

yoga's greater truth

continued from page 69

melded Western techniques with traditional Indian practices from disciplines like wrestling. Oftentimes, the name given to these strength-building regimes was “yoga.” Some teachers, such as Tiruka (a.k.a. K. Raghavendra Rao), traveled the country disguised as yoga gurus, teaching strengthening and combat techniques to potential revolutionaries. Tiruka’s aim was to prepare the people for an uprising against the British, and, by disguising himself as a religious ascetic, he avoided the watchful eye of the authorities.

Other teachers, like the nationalist physical culture reformist Manick Rao, blended European gymnastics and weight-resistance exercises with revived Indian techniques for combat and strength. Rao’s most famous student was Swami Kavalayananda (1883–1966), the most influential yoga teacher of his day. During the 1920s, Kavalayananda, along with his rival and *gurubhai* (“guru brother”) Sri Yogendra (1897–1989), blended asanas and indigenous Indian physical culture systems with the latest European techniques of gymnastics and naturopathy.

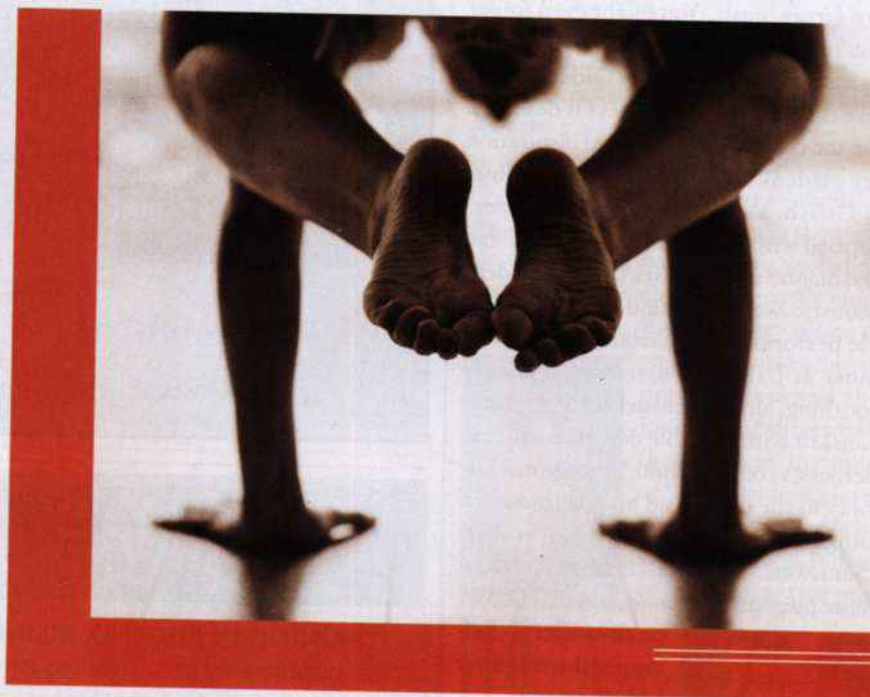
With the help of the Indian government, their teachings spread far and wide, and asanas—reformulated as physical culture and therapy—quickly gained a legitimacy they had not previously enjoyed in the post-Vivekanandan yoga revival. Although Kavalayananda and Yogendra are largely unknown in the West, their work is a large part of the reason we practice yoga the way we do today.

INNOVATIVE ASANA

The other highly influential figure in the development of modern asana practice in 20th-century India was, of course, T. Krishnamacharya (1888–1989), who studied at Kavalayananda’s institute in the early 1930s and went on to teach some of the most influential global yoga teachers of the 20th century, like B. K. S. Iyengar, K. Pattabhi Jois, Indra Devi, and T. K. V. Desikachar. Krishnamacharya was steeped in the traditional teachings of Hinduism, holding degrees in all six *darshanas* (the philosophical systems of orthodox Hinduism) and Ayurveda. But

he was also receptive to the needs of his day, and he was not afraid to innovate, as evidenced by the new forms of asana practice he developed during the 1930s. During his tenure as a yoga teacher under the great modernizer and physical culture enthusiast Krishnarajendra Wodeyar, the maharajah of Mysore, Krishnamacharya formulated a dynamic asana practice, intended mainly for India’s youth, that was very much in line with the physical culture zeitgeist. It was, like Kavalay-

has to peruse translations of texts like the *Hatha Tattva Kaumudi*, the *Gheranda Samhita*, or the *Hatha Ratnavali*, to see that much of the yoga that dominates America and Europe today has changed almost beyond recognition from the medieval practices. The philosophical and esoteric frameworks of premodern hatha yoga, and the status of asanas as “seats” for meditation and pranayama, have been sidelined in favor of systems that foreground gymnastic movement,



ananda’s system, a marriage of hatha yoga, wrestling exercises, and modern Western gymnastic movement, and unlike anything seen before in the yoga tradition.

These experiments eventually grew into several contemporary styles of asana practice, most notably what is known today as Ashtanga vinyasa yoga. Although this style of practice represents only a short period of Krishnamacharya’s extensive teaching career (and doesn’t do justice to his enormous contribution to yoga therapy), it has been highly influential in the creation of American vinyasa, flow, and Power Yoga-based systems.

So where did this leave me? It seemed clear that the styles I practiced were a relatively modern tradition, with goals, methods, and motives different from those traditionally ascribed to asanas. One only

health and fitness, and the spiritual concerns of the modern West. Did this make the yoga I was practicing inauthentic?

This was not a casual question for me. My daily routine during those years was to get up before dawn, practice yoga for two and a half hours, and then sit down for a full day researching yoga history and philosophy. At the end of the day, I would teach a yoga class or attend one as a student. My whole life revolved around yoga.

I went back to the library. I discovered that the West had been developing its own tradition of gymnastic posture practice long before the arrival of Indian asana pioneers like B. K. S. Iyengar. And these were spiritual traditions, often developed by and for women, which used posture, breath, and relaxation to access heightened states of awareness. Americans like