

The Viniyoga Letter

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Desikachar on Meditation

Following is an edited transcript of an interview of T.K.V. Desikachar in Madras in February, 1983. The interviewers were European students and teachers, Claude Marachel, Laurence Mamon, and Frans Moors.

Question: We are interested in understanding what is meant by meditation—how to do, what to do, to practice meditation. We would like to have some clarification, not only for ourselves but also for teaching others. A lot of people from the western countries have questions about meditation and would be happy to have some answers from you.

Desikachar: You must help me to understand why you people from Europe ask me, an Indian, these questions. You have your own culture, religions, practices, which are definitely different from ours. Can you tell me the reasons for your interest and for these questions?

Response: It seems that in the West now, when people speak about meditation, they mean something coming from the East, particularly from India. It could be Buddhist meditation or something else. But we seem to have lost the idea of meditation in our own culture, in Christianity, for example.

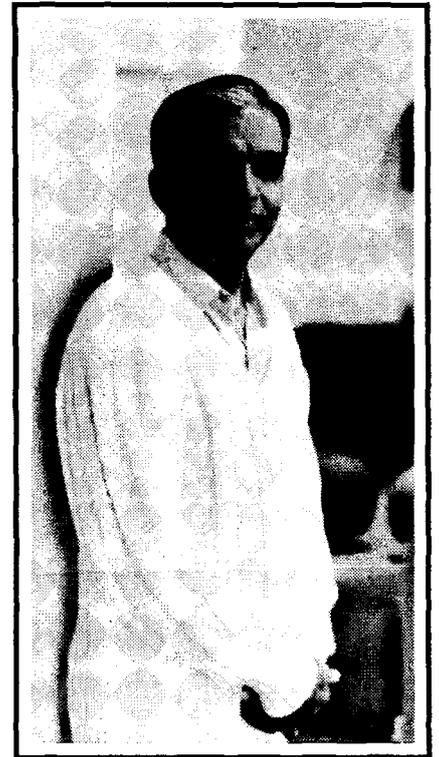
Desikachar: I am a little worried that in this field there is some delicacy, unlike in issues concerning the body, which are universal. We have accepted Western systems of medicine, and so what we have to offer for the body is very acceptable. But when it comes to this field we call meditation, there is some delicacy.

The delicacy has two aspects. One

is that you have your own great masters of the past who have suggested some systems, for example, St. Francis, who is very stimulating even for us. Second, our way of looking at the human mind, the human state, relationships between the master and the disciple, commitment to the faith, may not have any relevance to yours. I am assuming you are concerned about meditation for your people, not for Indians.

Question: I understand that it is a delicate question. But how can we explain a situation where you are teaching us *asana* (postures) and *pranayama* (breath control); we are very happy with this teaching because it gives us means to improve our health and also to change something in our mind—I will say in terms of peace. After a practice of *asana* and *pranayama*, there is some change; we feel better; we feel some lightness, some clarity, some peace.

According to the teaching of yoga, after this process of *asana* and *pranayama*, it may be possible to direct the mind towards something else which is related to this word, meditation. We have gotten from you the tools to reach this point. Then if you say, "I have given you the tools and now you have to continue by yourselves because it is your cultural problem," maybe we will be in a little difficulty. We are confident in you in this field of



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practical preparation, but we are also confident in you to continue.

Desikachar: I appreciate that. Recently our chief minister was very sick. The medical facilities here were not adequate. So he was flown to the U.S. for medical treatment. Everybody asked us to pray for his health. So there were prayers here in the temples, in the churches, in the mosques. The Americans did not pray for him; we did. He came back here and we prayed to God, "Thank you; you have taken care of him."

So he went to America so that he could be fit and then he came back to his regime here. He did not say, "Oh, the Americans have cured my kidney problem. I want to continue my exploration there because they gave me health; maybe it is their responsibility

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to take care of my other aspects." He did not think this way; he came back. The hospital in America took care of the physical aspects of the chief minister, not the spiritual aspects.

You go to your priests, you go to your churches, you go to your masters. We have taken care of what is in our means. Now, since you have confidence in us, we tell you, "Go back to your church; go back to your temple." We cannot expect you to come to our temples to pray when you have your own temples and your own culture.

The question I am asking you is, "Why and how can we teach you meditation when there are two fundamental problems?: One, you have your own great culture, and two, what we offer may not be valid for you.

Response: I think there are two considerations in the process of meditation. One relates to a change in the quality of the mind, which may be a universal process and which you may like to clarify. The other refers to our culture, our religion, or something else. Perhaps something can be applied, whatever the culture?

Desikachar: Should our job be to offer something other than what you have, or is it our job to create conditions so that you can really look back on your own great history? That is the question. The chief minister went to the U.S. where their job was to make him healthy so he could come back and do his job here.

Response: As you said in the beginning, we live in our culture, and we have our own meditation, but people interested in yoga often talk about meditation. And in this talk, in their meditation practices, we find a mixing of many different things, sometimes contradictory. For me, it is a question: what is meditation? Sometimes I feel this word, meditation, is almost harming yoga, when it should be the opposite. In the West, we are not very clear about what is meditation.

Desikachar: So what you say is you need some clarification. All right, I will give you my point of view.

Response: In your point of view, from what you said some minutes ago, meditation is related to the culture, the temples, the religion. Is it necessary to immediately relate the idea of meditation to the idea of prayer?

*To discover something that
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— that is meditation.*

Desikachar: I assume the word, meditation, is usually understood to involve some personal practices involving mind, God, etc.—something esoteric and not so easily explained as physical exercise. People are sometimes very secretive about what meditation is for them. People are also disappointed when we talk constantly about *asana*, *pranayama*, *Yoga Sutra*. They are happy only if we use the word, meditation. I am using the word, meditation, in the way it is normally taken to mean. Now your question is: "Does it mean simply that or something else?"

You also said, "Practice of *asana* and *pranayama* have helped us; we want to go further; we have confidence in you, so we ask you to go further." What does it mean when you say, "We want to go further"?

Response: It means that according to the study we have done in the *Yoga Sutra*, there is something beyond *asana* and *pranayama*. This is the capacity to focus the mind completely toward something so that it is possible to be more and more attentive to all the situations in life—that something happens in terms of discrimination in life.

We felt that the study of yoga we have done is not only a technical study to be healthy, but that there is something further to discover. The study of yoga gives us that confidence in something further, and we wish to make that discovery.

Desikachar: Let us say I am giving a class of *asana* to someone who has a

problem. The person is well informed, and I know a little about *asana*. So in this *asana* course, I would like to understand why this particular problem exists and how I must regard this problem in relation to the practice of *asana*. To investigate this, I observe some things—some postures, breathing, the expression in the face, etc. So gradually I get some information. This information reveals itself now, but it was not clear when the person was practicing earlier, nor was it clear for me when I first saw the person. For me, this is a meditation, in the way you have defined it, "to discover something."

Yesterday we had a sick person with a few problems apparently. I was asked to examine the person. She had given some information, but you know it takes some time to get to the core of the problem. This investigation is not always based on memory or experience. It is very interesting to really find out something more than what appears at first.

The nail was hit on the head, and the nail was not what she had said but something else that was very important—no sleep, sleeping medicine, bad stomach. You know what happens when you take sleeping medicine—seven years of it. And very ugly marriage, grown up children, no work in the house—all these things obviously affect the stomach. So it is nice to discover something. To discover something that was not discovered before—that is meditation.

How I discover it may be different in different situations. Maybe I will be praying to God, "Please, God, I have a sick person and I don't know what is the problem. I don't know the solution. Please help me, God." Maybe God will give me some ideas. Or we may sit and do some chanting. Or we may look at the person, make some trial and error system, so that something can be discovered. We have many methods of investigation.

So there is a need to discover something, and you believe that *asana* and *pranayama* help us to come to this level. Yes, we can do that. But this discovery need not be confined to the story of Indian culture. It can also be to understand our own religion, our own systems, our own masters of the past—not always *Patanjali* or the

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Bhagavad Gita.

We have three words for meditation. We have *dharana*, we have *dhyana*, we have *samadhi*. Each of these words of *Patanjali* could mean what you call meditation. Then there is *bhakti*. To pray to God is also meditation. There is surrender to God; that is also meditation. To serve in the name of God is meditation.

Another example is you sit with somebody; the person is giving some story. As the story reveals itself, the problem inside you becomes very clear. I think that is also meditation.

So there is repetition of *mantras*, sitting near a great master, reading something like the *Bhagavad Gita*, service, surrender to God. All these are examples of the means. The means must be according to the situation and naturally according to the individual. That is the first clarification.

Question: If I follow you rightly, it seems that meditation could be a state of discovery, of understanding or knowledge. Could it be said that this new knowledge will result in more right action? Or is it possible that the discovery coming from meditation could bring a negative action?

Desikachar: I accept your proposition that meditation is a discovery. No one here has said that the discovery must have an extraordinary character. After all, we discover only what already exists, and it is not necessarily a revolutionary fact. Let's say, for example, instead of running all over the place, I decide once to sit quietly, to think in a quiet way—directed and quiet. Then I realize that I am usually living in a state of great agitation. In fact, I did not gain anything more than the discovery of my distraction, my almost constant agitation. To get this insight, I had to sit quietly for a while. Before that I thought I had very clear ideas, but I became aware of the relativity of this point after having a brief moment of silence. This is one of the aspects of meditation—the discovery of a fact somehow simple.

The other aspect is the revelation of a more specific point. For ex-

ample, it could be the discovery of a means to teach a difficult *mantra* to an intellectually handicapped child. So there are different levels of discovery from the simplest to the most extraordinary, as long as one takes time to reflect, to meditate.

Now to come back to your question, which is to know if this discovery will help me to act rightly, this is the object of another discovery to be made for oneself. Consequently the process is done in two stages. The first is to find out what there is to be discovered, and second, to find out if the first revelation is positive or not.

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In other words, in the first step, we are in what we usually call "meditation." Somebody sits quietly, decides to be quiet in his mind, to calm down the internal agitation, to slow down the *guna, rajas* (excessive activity). Two types of consequences are then possible. Either the *guna, tamas* (lethargy), takes the empty space, or it is the *guna, sattva* (clarity) which grows in the mental space. Obviously one hopes that mediation will induce the latter situation.

We sometimes meet people who "meditate a lot." After some time of regular practice, their posture collapses, a state of sleepiness comes, they look more and more like those sleepy people we see on buses, because in them, *tamas* is stronger than *sattva*. It is obviously not what we call meditation.

Question: Is it possible to see the positive effects of meditation in certain people, and with others, is it less obvious?

Desikachar: Some people are doing things out of obligation, as performing rituals, and it helps them feel good. Not to observe these rituals

makes them feel guilty. And so in this case, to act in this direction could be harmful when the non-action produces a bad feeling. This is the first possibility where the action may be a little mechanical. This can happen in all sorts of standard techniques like *asana, pranayama, mantra*, etc.

The other possibility, more difficult, requires a constant awareness, a great confidence, and constant contact with a guide. The first possibility is easy to realize. You go to somebody who gives you an exercise, a *mantra* or something else, and you stay with it all your life. While practicing what is prescribed, you have a sense of peace, and when you don't, you feel a bit ill at ease. In the second possibility, with regular help from somebody, there is a progression, but the process is less simple; it requires a bigger effort and a more profound commitment. We have to see that the majority of people choose the first possibility because of the simplicity it presents.

Question: You mentioned the help of a guide. May I come back to the beginning of this dialogue when you said you could help us out with the technical aspects of *asana* and *pranayama* but for the "other," we must come back to our own culture? For us, as we come for the technical aspects of *asana* and *pranayama*, maybe a continuity of advice going toward meditation could be useful.

Desikachar: By advising you to go back to your own sources, I am not trying to refuse my help if it can be useful. When someone really needs you, if this person does not see other means, you must help, without hesitation. But it may be presumptuous to believe that you are the only person able to help someone else. We are too quick to take ourselves as the one who can solve everything.

We must always bear in mind that others are more competent than we are in many fields. Just because we succeed, perhaps by chance or by one or another intervention, we must not take ourselves as masters. Sometimes it is interesting, when someone comes to us, to say, "Try with somebody else. Have a look in your close surroundings; find out in your own culture."

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Letter from the President

Dear Friends,

This fall issue of *The Viniyoga Letter* brings warm greetings to you from myself and all the members of the Viniyoga America Board of Directors. I would like to bring you up to date on V.A.'s recent activities. As many of you know, we had a superb seminar in July with 112 people attending the first week and 46 people attending the second week. It was a time for study, practice, reestablishing connections with old friends, and meeting new ones. Desikachar's teaching was extraordinary, and the teachers assisting him during the Open Seminar brought an added dimension to the learning experience. For a more detailed report on the content, please read the article by Pat Miller in this issue.

Inspired by the participants' enthusiasm and appreciation for the quality of instruction provided at the seminar, the Board of Directors invited Desikachar to return next year. He graciously accepted, and we will be returning to Dominican College next July. We will keep you apprised of details via the brochure which will be mailed out some time in February. Please keep in mind that residential space at the college is limited, and that V.A. members have priority in registration until April 15.

At our general membership meeting on July 22, election of the Board of Directors was held. Elected to serve another term were Yan Dhyansky, Sonia Nelson, Larry Payne, Margaret Pierce, Martin Pierce, Mary Louise Skelton, and Jane Young. In addition, Gary Kraftsow was elected to the Board, and Kristy Greaves resigned due to other commitments. At the Board meeting which followed, I was reelected President, Jane Young was elected Vice President, Gary Kraftsow was appointed Secretary, and Sara Cloud was appointed Treasurer.

The Board determined that V.A. needed a committee of members who could help coordinate the projects undertaken by V.A. and also advise the board as it plans for the future. The

committee for this year is chaired by Yan Dhyansky and is composed of the following people. Their particular areas of responsibility are listed.

Martine Burat

Translation of articles from the French Viniyoga Journal

Dorothy Conlon

Membership

Phylliss Honneman

Book sales

Leslie Kaminoff

Audio system and recording arrangements

Mary-Ellen Lefort

Transcription of audio tapes

Pat Marcus

Reprints from Viniyoga Letters

Pat Miller

Visa arrangements

Anne Rogers

Brochure and book distribution

If you can assist in translating or transcribing articles or distributing brochures, please let us know as soon as possible. Through the work of Viniyoga America, an increasing number of people are being exposed to the incomparable wealth of knowledge found in this yoga tradition we value so highly. The widespread response we have received indicates that we are addressing a strong need for a comprehensive approach to health and well-being through yoga. We all appreciate the dedication and effort of the project coordinators and hope that many of you can participate. I have great faith that through the combined efforts of our members, the results of our work will continue to blossom and grow in the years ahead.

Sonia Nelson

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Traveling a long way to meet somebody does not assure his qualities, and in the field of meditation, many mistakes can be made. In this half spiritual and half intellectual field, too many confused and questionable situations have been created. On the other hand, too often people who want some help are going to several people at the same time, and this is only making things more complicated. What matters the most is faith, and to divide faith in different parts with different masters is not ideal.

Through meditation, people should perhaps try to find out why they are the way they are, and if it is desirable.

Question: You insist that one must respect the cultural background and also to be able to discover something worthwhile, one must not "flutter about" from one teacher to another. Perhaps, as teachers in the West, we should make those two points clear to our students?

Desikachar: I would not say so, for you have to consider two stages. First, whatever presents itself to you could be useful; nothing should be denied or rejected. In this preliminary phase, even tapes can be useful. But if these aids—notebooks, recordings, etc.—have really acted, something within myself will show me the next step. So at first, nothing should be denied.

The second stage concerns more refined, more subtle states of the mind, of the soul. A slightly different approach is then required—an action at the service of less gross desires, for example, wanting to know God. If the first stage is working well, something inside indicates what one should or should not undertake. If not, one sees the teacher.

We should all think of ourselves as being in the first stage. Consequently, no means should be rejected, but this does not mean that one should disperse oneself in going to several sources. There is a limit to what one can integrate. It is far better to stick to one direction than to sink in a multiplicity of methods.

Thank you for your questions.

This article was edited by Jane Young.