

INTERVIEW WITH TKV DESIKACHAR



Science, Medical Conditions and Yoga as a Therapy

By Paul Harvey in 2000 whilst studying with TKV Desikachar in Chennai

Paul thanks Desikachar for agreeing to give time for this interview and Desikachar replies with thanks.

Question from Paul Harvey

It is a very broad area that we want to look at around science and medical conditions, as there is a tremendous interest in Yoga as a therapy in the world today.

I would like to start by maybe getting a historical perspective on Yoga and asking questions on your understanding of it. Where do you feel that this link started between Yoga and Science? Because Yoga originally was something that was not associated with science.

It was something that was done for personal development, spiritual development, or even perhaps physical development and somewhere we seem to have made this link with science, which was predominantly something that was growing up in the West whilst at the same time Yoga was growing or has grown in India, with less connection directly with science.

So I am wondering if you could help develop this question about the link between Yoga and Science.

Response from TKV Desikachar

If we look at the history of India, for centuries and centuries for different reasons India has always fascinated the West. More people have travelled to India from the West than from other parts because the Chinese could not come because of the mountains. There has been silk; there has been a lot of mix about India's great history; also many conquerors came.

Through these travels people from the West, which is the source of modern science, heard about many things that are happening. Among the things that they came to know about were some of what we call the 'feats' of Yogis. In fact long, long ago Yoga was linked only to all these feats, levitation, flying, etc.

In the 18th and 19th Century, in the beginning of the 19th Century, there was an observation made during the time of the great King, Ranjit Singh in the Punjab, which fascinated some of the travellers of the West. There was a Yogi who was kept in a box and buried underground. He was there for a number of days and he did not die.

This has been a great fascination for the west, so the curiosity about Yogis increased because science seems to always talk as if it knows all the answers but when these people of science saw these things it was difficult for them to explain how somebody can live underground with very little air at all. In those days it was almost like a fashion for these Yogis to express their powers by these achievements.

This is how the interest of Western science in Yoga came, because of the interest the West always had in India. Then recently, because of the interaction between East and West because of the British and French advances more and more medical people became interested in this extraordinary experience that Yogis could express.

Take my own father's example. A couple of doctors from France came in the 1930s because they were interested in knowing the power of Yogis to control the autonomic system, like the heartbeat for example. My father, through his Yoga practise, demonstrated his ability to change his heart function, as they could evaluate, at his will to the extent that he even demonstrated before doctors how he could stop his heartbeat even for a few minutes. A lot of people thought he was dead, but he was not dead, so this is how the first medicine in Yoga started, not because it was that Yogis were fit or physically strong but because they were able to exhibit certain things that normally human beings could not do.

It is a part of Yoga and if you look at the Yoga Sūtra of Patañjali, there is one complete section, the Third Chapter, which talks about the power of the mind over the body. How a person who has mastered the mind can do what other human beings cannot, whether in terms of understanding and in terms of power it is almost like magic, they call it Siddhi. So this is the initial relationship between Science and Yoga.

Question from Paul Harvey

This link with Science and Yoga appears to have given way to more of a link between Yoga and medical conditions, what we call clinical conditions, pathology, to what was originally as you say the power of mind over body. It has become now much more of an interest in problems of the body and problems of the mind.

Could you talk more about how you saw this link developing, because on the one hand we have these as you say feats, these tremendous feats, you gave examples of these feats and now we have this interest in Yoga for clinical conditions. Do you have some understanding of how this has evolved into looking at Yoga in this way?

Response from TKV Desikachar

When these scientists, also medical scientists, became interested in Yoga they began to read books on it. Some of these books were translated into English at the beginning of the previous century. Some great English scholars translated some of the ancient Yoga books into English. Some of these books i.e. The Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā talk about the effect of Yoga practise on illness. They talk about certain postures, Āsana, curing certain diseases. This is not the only book; quite a few books talk about the curative aspects of Yoga.

Eventually there was a curiosity as to whether it was really a bluff or a reality. so further enquiry had to be done. Simultaneously, some of the Yoga teachers and masters in India in the beginning of the previous century started to apply Yoga for clinical conditions.

India is a very poor country and any system of health care that is inexpensive is very useful for us and India has had a long history of family medicine. Āyurveda, for example, is based on herbs and personal discipline, so there has been a lot of closeness within Āyurveda and Yoga, even believing that they came from the same master, Patañjali.

So here was information about the curative aspect of Yoga in the books that Western medical enthusiasts of Yoga became interested in and simultaneously some of the Yoga people such as Swami Kuvalayananda and a lot of others even Swami Shivananda, who was a doctor, began to use Yoga techniques for people with illnesses.

It did work and some of these people even wanted to do some research on it. One of the pioneers in Yoga research has been Swami Kuvalayananda of Lonavla. He wrote a book long, long ago called 'Yoga Therapy' using certain Āsana techniques, Prāṇāyāma techniques and what he calls Kriyā, he analysed how Yoga works with certain conditions.

My own father, Krishnamacharya, started using Yoga for sickness even before the journey to Tibet to Mount Kailash. He is known to have cured the diabetes of one of the Mysorees of India. You can see great teachers Kuvalayananda, Krishnamacharya, Yogendra of Bombay.

All these people began to use Yoga for clinical conditions because in India we do not need any philosophy. We have a very religious base and what we needed was some way to get rid of disease without much expense and Yoga offered an alternative, so Yoga became popular. The situation today is that more Indians come to Yoga for clinical conditions than for any enlightenment.

Question from Paul Harvey

On the question of clinical conditions, the Western way treats disease in terms of the use of drugs and has a consistent response to disease and is seen something that is of a great interest to people in the West.

In terms of Yoga research could you talk more about what exists in terms of research into Yoga in India from a medical viewpoint.

Response from TKV Desikachar

We have a lot of data to say that somebody had a problem, they went to some Yoga courses and then they got better. We have enormous data back in India. This is because India has many Yoga teachers, reputable teachers and not so reputable teachers. When I look at the journals and newspapers many Institutions are doing a lot of good work where people feel better after going to Yoga.

The problem is what does this word 'Yoga' mean. Because science is exact, science expects that we know what was given and what were the conditions in which it was given and what are the effects and science expects this to be repeated again and again. A particular medicine is given for a particular condition again and again and again and when it was not given it does not work and when it is given it works, this is why they have this double blind test.

Unfortunately, this is not so simple with Yoga. The techniques that different Yoga masters use, known as Yoga, are different, for example, what Svāmi Śivananda teaches is different from what my Great Uncle Mr B K S Iyengar uses, there is no comparison. Nor what a lot of other people such as Kuvalayananda use, I have nothing to do with that or what my uncle uses. In fact, they had a head-on collision about their techniques, they are not able to accept each others techniques, but each one of them helps hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of people in their own way.

Now this is the challenge for scientists, because the fundamental basis of looking at the human body by scientists is different from how we look in Yoga. As my father said modern medicine is based on a dead body anatomy but we are dealing with a human being who is alive, who has emotions and intellect and with so many things happening.

How to do research, to say this is the problem, this is the intervention and this is the result is a challenge for Yoga. In our own school, the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandarim, which was started twenty-five years ago, we had a data bank and there are now 28,000 people who came to us. This is quite a number, every day people came, tens and hundreds of people came and we have many teachers. Each teacher teaches slightly differently from the others. We have at least 95 per cent positive results.

Now if science were to ask me how could you prove this I don't know how to prove it. I ask them please help me as to how I can prove this because there are too many variations involved in analysing. But we continue to help people so we know what happens, we do not know why it happens, we don't even know how it happens, but we do know that when somebody comes we can help them and they feel better.

Question from Paul Harvey

And yet in many places around the world there are attempts being made to link Yoga to specific diseases, can you talk more about this and what is happening in your own Institute in this area.

Response from TKV Desikachar

Even if you take a particular illness, which is known as an illness according to medical parlance like asthma or blood pressure, what we offer to these people is not the same thing. We do not have a specific solution for a specific problem. For example, somebody may have blood pressure because of some family history, somebody else may have blood pressure because of some stress, somebody may have blood pressure because of anxiety, somebody may have blood pressure because of that period in their life, somebody may have blood pressure, high blood pressure suddenly because of a broken relationship.

We need to take into account all these factors to exactly form a programme of Yoga, it could be relaxation for somebody, it could be some breathing exercises for somebody, it could be some asanas for somebody, it could be some meditation for somebody, and for somebody it could be just talking to the person, just to establish a friendly relationship and console them and the condition is the same and these are all Yoga. As far as the doctor is concerned it is blood pressure. For somebody else maybe none of these things work but maybe we have to talk to them about their diet or their lifestyle.

We had somebody who had a serious neck problem and the solution was not Yoga the solution was where this person was sitting in their chair. They were sitting in an office with an air-conditioned blast coming across the neck. We had nothing to do; we suggested they change the position of their chair and after some time the neck got better.

We have to examine many factors to see what is the origin of what is known as a symptom and according to that we have to propose for this condition some Yoga which is not just Āsana. Yoga is a process which makes me understand how my mind is functioning and then reduces the turbulence of mind, any technique that helps this helps the person. We are reaching the human being through the mind; we are reaching the sickness through interaction at the mental level, with different tools of course. This is why it is a challenge for Yoga.

What also happens is if I like a teacher if something wrong is given by the teacher still it works, if I don't like the teacher and the teacher gives the best technical thing then it will not work because Yoga includes relationships.

This is why we have a problem; anyway we want to give our best. We have a research department and we have done some work, experiential work; experiential work is where we are not working symptomatically.

We look at a person, we evaluate the person as a human being, collect the data about this person as a human being, propose certain programmes, make sure that they are practising every day and then check the total personality of the person later and that is also research and that is the way we are trying to do research but that means collecting a lot of data, not just chemical pathological research, not just biochemistry some psychological relations, even emotional is necessary, family history.

We have done that and we want to pursue this, so we want to create a new system of research taking into account all these things, we want to get more technologists, biotechnologists, we do not want to get more psychologists, we do not want to get more medical people. We also want to get Yoga people so that all these team of experts learn all things and maybe they can crack this mystery of Yoga, hopefully.

Question from Paul Harvey

So from what you are saying it appears that it is not really possible to evaluate Yoga in the terms that would satisfy Western science, in terms of having several study groups, one group practising Yoga, one group practising some placebo, one group not practising; measuring the different groups and trying to determine the effect over the same period of time, which of course is not going to be very fruitful.

Response from TKV Desikachar

It is a challenge. Now I am not saying that people have not done this type of study, I always want to call it study, I do not call it a conclusion, study is being done by scientific people interested in Yoga, studies are being done but there is a tendency to make a hasty conclusion. There are many Institutions in India that say we have done these studies. For example Dr Dean Ornish has given a course of Yoga in his book for the heart, I am scared of that course. Somebody with a heart problem, suppose he has got some neck problem and has high blood pressure, he does the shoulder stand that he has put in his book what may happen to that person? I am sorry, but with all respect but some of these people in their enthusiasm to look for something good for society make a hasty conclusion without taking into account the other aspects of human beings.

You see when somebody comes to us they are not coming with one problem, there are other problems. Asthma, they come with asthma then they take medication, these medications produce blood pressure, some of the medication increases stomach ulcers, then they have diarrhoea then they have heaviness in the head, their legs are swollen, so many facts are there.

Now, this is the challenge, how can I evaluate this person with this problem, something is given, this person nothing is given. Is it possible and is it fair that twenty people get the benefit of Yoga and forty people do not get the benefit of Yoga is it ethically correct, these are some of the questions. This is what happens with mental retardation. If you want to evaluate you teach twenty and you do not teach others. Now these children are growing, after four years you cannot teach them because they will not respond. How do we use Yoga, that this is the question I have asked the scientists. Tell us if there is a means to evaluate so that it is fair to science, it is fair to Yoga and it is fair to the patient. That is the question.

We have published some books I am very honest about this, we are just telling what is the condition, what has been happening, but we are not a medical institution; we do not want to conclude that Yoga cures heart diseases. Many Yoga teachers have heart diseases, many Yoga teachers have family relationship problems, and many Yoga teachers have back problems so we should be honest.

So if to be honest means there is also science, science is honest, science is an on-going process. I am a student of science, I am always interested in science, and it is an on-going problem. It is very important because the true scientist is always honest because he is looking for the truth and it is what we want in Yoga, to find the truth.

So in the meantime through all these complicated situations we help people but we do hope that with the data back that we have and with the people coming we hope that we can break ground and ask people to help. I have asked the scientists to help us. Definitely Yoga therapy or using Yoga to help people with problems should not be equated to allopathy where a particular illness has a particular medicine for it. It is not fair to Yoga and it is not fair to science.

One more thing I would like to say, when somebody goes to a doctor certain illnesses are cured forever or it is not to be cured, sometimes when the discipline is stopped the disease comes back. So the responsibility of resolving a problem is not in the hands of Yoga it is in the hands of the person who is suffering. The person is curing his diseases the person is resolving his problem or her problem, so the responsibility here is not in Yoga it is in the person and the responsibility is in the teacher who ensures that this person loves what is given so much that he or she will not stop doing it.

Question from Paul Harvey

So if we find that Yoga is difficult to evaluate in terms of Science and I appreciate that it does not work in the same way that Western medicine does in that Western medicine looks at the symptom then tries to tackle the particular symptom. How in your opinion does Yoga work, what is in Yoga that is so precious, so special?

Response from TKV Desikachar

I had an expert medical doctor, super expert doctor she had some problem with headaches. An extremely competent person but nothing could help, she is a surgeon also, a great writer and then somebody suggested why don't you try Yoga, that is all. She came to us. I did not teach her, I asked one of my colleagues to teach her. After one month she just said, this is magic. I cannot explain it and the science to it, I have done research, I tried meditating, nothing happened, and this is magic, that is all I can say. She is very grateful for this. I asked her how do you explain some of simple things that we taught you. One thing I must say she said is that you seem to know more about the body than we do. You seem to know about the intricacies of the body but we do not know how the body moves, we do not know what is stiffness what is flexibility, we do not know how to make a body flexible.

We don't have love and care in our work, we are experts in technology, we have the tools and we have the medicine but we do not know love, we don't know care. When I come here with a teacher I feel I am so loved I feel I am so cared for I am so taken care of already I feel half-cured. I do get my headaches once in a while but I do not care. Before it was stopping my work now I don't care. So my relationship with my headache is different today than before.

I thought I would mention this because here is somebody who is one of the best medical people in India.

Now I will give another example of another eminent doctor. This doctor, who was a very busy person and an expert in neuroscience, had at a very late age, past 70, a by-pass. After the by-pass this person lost his voice. He called me; he was always considered one of the best medical men in all of India. He said, "I am a public speaker and I have just lost my voice, can you do something". So I did something and he got back his voice and he told me something, because I interviewed him for something.

I said how do you sir, you are a religious person, he is a very religious person, you have been praying, you are a doctor, none of these things helped you. You came to us, we taught you some breathing exercises and all that and your voice has recovered, how do you explain all that.

He said, "when I learned my religious practice I was never taught how to pay attention, I did it mechanically. In medicine I was taught how to do things I was not taught how to be aware of what I am doing. You people taught me how to pay attention to what I am doing. So today the same religious practice that I was doing before has more effect because I am paying attention to this religious practice and my Yoga, when I am doing my Yoga, I know what I am doing when I am doing my Yoga. Because I am paying attention I think there is much more effect than when I do something without paying attention.

I have given two examples of two eminent doctors, one lady and one gentleman, I think that there is a meaning in what they are saying. If I love my body my body will heal, if I abuse my body it will not heal. Attention is also to learn what we have been given, precious, which we cannot buy. I think Yoga teaches us to love what has been given to us and the Yoga teacher perhaps helps us to understand this. The other thinks of techniques, this posture and that posture.

We have seen, for example, for the same condition, for the same background, we are taught different courses, they still work. The only thing we do is we will avoid anything that will complicate the problem. For example, if somebody has got a back pain we are not going to teach something that will increase the back pain.

Of course, one of the important rules is that we should know what not to teach, that is the first thing we do in our consultation and when we have seen this we can try a few things within that range as long there is this relationship within the human system of love and care is established the body is asking for that this is all I can tell.

Question from Paul Harvey

So we can consider then that the effect of Yoga is not seen to be directly on the symptom as in modern medicine. It appears from what you are saying it is more to do with the relationship with that problem.

At what level is the human system changing? Because there must be some change in order for that change to reach to the level of the symptom or to my relationship with the symptom. At what level of the human system do you think these changes are occurring at?

Response from TKV Desikachar

I have asked this question to experts because one of my jobs is also to write about these things. I have asked people how does it happen. Positive attitudes they say produce positive things in your immune system. There are a lot of technical terms for that. Negative attitudes produces negative immune system. Attitudes influence how the immune system functions.

Somebody who is asthmatic, who is so miserable, who thinks she cannot do anything, when she starts she can do something, she is not so unfit, she can raise the arms, she can breath a little more than she thinks she can.

When she gets confidence in herself she becomes more positive about herself, even the medicine she takes has a more positive effect as we have seen sometimes when people do Yoga with this affection, with this love, the need for medicine is reduced.

So I think from the scientific point of view a positive approach has a positive effect on the immune system and the rest is a question of time.

Question from Paul Harvey

In today's society we see many books on positive attitude, positive thinking, so what is it about Yoga that is different from say going into a bookshop and picking up a book that says 'think positive'.

What are the qualities in Yoga that makes it unique and different than from say reading a book on positive action, trying to cultivate positive action because in some sense it could be less effort to just pick up a book.

Why Yoga and how does Yoga work in this area of positive attitude?

Response from TKV Desikachar

This eminent neuroscientist who had the by-pass who also was shocked by the by-pass he has said a lot of things, he was written a lot of books, he is a great scholar and what in fact they had was intellectual but when he went to a teacher, in this case me, when I spoke to him it had a stronger impact to the extent that it stayed, it stayed and became a part of his life.

That is the difference between what we get out of a book and when somebody is in front of you, you trust this person, you are ready to listen to this person and that person says something it has a power, it is coming from a human being. I am not rejecting books, books influence, books influence me but in this a person is more profound.

Question from Paul Harvey

Would you say that this response is true for the West, because I know in India the role of relationship, especially with the teacher, is much more pronounced, much more prominent, much more an accepted part of society, whereas in the West we tend to live in a more remote way and therefore using books, using videos is much more acceptable for us in terms of relationships.

Do you feel that your words, which have come out of another culture in our society, can have the same impact for us in the West where we are much more used to going to the bookshop, much more used to being able to do it ourselves.

Also, it is almost for us in the West to be seen as a failure if I have to go to somebody. Sometimes when people go into therapy they regard it as a failure that they have to go to a therapist and talk to someone because I am not able to do it myself.

Response from TKV Desikachar

You know Paul I am not just of India, I am also of South India and there people like you come to see me in India. Once there is some confidence I do not see much difference between East and West, it is a question earning the confidence.

That is why in Yoga the word for earning confidence is 'Atha', now I am ready. It is the first word in the Yoga Sūtra, so I as a teacher have to put in more effort to understand that, in a society where relationships are breaking, people are more comfortable with a video than a human being.

With all due respect, in India we have the opposite problem, we have confidence in too many people so that is really why people are sometimes confused, so we have to do something else there.

So it is not Indians basically, but earning confidence is the first step in this type of work. This confidence may come because of how I am with the person or even sometimes when you consider me as an authority, confidence may be there.

Question from Paul Harvey

So we as students come to Yoga. How do teachers evaluate, if from what you are saying it could be that the same symptom. If we take stress for example, similar stress could produce five different responses. One person gets blood pressure, one person will get digestive problems, another person will have headaches, and another person will get sleep problems and another person it will effect their relationship.

How do you evaluate? What are the principles on which we can evaluate in order to decide what could be helpful for a problem when there are so many variables based on the same, even on the same symptoms such as in particular stress which can produce some of the results.

Response from TKV Desikachar

First I must have the training, anybody can have good training. I can work on the computer but I must have training. I know nothing I must have training. Training includes certain knowledge of the basics of Yoga, knowledge of the human system, personal pride so that you have some conviction of what you are talking about which means personal experience, internship where we see how the more experienced teacher is doing that work she is doing. We make sure of that in our School that there is a strong internship.

Through this we know how to look at a person, we know how to look at a body; we know how to understand some data they give because medical information must be understood. In our training we have one full semester where we teach people how the Western science looks at the human body. As a part of it we also have a course on Western psychology, of course it is very important too to understand 'ego', so training, a comprehensive training is required.

Internship is required, then reference is required that is why some of these people will have to sit with us, more experienced people to see how we do these things, how we communicate, how we talk, how we accept. This is a preliminary requirement before we go into the study.

The most important things is that when people are coming to us they are not coming to us when they have got the disease, they come to us after they have gone to other medicines, sometimes they go to Āyurveda, sometimes they go to allopathy sometimes they go to homeopathy, many things, so we get more complicated people than medical doctors get in terms of chronic conditions.

I am not talking about simple conditions, we are the last post so we have to be more careful, so we have to have more training and make more effort. Then it is a question of, say swimming, you get into the water and you know how to swim.

Question from Paul Harvey

If I may conclude with an awkward question. For somebody reading this interview they would perhaps understand from it that Yoga is not a straightforward means of for this problem this solution and yet there are many, many Yoga books already on the marketplace that offer precisely this, almost as a glossy self-help manual with quite specific links between postures and diseases or breathing techniques and diseases, between techniques and illnesses.

What have you to say to the reader with this respect, because there is this large body of, I cannot say evidence of, there is this large body of information that is there. What is the reader to do? With all this what can help?

Response from TKV Desikachar

There is such a large body of information that is there which tells that this disease can be cured by this posture or by this breathing that I wonder if the reader should think why there are more and more people and more and more sicknesses if all these solutions are there.

I think most of the doctors must close their shop, but it has not happened and how many of these authors who have written these things can really honestly say there have been out of these problems they are talking about.

Today if somebody comes to me after how many years now, thirty nine years I have been teaching, if somebody comes to me with all this experience I still do not know the answer until I meet the person, interact with the person I do not know what is possible even if it is a simple headache.

Question from Paul Harvey

So to conclude from what you are saying because somebody comes in with a particular problem and Yoga helps that person with a problem we cannot turn it around and say therefore that Yoga helps that problem in all situations.

Response from TKV Desikachar

We help the person, because we help the person certain illnesses are reduced but we need to know how to help the person.

Paul Harvey

Thank you.

TKV Desikachar

Thank you.