

# The Life and Yoga of Śrī T. Krishnamacharya

AN INTERVIEW WITH T. K. V. DESIKACHAR

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**T**irumalai Krishnamacharya was born on November 18, 1888, in a village in the state of Mysore, South India. He was born into a family that traces its roots back to the famous ninth-century South Indian sage Nathamuni, author of the *Yoga Rahasya* and the first teacher in the line of Vaishnava gurus.

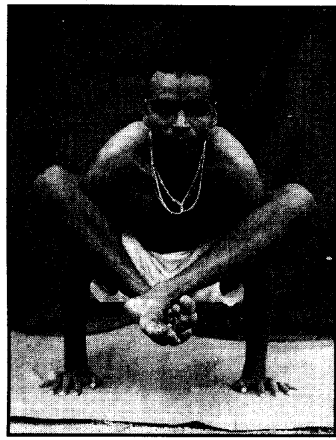
Krishnamacharya received his first instruction in Sanskrit and yoga from his father before becoming a pupil at the Brahmatantra Parakala Mutt in Mysore, one of the best known and most respected Brahmin schools. Enrolled at the age of twelve, he studied the Vedic texts and learned the Vedic rituals while simultaneously attending the Royal College of Mysore. At the age of eighteen he moved to Banaras, where he studied Sanskrit, logic, and grammar at the university. Back in Mysore, he received a thorough grounding in the philosophy of the Vedānta from Śrī Krishna Brahmatantra Swami, the director of the Parakala Mutt. Then he went north again to study the Sāṃkhya, India's oldest philosophical system and the one on which yoga is fundamentally based. In 1916 he went to the Himalayas where, at the foot of Mount Kailash, he met his teacher, Śrī Ramamohan Brahmachari, a learned yogi who was living with his family near Lake Manasarovar in Tibet.



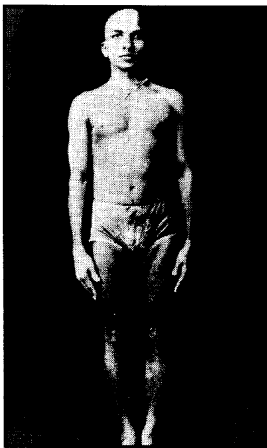
*Krishnamacharya at age 84.*



*Krishnamacharya patron and student, Krishnarajendra Wodoyar IV, the mahārājah of Mysore.*



*B. K. S. Iyengar at age 24 demonstrating bhujapīdāsana.*



*Krishnamacharya at age 46 in samasthiti.*

Krishnamacharya spent more than seven years with this teacher, who exercised considerable influence over the direction he took in life, giving him the great task of spreading the message of yoga and using his abilities as a healer and helper of sick people. Consequently, Śrī Krishnamacharya did not embark upon an academic career, but returned to the south where he studied Āyurveda, the traditional Indian healing system, as well as the philosophy of Nyāya, a Vedic school of logic recognized for its tools of inquiry and emphasis on discrimination gained by valid knowledge. In 1924 he returned to Mysore, where the rājah, a progressive ruler, gave him the opportunity to open a yoga school. The rājah himself was one of Krishnamacharya's most enthusiastic students. From 1933 to 1955 Krishnamacharya taught yoga at the school and wrote his first book, *Yoga Makarandam* (Secrets of Yoga).

By this time his reputation was spreading throughout South India and beyond. Krishnamacharya's first Western students came to study yoga with him in 1937. Indra Devi was among them. B. K. S. Iyengar, who was to become Krishnamacharya's brother-in-law, received his first yoga instruction with the acclaimed teacher. In 1939 and 1940, Krishnamacharya was visited by a French medical team who wanted to verify that an experienced yogi could deliberately stop his heartbeat. For Śrī Krishnamacharya, this much-marvelled-at examination was a rather bothersome demonstration, one that he undertook out of feeling responsible to validate yoga in the eyes of the skeptical scientific world.

Soon Krishnamacharya's interest and work turned toward treating the sick, using Āyurveda and yoga as healing agents. He became increasingly well known, and in 1952 was summoned to Madras to treat a popular politician who had suffered a heart attack. Finally, Krishnamacharya settled in Madras with his family.

As well as his Indian students, more Westerners came to Madras to study. Gerard Blitz, who brought these teachings to Europe, was one of the first to seek out Krishnamacharya, as was Jean Klein, the Advaita teacher. In 1976, T. K. V. Desikachar, Krishnamacharya's son and one of his closest disciples, founded the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram, an institution where yoga is used to treat sick people, and is taught to both Indian and foreign students. Śrī Krishnamacharya was teaching and inspiring those around him until six weeks prior to his death in 1989.

**Q:** As both son and student of Śrī Krishnamacharya, you must have been one of the people closest to him and one of those who knew him best. Can you please tell us something about Krishnamacharya, the Sanskrit scholar, healer, and yogi?

**A:** The foremost reason my father became a scholar of Sanskrit was because of his family tradition. In the old days, people like my father's forebears were well known as advisors, even to the kings. Nowadays we would call my father's grandfather something like prime minister, for example, but at

that time the position of prime minister was not a political one in the way that we now know it. He was rather an advisor who told the rulers what was right and what was wrong. For this purpose, these scholars naturally studied the old texts, which are all written in Sanskrit. So at that time it was perfectly normal for someone who grew up in the milieu in which my father did to become versed in Sanskrit; it was the language of these circles, just as today English is the language of technology.

In his formal education he had to learn Sanskrit well enough to be able to read and study the classic texts that describe the branches of the Vedas. Yoga is just one of those branches, but my father developed a special interest in yoga because his family was historically involved with yoga. One of his ancestors was the famous yogi Nathamuni. The interest in yoga is like a thread going right through the history of this family, and my father simply picked it up. His first teacher was his own father.

He pursued this interest further when he studied with great masters in the north of India, and he found his own special teacher, Ramamohan Brahmachari, in the region of Lake Manasarovar in the Himalayas. Krishnamacharya stayed with his teacher for nearly eight years. Ramamohan Brahmachari instructed him in the *Yoga Sūtra* and taught him how to help the sick by means of yoga. Much of what is seen as the uniqueness of my father's work comes from this teacher.

It is normal for someone with a family tradition like this to become a great Sanskrit scholar and to be versed in the literature and religion given to us in the Vedas. But because his teacher said to him, "You must spread the message of yoga," Krishnamacharya decided to become a yoga teacher. He turned down many offers of professorships—in Sanskrit, in logic, in Vedānta and other subjects. He immersed himself in everything he had been taught and finally became a guru. It was no easy matter—indeed there were inner struggles for him—but he did it.

Another important point was that, through his interest in religion, especially his own tradition of the Vaishnava, Krishnamacharya came across the teachings of some great yogis of South India. These people are called *alvar*, which means "someone who has come to us to rule." Alvar direct the minds of other people and are regarded as an incarnation of God. Their greatness is bestowed upon them as babies, and many of them are not from Brahmin families but sometimes come from simple peasant families. They were born into the world as extraordinary people. Śrī Krishnamacharya studied the writings of these masters, which are in our language of Tamil, and so discovered the meaning of yoga as it is understood in the south of India. This is how he could combine the great teachings from the north, learned from his teacher in the Himalayas, with the great teachings of the south, which come from our Tamil masters, the *alvar*.

Q: Was it required at that time that someone taking this path should go to the Himalayas and live there with a master?

A: No, this was Krishnamacharya's personal decision. He decided that he wanted to learn everything about the Vedic darśanas—the various systems of Indian thought—because some of his views were not accepted by his teachers. When he was attending lectures on Sāṃkhya and Mīmāṃsā in



*Krishnamacharya teaching a Western student, 1954.*

Mysore, he vowed he would go to the best universities in India and learn all there was to learn about various schools of Indian thought. In those days, the best place for studying these was Kashi, now known as Varanasi or Banaras so he went there. He was lucky to have the opportunity to go there, because the teachers there recognized his special abilities. It was in Banaras, where Krishnamacharya met a teacher named Ganganath-Jha who recommended he go to a great yoga teacher in the north. That is how he went to Tibet. It was not a requirement, but instead almost chance.

Q: And the healer Krishnamacharya?

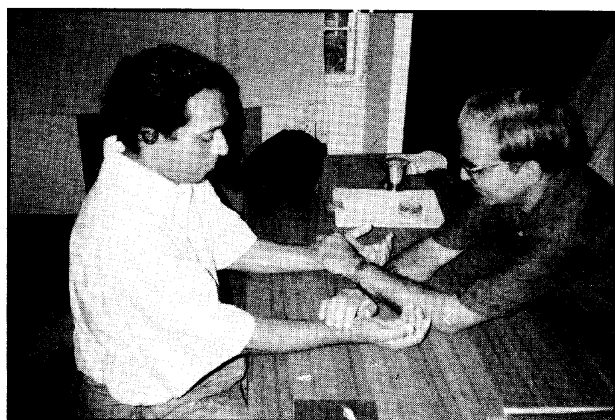
A: For most people yoga is purely a spiritual discipline, but it is clear that for my father, yoga included other things as well. One of the biographies written about him relates how he was concerned with the sick even as a student. My father himself told me that once he was asked to come to the British governor, who suffered from diabetes. My father was able to help him, then left to continue his studies in the north, at Mount Kailash.

The ability to heal must have come from his own background. Probably it was his father who first gave him tips on how to treat diabetes and other illnesses, for in Nathamuni's *Yoga Rahasya* we find many remarks about the use of yoga in the treatment of sick people. Illness is an obstacle on the road to spiritual enlightenment; that is why you have to do something about it. There are many ways of treating sickness through yoga: sometimes a mantra is needed, sometimes a change of diet, sometimes certain āsanās, and sometimes prāṇāyāma. Probably Krishnamacharya had heard about all of this early in life and wanted to learn more about it. It became clear to him that if he wanted to learn more about healing, he would have to learn about Āyurveda. So he went to a well-known teacher named Krishna Kumar in Bengal and stayed with him in order to learn Āyurveda. Eventu-

ally, as well as knowing Nathamuni's teachings about how to use yoga to promote good health, my father had all the knowledge of Āyurveda at his fingertips. This is how he knew the importance of the pulse for giving information about a person's condition. He learned this from masters as well as by studying the old texts on the subject. Krishnamacharya always took the pulse of anyone who came to him; one of the first things he taught me was how to take someone's pulse. Being able to diagnose a condition through taking the pulse and using Āyurveda and Nathamuni's yogic health system were the means Krishnamacharya used when he gave advice on physical, mental, and spiritual wellness. So it is not surprising that he sometimes performed real miracles.

Q: What makes Krishnamacharya's yoga so unique?

A: What makes my father's yoga teachings unique is his insistence on attending to each individual and to his or her uniqueness. If we respect each person individually, it naturally means we will always start from where each person currently is. The starting point is never the teacher's needs but those of the student. This requires many different approaches; there is not just one approach for everybody. The way yoga is taught nowadays often



Desikachar making a diagnosis based on the pulse.

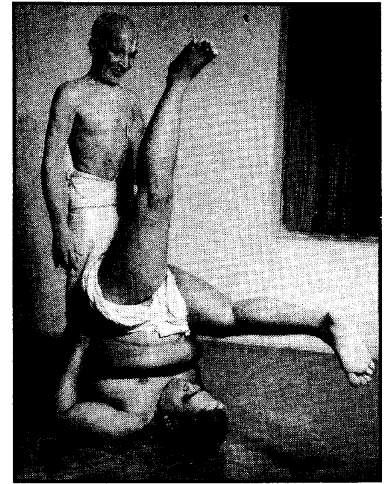
gives the impression that there is *one* solution to everyone's problems and *one* treatment for every illness. But yoga affects the mind, primarily, and each person's mind is different. Indeed the culture and background of each person is different as well. In every case, my father chose what seemed necessary and useful: sometimes it might be āsanas, sometimes it was a prayer, sometimes he even told people to stop a certain yoga practice: then the healing occurred. There are many stories I could tell, all of which show the necessity for an individual approach to yoga. By this I do not mean that I have to give only private lessons, but I must create an atmosphere in my classes in which each student can find his or her own way to yoga. I have to realize that each of my students is not the same person today as they were yesterday, and not at all the same as when they came last week, perhaps with similar questions. This is the most important message my father passed on, and it is essentially the opposite of what is currently being taught in most places.

The essence of my father's teachings is this: it is not that the person needs to accommodate him- or herself to yoga, but rather the yoga practice must be tailored to fit each person. I would even go so far as to say that this is what makes my father's approach different from most of the others around today, where everything is well organized and you have to fit into a certain structure. With Krishnamacharya's yoga there is no organization, and the individual must find her or his own structure.

This implies that progress on the path of yoga means different things for different people. We must not obstruct this progress by deliberately setting certain goals. Yoga serves the individual, and does so through inviting transformation rather than by giving information. These are two very different things. For instance, this book gives information about various topics, but in order to bring about transformation, I would explain each topic in a different way to each person. My father taught us more ways to approach a person in yoga than I have found anywhere else. Who should teach whom? When? And what? These are the important questions to be asked in beginning a practice. But underlying all these is the most important question of all: How can the power of the breath be utilized? That is something quite exceptional; nowhere else is the breath given so much importance, and our work has proven that the breath is a wonder drug, if I may use this term.

Q: As well as the breath, you, like your father, use many sounds and mantra. Mantra belong to the Indian tradition. Can we in the West relate to this aspect of Krishnamacharya's yoga?

A: You must understand the word *mantra* correctly. It is not a Hindu symbol but rather something much more universal: it is something that can bring a person's mind to a higher plane. Sound has a lot of power; the voice has a tremendous influence. Just think about how an orator can capture an audience just by the way he speaks. In our Indian tradition we have made use of these qualities of sound. We use Sanskrit words, but your language



*Krishnamacharya and student performing eka pāda sarvāṅgāsana.*



*Desikachar chanting with daughter Mekhala, age 10, accompanying on the vīnā, Germany, 1992.*

too is made up of sounds. In India we use mantra because, by virtue of their religious tradition, they mean something to many people. But I would never use a mantra indiscriminately. We can always work within an individual's tradition. What is universally true is that sounds can have a powerful influence on us. Our work proves this again and again.

Q: Can you say something about the concept of structuring your yoga practice intelligently—the concept of *viñyāsa krama*?

A: First I must ask: What do you mean by “intelligently”? You are probably familiar with the argument that doing the headstand brings more blood into the head. Somebody who has the feeling that the blood supply to the head is not good enough then comes to the conclusion that the headstand is the best *āsana* for them. But first we should think this through. Do we all suffer from a deficient supply of blood to the head simply because we stand and walk upright? Suppose that someone is haunted by this idea so much that he begins to practice the headstand every day, if possible first thing in the morning, perhaps as the first or only *āsana*. Our experience in working with all kinds of people has taught us that people who do this eventually suffer from enormous problems in the neck, that then result in great tension and stiffness in that area and a decreased supply of blood to the whole musculature of the neck—precisely the opposite of what they hoped they would achieve.

An intelligent approach to yoga practice means that, before you begin, you are clear about the various aspects of the *āsana* you wish to practice, and know how to prepare for them in such a way that you reduce or negate any undesired effects. With regard to the headstand, for example, the questions are: Is my neck prepared for this? Can I breathe well in the *āsana*? Is my back strong enough to raise the entire weight of my legs? To approach your practice intelligently means to know all the implications of what you want to do, whether that be *āsana* or *prāṇāyāma*, and to make appropriate preparations and adjustments. It is not enough to jump if you want to reach the sky. Taking an intelligent approach means working toward your goal step by step. If you want to travel overseas, the first thing you need is a passport. Then you need visas for the countries you intend to visit, and so forth. The simple fact that you want to go there does not make the trip possible. All learning follows this pattern.

Q: How did Krishnamacharya see the significance of *āsanas* in the practice of yoga?

A: My father never saw yoga simply as a physical practice. Yoga was much more about reaching the highest, which for him was God. So for Krishnamacharya, yoga meant taking steps that would lead to God in order to become one with God. This path demands much from those who follow it: a strong will, trust, and the ability keep up one's efforts constantly. Illness is definitely not a good companion on the way, for it can distract the attention; instead of being devoted to God we can think only of our physical pains. The steps in yoga that are concerned with the physical body are steps that should enable us to go the whole way, not the other way around. It is not a matter of making the body the center of all activities, nor of depriving

it altogether. Yoga for one person can mean becoming healthy again through the practice of āsanās; for someone else it can mean finding help in preparing for death—certainly not through practicing āsanās, but rather by finding a way of reaching a peaceful state of mind where there are no feelings of guilt or blame. Perhaps in this case I would teach the person to pray. For a child it is interesting and meaningful to have a lot of physical exertion—but why should I teach an eighty-year-old person to do a headstand or sit in the lotus posture?

Yoga is primarily a practice intended to make someone wiser, more able to understand things than they were before. If āsanās help in this, terrific! If not, then some other means can be found instead. The goal is always bhakti or, to put it in my father's words, to approach the highest intelligence, namely, God.

Q: When Śrī Krishnamacharya was teaching, his explanations were always closely linked to the old texts. There was scarcely one explanation that did not contain a reference to an appropriate quotation from one of the writings of the sages of old. Was there one work that was most central to his teaching?

A: The most important yoga text as far as my father was concerned was always Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra*. The other texts were certainly useful, but there was no doubt in his mind concerning the relevance of the *Yoga Sūtra*. Another text that was important to him was Nathamuni's *Yoga Rahasya*. In that text there are hints on practical procedures; it is a book much concerned with the question of how yoga can be adapted to each individual. There is a lot of detailed information about breathing in the āsanās, for example. The *Yoga Rahasya* contains a wealth of information that is not given in the *Yoga Sūtra*. Furthermore, Nathamuni's text places great emphasis on bhakti, devotion to God. The *Bhagavad Gītā* is also a great yoga text. It emphasizes the thought that the way to the highest power does not mean that we should neglect or refuse to carry out our duties in life. This is what makes the *Bhagavad Gītā* unique. It tells us that our search should not be a flight from life. For anyone to whom the Vedas is important, the *Bhagavad Gītā* is a significant text. It relates many of the things from the Upaniṣads in a way that is easy to understand, and surprisingly enough, it contains important hints on things like breathing techniques and nutrition. In details like this the *Bhagavad Gītā* is much clearer and more precise than the *Yoga Sūtra*. A text like the *Hatha Yoga Pradīpikā* contains a lot of good information, yet the essential text is still Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtra*. Understanding the *Yoga Sūtra* is a lifelong task. Each time you read it you can see something more, something different. I studied it eight times with my father, and I think my father went on studying it throughout his life. Each time he went through the *Yoga Sūtra* with me he could say something new about it. His last commentary on this text, written from 1984–1986, contained thoughts that he had never expressed before. In 1961 I studied the verse regarding *nābhicakra* with him,<sup>1</sup> but how much more information about the human body he put in his later commentary on this same verse! The *Yoga Sūtra* is an inspired text on all levels, whether about the body, the breath, or the mind.

<sup>1</sup> *Yoga Sūtra* 3.29.



*Krishnamacharya and  
his family.*



*Namagiramma,  
Krishnamacharya's wife,  
demonstrating mahāmudrā.*



*A young Desikachar with his  
sister and brother demonstrat-  
ing bharadvājāsana at a  
public lecture.*

Besides Nathamuni's *Yoga Rahasya*, which goes into more detail and emphasizes the theme of bhakti, the *Yoga Sūtra* was the seminal text for Krishnamacharya.

Q: Śrī Krishnamacharya was a family man and had six children. Can you say a few words about his family life?

A: My father was a very concerned person. He wanted all of us to do yoga and know everything he knew. At the same time, he found time to take care of our needs. I remember him taking us to the cinema when I was eight years old. But somehow we children were much closer to our mother. She was the one we usually went to when we needed something.

Q: What part did yoga play in the family?

A: Whether we liked it or not, we all did yoga. Everyone, including my mother and my three sisters, practiced āsanās. I remember seeing my mother doing āsanās, prāṇāyāma, and meditation when she was expecting my younger sister. I was the least interested, I must confess. When my father was around, though, I pretended to practice āsanās. My elder brother was the expert.

Q: Contrary to the trends of the time, your father did a lot to promote yoga for women, and your mother practiced regularly.

A: Yes. How she learned so much, I do not know. She must have picked it up from Father, who taught at home. I never saw him actually teach her, but she was able to correct all our practices. She knew all the texts by heart, even though she did not have much schooling. Her sister was adept at yoga too. She used to accompany Father on his lecture tours. And my sisters helped Father in his classes; my youngest sister now teaches yoga. Some of our women teachers are former students of his, including my wife. The well-known American yoga teacher Indra Devi studied yoga with my father in 1937.

Q: It is interesting that your father chose family life rather than the life of a sannyāsin. What was his attitude toward sannyāsin?

A: To be a sannyāsin means to give yourself totally to a higher power, to God. I think my father was a great example of that. There was never any doubt that he felt that it was not he himself who did things. He regarded himself as powerless, and it was always the power of his teacher or God that worked through him. He always claimed that everything he said and did came from his teacher and from God. He never claimed to have discovered anything, but always said: "Nothing is mine; it all comes from my teacher or from God." To me, that is sannyāsa. You cannot be a sannyāsin and at the same time say you discovered something yourself. To be a sannyāsin means to lay all that you do at the feet of your teacher or God. My father was an example of this. Those who met him often saw him take his teacher's sandals and lay them on his head as a way of saying that he felt he was small, smaller than the feet of his teacher. I think my father was a sannyāsin

par excellence, and yet he was also a family man; he never experienced any contradiction between living with his family and living in the true spirit of a sannyāsin.

Sannyāsa in the sense of wearing orange robes, never staying long in one place but wandering about and begging for food was, in my father's opinion, no longer appropriate for our times. Manu, one of our great scholars, used to say that in these times of kaliyuga, sannyāsa has become impossible. My father's teacher told him that he must lead a family life, and Nathamuni says that family life is the most important part of one's existence. By that he does not just mean having children, but living as others do and having responsibilities. Even the Upaniṣads do not insist on sannyāsa in the formal sense of the word. The *Bhagavad Gītā* places no great value on sannyāsa. In it, Arjuna comes to see that he should involve himself in life and not run away from his tasks. Perhaps it is appropriate for those who have carried out all the tasks they have to do in the world to choose the way of sannyāsa, but there are not many like this. What was traditionally understood by the term *sannyāsa* is nowadays no longer possible.

Q: You studied with your father for more than twenty-five years. How did you come to be a student of your father's?

A: First of all, it is not quite accurate to say that I studied with him for twenty-five years. To say that gives the impression that I was like a student at university where the whole day is filled with studying. No, I lived with him for twenty-five adult years and during that time I also studied with him. In this way, studying with my father was like going to a foreign country and slowly becoming familiar with the language, customs, and habits of the people there. That is how I learned from him. He taught me how to understand the important texts such as the Upaniṣads. I learned how to recite these texts and how to interpret them. He told me what I had to learn and decided what I should teach. For instance, when I was wondering whether to accept an invitation from the European Union of Yoga, he said, "Go to the yoga conference in Switzerland!" and I went. He told me to go and teach Krishnamurthi, and so I did, and my father told me how I should do that.

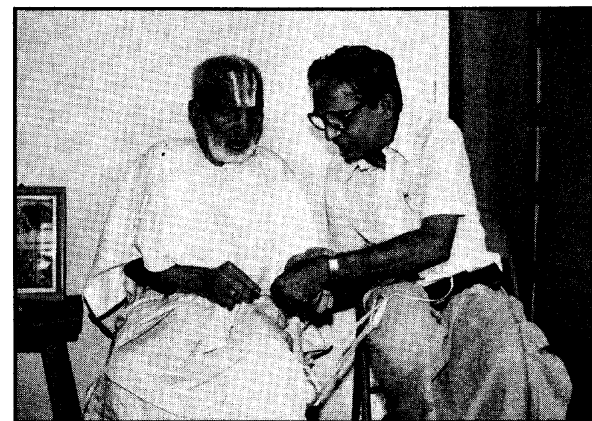
Living with him, being with him, seeing him, eating with him, and so forth were the most important aspects of my life. I studied with him too, which is how I can now explain this and that to you from the *Yoga Sūtra*. But my explanations contain more of my experience with him, my shared life with him, than his words themselves. All that has been a great gift for me. Everything happened in our house: his treatments, his teaching, our family life, everything. That was the essential part of my "study" with him.

Q: What was his instruction like? How did he teach you and what did you learn?

A: I learned āsanās, but I only needed to work on them for six months or so. I was twenty-five and very flexible. He often took me with him to lectures and I had to demonstrate the āsanās to the audience as he explained their



*Krishnamacharya with his grandsons Bhushan and Kausthub and their mother Mrs. Menaka Desikachar on the occasion of their bhradhoupadesham or sacred thread ceremony, 1983.*



*Krishnamacharya at 100 years old with Desikachar.*

