

{ JOURNEYS }

Studying Yoga in India

A financial journalist quits her job and signs up for four weeks of intensive yoga training. Here's her story.

By ANNA DUBROVSKY



FRESH VISION

India made the author pay attention, just as yoga had.

In August, a few days after I arrived in India, I sent an e-mail to almost everyone in my address book. “Everyone” included erstwhile friends who didn’t know I had quit my job, sold my stemware and salad spinner, parked my car in a friend’s garage, and left Los Angeles. So I got a lot of questions in reply: “What in heaven’s name are you doing in India?” “What made you go out there?” I got a few of these: “!?”

Normally, I’m diligent about answering e-mails. But weeks went by, and these messages, tagged with little red flags, remained unanswered. It’s not that I didn’t have time. It’s not that I didn’t have answers. What stopped me from hitting “reply” was the very simplicity of my rationale. Why did I move to India? Because I wasn’t seeing the flowers or the dogs.

On Saturday mornings, if he’s not traveling, renowned yoga teacher T.K.V. Desikachar gives a public lecture at the healing center he founded in the South Indian city of Chennai. He talks about Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutra* and the lessons he learned from his father and guru, the late T. Krishnamacharya.

Desikachar has a rich store of anecdotes to convey esoteric concepts, and his lectures are part brain twister, part bedtime story. One such anecdote is set in Detroit, on a leafy street, where Desikachar and his wife are taking a walk. She’s noticing every flower. He’s admiring the dogs, particularly those that recall his late Labrador. “Did you see those beautiful >>

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flowers?” Menaka Desikachar asks her husband. No, he didn’t.

What he’s saying, of course, is that what we see depends on our point of view. And that just because we don’t see something doesn’t mean it’s not there. I came to India for a new point of view. I came because I’d gone nearly blind. I didn’t see the flowers. I didn’t see the dogs. I

Bangalore after several years in the U.S. I knew within the first few days that I’d be back—and for much longer. In India, my vision was restored. I walked the streets wide-eyed, drinking in strange sights. I saw flowers everywhere—in women’s hair, draped over deities, in heaps on sidewalks and street carts. I saw mangy dogs scavenging. I saw cows, cars, buses, bicy-

cles, scooters, rickshaws, and the occasional elephant squeezing past one another on narrow, pockmarked roads. I saw women carrying stacks of bricks on their heads and men urinating on walls. I had to stop myself from staring; I had a million questions. I was like a toddler set loose in Toys “R” Us. Everything was colorful and waiting to be explored.

had taught me all about balance sheets, and in India I saw an opportunity to quit it. And then there was Desikachar. Earlier that year, I’d opened his book *The Heart of Yoga* and highlighted a sentence in the first chapter. “Yoga attempts to create a state in which we are always present—really present—in every action, in every moment.” I stopped reading after

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drove the same route to work every day but sometimes missed my exit. I’d look at a clock and, moments later, wonder what time it was.

I didn’t see what was in front of me—let alone inside me—because I was too busy. I kept myself busy to keep at bay misgivings about the path I’d chosen. My mantra was a to-do list as long as the *Mahabharata*.

WHAT I FOUND IN INDIA

In December 2005 I traveled to India to visit a friend who’d returned to her native

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There were other reasons to return. India is cheap: A meal can be had for 50¢; a maid can be hired for less than \$10 a month. What I spent in six months in L.A. would last for six years in India. My job

the first few chapters—I had too much to do!—but in spare moments I ruminated on that.

At the time of my first India visit, I’d been studying yoga for four and a half years. Asana practice held my attention like no other activity. I ate breakfast, blow-dried my hair, and read a magazine all at the same time. I brushed my teeth with my right hand and checked e-mail with my left. But in *tadasana*, *adho mukha svanasana*, and *shirshasana*, I was focused. Yoga, like the country in which it originated, made me pay attention.

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IT'S NOT ABOUT THE POSTURES

When I said good-bye to my friend in Bangalore, I handed her my application for a training course at Desikachar’s Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram (KYM). Hold onto it, I told her. The mandiram required a \$200 deposit; I wanted to be sure. Within a month of returning to L.A. and my job, I shot her an e-mail: “Send it.”

KYM’s four-week “Universal Yet Personal” course for foreigners fills up fast. It’s offered twice a year, and enrollment is capped at 30. Fourteen countries were represented in the most recent session. I was one of three Americans.

My classmates ranged in age from 23 to 65. About half were yoga teachers. One participant, an ayurvedic therapist from Germany, had never practiced yoga. Classes started at 7 a.m. and finished at 6 p.m., and sometimes we were treated to an evening lecture or performance.

We practiced asana and Vedic chanting.

Anna Dubrovsky, a former editor and reporter at Bloomberg News, will be based in Chennai, India, for at least the next six months.

We studied yoga theory and philosophy. We got a taste of what the mandiram does best: *yoga cikitsa*, or yoga as therapy, for conditions as wide-ranging as scoliosis, infertility, and depression.

Unlike most yoga schools in the West and many in India, KYM doesn't emphasize mastery of postures. Asana is a means to an end: freedom from pain. Its students, many of whom are sent by doctors, receive personalized practices in one-on-one sessions with teachers. They rarely know the names of the postures and breathing techniques they're told to practice daily. How they look doesn't matter. What matters is how they feel.

When asked why his approach is so different from that of B.K.S. Iyengar and Pattabhi Jois, two of yoga's best-known teachers and pupils of Krishnamacharya, Desikachar explains that both were teenagers when they studied with his father. They learned what was appropriate at that stage in their physical and mental

development. Desikachar studied with his father for three decades, and as he matured, so did the concepts.

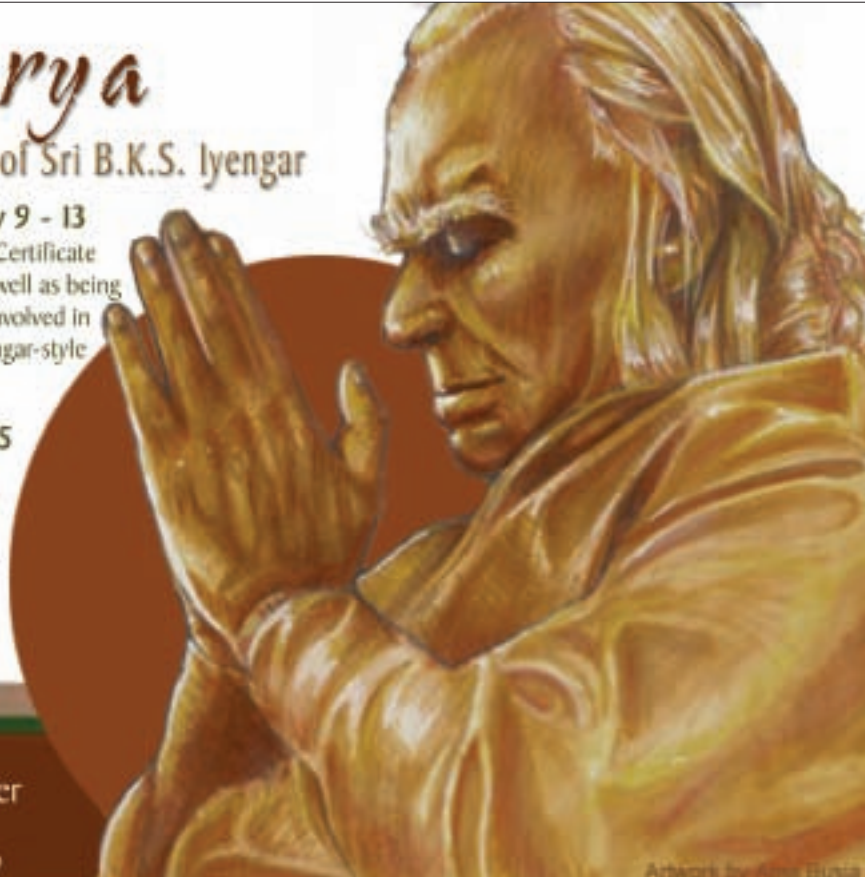
Aside from the Saturday lectures, we rarely saw Desikachar. You'll get more face time by attending one of his workshops abroad. That bothered many of us, but no one could deny that our teachers—his students—knew their stuff.

"When I looked at our teachers and how well trained they are and how deep their knowledge goes, I started to think I'm too inexperienced and shouldn't be doing this," said Nadine Fawell, who teaches as many as 14 yoga classes a week in Johannesburg. Her confidence grew with every case study. Half a dozen Indians being treated at KYM for injuries and illnesses allowed us to peek into their files, observe their practices, and finger their spines, hips, and kneecaps. Fawell returned to South Africa with plans to revamp her classes—and return to Chennai for more training.

I thought I might leave the city when the month was over and settle in a part of India that's greener and cooler. I decided to stay. The course piqued my interest in yoga theory and therapy, and it made sense to stick close to KYM.

What that means, of course, is I'm no longer wide-eyed. I've become used to the sights and smells. I'm comfortable taking cool showers and squatting in public toilets. I look to the right first when crossing the street. I give directions to rickshaw drivers. The remarkable has become run-of-the-mill.

But my vision remains sharp. I still pay attention. I have to. Here, stoplights are scarce and headlights optional. Motorcycles and cars whiz by within inches of me. I jump to avoid collisions so often as to consider it cardio. If I let my mind wander, I'm liable to trip over a dog taking siesta or a woman sitting on the side of the road, an infant in her lap and hills of jasmine at her feet, threading garlands. +



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