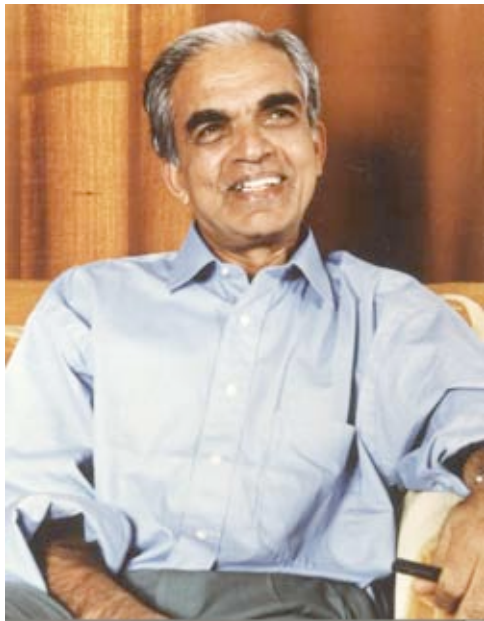


# YOGA AND THE XXIst CENTURY

## – Health, Psychology And Spirituality



*TKV Desikachar was in Narbonne (South of France) for a symposium on "Yoga and the XXIst Century" from 22 to 25 May 1999. The purpose of the symposium was to consider the role of yoga for the coming century in the three fields of health, psychology and spirituality. The following interview was an introductory presentation.*

### The relevance of traditional teaching

**Question:** Do you think that the teaching you received from your father T Krishnamacharya is still relevant today, particularly in the West?

**Desikachar:** It looks like it because, wherever I speak, more and more people come, and from all sorts of different backgrounds. It is relevant, and it is going to be.

**Question:** You studied the Yoga Sutra of Patanjali many times with your father. Could you say a few words about this text, and since it is about 2 000 years old, do you think its message is still valid today and for the future?

**Desikachar:** This text is very old, and it deals with the mind. Anything we do, or intend to do, involves this instrument, and all pains and pleasures are rooted here.

Patanjali was very prophetic, because he spoke not only of yesterday's mind, but also of tomorrow's. His message concerns clarity, and it will become more and more pertinent as time goes by, because people are now questioning much more than before.

Earlier there was belief, and so people did not have to question, or even to think. Now, we all want to have more responsibility in what happens to us. Therefore, we need to have a clearer mind, and this is why the yoga sutra is still valid and will remain so.

I believe that, unless a new religious order comes to the world in which case belief will take over, this text will have a wider and wider impact in times to come.

### Yoga and health

**Question:** How far do you think that yoga can contribute to maintaining good health in the coming century?

**Desikachar:** It is now known that health is not just the absence of diseases coming from infections, etc. There are many illnesses for which medicine has no answer or knowledge of their origins.

People are also turning to other health systems, which give them hope. Anything that can offer some solace is now being tried - there is aromatherapy, hypnosis, magnetic therapy, etc.

In yoga we have this fundamental idea - anything that disturbs a person, including illness and disease, can be helped if we can act on the mind. What is so special about yoga is that it gives us a way to strengthen our mind. When the mind gets stronger, we can face illness and we feel healthier.

It has already been proved that yoga can help. Yoga is not medicine - it is concerned with the quality of life, attitudes to life, personal disciplines, and various other things, which any system of medicine can accept. It will certainly have a role to play in every system of health care for times to come.

**Question:** In this field do you see the most important contribution from yoga being on a preventive or a curative level in the coming century?

Desikachar: I think the most important contribution yoga can make in the field of health is the courage it can give to face illness, the strength we can find to cope with our ailments. The moment we have this strength, we have already been cured.

That, I think, is a very significant contribution. This is at least what we see with the many different people who come to our yoga institution in India. Some of them have not received education, others are very cultivated, but whoever they are, when faced with illness, they generally feel discouraged.

After some time they have the courage to smile again, to take a walk, to climb some steps - which can be a big improvement. This happens because yoga identifies a power within them, a power which they didn't think they had. It is not medicine, but it works.

**Question: Are dietary restrictions a part of yoga?**

Desikachar: When we start yoga, we begin to look at ourselves. We notice what creates problems and what relieves these problems. Food can do both. If we notice that good food makes us feel better, we will start taking more care about our diet.

People who begin yoga practice start thinking about many things, which they hadn't considered before. Some even reflect on what colour the carpet on which they do their practice should be!

Obviously what we eat is an important consideration, but it is not something that we as yoga teachers insist on. Each person takes care of his or her own diet. As time goes by yoga makes us more aware of what we are doing and what we should be doing.

**Question: Modern medicine has done wonders to improve many ailments, but the contemporary disease, which we call, stress seems to be difficult to handle for the medical world. Why is yoga practice effective for this field? Do you think it will remain so in the future?**

Desikachar: Our future life will be stressful - there is no doubt about that. With all the comforts and conveniences we have, and all the opportunities which modern life gives us,

we have more and more ambitions - this can only increase the stress level.

The question is how to cope with it? No outside force can do this for us - we have to look after it from within ourselves, using our own resources.

Yoga cannot prevent stress, but as I said earlier, yoga gives us access to our resources, which are linked to the mind. In strengthening the mind, yoga enables us to develop a sort of cushion, an increased ability to withstand stress. This is the best way to cope with it. It's like having a good shock absorber when driving a car on a bumpy road.

Through an understanding of what is at stake, linked to the practice of yoga, the force of our mental resources are developed and we can handle stress better.

## Yoga and psychology

**Question: Was yoga considered in ancient times as a therapy, and do you believe that it can be so in the XXIst century?**

Desikachar: I am not really sure what "therapy" means. However I will say this - yoga has answers for different situations. The basic idea is that if our system is better organised there will be fewer problems.

It is like a house, which is well managed - everything works well. Further, if our system is better organised, even if there are problems, we will know how to find solutions. I feel this is an important point about yoga - it gives us access to better solutions.

**Question: In the West, health problems, even the most serious ones, are often looked upon as having a psychological origin. Does this fit in with the point of view of yoga?**

Desikachar: I am so happy to hear this! Because our ancient yoga texts have said that disease and mind are interrelated. If we are sick, our mind is disturbed. If the mind is agitated, we become sick.

I am so happy modern science has recognised this! There is no incompatibility here. We are together.

**Question: Can yoga practice be beneficial for someone doing psychotherapy or psychoanalysis?**

Desikachar: Many people involved in psychotherapy or analysis also practice yoga very seriously. That means they derive some benefit from it. The opposite is also true - some people who practice yoga or who teach can need psychotherapy or analysis. In the West, without any doubt, there is reciprocity in these fields.

**Question: Are there no yoga practices, which you think, should be avoided while undergoing analysis or psychotherapy?**

Desikachar: When somebody comes to see me, I look at the person as he or she is - totally. The person may be undergoing psychotherapy, seeing a psychiatrist, following homeopathic medicine or other systems of medicine...

The person could be a mother having some problem with her child, or someone with a back pain taking some pain killer, or it could be somebody with an emotional problem having counselling ... I am not going to say "You cannot do this, or you cannot do that".

The question is can we establish a good relationship? The moment we have this, we can do anything.

**Question: Do you think that a yoga teacher in the west should go through some therapy or analysis in order to be aware of the developments in this field and to meet the growing demand for psychological help?**

Desikachar: The term "yoga teacher in the west" seems to suggest that everyone has the same way of teaching. This is not so.

There are those who only give instructions about techniques, like explaining how to use a computer to someone. There is not a lot happening in this teaching situation and the awareness of psychological questions would seem relatively unimportant.

But there is another situation where techniques are not the only element involved. These yoga teachers are personally concerned by the evolution of their students. They cannot be ignorant. Otherwise it would be like the blind leading the blind.

In this second case, and I know many teachers in the west who do this, they look to have as comprehensive a knowledge as

possible in many fields, including psychology. The way they go about it is up to them.

## Yoga and spirituality

**Question: How do you define spirituality from the point of view of yoga?**

Desikachar: What are we seeking? Within every intelligent human being there are deep, searching questions - "Who am I? Where do I come from? Why do I sometimes feel so well, and not at other times? Where is the origin of my habits? What is it that will give me permanent happiness?"

Many people are looking for perfection in life situations - to have an ideal wife or an ideal husband and so on. Searching for happiness in external circumstances often leads to disappointment. We all know that wealth will not give us happiness, and we will not find it either in external freedom - doing what we want.

When we come to yoga, we begin to discover how the mind functions, and find that there is a lot of "junk" in it, which we try to remove.

Slowly the mind becomes more and more like a mirror that tells us: "Look here, there is something that I can show you". This something was already there, but is now revealed to us. There is "something" in us who is beyond the mind - I do not know what we can call it.

When we begin to feel this, it is spirituality. The role of yoga in spirituality is to give us awareness of this feeling.

**Question: Do you think that yoga can help a person in his or her religious practices?**

Desikachar: The moment there is a search, an enquiry, we need some help and start looking for it. Then what happens?

We all have roots - we did not appear spontaneously! We came from our parents, and they came from their parents. We are a part of a society, with a culture. We begin to look at our past, discover aspects we may have ignored, and some of these are religious. One discovery leads naturally to another...

I strongly believe that a serious aspirant of life, who goes into yoga, will find his or her roots, and these roots are often linked to religion.

Question: Some religious groups see yoga as being incompatible with their beliefs. Do you think this is simply a question of misinformation?

Desikachar: Absolutely. We have to communicate more with them. This was lacking in the past, but things have improved. Many years ago, people thought that doing yoga would make a person crazy!

Earlier, it was also thought that yoga was anti-social, that it isolated people from society. It was perhaps considered potentially dangerous because it came from a different culture. Today, I don't think this opinion is widespread.

All my friends live normally - they have children, a husband or wife and have responsibilities within the society. They work, have fun, watch football matches...

We, in the field of yoga, have a duty to explain better the true nature of what we are doing and how we live.

On the other side, unfortunately, some religious groups are very rigid. There is also some anxiety in certain religious circles - they feel they are losing their numbers and give misinformation to try to avoid this. Perhaps there is also some ignorance - but this method will not succeed.

There is also a little fanaticism in certain religious groups. They provoke basic instincts, unfair to religion as a whole, so that their followers look at everything else negatively. Unfortunately, there can be an element of cult in religion.

So, on our side, we have not given the right information; on their side, there can be some nervousness.

Question: It would seem that the relationship between the teacher and the student, in the traditional Indian context, is the important factor in change for the student - health-wise, psychologically or spiritually. In the western context, for the coming century, do you see this aspect as feasible or should we be looking to emphasise other aspects?

Desikachar: It is not only going to be feasible, it is going to be more and more dominant. We are losing touch with relationship. We have no husband, no wife, no father, no

mother, no religion... At the same time we cannot live alone.

A human being likes to be with others. I have heard that there are some "psychological clubs" in France where people meet and share over a cup of coffee, because they have nowhere else to meet and talk. We are becoming lonely, because we wanted a certain freedom, and this is the price we have paid.

Relationships are going to be very important. This means that a teacher has to be very careful, because the moment a student likes a teacher, there is a risk that the teacher will be considered as their husband or wife, or father, or guru, or whatever.

Without a doubt there will be an increasing demand for relationships. Depending on how we handle it this will be for good or for bad... Today, technology has created a big wall between human beings. No need to go to the bank to get money, nor to a travel agent to buy a ticket. Everything is done through technology. We are always focusing on machines.

I observe this when I walk in the streets of any big city in the west - people are not looking at each other, they are looking at machines or talking on their telephones. Even when I go to the counter, the lady is not looking at me; she is looking at the computer! Technology is great, but it can separate human beings. Therefore, we will certainly be looking for relationships in the future.

Question: And where does yoga fit in?

Desikachar: Yoga is relationship. The word yoga means to relate.