

# The Evolution of Hatha Yoga

The Lineage of Krishnamacharya

by Sandy Gross, Director of Evolution Yoga

As I venture along my own yoga path as a teacher, I am most inspired by other teachers that encourage me to find my own path in this vast “ocean” of yoga, rather than choose theirs. It can be a mixed message in today’s capitalistic yoga world as teachers of today are selling their brands of yoga, their videos and their books. So when I take workshops from master teachers who are marketing their own spin on yoga of today, my first question to them is, ‘who are *your* teachers?’ I am looking for *their* seeds, *their* roots, and *their* lineage and I have learned along the way that they all have one thing in common: a link to a man known as the Grandfather of modern hatha yoga, Sri Tirumalai Krishnamacharya.

Born in late 19<sup>th</sup> century India, he came of age in an era when the indigenous practice of Hatha Yoga had lapsed into a nearly forgotten art. Few yogis remained and his father was one of them. Krishnamacharya started studying Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras at age five. He embarked on an odyssey of mind, body and spirit that would enable him to become an expert in asana, pranayama, Vedic scripture, chanting and Ayurveda. He is responsible for helping to revitalize yoga in his homeland through frequent tours and asana demonstrations, and the teachers he trained eventually and famously brought yoga to the West.

During one stopping point along his lengthy path, he lived in the mountains with a living guru he heard about named Brahmachari, and Brahmachari’s cave became Krishnamacharya’s home for 7 years. During that time, that cave was his university, laboratory and dormitory as he studied asana, pranayama and therapeutic aspects of yoga. He supposedly mastered 3,000 asanas before he was told to leave and begin teaching a standard of yoga that would benefit the masses.

Krishnamacharya taught until he was over 100, a teaching career that spanned seven decades and he only achieved fame near the end of his life. What I find most interesting is that he was not the same teacher at the beginning as he was when he passed. His most well known students, Pattabhi Jois, Indra Devi, BKS Iyengar, and his own son, Desikachar all received lessons that varied in emphasis.

Pattabhi Jois of the Ashtanga Vinyasa tradition, studied with him first and his dynamic brand of vinyasa yoga reflect the early days when Krishnamacharya was young and athletic. Devi was the first woman that he taught and she was instructed in a gentler and more individualized manner. She ultimately became one of the first Hatha Yoga ambassadors, opening studios all over the world. BKS Iyengar had a brief apprenticeship and perhaps his style of adapting asanas to the physical ability of each student through the use of props is an extension of Krishnamacharya’s emphasis on individualized instruction.

His own son, Desikachar, as a boy, hid from his father to avoid asana practice, but much later in his life, realized the wealth of his father’s knowledge and became his apprentice. Srivatsa Ramaswami, Desikachar’s contemporary, studied with Krishnamacharya for 35 years, and it is said that these two men experienced this yoga legend at the height of his wisdom and compassion when he advocated that yoga should be adapted to the age and lifestyle of each student.

In today’s branded yoga market there is debate about which style is the purest form of yoga, one that adheres closest to Krishnamacharya’s principles. In the end, it is impossible to say because his relationship to yoga evolved over time, he taught for the individual’s ability for their stage of life and he refused to brand it. It is easier to place a finger on one single element that unites all the approaches that stem from his lineage and that is his emphasis on the breath. In addition, what Krishnamacharya

ultimately focused on was the adaptation and application of the ancient discipline of Yoga to contemporary lifestyles, thereby enhancing health, longevity and quality of life.

As a yoga teacher, I have learned to balance out all the workshops and trainings I attend within a variety of yoga styles with my own search for seeds of the past, so that I ultimately stay true to my own path, this ocean of yoga, and can encourage the same. There is much information along yoga's evolution. In Krishnamacharya's words, "No one is wise by birth, for wisdom results from one's own efforts".

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Sandy Gross is the founder and director of Evolution Yoga in Beachwood, which has two eco-friendly yoga rooms, features 45+ Vinyasa-based classes weekly for all levels and also offers workshops, teacher trainings and events from various yoga traditions. Evolution Yoga is located at 3737 Park East Drive, near I-271 and the Chagrin Blvd. and Harvard Road exits. Visit Evolution Yoga's web site at [www.evolutionyogastudio.com](http://www.evolutionyogastudio.com)