

INTERVIEW WITH TKV DESIKACHAR

By Lisa Miriam Cherry

Desikachar's father, T Krishnamacharya, taught Pattabhi Joys and B K S Iyengar. They were young boys and their teacher devised Yoga practice to suit their individual body type and energy. TKV Desikachar, a former engineer-turned-Yoga teacher carries on his father's values which were brought down from the Tibetan mountains, that the individual comes first, and that there is only one Yoga. His son, Kausthub, agrees. I entered their course as a typical Westerner, believing Yoga was only about asana. I emerged a different person, one who could see that much more through the eyes of Pantanjali and who could recognise Yoga as the holistic practice it is.

L: Have your teaching methods changed over the years?

D: I'm not the same person I was. My body's not the same. My age, my goals, my abilities and my wishes, are not the same. Sometimes even my environment is different. My goals have changed. At 21 I wanted to excel in all the asana that was my goal. Today it is different, and one year later will be different again. When I became a Yoga student, I lost a lot of my friends, because they thought I was doing something crazy. They thought of me as an engineer. They were ashamed to be Yoga teachers in the 1960s. When Yoga became more popular in the West, India began to look at Yoga differently, and today because of this contribution from the West, Yoga is now accepted. It's now in the mainstream, it's in many medical schools, there's a board that decides who should be recognised. In India, still the wind blows from the West!

L: Before were you less interested in spirituality?

D: When I was a student of my father in 1961, although my father expected me to, I never imagined I would chant—to sing only one note was my goal.

L: When you were younger, your father wanted to get you interested in chanting and you didn't want to do it?

D: Yes, then a lady once visited and called out loudly "Professor". I didn't know who the professor was. In a few seconds my father appeared, half naked. This lady then proceeded to hug my father. When I saw this lady hugging my father who was wearing typical braman dress, when my mother had never even taken a walk with my father, and here was this foreign lady hugging my father in the morning! I could paint a picture of the scene, so so strong does it remain in my memory even now. When she left I asked my father who she was. He said she was from New Zealand and hadn't been sleeping properly for 25 years. The previous night she had slept without the use of medicine. So she came to thank him because he had been teaching her for the previous year. She was so excited, she told her husband "I have to see my professor to thank him". That hit me. That hit me. Ever since, that lady has apparently been sleeping well. She is still alive and well as the great age of 91. We don't teach Yoga teachers. We teach people. This lady's husband was a top businessman. That was the day I decided I needed to start studying with my father. I took a job in the same city as an engineer and that is how it all started. Most of the people who came did so because they were not well. They could afford the best medical facilities, so people suggested for them to visit Professor T Krishnamacharya.

L: In what way do you think Yoga can help where western medicine cannot?

D: I have discussed this with many doctors. There are some situations where both approaches are good. I cannot help someone who has a deep fracture. Even my father had to go to someone when he had a serious illness. I cannot say that where Yoga starts, medicine stops. Or

where medicine starts, Yoga stops. The human system is not just the body. You can take charge of yourself to some extent. That makes a big difference. And we need to make sure that we understand Yoga correctly. I will not say that I can cure all diseases. That would be ridiculous. I have seen so many books writing about this Yoga asana helping in this way. It is a joke. Some Yoga teachers have written books saying that they're 'curing all these diseases'. But how did this lady feel better? My father enlisted the help of her whole system.

L: He didn't suggest specific asana for sleeping?

D: No. There's no prescription at all and I hope that never happens. She had some problems definitely. She was disturbed because she did not have a child. She was also disturbed because her husband was working in India in the leather business, and got some serious asthma because they use lots of chemicals in the leather industry. But he liked his job. So there were many factors that were disturbing her mentally. The relationship with my father, and the way he took care of her as an individual effected some change on her. It did not remove the illness. After some years when she lost her husband, she again had problems with sleeping for one and a half years because she was alone. So if a person who is qualified in Yoga, and not just postures since Yoga is not just about asana, can interact with someone and offer some suggestions using meditation or whatever other method may be appropriate, that person can change. That's what my father taught. Every person is different.

L: Is this how his system of Yoga differed from other teachers since they didn't look at the individual?

D: How can I answer that? I only had one teacher? To be fair, some people write about illnesses to encourage us to practise Yoga, stretching it to the limit by saying that if you do this, that will happen. If that were true, then there are now so many Yoga teachers in America that the doctors will have to close their business. But I know many Yoga teachers are now going to more doctors, psychoanalysts, herbalists, and Chinese doctors than ever before!

L: Really?

D: Yes!

L: But is it true that some asana are more energising than others, so if you want to sleep you avoid them? Such as inverted poses?

D: I will not comment on that. There should be some logic, some paradigm to talk in this way. Inverted (postures) don't give you more energy for that reason: if the blood went to the head when I stand on my head, why doesn't the blood go to the feet when I stand on my feet? You answer that question. I walked so hard today for over 15 minutes, and there was very little blood in my feet!

L: How do you know?

D: Because my socks were very tight when I started, then after walking my socks were very loose. So the blood flow is not based on gravity.

L: That's how some teach - if you go upside down, the blood will go to your head.

D: Here is the brain, the heart, so many neurological systems. Our body is not a bucket. That's why some scientific-medical people laugh at Yoga because of such ridiculous statements! Many years ago they did an experiment to see how the blood flows.....

L: Many articles say "this move helps the thyroid" or another organ. If it's not true, how come the proponents aren't in trouble?

K: They are in trouble.

D: They are or will be. The most important thing in Yoga is the mind. Change the mind and the human system changes. When you did your Yoga, something changed in your mind so you felt better. Yoga people should talk sensibly and talk in a way that makes sense to people in the medical professions because medical professions are only interested in solutions. Whatever

helps the person's mind will help the Person. Whatever doesn't help the person's mind will not help the person. It may be asana, it could be meditation, whatever it is.

L: So the mind comes first?

D: Yes. We have to be aware...this person has certain situations, I should know them (as a teacher). What is the definition of Yoga? It is "state of mind." My father, at 100 years of age, was not able to do asana, but he was so serene because he had his own Yoga practice. On the day we honoured him, he recited "Om" for 55 seconds. So, there were strengths to his discipline.

L: It's amazing how the Queen Mother lived that long. When you talk about "state of mind" I think that helped her a lot.

D: Some people take things lightly and some people take things very seriously. You have to look at the person in totality. If you want to talk about transformation, transformation is not reading a book and picking some asana and doing them. It's not fair to the person, it's not fair to the art, it's not fair to the science. We have seen so many people with problems at the Centre. We have the data of 35,000 people. You will find the approach to each is so different. A most important factor to mention is their trust in what we are giving them, their personal discipline and their trust in the teacher which have also contributed to their wellness.

L: When they come to you, they tell you how they feel, and what's wrong with them?

D: We have a procedure. We have trained people how to look at those who come to us, not just how to do asana. We have a system so that when a person arrives, they're briefed. Then a senior teacher looks at them, collects some data and makes their own assessment. When necessary, they may ask me for help, Then it is decided which teacher would make the best connection with that person. We discuss with that teacher what s/he should to teach this patient and we offer some feedback on how they can adapt the practices. It's not a ready made "prescription". Every week, the student comes back after practising for 5 or 6 days and we make a review. Based on that review, we go to the next step. We work every day except Sunday. We do have some doctors on call and know what is our limit. We never promise to cure...we only say "try". The most important thing is one's attitude to what we offer. One must make a decision that one will practise.

L: So it doesn't matter so much what illness they come with?

D: No. If someone comes with back pain, for instance, we examine the body and examine what may exacerbate that pain, and decide what not to introduce and what to introduce.

L: How would you describe the "ocean of Yoga"

D: We could have called it 'the mountain of Yoga'. Think about this. A mountain is stone, it hardly changes. Yoga is flexible, that's why we called it ocean. The ocean changes, waves change, the water temperature changes. The mind is like an ocean.

K: Yoga is not asana. There are so many parts to it. People are not aware of this. Let me illustrate. There was a Yoga competition. It was so aggravating. It wasn't just the way it was being held but the way 'competitors' treated each other before it even began. It was ridiculous. I was wondering, are these really people who do Yoga? They talk about values, they talk about non-violence, they talk about this, they talk about that. But look at how they are behaving with each other - other human beings, other people who are also supposed to be doing Yoga. They're all in the same boat. I found it ridiculous to watch and felt that something was not going right. This is when I started observing and finding out more about what is happening around the world in the name of Yoga by talking with different people. It seems people have divided themselves into different groups based on what technique they practise. 'If I do this technique I belong to this section; if I do that technique, I belong to that one'. But Yoga is not about technique; it's about experience. Yoga is not about whether you raise your arms to the front or from the side, or keep your fingers together or separated. It's about how Yoga affects YOU, what experience you have as an individual practising it and how you become a better

person. That's when I spoke to my father about presenting this idea. A couple of years ago we started a series of workshops in which we thought we'd present different aspects of Yoga in the spirit of Yoga, i.e. unity. Last year, we had a workshop on sequencing and, along with all these interactions we came up with the idea of presenting the wide range of tools that Yoga has to offer so that people know that there is so much more involved over and above simple techniques. We can't say that we taught 35 different styles; there were 35 different classes, but it is 35 different experiences, and maybe more because each individual receives the teaching in different ways. There is just one Yoga. This is why we presented the concept of 'the ocean of Yoga'. We are aiming to present the whole spectrum of Yoga rather than worrying about small boxes into which we try to fix everything. I always ask people this question: When you go into a shop, do you try to choose the shirt and fit into it or do you try to choose a shirt that fits you? It's the same with Yoga. I don't think we should try to fit into one technique of Yoga. Yoga must fit into our system, our life. It must be tailor-made to be appropriate for us, not the reverse. Not 'if I am unable to do this technique, I am not fit for Yoga'. My grandfather always said, 'if anybody can breathe, they can do Yoga.' If somebody is paralysed below the hip, does that mean they can't have the experience of Yoga? No. If somebody is mentally retarded, does that mean they can't have the experience of Yoga? No. We work with those people. They don't fit into those techniques, but it doesn't mean that they don't fit into the ocean of Yoga.

D: What people have received this week is amazing. There has been no word of one style being better than another. People have received so much from so many Yoga teachers. Swami Satchidananda has done so much good for a lot of people, and he's not one of my father's students. A lot of people have got a lot of problems from some of my father's students also. There's a lot of people who have done a lot of good work on Western psychology-the Himalayan Yoga Institute for example. Why is it that in some systems, something good happens, and in another, something not good also happens? Because of how it is received. If something changes the state of mind from negative to positive, the person changes from negative to positive, irrespective of the technique. The 80 people in our class felt a relationship with us, so the system became different. If I met each one of them, I would have been able to honour each of them. I wish I had met each one of them. So I shook each of their hands at the end. What else could I do?

L: What do you think of the term "ViniYoga" which people use to describe your style?

D: I think they should destroy this word ViniYoga! The word ViniYoga is what I have been speaking to you about for one hour. It means know the person, then after decide what you are able to do, then go step by step. There is no style. The word "ViniYoga" has destroyed the philosophy of the symbolism of ViniYoga. It is a typical system. In India, they talk about Ayurveda. There's no such word in the ancient texts. It's a branding. It's an identification. I'm sorry, but they've destroyed the spirit of ViniYoga by using the word ViniYoga. Tomorrow somebody (may) call and say "I'm starting an Ocean of Yoga School. The ViniYoga Yoga of Ocean style, based on the conference given at the Omega Centre". Watch!

L: So that could ruin it too!

D: Yes, it's like a grouping.

L: It limits the ocean of Yoga.

D: It's not only limiting, it separates. I have suggested some people go to Satchidananda. Is it because he's a ViniYoga teacher?

L: No.

D: I felt Swamaji could work with this person. I said, please go because he's a very nice person and he could help you. I have sent people to Pattabhi Jois and to my uncle, because I felt they were the right people for them. So this is what is ViniYoga. It is what suits the individual. It is not a style. The moment you call it a style, you're killing the spirit of ViniYoga. Just as Kaustub likes cappaccino, Craig likes light coffee with no sugar and you probably don't like coffee at all. That is ViniYoga!

L: What if people started calling it Desikachar Yoga? Would that ruin it too because you suddenly have a label?

D: It is really murdering - they are murdering my spirit! What I have received is from my teacher (T Krishnamacharya), and what he received is from his teacher. There is a lineage of more than 2000 years. How can they label this Desikachar? They are murdering me because they are murdering my teacher.

L: If they named it after your father that wouldn't be good either?

D: No, my father would be in tears. Whatever he invented, he never said he invented it. I know that he innovated things, but he would never say 'it is mine'. That is the Indian philosophy of humility and respect for the teacher. They always would say, 'my teacher taught this to me.'

L: So you would be appalled if people called you their guru?

D: I would not be appalled. I have no comments to make, because I cannot stop people from doing what they want!

K: Somebody asked me 'What should I call your father?' I said, 'Call him by his name!'

D: It is unfair to label this great, timeless teaching of Yoga which has no limit in terms of a particular individual. It is not fair, it is almost murdering.

L: Did you adapt anything your father taught you at all?

D: Yes, adaptation is a necessity. I speak in English. My father taught me in Sanskrit. So there's already been an adaptation. Culture has changed. It is not an adaptation because I want to adapt. It is a necessity.

K: I think even my grandfather adapted a lot from what he learned from his teacher because he was living in Tibet. It's very different from living in Madras which is a huge city of six million people. The pace of life is different, the culture, the values. So I think adaptations must be made, that is also ViniYoga. The spirit behind ViniYoga is to respect the situations and adapt. It is not a Yoga word at all. In English, the word is 'adaptation', in Sanskrit it is 'ViniYoga'.

L: What is your dream for the new century of Yoga?

D: Many years ago one of my students asked me 'What is Yoga? And I went to my father, and asked him what was the right definition. My father said, 'Tell him Yoga means 'shanti', peace.' How to offer this great gift-timeless gift-to this World? There is so much technology, there's so much advancement in science and medicine and all that, and yet people are not very happy. How can Yoga serve the community so that there is more peace? This is a great lesson. The US is the richest and most powerful country in the world. People are scared to walk, to talk, even to look at people. In Denver, 100 people came to our conference, and they felt healed. That was such an experience for me. Anybody who is interested in this, can add one drop of water to this Healing process. This would make me a very happy person. Wealth, power, does not give happiness and peace. A heart to heart connection, as introduced through Yoga, offers this. This is my dream.

K: I don't think my dream is far different from that of my father. I just hope I'll be able to play a part in this, that's all. Yoga helps us. It is not a question of technique. One of my friend's husband is working in the Fire Department in New York City. On September 11th he lost 350 of his colleagues when the Towers crashed. They were both shocked and devastated. They were supposed to come to our September 14th conference in Denver and they both cancelled. For two or three days they both sat in the house, weeping and weeping. Then one of their students called them on September 13th and said, "I just feel so tired, with all that has happened. Can you teach me a class today?" The class made a great difference to the student and she called her to say how grateful she was that she met her under these circumstances and how much better she felt. This opened the teacher's eyes and she said, "If Yoga can help my student, it can also help me." That night they both decided to come to the conference. They found a flight and came immediately and were probably the people most affected by the whole

event. Her husband made a statement: "I came from hell, and I'm going back to hell, but now I feel better." There are problems in this world, there are conflicts and issues to be resolved. That's what happened to this man. He had to go back to Ground Zero. And he said 'Yoga has helped me to go back there.' That is what I hope will happen to people who are practising Yoga, not to escape from all these problems but to go back to these problems with more strength. This is possible through the example of this beautiful couple. Yoga should help people do deal with real world issues, not to run away from them. That is not going to give peace. It is going to catch up with us one day or another

D: His wife got back her inner strength. This is what I discovered in Tibet. I'll give a very important example. In one small village where we were, there were many poor people who often only had the set of clothes they stood up in. I don't know what they eat in winter. But they have such strength. There was a little girl and we gave her a small photo of the Dalai Lama. She became almost an enlightened person. She smiled. Her feet were dirty, her clothes were dirty. That was inner strength. For that person, that small photo made her a different person. So we have an inner strength, and I think Yoga helps us discover this. It is not technique that gives it. We can be next to a great spiritual person, and we are not peaceful? These people are in Tibet where they're not sure what will happen tomorrow, there's always tension because of China, but in these small villages, they're so soft. It is not easy, but they have strength. This is what I discovered in Tibet. Each of us have an inner strength which you cannot buy. It is priceless. But somehow we lose it because of our temptation and what happens from the outside.

Key: K=Kausthub Desikachar, TKV Desikachar's son; D = TKV Desikachar

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