Final Revision- My Talk about Guruji

I first got interested in yoga in 1969 when in Switzerland to attend the talks of J. Krishnamurti. Although Guruji taught Krishnamurti for 20 years, at that time Desikachar was his teacher. A student of Desikachar’s was staying at our chalet and teaching classes and that was my first introduction to yoga. I went to Madras the following year and studied with him for 5 years. His father T. Krishnamacharya was there sitting on the front verandah nearly every time I went over to the house for lessons – all of which were one-to-one.

After 5 years there, some American friends of mine came back to India after spending 6 months with Dona Holleman who was one of the first westerners to study with Guruji. We began to practise together & I was immediately taken with the approach which was so full of life & I knew I had to go to Pune. However I did have some misgivings as in 1971 in Switzerland Guruji was teaching a class and a few of us went along to observe. I remember there was a queue of about 60 to 80 students waiting to get in – one of whom was smoking and said –”I guess I better quit right now!” Guruji came into the room and quickly put them in 3 long rows with Dona and another woman demonstrating on a stage. The way he taught the very mixed class of near total beginners, including some with therapy problems as well as experienced students with electric energy, lightning insights and adjustments without missing a beat made me think “this guy is a Yogic madman!” My friends and I looked at each other and said “thank God we don’t study with him!” If you would have told me then that 5 years later I was going to Pune to study with him and would do so for the next nearly 40 years I would thought you were nuts.

But I did go. However you might wonder why he let me come when I read you this excerpt of my first letter to him, which I still have. After asking if I could come I said“…if this may be arranged, I would like to know approximately how many classes a week I would be allowed to participate in, both in Bombay and Poona, how long the classes are and (here’s the killer) if there would be any possibility of individual instruction from yourself.” He wrote back “…you can come for 3 months and if you think it is worthwhile you can stay or else you can return… (in other words you can take it or leave it!) …even in groups all are taught individually– you will have your share of attention.” And I certainly did.

When I arrived at the Institute in “76, Guruji was on a tour teaching in South Africa. Things were going along well for a week or so while he was away and one night in Savasana at the end of Geetaji’s class I had my glasses off and when I opened my eyes I saw this man striding around the hall as though he owned the place. I thought who is this person? I put my glasses on and quickly figured it out…

He was very hard on me the first month I was there and my husband reminds me I wrote some early letters saying “What Am I Doing Here?” For example he would call Geeta and Prashant over when I was doing a pose and say “5 years wasted!” followed by gales of laughter. Or one unforgettable evening I was in class doing Paschimottanasana – unwittingly right underneath the ceiling ropes. I still remember seeing stars after he silently grabbed the rope and stood on my back ….for a long time. However the change to my Paschimottanasana was most impressive according to my friend next to me.

Our relationship suddenly changed for the better forever. I knew he was teaching at an international Yoga conference outside of Pune and I had signed up for it months before. When I told him I was going, he said “good, come with me and 2 Indian ladies in the taxi”. From the moment we were in the taxi it was like there was a radical transformation from stern yoga master to the most riotously funny and engagingly brilliant person any of us could ever hope to meet. As I had lived in India for years I had a good supply of stories and jokes and I remember well his turning around in the front seat to join us in our laughter.

When we got to the conference they said they didn’t have a room for him – he who was the main event! He wasn’t phased and put the organizers as ease. He had so many friends everywhere and fortunately he called one who had a vacant house locally where we could all stay in for the night. We then went back on foot to the conference where they promptly asked him to do a demonstration with no prior warning! Of course he graciously accepted the challenge – even after the long drive, no dinner. Needless to say it was brilliant and they gave him a standing ovation. It was a wonderful day I’ll never forget.

The next day we all settled in and at first most people were afraid of him and wouldn’t sit at the table with him in the dining room. By the end of the week it was the opposite. You had to run to get a seat there as all wanted to be with him. The same thing happened in his classes, only faster. Naturally it only took one day for his classes to be packed. I’m afraid the other yogis took it rather badly when virtually no one showed up for their classes. The same happened on the panel discussions. He was superlatively brilliant on any yoga and philosophical subject and left the others for dead.

During the convention we all went to a short film about Oki yoga as Oki himself was there. In this film Oki was in Japan at his school and he was whacking his students very hard with a long stick and they were writhing in pain. I was sitting behind Guruji and he turned around and with that endearing smile of his said “see, I’m not so bad”.

I read in one of the newspaper articles that some American students said BKS stood for beat, kick, slap! I apologize on behalf of all the Americans if this is the case. Beat – never. Kick – almost never. Slap – well, not exactly, I wouldn’t call it a slap. Let’s call them awareness makers. He said “I am not hitting you, I am hitting that part with no intelligence to bring some life there”. After not having seen him for a year and sometimes with a new problem he would instantaneously know how to correct my practice. I had a back injury 15 years ago & after the first class with Guruji and Geetaji it brought tears to my eyes to see how quickly it gave immediate relief.

The library at the institute was something of a sacred space as Guruji was there working and meeting people 6 days a week all afternoon. People would be there helping him with his work like Stephanie and other old students. Some would be there with a similar outlook to one I sometimes had. Pick out a book – any book – it could even be in Sanskrit. Turn a page now and again – it didn’t even matter if it was upside down. Any excuse to be in his presence and have his Darshan. And of course the atmosphere was so charged with him there for any and all study of yoga. What wonderful times were had there. Sometimes people interviewed him or they came with yoga and sometimes personal difficulties or just to say hello. When he wanted it private he spoke softly so only that person could hear. But sometimes he encouraged us all to join in whatever was going on.

We were having a discussion with him about how his life and teaching had helped so many people. He said “you see all the leaves on the tree outside the window - how many leaves are there?” I said probably about 300. He said “I am happy to come back that many times to help all of you.”

So what does BKS really stand for?

B = Best, brightest, our benevolent benefactor, K= Kindness personified, King of Yoga and S= Yogi and human being Supreme – BKS for all time and beyond time.