point out the diachronic differences between the base-text and his own epoch, he would have to reveal his own share of innovation and his individuality. He prefers to keep this latter hidden. For him, the important thing is to present the whole of his knowledge—which contains both the ancient heritage and his new vision—as an organized totality. (Filliozat 1992: 92, my trans.)

To point up the influences and unmistakably modern innovations that contribute to Krishnamacharya's Mysore method (and by extrapolation to the current Ashtanga Vinyasa system) is, by this reasoning, not to impute any kind of inauthenticity to it. Krishnamacharya, like legions of pandits before him, adapted his teaching to the cultural temper of the times while remaining within the bounds of orthodoxy. Krishnamacharya's (and K. Pattabhi Jois's) account of Ashtanga Vinyasa's origins legitimated this modernized yoga in traditionally acceptable fashion, with reference to *śāstra* and guru. We should also add to this that, as Joseph Alter puts it, the modern yoga renaissance was "self-consciously concerned with modernity, and the programmatic modernization of tradition" (2006: 762). Although today's "Krishnamacharya industry" tends to foreground the timeless and traditional in his teaching—such as his direct and transhistorical access to the sage Śrī Nāthamūni, and his study of the orthodox *darśanas*—there is no question that Krishnamacharya's time in Mysore was heavily influenced by the same kind of "programmatic modernization" that was occurring all around him.

It would be a mistake to think that the present work's focus on the genesis of Ashtanga as a partial result of modern Indian physical culture implies either a diminution of its value or a denial of the other practical and philosophical elements that so manifestly inform the practice, such as the "classical" procedures of *haṭha* yoga (viz. *mudrā, bandha, dṛṣṭi*, and *prāṇāyāma*) and the orthodox Hindu intellectual tradition in which T. Krishnamcharya was steeped. The modern practice of Ashtanga Vinyasa yoga stands in a complex relationship to history, and the influence of pedagogical gymnastics is just one element in its composition. It is, nevertheless, a major one, and Krishnamacharya's early phase of dynamic yoga teaching, which persists (at least in mode)[21] in the Ashtanga Vinyasa

method of Pattabhi Jois, cannot be fully understood without reference to it. That Krishnamacharya drew on a variety of popular physical culture forms and exploited the topos of *haṭha* yogic "circus turns" in his elaboration and promotion of yoga need not in any way invalidate the method. It does, however, provide an invaluable insight into the dynamics of knowledge transmission with regard to one of the twentieth century's most revered yoga teachers and into a far more widespread osmosis between modernity and tradition.

Concluding Reflections

This chapter and those which precede it have outlined some of the ways in which the early modern practice of *āsana* was influenced by various expressions of physical culture. This does not mean that the kind of posture-based yogas that predominate globally today are "mere gymnastics" nor that they are necessarily less "real" or "spiritual" than other forms of yoga. The history of modern physical culture overlaps and intersects with the histories of para-religious, "unchurched" spirituality; Western esotericism; medicine, health, and hygiene; chiropractic, osteopathy, and bodywork; body-centered psychotherapy; the modern revival of Hinduism; and the sociopolitical demands of the emergent modern Indian nation (to name but a few). In turn, each of these histories is intimately linked to the development of modern transnational, anglophone yoga. Historically speaking, then, physical culture encompasses a far broader range of concerns and influences than "mere gymnastics," and in many instances the modes of practice, belief frameworks, and aspirations of its practitioners are coterminous with those of modern, posture-based yoga. They may indeed be at variance with "Classical Yoga," but it does not follow from this that these practices, beliefs, and aspirations (whether conceived as yoga or not) are thereby lacking in seriousness, dignity, or spiritual profundity.

For some, such as best-selling yoga scholar Georg Feuerstein, the modern fascination with postural yoga can only be a perversion of the authentic yoga of tradition. "When traditional yoga reached our Western shores in the late nineteenth century," writes Feuerstein, "it was gradually stripped of its spiritual orientation and remodeled into fitness training" (2003: 27).[22] However, as should be clear by now, several aspects of Feuerstein's assessment are misplaced. First, Vivekananda's system should not be considered "traditional yoga" in any strict sense but rather the first (and possibly most enduring) expression of what I have termed "transnational anglophone yoga." Second, the notion that "fitness" is somehow opposed to the "spiritual" ignores the possibility of physical training as spiritual practice, in India as elsewhere (e.g., Alter 1992a). It also misses the

deeply "spiritual" orientation of some modern bodybuilding and of women's fitness training in the harmonial gymnastics tradition (chapters 6 and 7 above). Third, the merger of "traditional yoga" (viz. the modern yoga of Vivekananda) with physical culture did not begin on North American shores, even though its development was, and continues to be, influenced by experiments and innovations there.

As I write this conclusion, winners of regional and national heats are gathering at the Bikram Yoga College of India Headquarters near Hollywood, Los Angeles, to compete in the 2009 Bishnu Charan Ghosh Yoga Asana Championship (named in honor of international bodybuilding champion B. C. Ghosh, brother of Paramahansa Yogananda, and guru of event organizer Bikram Choudhury; see chapter 6). Each contender will have three minutes to perform five compulsory postures plus two additional postures of choice, drawn, as the official entry form specifies, "from the 84 asanas as derived from Patanjali." Competitors will be judged on three main criteria: "a) Proportion of the body, b) Performance regarding steadiness of the posture, c) Dress, style, and grace in asana execution" ("Rules and Regulations," Choudhury 2009). In many respects, Bikram's competition represents a culmination of the historical processes described in this book. Each of its elements can be traced ultimately to the encounter of international physical culture and modern yoga during the early twentieth century: the aesthetic concern for grace, beauty, and sartorial style; the focus on the muscular and structural perfection of the body and the "pose-off" format reminiscent of bodybuilding competitions; and the erroneous but ubiquitous notion that such posture practice derives from Patañjali. A competition like this in the name of yoga would scarcely have been conceivable were it not for the early merger of physical exercise and international yoga and its subsequent normalization as the practical substance of yoga itself in the post–World War II West—and this in spite of Bikram's claim that *āsana* competitions have a two-thousand-year history in India (Daggersfield 2009).

Not satisfied with his own international tournament, however, Bikram is currently negotiating with British Olympic Committee chairman Sebastian Coe to make yoga an event at the London Olympic Games in 2012. Whether the bid is successful or not, it is a sign that global yoga has entered a new phase, one that foregrounds the same Grecian-inspired ideal of psychosomatic fitness that characterized the creation of the modern Games twelve decades ago. The first modern Olympics in Athens and the publication of Vivekananda's *Raja Yoga*, both in 1896, simultaneously brought modern physical culture and modern yoga onto the international stage in unprecedented fashion. Bikram's bid is a powerful symbol of the marriage of these two cultural phenomena and is exemplary of the way in which yoga and physical culture have merged in the modern era.

His guru, as we have seen, was one of the driving forces behind the refashioning of yoga as a democratic health and fitness regime in India during the early to mid-twentieth century. For Bikram (as perhaps for the recently deceased Pattabhi Jois and his yogic heir Sharat Rangaswamy), the lines of influence are clear-cut, and we can pinpoint fairly accurately the historical reasons for the way they practice and teach their yoga. In other cases the vectors may not be so easily traceable. One thing, however, seems evident: yoga as it is practiced in the globalized world today is the result of a new emphasis on physical culture, understood in the various and multiform ways we have examined here. What will become of yoga as it grows and acculturates in the West remains to be seen.