

K.V. IYER: MIXING BODYBUILDING AND YOGA

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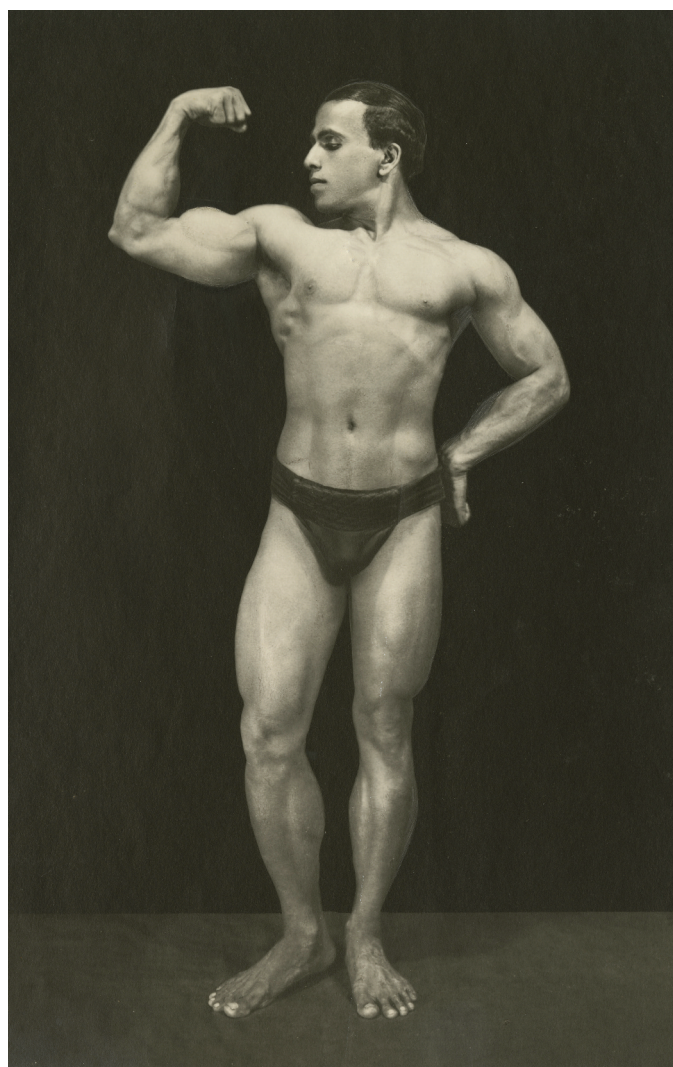
*Editors' Note: Elliott Goldberg spent ten years researching *The Path of Modern Yoga: The History of an Embodied Spiritual Practice* before it was released in August 2016. In doing his research, Goldberg probed the connections between Western physical culture as popularized by Bernarr Macfadden and Eugen Sandow, and the ancient Indian traditions and practices which gave rise to modern yoga. In Goldberg's book, K.V. Iyer is discussed in several different chapters. The excerpt that follows is from Chapter 11, pages 142-152.*



Muscle Cult

In 1922 twenty-four-year-old Kolar Venkatesha Iyer (1898–1980) founded the Hercules Gymnasium in Bangalore, the first commercial Western-style gymnasium in India. It consisted of one small room, available after working hours, in the headquarters of the Mysore Troop of Boy Scouts (established by the maharajah of Mysore, Shri Nalvadi Krishnaraja Wadiyar, in 1909), attached to the rear of Tipu Sultan's summer palace (long owned by the state), an ornate, two-storied, Indo-Islamic structure made of wood, with pillars, arches, and balconies. At first there were only four students. They trained with Iyer not so they could boast of their great strength, enter competitive weight-lifting contests, or excel at sports; they sought, instead, to develop a harmonious, muscular physique, as well as to attain good health and more than adequate strength.

Classes were held six days a week at 5:30 p.m. Every Saturday evening, after finishing their exercises, Iyer and his students bathed and put on clean clothes in preparation for *puja* (a form of ritual worship). Iyer conducted *bhakti* (devotion) to invite the blessings of Hanu-



K.V. Iyer was India's first well-known bodybuilder. Mark Berry wrote in 1927 that Iyer was an "example of the ambitious youth who worked hard with his mind set on physical perfection." Although not a large man—Iyer stood 5' 7.5" and weighed about 160 pounds—his beautifully balanced body inspired many men to take up exercise, including Jack La Lanne.

man, the deity whose portrait sat on a table covered with an altar cloth. (Hanuman, the mighty Monkey God, is revered by gym enthusiasts, including bodybuilders and wrestlers, not so much for his traditional role as faithful servant to Rama but as the giver of strength.) Accompanied by Iyer's harmonium playing, the worshippers sang *bhajans* (devotional songs, especially those of Tiger Varadachar, a composer and singer). Afterward, they offered food and incense to Hanuman, passed their hands three times through a camphor flame, and lightly touched their eyes with sanctified water cupped in their right hands, drank the water, distributed *prasad* (the offered food that had become sanctified), and sat for meditation.

Unlike the discus thrower's or blacksmith's bodily makeup, Iyer's muscular physique wasn't formed as a by-product of some physical task; it was an artificial physique that Iyer designed, as if he were chiseling a stone sculpture, to be pleasing in appearance. Although bodybuilding as an aesthetic endeavor—the urge to transform the human body, the very size and shape of it, into (something like) a work of art—didn't begin until the 19th century (the term “bodybuilding” was coined by Robert Jeffries Roberts in 1881 to describe the workout that he'd devised as director of the Boston YMCA), Iyer validated his pursuit of physical beauty as a continuation of “the ideals of perfect beauty of figure” formulated by ancient Greeks and embodied in their statues, made familiar to people of the early 20th century, including Iyer, mostly through photos of the Greek statues, or, more accurately, photos of Roman copies of the Greek statues. “These ancient classical statues,” Iyer declared in “The Beauties of a Symmetrical Body,” an article he published in the June 1927 issue of *Vyayam*, an Indian physical culture magazine, “have given us models to admire, learn from and even to imitate.”¹ Following the fashion of the times created by Western bodybuilders, Iyer posed as an actual or seeming Greek statue for many of his publicity and illustration photos. For the first photo caption in his gallery of self-portraits in his 1936 pamphlet *Perfect Physique*, Iyer included the words of Carl Easton in order to burnish his reputation and, in effect, define his essence: “‘The living ideal of ancient Grecian Manhood,’ writes Carl Easton Williams, Editor of *Physical Culture*, a Bernard Mc Fadden [*sic*] Publication.”²

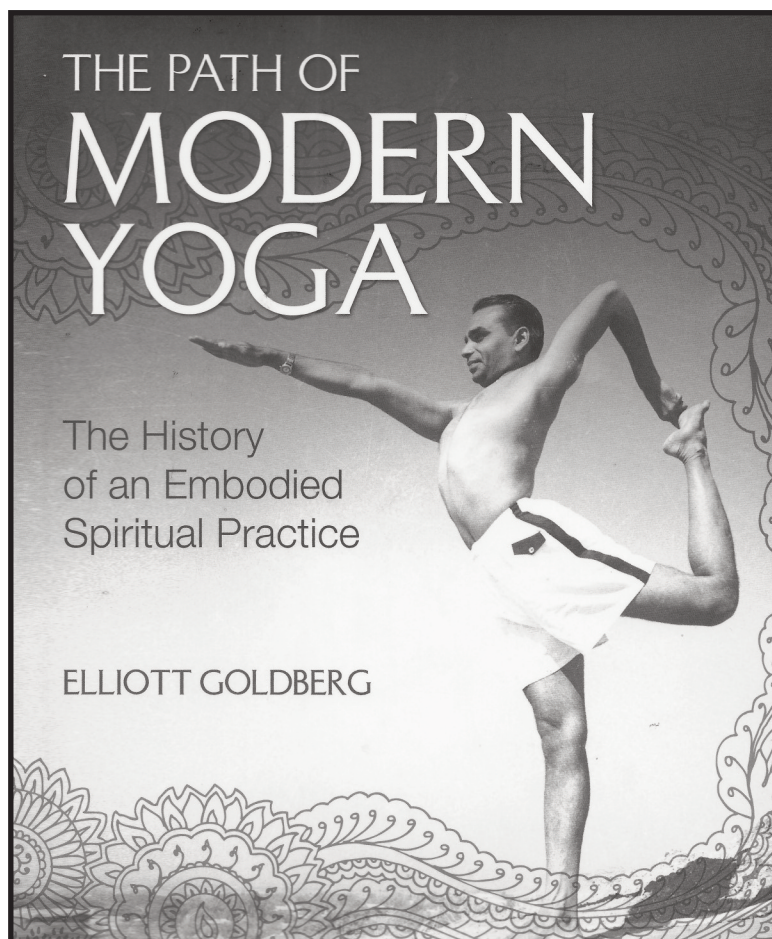
Iyer also positioned his pursuit of beauty in the context of ancient India. During the Gupta period (3rd to 6th centuries), considered the classical artistic and scientific peak of Indian culture, instructional manuals, called

Shilpa Shastra or *Vastu Shastra*, were created by Brahmin priests and *shilpin* (master sculptors) for holy pictures, carvings, and statues. Iconometric rules for the presentation of the major gods included, for example, exact measurements for the width of the shoulders and waist and the depth of the chest. For six years, “through sheer physical culture,” Iyer recollected, he sculpted his body to bring it into accord with “the ideal proportions of the *Silpi Shashtra*,” producing a body “‘identical, limb to limb and inch to inch, with the same.’”³

In the October 1927 issue of *Strength*, a magazine devoted to weightlifting, bodybuilding, and fitness, editor-in-chief Mark Berry, who would become Iyer's biggest booster over the next six years, introduced his readers to Iyer with a photo of Iyer displaying his broad back muscles (“One of the finest poses we have ever had the pleasure to present to our readers”).⁴ Berry described Iyer as an “example of the ambitious youth who worked hard with his mind set on physical perfection; that he has achieved it, can hardly be denied, though he may not consider such to be the case, being an Indian idealist.”⁵ Berry was mistaken about Iyer's modesty. Just a few months earlier Iyer had proclaimed (as perhaps only a young man could or would) his pride in possessing “a body which Gods covet.”⁶ Although the desire of the gods cannot be affirmed, from all accounts it can be said with some certainty that Iyer was entirely justified in his claim to the title of “India's most perfectly developed man.”⁷

What made Iyer “perfectly developed” was his muscular symmetry and its effect on his carriage. Only a muscular body with pleasing proportions, he argued, could radiate “ease, grace and poise.”⁸ For this reason, he abhorred the kind of body developed by the *vyayam*, the centuries-old Indian system of physical training practiced in the service of wrestling (and feats of strength). As in Japan, wrestling is a way of life in India. It's been practiced since ancient times, probably then, as now, as more of a dueling art than a military combat art. Anthropologist Joseph S. Alter fruitfully explains *vyayam* through its relationship to yoga: “As with yoga, a key concept in *vyayam* is the holistic, regulated control of the body. In yoga, however, the body is manipulated through the practice of relatively static postures. *Vyayam* disciplines the body through strenuous, patterned, repetitive movement.”⁹

Vyayam exercises fall into two categories. The first encompasses exercises to develop explosive movement, agility, and stamina. These include *dands* (something like



Front cover of Elliott Goldberg's *The Path of Modern Yoga*.

push-ups) and *bethaks* (squats), which are performed together. The second group contains exercises to build strength and muscle bulk. These include swinging *sumtolas* ("Indian barbells") and *korelas*, *joris*, and *gadas* (types of heavy clubs) and lifting *nals* (stone weights) and *gar nals* (stone wheels). The body that's formed from the strengthening exercises is hardly like that of a Greek statue or a god. "It pains me awfully to look at a modern wrestler," Iyer lamented. "One in fifty possesses a symmetrical build. These wrestlers devote themselves *only* to increase the bulk of their flesh."¹⁰ While they aid wrestling, *vyayam* strengthening exercises, he realized, aren't effective for bodybuilding because they aren't based on scientific principles

To achieve symmetry, Iyer turned to Western means of muscle development, primarily barbell exercises practiced according to Sandow's three principles of bodybuilding: selectivity, progression, and high intensity. Selectivity is choosing particular resistance exercises to target muscle groups. For example, straightening bent

arms to target the triceps; pulling the arms down and/or back to target the latissimus dorsi (lats); and curling the trunk up to target the abdominals (abs). Progression is increasing muscle growth by gradually adding more weight resistance. High intensity is lifting an amount of overload much heavier than we're used to. Iyer also practiced and taught Maxalding, the muscle control system developed by Maxick and Monte Saldo based on the isometric contraction of muscles in isolation. Practitioners will a muscle to contract (without moving a bony segment), hold the contraction, and then relax the muscle.

Iyer well recognized that these scientific principles could be misapplied. He found repugnant not only wrestlers who ignore the scientific principles of muscle development but also bodybuilders who use heavy weight lifting to develop a massive musculature: "While exercising one should bear in his mind that he is performing [the exercises] to acquire a good build, a sound and healthy body with ample strength. The desire for only big bulging biceps might mar the symmetry of the body and make him knotty and abnormal."¹¹ Even worse, "heavy weight lifting . . . when applied unscientifically . . . often results in rupture, heart strain, [and] nervous break down, [as well as] in an ugly unsymmetrical body."¹²

Through introducing and promoting bodybuilding to the average man in the 1920s and 1930s, Iyer helped popularize the Sandowian image of modern male beauty in India, nurturing an avidity for transforming the body among Indians to match the zeal of the ancient Greeks. How thrilling it must've been to be a part of the gathering of men in the various incarnations of Iyer's gymnasiums (from the early 1920s to the mid-1930s, Iyer moved to bigger spaces to accommodate his growing membership) who were involved in this new project to perfect their bodies!

Reconciliation of Muscle Cult and Hata-Yoga Cult

Along with his fervor for conferring physical perfection on his countrymen, Iyer was equally dedicated to improving their fitness and health. He was concerned with imparting not just the ability to do daily physical activities with a minimum of fatigue but also the capacity to ward off chronic disease, "to remain active to a ripe old age."¹³ He bemoaned the then current concept of well-

ness:

*The attitude of the physician towards health seems to be to classify all people under two heads—the sick and the well. If actual disease is not present, the individual is classed as well. But there are degrees of health, just as there are degrees of humidity and temperature. One person may have excellent health, another fair health, and still another poor health, yet none of these would be classified as sick from the view-point of the physician. One may be organically sound, in that, no defect could be found in any organ or tissue of the body: and yet he may not be a robust healthy individual.*¹⁴

Iyer described the manifestations of robust health by comparing it to the symptoms of poor health:

*A person in poor physical condition is easily exhausted by mental and physical exertion; he is irritable, likely to have morbid thoughts, petty ailments, and low morale; he may have a sallow complexion and dull eyes; and he frequently complains of constipation, head-ache, nervousness and insomnia. On the other hand, it is equally common to observe in a man of good physical condition, evidences of mental and bodily vigour such as alertness, cheerfulness, high morale, bright eyes, elastic step, healthy complexion, and capacity for arduous mental and physical work.*¹⁵

How is one to obtain this “mental and bodily vigour”? According to Iyer, it could only be accomplished by complementing bodybuilding with the health-building aspects of hatha yoga: *asana* (consisting of conditioning postures, as opposed to the postures suitable for prolonged immobility), *pranayama* (consisting of breathing exercises), *kriya* (consisting of cleansing techniques), *mudra* (consisting of seals), *bandha* (consisting of locks), and diet. He proclaimed:

The dissimilarity between Hata-yoga

*Cult and the Western Cult of Body-building lies in the very goal that these two systems aim to achieve. Longevity of life—a life healthy and free from ailments functional and organic, to fit the individual human unit to fulfil his obligations to himself, his home and the society he is a part of, succinctly sums up what Hata-yoga imparts to the worldly man. Europe—ancient, medieval and modern—in her Cult of the human body, has ever been aiming at the symmetry, bulk and strength in the developed man.*¹⁶

Iyer was the first practitioner of physical culture to combine the “Cult of Body-building” and the “Hata-yoga Cult.” “My aim in My System,” he declared in 1930 in his manifesto *Muscle Cult—A Pro-em to My System*, “is to reconcile these two great systems to assure the future Culturist of robustness of health and beauty of limb and trunk.”¹⁷

Iyer brokered this reconciliation in a period of great agitation, recollected in a kaleidoscopic rush of words: “Born of early motherhood, puny boyhood, Sandow’s pictures, earnest emulation, unguided headlong rush into spring-bells and cold-baths, small reward of sprouting muscles and stern reprisals of recurring colds and fevers, a depressing period of no gain in bulk or strength,—a baffled mind steeped in Western Physical Culture turns to Hata-yoga, India’s heritage—blending of the two systems.”¹⁸ The result of this febrile revelation was newfound good health and a fine physique. Having created his own system (although he modestly wrote, “I have invented no system of my own” but just made an “experience-guided selection” from other systems), Iyer would then turn to initiating others into it. “It is absolutely necessary,” he advised prospective bodybuilders, “that all those who are ambitious of a beautiful and symmetrical body, combined with the highest efficiency of strength and endurance, should tone up their everlasting health, by developing the internal muscular organs of the body, and their functionings, through proper Yogic Asanas first, and thus overcome once and for all times, all functional defects, to restore the body in every part.”¹⁹

It turns out that Iyer was largely mistaken about the benefits of hata- or, what we now call hatha yoga. While providing a degree of good health, hatha yoga practices don’t promote the abundant good health that he

believed. However, *asana* practice does provide superb flexibility, as well as grace, which is why *asana* imparts just as much beauty of limb and trunk as does bodybuilding. He was largely correct, though, about the benefits and limitations of bodybuilding. Bodybuilding provides “symmetry, bulk and strength.” It doesn’t impart “longevity of life,” although it does have some health benefits. [Editors’ note: Although Iyer’s use of both bodybuilding and yoga training is interesting, Goldberg does not cite scientific/physiological evidence to support these assertions or to support his dismissal of the health benefits of strength training below.]

Around 1940, after he’d become India’s most famous bodybuilder and the owner of India’s largest and most successful gymnasium, Iyer came to feel that he’d overemphasized the value of attaining “the beauties of a symmetrical body.” In his 1943 book *Chemical Changes in Physical Exercise*, he not only warned again against developing large muscles for a showy physique, with the attendant “pitfall of over-strain,” but seems to have abandoned bodybuilding (weight-resistance training with the goal of developing a well-proportioned musculature with large, well-defined muscles) altogether. Instead, he promoted strength training (he used the term “physical training”) as a means of providing good health to the internal organs, especially those of the circulatory and respiratory systems.²⁰ In actuality, strength training, like *yogasana* (the practice of yogic postures to maintain or improve fitness and health), has little effect on maintaining good health or improving poor health. It primarily provides a key aspect of fitness: the strength to perform everyday activities involving lifting, lowering, pulling, and pushing with ease (*yogasana* provides the flexibility to perform everyday activities involving bending forward, backward, and sideways and twisting with ease).

Not that Iyer didn’t recognize the fitness benefits of strength training. It makes us “fit enough to accomplish each day’s work with minimum fatigue and to remain active to a ripe old age,” he wrote.²¹ He provided training guidelines accordingly. “Hence, it is advisable to exercise each muscle or group of muscles separately.”²² “For ‘strenuous exercise, . . . exercise the extremities [*sic*] of the body one day and the torso the next day.” “If graded exercise is taken day after day, the load of work may be gradually increased and, finally, that which formerly was a heavy load is comfortably carried.”²³ Fatigue is determined in part by “habits of muscular use. . . . And so, exercises that have rhythm of movement, tempo of



Deeply proud of his native homeland, Iyer paid homage to his Indian roots in this photo where he is dressed to honor the Indian gods. This particular photo best supports historian David Chapman’s assertion that Iyer “was like a bronze temple God that had somehow come to life.” [David Chapman, “Gallery of Greats—K.V. Iyer,” *Iron Man* (March, 1991): 68.]

breathing, and harmony of co-operation of the motor nervous system are a potent factor in preventing fatigue.”²⁴

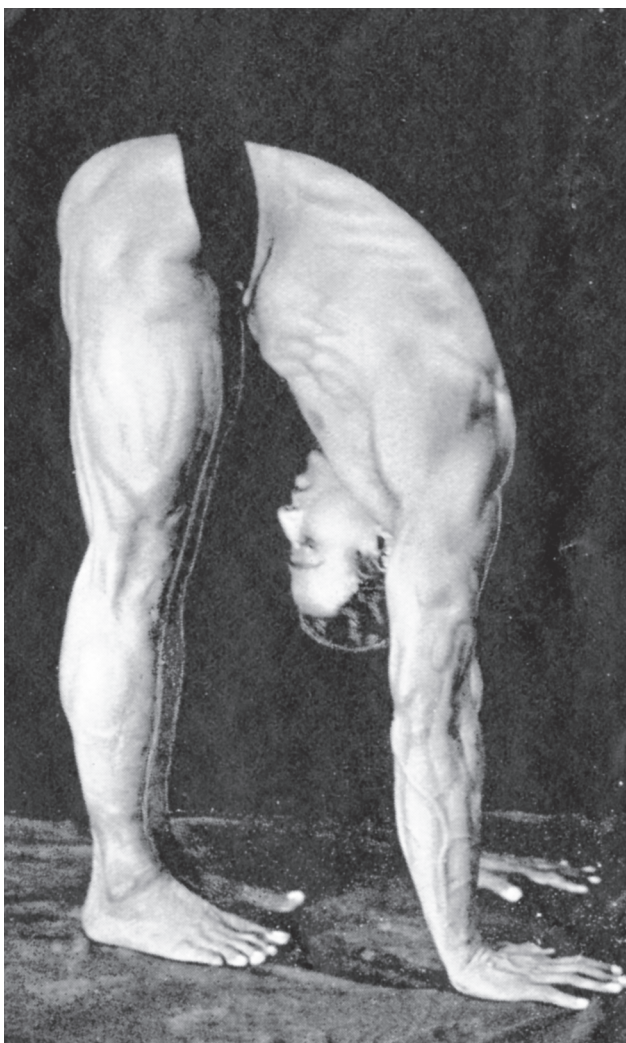
Like Sandow, Iyer drew heavily on photography to promote his system. As art historian Tamar Garb observes in *Bodies of Modernity*, her exploration of the representation of masculinity and femininity in the late 19th century, photography was an especially felicitous medium for making the connection between modern and ancient Greek muscle cult: “It was the newest of pictorial media, photography, which became an important vehicle through which modern endeavours could establish their links with an ancient and noble past. The modern body-

building or ‘physical culture’ movement, as it was then called, depended on photography for its publicity and for propagating an image of ideal masculinity based on ancient prototypes.”²⁵

To promote the three-month correspondence course for his Correspondence School of Physical Culture, founded in 1928, Iyer created a booklet, *Muscle Cult—A Pro-em to My System*, in 1930, which was replaced in 1936 by a more polished version, *Perfect Physique—A Proem to My System*. The booklets contain a plenitude of photographs of men (some beefed up, but others quite trim, even slight) showing off their muscular development. (None of them are doing exercises; they’re all posing.) The front of the booklets contains a gallery of photographs of Iyer (taken by Iyer, who was an avid photographer). He’s naked, or nearly so, dramatically lit to emphasize the chiaroscuro of his musculature, and often posed like a Greek statue of an athlete. But

it’s the casual poses, the ones with Iyer in repose, that catch our eye: they both startle us and draw us in with their seeming intimacy and candidness. One of them, entitled “In a Pensive Mood,” shows Iyer sitting on the floor, looking off contemplatively.

Iyer used photographs to link not only modern and ancient muscle cult but also bodybuilding and yogasana, two disciplines ordinarily opposed in people’s minds. Included in *Perfect Physique* is a photograph of a student performing a seated twisting yoga pose cited in the *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*. The caption reads: “T. K. Ananthanarayana depicting ‘Purna Matsyendrasan,’ a very difficult Yogic pose of great chiropractic value”²⁶ *Muscle Cult* contains photographs of a student demonstrating yogic purificatory exercises of the abdominal



Iyer created remarkable flexibility by including yoga exercises with his physical culture training.

region. A single caption reads: “S. Sundaram. An exponent of Hata-Yoga performing ‘Uddiyana and Nauli.’”²⁷ Although he includes many more muscle cult than hatha yoga cult photographs, by placing the photographs from the two disciplines side by side—or, perhaps better said, by dropping the hatha yoga cult photographs into the middle of the muscle cult photographs—Iyer was showing that they make up one capacious exercise system.

Legacy

When he was a teenager in the early 1930s, Jack La Lanne (or LaLanne, as his name is often spelled), who would become a famous American fitness expert and bodybuilder best known for his prodigious feats of endurance and his long-running (1951–1985) television show, “began to see stories and pictures in magazines about a Hindu physical culturist named K. V. Iyer. He was

not a ‘strong man’ in the classic sense of being able to perform great feats of strength,” La Lanne recalled in 1973. “But he was a perfect physical specimen, with a muscular and fully developed body that I, skinny Jack La Lanne, envied.”²⁸ After realizing that he and Iyer had the same slight build (their height and bone structure were nearly the same), La Lanne made Iyer his model for changing his body, which means to say, for changing his life. Although Iyer “lived on the opposite side of the world,” La Lanne wrote, “he became my inspiration.”²⁹ Following Iyer’s recommendations for weight-resistance exercises, La Lanne worked out, “taking my own measurements, always aiming toward the dimensions of K. V. Iyer,” until a few years later he finally achieved a physique like Iyer’s.³⁰

But more compelling praise for Iyer came from

an unsolicited testimonial made by a correspondence school student, Ooi Tiang Guan, from Penang, Malaysia, on June 6, 1929, published in *Muscle Cult*: “I have now come to the last lesson. I can honestly say that your course is the best, because it is not mere muscle culture. The internal organs too are strengthened and nerves are toned up. It unfolds to me the precious and vital secrets of life ‘The Yogic Culture’ which accounts for the long and healthy lives of the Indian Sages.”³¹ Ooi understood what La Lanne didn’t: that Iyer’s full teachings were groundbreaking, and what made them so was that Iyer wasn’t merely a bodybuilder but, in Berry’s words, “a professional physical culturist, teaching modern methods of progressive [weight-resistance] exercise, combined with the science of yoga.”³²

Iyer was the ideal person to implement this merger of Western and Eastern physical culture. By upbringing and inclination, he was cosmopolitan (without ever having left India), yet steeped in his own traditions. Moreover, he had a conciliatory temperament: for him, there was no conflict between muscle cult and hatha yoga cult. They simply complemented each other. In this conviction, Iyer was far more sensible and ecumenical than the oft-intolerant contemporary hatha yogins who feel that they’re upholding the purity of the yoga tradition when they reject other forms of exercise. They’re ignorant of their own history. Two of the yogins who created modern hatha yoga, Kuvalayananda and Sundaram, approved performing both *yogasana* and strength training. Kuvalayananda recommended waiting twenty minutes between the exercises: “Those that want to finish their exercises with a balance introduced into their system, should take the Yogic exercises last. But those that want to have a spirit of exhilaration at the end, should finish with the muscular exercises.”³³ Sundaram recommended doing the exercises at opposite times of the day: “If the Yogic system is practiced in the mornings, the Muscular exercises ought to be done in the evenings and vice versa. The former works up the internal organs and attracts greater blood to them: while the latter do the same thing for the superficial body.”³⁴ But Kuvalayananda and Sundaram didn’t integrate the two disciplines into one system.

Iyer’s legacy is in having brought muscle cult and hatha yoga cult together into one workout: the understated muscularity and strength of intense strength training complemented by the graceful suppleness and flexibility of a dedicated *yogasana* practice. An Indian enthralled

with the bodybuilding systems of Europeans, yet proud of and indebted to the centuries-old Indian practice of hatha yoga, Iyer forged a dynamic West-meets-East physical exercise system, in which movements to resist opposing forces are coupled with movements to surrender to opposing forces.

NOTES:

1. K.V. Iyer, “The Beauties of a Symmetrical Body,” *Vyayam* 1, no. 6 (June 1927): 160.
2. K.V. Iyer, *Perfect Physique—A Pro-em to my System* (Bangalore City, India: Bangalore Press, n.d. [c. 1936]), 4.
3. Iyer, “Beauties,” 160.
4. Mark H. Berry, “If You Had a Bar Bell,” *Strength* 12, no.8 (October 1927), 34.
5. *Ibid.*, 82.
6. Iyer, “Beauties,” 163.
7. *Ibid.*, 164.
8. *Ibid.*, 159.
9. Joseph Alter, *The Wrestler’s Body: Identity and Ideology in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 97.
10. Iyer, “Beauties,” 160.
11. *Ibid.*, 161.
12. *Ibid.*, 164.
13. K.V. Iyer, *Physical Training Through Correspondence*, Lesson 4 (Bangalore City, India: Vyayamshala and Physical Culture Correspondence School, n.d. [c. 1942]), 2.
14. *Ibid.*, Lesson 4, 1.
15. *Ibid.*, Lesson 4, 4.
16. K.V. Iyer, *Muscle Cult—A Pro-em to My System* (Bangalore City, India: Bangalore Press, n.d. [c. 1930]), 41.
17. *Ibid.*, 42.
18. *Ibid.*, 43.
19. Iyer, “Beauties,” 164.
20. K.V. Iyer, *Chemical Changes in Physical Exercise* (Bangalore City, India: Bangalore Press, 1943), iii.
21. *Ibid.*, 3.
22. *Ibid.*, 39.
23. *Ibid.*, 58.
24. *Ibid.*, 65.
25. Tamar Garb, *Bodies of Modernity: Figure and Flesh in Fin de Siecle France* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 55.
26. Iyer, *Perfect Physique*, 42.
27. Iyer, *Muscle Cult*, 39.
28. Jack La Lanne with Jim Allen, *For Men Only: With a 30 Day Guide to Looking Better and Feeling Younger* (New York: Prentice Hall, 1973), 14.
29. *Ibid.*, 13.
30. *Ibid.*, 15.
31. Iyer, *Muscle Cult*, 44.
32. Berry, “If You Had a Bar Bell,” 82.
33. Swami Kuvalayananda, *Asanas* (Bombay, Popular Prakashan, 1964, first published in 1931), 139.
34. S. Sundaram, *Yogic Physical Culture or the Secret of Happiness* (Bangalore, India: Gurukula, 1929), 109.

