

# YOGA SŪTRA ON STRESS

an interview with T.K.V. Desikachar

The Yoga Sūtra presents the potentials of the human mind, the means to its refinement, control and clarity and the obstacles that can come in the way of one's progress. An understanding of stress in the light of the Yoga Sūtra is presented in the interview below.

In addition to covering the many techniques in yoga to help persons under stress, T.K.V. Desikachar constantly emphasises the importance of the attitude to our actions. He singles out the cultivation of the twin qualities of *śraddhā* and *īśvara pranidhāna* as the only sure means for being free from stress permanently.

**What is the Indian tradition's view on stress?**

In the Indian tradition, stress would be the situation where a person exhibits the *udvega-s*, attitudes or behaviour which take over a person and control him.

The origin of the *udvega-s* lies in the *ṣaḍ ūrmi-s*, the six enemies. These six are,

*kāma*: desire

*krodha*: anger

*lobha*: possessiveness, greed

*moha*: darkness; though not actually dark it is as if darkness exists because the person is so sure of himself and his opinions that he is unable to see.

*mada*: arrogance, the refusal to accept or give in.

*mātsarya*: jealousy, to resent the success of others and to be happy at their failures.

These are Āyurveda's *mano roga-s* (diseases of the mind).

If any one of these six is dominant in a person, that person is sure to experience *udvega-s* in one form or the other.

**There is a view that a certain 'essential tension' is required for high performance. Yet, T. Krishnamacharya consistently achieved a**

**high quality of action in diverse areas without any trace of stress or tension.**

A human being is made up of the three *guṇa-s*: *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. All three are important and have their respective roles. The role of the *rajoguṇa* is to initiate action. Every function of the body and action of the person is because of the operation of the *rajoguṇa*. Even breathing requires the action of the *rajoguṇa*. In all his teachings, my father would always insist on action. As long as a person is alive, the three *guṇa-s* will exist in his system thereby making action not only necessary but inevitable. Stress or tension, however, has its origin in the attitudes to our actions. There are two attitudes in particular that are the cause of stress. These are: *aham* and *mama*. *Aham* or *ahankāra* is the attitude "I am the doer" and *mama* or *mamakāra* is the attitude "it is for me". These two factors most surely produce *udvega-s*.

The moment the attitude is one of *na-mama* — 'not by me', 'not for me', there cannot be any stress. A person who has total faith in God cannot have stress and will not exhibit the *udvega-s*. This was the view of my father and was what he practised. It is not that he did not experience failure or suffering. He did fail and he did undergo suffering in his life. But these were, for him, the fruits ordained by God. In

the face of these setbacks his faith never diminished. On the contrary, it grew. And this was reflected in the total absence of stress in him, at all times.

**Which is the single most important attribute that is responsible for great achievements?**

There have been persons in our history who have achieved extraordinary things with almost no resources. The extraordinary achievements of Śankara in his thirty two years or in more recent times of Mahatma Gandhi, have all been possible because they had *śraddhā*, faith. What is emphasised in our tradition is faith. And faith leads to *vīryam* says the Yoga Sūtra. When *vīryam* is lacking, the goal is not reached.

If a person is really serious about doing a thing and is determined, he will find the energy to do it. This energy will come from within and this is what is *vīryam*. There are three types of people. The first, the *adhama*-s, never begin anything because even before they begin, they believe that they will not succeed. The second, will begin but will give up the moment there is failure. The third will get greater and greater energy with each obstacle or failure they experience, till they finally reach the goal. These are the *uttama*-s. The person with *śraddhā* cannot fail. If someone has failed, it is because he lacks *śraddhā*.

**There is the opinion that due to the value-based and stress-reducing approach of Yoga and Indian philosophy, Indians lack the drive or zest to succeed.**

If you read the Śāstra-s, you will see that every one of them exhort the person to 'do his best'. Nowhere is a person asked to perform moderately. If Indians are not putting forth their best efforts in what they attempt, the reason lies elsewhere and not in the Śāstra-s, whether Yoga or any other. In fact it is said that *Īśvara* is on the side of the one who does his best.

Patañjali in the Yoga Sūtra has listed nine obstacles on the path to the goal and one of them is *alabdha bhūmikatva*, 'to give up'. He further says that if a person has *īśvara praṇidhāna*, there is no question of not succeeding as he will never give up.

Though Yoga has many solutions for the symptoms brought on by stress, they are, with due respects, symptomatic solutions. The symptoms will be removed but will reappear after a while. Once the symptoms subside, the

person must examine himself and search for the cause of the problem. The only solution for the removal of the cause of the problem is *śraddhā* and *īśvara praṇidhāna*.

It is due to the wrong attitudes or the disturbances of the mind that the person finally gives up. To avoid this, the two attitudes prescribed in the Yoga Sūtra are *śraddhā* and *īśvara praṇidhāna*. In the Bhagavad Gītā, the two attitudes of *ahankāra* and *mamakāra* are identified as the fundamental problem. The solution lies in the cultivation of the attitude of *na-mama*, not by me.

**What should motivate people to act?**

*Svadharmā*. *Dharma* is that which protects, holds up and elevates. In the upholding of *dharma*, every person has a role to play. Each of us, have responsibilities. It is necessary to be clear about what each responsibility entails, and do one's best to discharge it. It is also necessary to be clear about the limits of this responsibility and not interfere in or worry about things that fall within the orbit of another's responsibility. This is *svadharmā*.

*Svadharmā* must be done with *śraddhā*. *Śraddhā* in the rightness of the action performed. There is then no other option and so the person never gives up and thereby he definitely reaches the goal.

While it is *svadharmā* that should motivate people to act, this action should not be with the attitude of *aham* or *mama*. To keep the mind free from these negative attitudes it is necessary that the *svadharmā* is done with the attitude of *īśvara praṇidhāna*. *Īśvara praṇidhāna* is the acceptance of a higher force.

The problem often is that we are unable to identify our *svadharmā*. Very few people even question themselves to ask if they are doing the right thing. When what motivates is not *svadharmā* but *rāga*, then you have the attitudes of expectation and disappointment and this results in stress.

**What is the means by which one can know one's *svadharmā*?**

*Ātmatuṣṭi*. The feeling of peace and profound satisfaction that results from the performance of the action, even long after the action is performed. Those fortunate to have an *ācārya* to guide them, will of course know their *svadharmā* from their *ācārya*.