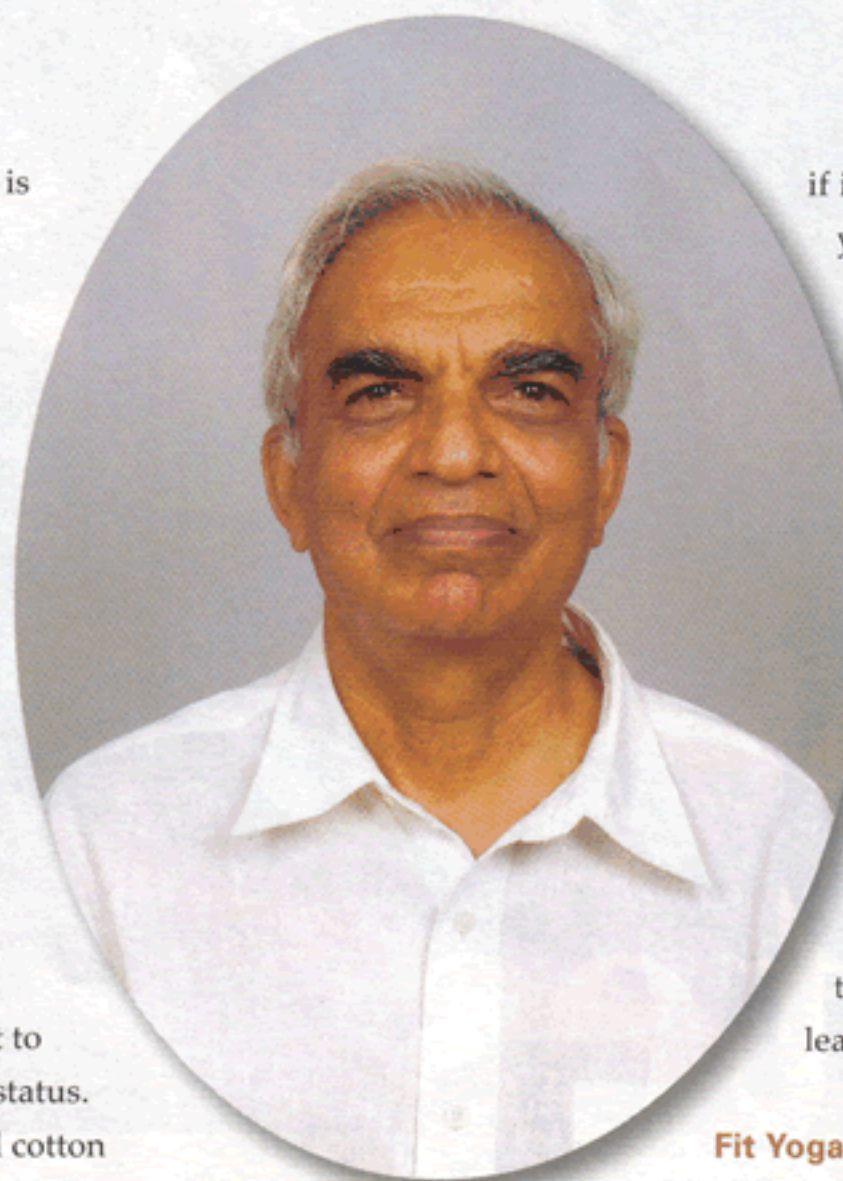


Independent Spirit

A conversation with TKV Desikachar

by Leanne Wong



For many, TKV Desikachar is a living guru; for others (including the late philosopher J Krishnamurti), he's a healer. It's enough to say that he's one of today's greatest yoga teachers.

His book, *The Heart of Yoga* (Inner Traditions, 1995), resonated with me, fresh out of my first yoga teacher training. In September 2007, I was fortunate enough to study directly with the man himself at the Krishnamacharya Mandarim (KYM) in Chennai, India.

Desikachar makes no attempt to flaunt superiority or a guru-like status. Wearing a simple white shirt and cotton sarong, he moves with natural grace. He set up KYM as a non-profit organization in 1976 based on the teachings of his father, the late Tirumalai Krishnamacharya, with whom he studied for more than 30 years. "Don't ever assume that what works for you will work for everyone else as well," Krishnamacharya advised. "Yoga must be tailored to suit the student, not the other way around."

This explains why small rooms replace one large studio at KYM—there are no generic group yoga classes for adults. Instead, teachers work with students one-on-one, looking not only at posture, current bodily concerns, and previous injuries but at lifestyle, work, sleeping patterns, and family life too. A yoga practice may include asana (postures), pranayama (breathing exercises), mantras (chanting), and *svadhyaya* (counseling). Desikachar's approach to yoga is simply to heal, even

if it means veering from traditional yoga techniques.

His messages are strong, even controversial for some.

He doesn't believe in God and isn't shy to say that those who mix yoga with religion or Hinduism are teaching incorrectly. He considers vegetarianism illogical, especially for those living in places like Tibet, where it's virtually impossible for vegetation to grow in the cold climate. To Desikachar, this is his interpretation of Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* as he learned from Krishnamacharya.

Fit Yoga: What is your message to those who avoid yoga in fear of delving into spirituality and chanting?

TKV Desikachar: Unfortunately, many people are not able to differentiate between yoga and Hinduism. This is the biggest blunder I have seen in many institutions. They always start with prayer. There are certain disciples that are doing worship; that is not at all correct.

This is why we need to clarify that yoga is not a religion, it is a secular practice. It's not that Patanjali is rejecting religion, it's not that Patanjali is insisting religion. It is our choice. It is an individual choice. The whole definition of yoga is, Whatever quiets the mind, do it. *Yogas citta vritti nirodhah*. Anything that quiets the mind must be done. If you believe in God, OK. If you chant Buddha, fine, if it quiets the mind. If you don't have faith in God, I have other solutions. This is what is so special about the *Yoga Sutras*.

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FY: Do you believe in God?

TKVD: People ask me, do you believe in God? I say no, I don't believe in God because I have not seen God.

I don't mind chanting for God, but I don't have any belief in God. My belief is in my teacher called Krishnamacharya. This is my God. I have seen him, I have interacted with him, I have seen his qualities, I have seen his ability, and I am amazed that he has done wonders for people. He lived for 100 years, and he healed a lot of people. With all respect, I don't have any faith in God, and many people are angry at me.

I learned all the meditation practices from my father. He taught me about Shiva, Vishnu, and I'll teach whoever has faith. If somebody believes in Lakshmi, Jesus, prophet Mohammad, or Jewish God, I never tell in public that I don't agree, or forget about Lakshmi, Jesus, prophet Mohammad, or Jewish God. What they like is what we must honor. We should not impose on what we don't accept. This is what is very important.

Every day, I go for a walk, my wife goes to a Ganesha temple, and then afterward, she goes to a Krishna temple. I always follow her so she is happy. I will not say I am not interested. I just go with her. So, this is what I honor.

FY: You seem like such a happy man. How do we eliminate dukkham (suffering) from our lives?

TKVD: Well, I want to be honest with you. I will not say I'm permanently happy. I have been through certain problems in my life. But somehow, I have total trust in my teacher. Whatever he said, he proved. That's why, whenever I have difficulties, I pray to my teacher. Somehow through the prayer, something resolves. I am amazed at how these things happen.

Patanjali insists that certain problems happen. You have to find out, why did something go wrong? Identifying the cause of the problem finds the right means to reducing the problem. As you reduce the problem like a cloud that goes away, you get some clarity.

This is what Patanjali talks about with such clarity. If you want to do some mindful practices, look at something that is very pleasant and visualize that pleasant object, and, at certain times, your mind will improve. So, Patanjali offers many solutions so we can apply them, and slowly we do feel better.

Unfortunately, even though many people have faith in God and prayer, they're not at all happy. It's a sad thing.

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You have to put in certain efforts. Without the effort, you can't resolve the problem. You must have the right references, and you have to have an encounter with something. If it's a good encounter, it could be a book or a Buddha story, it could be anything, but when you read these stories, it inspires you.

That's why Patanjali insists on counseling or self-inquiry. When that is done with some effort, something will happen. When the problem is too complicated, we do need some help.

FY: How does one live enthusiastically and lovingly from the heart, without attachment and passion?

TKVD: That is a beautiful, a real question. It's almost like Patanjali knows what question you're asking. He says *visokava va jyotismati* [1.36]. Whenever there is some attachment, just visualize it as a momentary phase of life. It is not going to be a permanent life. We too shall pass, so just visualize. It too shall pass. Something happens.

FY: You have healed many people and seen severe conditions. Emotionally and mentally, how do you not let it affect you?

TKVD: Many people are very thankful to me, but I always tell them I received some teachings from my teacher, I was able to give some suggestions, and, because you followed them, you have been healed. It is not that I healed you. You healed yourself because the healing process is where you participate with some effort. Without participating, you cannot heal yourself. That's why I can only give you some suggestions. Since you followed the healing process, something has happened.

We had an eminent neurologist

who suddenly got Parkinson's disease, and he came to see me. Even though he took medicine, nothing happened. I gave him instruction, and he began to practice every day. He was able to shave, he was able to walk, his swelling reduced. That is what the concept of healing is, where we put the effort.

FY: In the West, yoga has become an exercise. What are your thoughts on this?

TKVD: That is, sorry to say, not correct, where some people are teaching the same style. With young children, it is all right to push, but once we are grown up to the age of 30 years, we should never push.

First step, at the age of 5 to 25 or 30, is called *siksana krama*. It's perfect posture. Once we pass 30, we have to respect promotion of health. That's why individual practice matters. That's why every time we meet somebody, we talk to individuals. And if they don't like it, they will not practice. The first requirement is that they should like us. I always create a very good relationship, and when they like the relationship, they'll listen to me. And if they don't like the relationship, they will not listen to me.

FY: I was touched by the brief interaction between you and your wife, Menaka. What is the secret to your marriage of over 39 years?

TKVD (turns to S Sridharan, KYM's managing trustee and his best friend): I will ask Sridharan to answer; he has known me for 35 years.

Sridharan: I cannot tell you how it is, but I have seen the affection. The first and foremost thing [about] the success of this marriage is what Desikachar has told me, which is this marriage was fixed by his teacher. I think it's the most auspicious thing that could've happened. Without even blinking an eye,

not knowing who the person was, Desikachar believed and said this is another gift he is getting from his teacher. So even today, I have seen the amount of sentiments he has about this marriage. It's a gift from his father.

Menaka considers it to be a gift in her life from a Supreme Being. I have also had occasion to interact with Menaka; she's my teacher for chanting. It is not a simple, small respect love. It is much more than this. It is much more than the amount of respect Menaka has, which includes love, affection, everything. It's completely different. And it will last forever.

FY: Aside from your family and yoga, what brings meaning to your life?

TKVD: I love the sun. As a scientist, if sun were not here, I would not be here. That's why, every day, I honor the sun. Thanks to you, we are here. Thanks to you, my father was born here. We always honor the sun in chant, about the sun removing health problems, removing obstacles, everything. The sun is a reality.

FY: Do you have any regrets?

TKVD: Yes, I never studied any yoga practice before the age of 22. So my regret is I wish I had studied with my father before that. I would have learned a lot more, so that is one of my small regrets.

FY: Today is my 31st birthday. If you were turning 31, what would you wish?

TKVD: I never celebrate my birthday, but my main wish is, I hope next year, I make less blunders. That is my wish. 🙏

Leanne Wong, a freelance writer and certified yoga teacher in New York and Sydney, has studied with Desikachar, Cyndi Lee, Judith Lasater, and Bikram Choudhury.