

MASTERS IN FOCUS

AN INTERVIEW WITH KAUSTHUB DESIKACHAR

BY RACHAEL STARK

The Book *Masters In Focus: Inspiring Images of Yogacharya Sri T Krishnamacharya and His Pupils* is available for purchase here:

<http://resource.khyf.net/>

Sri T Krishnamacharya, in a moment of reflection. Chennai. Early 1980's.

Photographer Siddhartha Buch



VERY FEW INDIVIDUALS HAVE THE stature, the profound knowledge, and the direct generational connection to the most influential and pre-eminent yogis ever to have practiced, taught, and lived in the world. Kausthub Desikachar, the son of TKV Desikachar and grandson of Sri Krishnamacharya, is unique. His far-reaching talents, both as a teacher in his own right, who frequently travels and is extremely active in the international yoga community, and a supremely gifted photographer, are particularly evident in his stunningly crafted book, *Masters In Focus*, a collection of fifty-four full page color and black and white photographic plates—beautiful portraits of the essence some of yoga’s greatest gurus printed on cotton bound paper.

What makes *Masters In Focus: Inspiring Images of Yogacharya Sri T Krishnamacharya and His Pupils* such a critical and important book is that the endeavor is much more than a mere “collection” of iconic photographs. Instead, the work is a true labor of love—a series of vivid, breathtaking glimpses of masters of contemporary yoga and their foremost students in their most intimate and human of moments—informal, distilled, almost intensely private visual revelations of Krishnamacharya, TKV Desikachar, K Pattabhi Jois, Indra Devi and BKS Iyengar.

Among these unforgettable—and for the most-part candid—photographs, there is a portrait of TKV Desikachar quietly seated and lost in thought, Sri Krishnamacharya enjoying a simple picnic with his wife, a young Iyengar posing as he tours Italy, Pattabhi Jois absorbed and deeply engaged in the ritual of his daily puja, and Indra Devi practicing meditation in her lush garden. All of Kausthub Desikachar’s images are captivating and compelling—but it is his purpose that makes the book unparalleled. Few artists ask the viewer to enter the world of their subjects and here, within its pages, Desikachar bids the reader to view these illustrious yogis not as a mere petitioners but as friends.

Desikachar’s primary intent behind *Masters In Focus* therefore, is not to portray any of these teachers as the larger-than-life figures that they eventually

became, but rather to challenge the reader to enter and re-enter the picture frame and thereby, slowly develop a relationship with these gurus. It is as if by profoundly regarding each image, the reader forms a bond with these masters as if they were family.

Apart from Desikachar’s talent as a photographer, the book serves as a documentation of these yogis’ daily lives—from the minutiae to the richly spiritual. Desikachar grew up with these individuals—knew them in all their diverse roles as householder, or father, instructor, and friend of the family. It’s a bond that he formed with each of his subjects that began at boyhood and carried through his life as an adult. Ultimately, his affection and intimate knowledge allows him to capture Sri Krishnamacharya, TKV Desikachar, BKS Iyengar, K Pattabhi Jois, and Indra Devi all at their most vulnerable, most proud, and ultimately, most elusive moments.

What follows is an interview with Kausthub Desikachar on the nature of how he compiled and selected the images for *Masters In Focus* and what his book says about the foundations of yoga, the enduring legacy of its practice in the world, and ultimately, how yoga will adapt and thrive in the twenty-first century.

RS: *The first question, considering the stature of these teachers, is why did you use the visual medium alone as a means of expressing their nature? In other words, why omit the specific historic or chronological background surrounding these photographs?*

KD: Two reasons. One is very simple. So much is known about these masters. There are biographies of almost every one of them. Newspapers, magazines and other media have said so much about them. None of these masters are unknown to the general yoga public. A lot is known about their public yoga lives. And people have a lot of ideas in their minds about who they are, what they do, etc., which is a combination of fact and fiction. Hence, my goal was to provide a sample of very intimate pictures, which

would allow the reader to imagine about their personal lives, and would mirror to the audience that these great personalities were human too.

Secondly, I think in this world we are often told a lot of things, and we form impressions based on this. Not only does this bias our opinion on what we know about people, it also in some manner removes our own thinking faculty from the scenario. In this book, which is presented through these photographs only, the reader, or rather the viewer, needs to imagine, to fantasize, to create his own fantasy of the scene in front of him, and in the process emote with the images.

RS: *In terms of the book’s intent, you state that you “chose to have only images of these masters appear and speak for themselves...” If some of the photographs could “speak for themselves” what might they say? Do you encourage the observer to use their imagination as to the ‘unwritten’ dialogue?*

KD: Absolutely. I want the viewer to fantasize every scenario by placing him or herself as part of the scene. In most of the photographs this is possible and, as I said earlier, a very emotive connection can come out of this process. Maybe the reader can visualize that Pattabhi Jois is observing their practice. Or the reader could visualize that he/she is learning how to observe a student from Desikachar, or waiting for Krishnamacharya to serve them next in that picnic he and his wife are on.

RS: *In looking through this rich collection, the images range chronologically from 1917 through 2008—nearly one hundred years—and span three continents—India, Europe, and South America, depicting five distinctive gurus. What do the pictures have in common? What unifies such a complex history of yoga through these snapshots of these contemporary gurus?*

KD: For me the consistent thread here is that despite their apparent greatness in their professional lives, they are all still fundamentally human. Just like you and me.

RS: *On a simpler note, what is your favorite photograph, if you had to pick one of the many splendid portraits and why?*

KD: There are two actually. One is the picnic photograph where T Krishnamacharya is serving his wife Namagiramma. The other is where my own father Desikachar is relaxing in a chair, reading a newspaper, while my daughter is just embracing him.

RS: *In several photographs, there are illustrious persons along with the revered Masters—the Pope meeting BKS Iyengar in 1967, your father, TKV Desikachar consulting with the Dalai Lama on dharma in Chennai in 1995, a young Indra Devi posed alongside the glamorous*

American movie star, Gloria Swanson. What do these images say about yoga's influence on other religions, societies, and its profound impact on world culture?

KD: The very fundamental meaning of yoga is *union*. So it's so nice to see these grandmasters uniting in a very social and respectful way to other leading personalities in the world. This really sends a strong message that yoga is not something only for the mat, but actually something that influences more deeply your personality and behavior.

RS: *Many of the photographs show Sri T Krishnamacharya, Indra Devi, K Pattabhi Jois, TKV Desikachar, and BKS Iyengar during profound and deeply spiritual*

moments. How would you characterize the devotional life of these masters?

KD: Yoga is fundamentally a spiritual practice. And it shows how these different people connect with this idea. For T Krishnamacharya and Pattabhi Jois, who is very devotional, it was through religious practice. For Indra Devi, it was more meditative. For TKV Desikachar, it's a bit more reflective. Watch carefully that photograph where he is lecturing on God. The question he asks is, "*What is God?*" not "*Who is?*" So even though all of these teachers are fundamentally belonging to the same thread of yoga, their expression of [their] spiritual side is unique to each. This is wonderful. Isn't it?

RS: *The initial epithet in your Editor's Note states, "One must never forget the ladder that got us so high," and you explain to the reader that "yoga has withstood its 'in-vogue' status to become a full-fledged, respected self-health discipline of which we, as teachers and as students, can be proud to be a part. This has not happened overnight, we are merely reaping the benefits of the selfless and sustained efforts of some giant pillars of yoga..."*

You also mention that these teachers endured "poverty, racism, and many other obstacles that confronted them." Could you explain in detail a little more of what some of these masters had to overcome—in terms of prejudice, physical hardships, or conflicts with civil authorities?

KD: At an age when people usually start to contemplate retirement, T Krishnamacharya had to start life afresh, as India became a democracy and funding for his yoga school was cut. This was a very hard time for him. When BKS Iyengar traveled first to Europe to teach, despite being "invited" as a yoga master, he was made to sit in the "non-white" tables to eat, even at the places he was teaching. He suffered humiliation in the form of racism for many years. Family members of my own father had to present him as an "engineer" to find a bride for him, as being a yoga teacher in the 1960s was not at all respectable.

Also I remember that when my father

Sri T Krishnamacharya and his wife Namagiramma, sharing a meal on a picnic. Possibly in 1965. Photographer Unknown



[TKV Desikachar] was going to buy our home in the 1970s, banks would not loan him money, merely because he was a yoga teacher. So my father had to borrow money from family and friends to secure a home for our family. So many such hardships came into the lives of these masters merely because of being yoga teachers at a time when yoga was not popular. Yet, they never gave up. They strived hard to bring glory to yoga, so that our generations can reap the benefits, which we are. Yoga is so much more popular and lucrative now. Yet our commitments don't match theirs.

RS: *The year 2008 was “auspicious” in that it marked the 120th anniversary of T Krishnamacharya, Iyengar celebrated his 90th birthday, TKV Desikachar turned 70, Indra Devi would turn 110, and K Pattabhi Jois completed his 93rd birthday. Sadly, from the time of the book’s publication, K Pattabhi Jois passed away in 2009. Does the inevitable march of time make this book more relevant?*

KD: This is a question only time will truly answer. But true, already since the

book was released in 2008, K Pattabhi Jois has passed away in 2009. And now, only two of these grand masters remain. So, in time, this document may be a precious document to connect with intimate memories of these masters.

I have been so fortunate to have been able to shoot all three masters who were alive while making this book. In time, I am sure this book will become an invaluable asset to every yoga enthusiast, a kind of museum in their own library. I do hope that people will regard it as such.

I would also like readers to value what the book stands for—a union of some of the grand masters of yoga, which itself is so wonderful. They were all so supportive in making the book and this is testimony to the philosophy of what this book stands for—an honoring not just of the masters of yoga of our time, but also of yoga itself. I hope that readers will also embrace this book not just as a souvenir of intimate moments of these exciting personalities, but also connect emotively with their humane side.

RS: *In terms of yoga’s future and the fact that it’s become so popular and*

commercialized, particularly in the West, how important it is to preserve the original teacher/student dynamic and methodology of yoga as exemplified by these extraordinary masters?

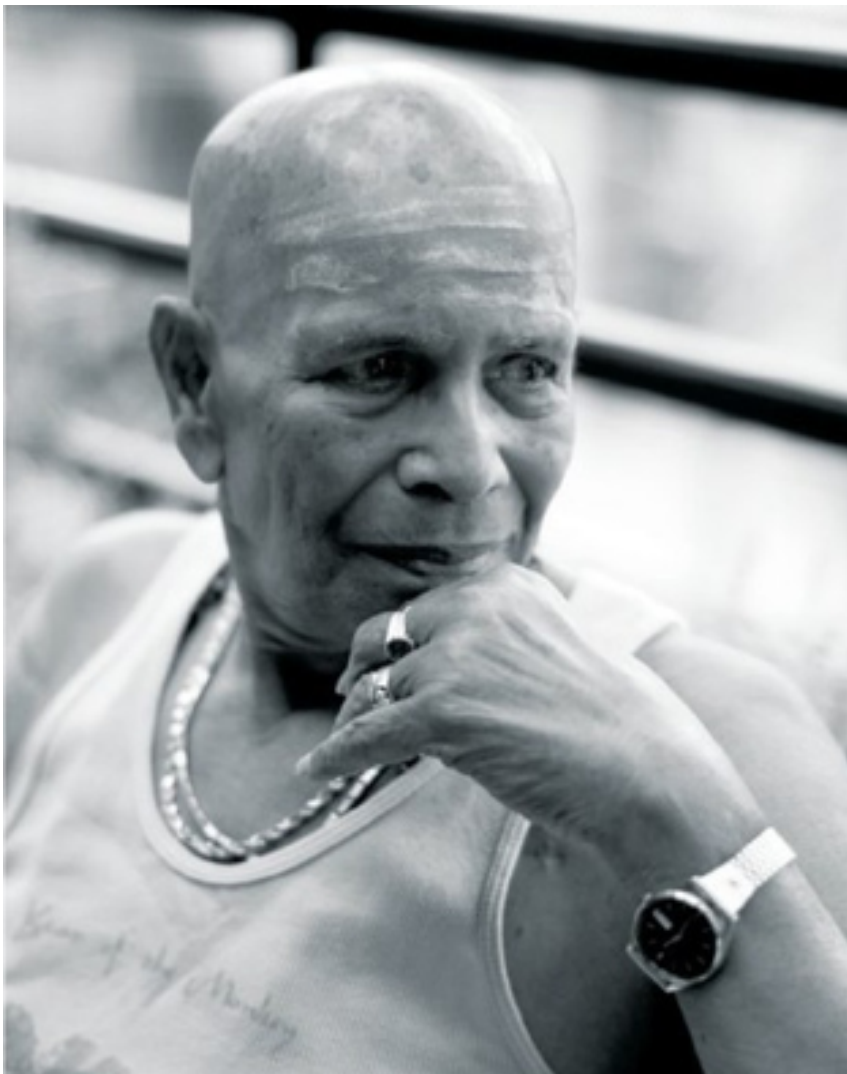
KD: When you say “methodology” I kind of start to reflect about what you mean by it, because when we look at yoga and its process, there are two aspects of it: One is the form of it and the other is the function of it. And in my view, I think that there can be some modification in the form as long as the function is the same. So, I don't think we need to be stuck about the form of yoga and worry about yoga being the same but the function of yoga must be consistent. For example, the principles of why yoga was originally created; that's my feeling about it.

RS: *And the principles of yoga would be what, primarily?*

KD: The primary function of Yoga is spiritual—to remove our suffering in various layers—whether it's physical, physiological, emotional,



TKV Desikachar relaxing with newspaper, and his granddaughter, Sraddha. Chennai. 2008. Photograph by Kausthub Desikachar



*Sri K Pattabhi Jois in his home. Mysore. 2008
Photograph by Kausthub Desikachar*

or psychological. That's why yoga was created. In the past, yoga was not created simply for an exercise routine. Unfortunately the sad reality today is that many people associate yoga as a physical form rather than a spiritual thing that is much deeper. That's really why we need to rethink why we're doing yoga—not what yoga we are doing but rather why we are doing yoga and if it's serving the purpose or function that it's meant to serve.

For example, I feel that in a majority of situations the function of yoga has been lost. There are many, many cases where this practice of yoga on the purely physical level has been causing people a great deal of injury.

RS: *Returning to your book, Masters In Focus and the way that these dedicated gurus taught and practiced, you strove to capture the intimacies of their lives and their teachings. Have we lost the intimacy of the Gurulstudent relationship?*

KD: Well, I think that this is one of the things that I feel. Nowadays, a lot of the yoga business is run as a “business” and the relationship between the teacher and student seems to be based on the business contract rather than a spiritual guidance or intimate contact where there is a much deeper connection to the many layers of yoga. I think this connection is something that is fading and I hope it will not totally disappear.

Unfortunately, there are not many

yoga Masters today. There are many, many yoga instructors but there are not those giants of yoga. We are losing these giants of yoga and I also think one of the things that people are losing today is having a good, intimate relationship with their own teacher. Now we have business contracts and we have an employee relationship with the student. It's not just technology or the economy that has allowed this to happen; it's that people don't want to pursue a relationship long-term anymore. We want to learn as quickly as possible so that we ourselves can make money from it. The level of long-term commitment is disappearing now.

RS: *Especially in this age of immediate gratification and electronics...*

KD: Yes.

RS: *How do you think then that we can bring this traditional student/teacher relationship that you documented so carefully in Masters In Focus back today, especially in a world that seems to continually remove the human and interpersonal dynamics between people?*

KD: I think we just have to be patient and to be good examples as teachers. That's all. Maybe we ourselves have to nourish our own relationships with our teachers and just be good examples to our students. That's it. There's no other way.

RS: *And as good examples do you mean that teachers should follow yoga principles?*

KD: Yes.

RS: *Is there anything else that you want to add or reflect upon—in terms of the future of yoga and its enduring growth?*

KD: I strongly feel that there will be a tide that will change in the yoga world because I really think that there is too much spiritual strength in yoga for it to just simply disappear. Yoga is probably simply going through a phase now where the traditional relationship and original style of yoga is fading but people will

realize the value of yoga and come back to it in the future. I'm very sure about it and I think that when that happens, there are these good examples of these great Yogis and that will be enough. I don't think that we can "save" yoga—I think that yoga will save us.

RS: Finally, do you in your personal life remember one particular moment in the lives of these legendary figures?

KD: Well, my relationship with many of these masters has been very, very intimate. That's one thing that I say that we must not forget—that all of these people are human beings at the fundamental level.

I think that one of the incidents that really stands out in my own memory is that, even though my grandfather [Sri Krishnamacharya] was one of the

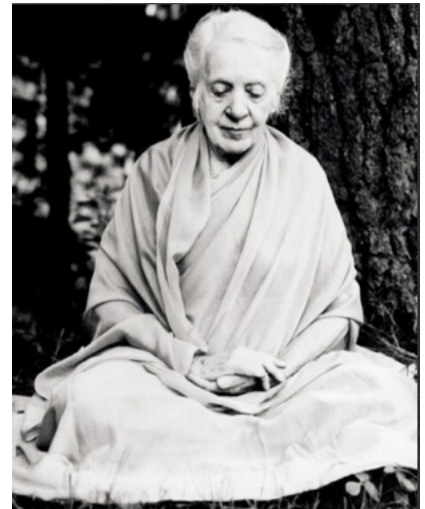
great yogis of our time, one of the most influential, when my grandmother passed away, he was like a child—he was shattered and this is something that I think nobody really knows.

Fundamentally, all these yogis were human beings and this is what I remember so much because it was a very simple but intimate moment and very, very human...

RS: That we are all both teachers and students...

KD: Yes. The teacher is the student at the same time. You don't ever stop learning. ❧❧

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Indra Devi. Photographer unknown.



*Sri BKS Iyengar relaxes in his living room. Pune. 2008.
Photograph by Kausthub Desikachar*