

TKV Desikachar
on

Healing

Interview by Stefan Lemle

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The gloomy suite in the Hotel at the Friesenviertel of Cologne, cold rains against the window panes. Desikachar opens the door and receives the visitor with a bow and a smile which couldn't exude more warmth. A few hours later and six floors below he will commence, together with his wife Menaka, daughter Mekhala and son Kausthub, the inaugural session of the world-of-yoga tour. Desikachar glows with love and large-heartedness, speaks English in the charming Indian sing-song way. And fights with the temperatures he is not accustomed to: during the interview he wears and removes his grey Kashmir shawl three times.

You have just arrived out of India and you look fantastic. Aren't you having a jet-lag?

Yogis don't know jet-lag. Seriously: I am travelling around the world since decades and am used to the constant change. During long flights I throw a cloth over my head to not disturb my co-passengers and do a few breathing exercises. But perhaps the real trick lies in not thinking at all about the jet-lag

That helps?

If you have enough faith in yourself, why not? It works with me, then why not with you too?

I would like to talk to you about healing, agreed?

Very much. That is my profession.

Many in the west see you more as a yoga teacher.

Not every yoga teacher is a healer and not every healer is a yoga teacher. I am both, but prefer the healer.

Never before could we choose between so many means of healing as today. But at the same time more and more people seem to be ailing. What is going wrong?

The people are lonely, no one cares for them, they lose their inner faith because they have experienced disappointment so often. This way one becomes sick and suffers.

The frequently quoted loneliness of the modern man...

... and something more: the more of prosperity, the more suffering. This is paradoxical only on the surface. A

good friend of mine is an advocate. When he started off with his practice, he hardly had anything, went to the court on his bicycle and was a happy man. Today he is one of the renowned jurists in the country. And unhappy. He can hardly bear anymore the pressure which came along with prosperity and fame and that robs him literally his sleep.

How does illness arise?

Illness is always sickness of body and mind. Especially chronic problems are mainly caused by the mind. Fear, depression, deep anger: all that makes us ill and leads us to physical symptoms. Curing and healing are also two different things. An illness may be cured, that doesn't however mean that the patient has been healed. And at times we are healed, although the illness hasn't got cured.

How do I come to realise that I have to be healed and not merely cured?

You don't feel happy any more. Disturbed sleep is an important symptom. Then there is breathlessness, faltering heart-beats, pain in the chest...

... panic-attacks?

Correct. And all that without any clear somatic problem causing it.

That sounds like a classical case of depression.

It is an emotional imbalance. Emotional factors like fear cause physical as well as mental problems.

How would the healing be like? Many people here think yoga is a compendium of acrobatic postures or an esoteric and trendy form of sports, they don't think it is therapy.

Yoga is so much more than mere physical postures. Sound, breathing exercises, meditation, personal attitudes are as much a part, if it concerns healing. The method has to be adapted to each person individually.

In the western medicine two people having the same symptoms are treated alike.

With due respects to all, that is naturally not okay. I once had a couple for treatment. Both of them suffered under depression and tremendous overweight, with the same symptoms. I soon discovered that the man grew obese due to his depression and that the woman obese depressed due to her obesity. Consequently there had to be two different approaches for the treatment of the two persons. If it had to do with accidents, open wounds or infections the allopathic medicine would be my first choice. But most illnesses are of a different nature.

Is yoga competing with the medical system?

It is a complementary system, a filter, a catalyser. There first has to develop a good and stable relationship between the healer and the patient. Relationships which make us happy, can heal. Medical people often don't want to accept that. With all the economical factors, time-pressure and technical gadgets where can the personal relationship grow? Feeling the pulse on the left and the right side, tests, touches, through all this many patients feel already better. Many doctors don't feel even the pulse, much less talk with their patients.

And you?

I like to get the people to like me. I have to touch them, physically, but also in their core. Only then will they trust me in a way that they will accept my suggestions. I never start of with a list of restrictions, like doctors often do: you shouldn't eat this any more, do that any more... People don't care much to listen to prohibitions, surely not from persons they don't know, or worse still, don't like!

What role does faith play?

Healing doesn't happen through the application of a technology. In India we are used to having faith in our teachers and healers. The western mentality, to the contrary, doubts everything at the outset and has to question the validity of each advice. You have to believe in it and really want success too, then it will happen.

So you mean a sort of placebo-effect?

Faith goes in a similar direction to Placebo, but it is much more powerful. By the way, this faith has nothing to do with belief in god. Yoga is not a religion. Many god-believing Hindus reject Yoga because it does not take a clear "yes" to the question of god. Here we are talking of the faith which you have in yourself and can only find it within yourself. Placebo is harmless compared to the power of this faith.

In some circles you are considered a healing wonder.

But I don't work any wonders. I had once a patient who was suffering for years under hiccups. Nothing seemed to help him and he finally came to me. After a while I asked him to relax on a couch and chanted a few traditional songs. Then I sent him home with the instruction to take only liquid food for three days, do a few breathing exercises and to repeat a particular song regularly. The following night he slept without hiccups for the first time in years. The next morning he called me and said, "A wonder! A wonder!" But between you and me: the man was so tense due to the years of hiccup that no medicine could help him anymore. And because of that he became even tenser. A vicious circle. Because of the diet his abdomen became relaxed, breathing exercises and the chanting relaxed his diaphragm. A wonder for him, but not for me.

For you, then, Yoga is a classical science?

Surely! Only, the problem is: how does one measure mental and psychological change? Blood pressure or sugar level can easily be verified. But the resolving of a mental blockage? It is simply difficult to define subjective feeling. We can only be sure of one thing: when the mind relaxes, the body relaxes too.

You mentioned just now traditional songs as a healing method. Are there any scientific explanations for that?

The recitation of verses from the Vedas has an enormous healing potential. When I began to learn with my father, most of the texts were in Sanskrit and I could not understand them. I discovered that it is the sound of Sanskrit which is so exceptional. It has so many different qualities. The series of sounds brings a healing vibrational effect into the different regions of the body one after another. Therefore there is a renewal of energy. For having the maximum vibration the exact intonation and pronunciation of the Sanskrit words is important. The meaning of the text plays merely a secondary role in the healing process.

Neuroscientists recently made test on Buddhist monks, who were meditating in CT machines...

... and the results showed that there was a great activation of those regions of the brain which control wellbeing and the sensation of happiness. I too heard about this research and have taken notice of it with great interest. I guess meditation is even more important than we all believed until now.

Some believe that meditation could even heal cancer.

I believe that too. But it is probably different from person to person. I had a breast-cancer patient who was only given a few months' time by the doctors after she went through chemo, radiation and surgery. That was many years ago. She meditated a lot. Very likely, that it helped her.

Which illnesses are suited for a Yoga-therapy and which ones are not?

In the case of emergency problems like a heart-attack, yoga cannot help much. But you can take care, that it doesn't come to such an emergency. Blood counts, BP, obesity, hypertension, angina pectoris, all that can

be treated well with yoga. With breathing exercises you can help or even heal asthma and almost all other ailments of the breathing system, even tuberculosis. Physical, muscular pains and those linked to arthritis can also be fairly well controlled by yoga. Likewise we have very good success with cases of mental illnesses like depression and attacks like epilepsy. Many of our sugar patients could almost normalise their metabolism through yoga and hardly need to take insulin. We also have clear approaches for patients with hepatitis, stomach ulcers and migraine. Patients suffering from aids, immunity deficiency illnesses, Parkinson and stroke benefit a lot from yoga. Almost every process of convalescence works better with yoga than without yoga.

Sounds almost like an all-round medicine.

It would not be correct to say that yoga is the only right solution. We tell every diabetic patient to continue with his medication and to keep up the dietary advice of the doctor. But if the blood sugar count goes down significantly due to meditation and the yogic exercises, then you could also reduce the dose. Many doctors even come to our centre when they are unwell. It is amazing. Sometimes they have more faith in us than in their own colleagues.

Men or women, who learn better?

Women are much more aware of health and much more disciplined. Healing generally is faster with women than with men.

Your father, Sri T. Krishnamacharya is known even outside the boundaries of India as one of the greatest personalities of the 20th century. How strongly did he influence you?

Immeasurably. My father had – going by today's standards of evaluation – six professor titles, including one in the subject of logic. He was a genius, for whom it was a great honour to be regarded as a yoga master and a healer. He learnt all the aspects of Yoga directly from the gurus in the mountains of Tibet in the Himalayas. And, that is probably his greatest contribution, he revolutionized it, in that he adapted it to the modern conditions. My father was not skilled in English, in spite of that he could help a lot of people from the west. Most of them would have had enough money to go to the best and the costliest hospitals. Despite that, they preferred to come to him.

But you needed a while to appreciate that.

True. Faith eluded me for a long time. Only when he demonstrated to me in 1964 that he could stop his heart-beat for two minutes, did I start to believe in him and in the power of yoga. Only then I knew that he was not playing a trick. My father only taught me what he knew from his own experience, not what is said in the books. In all those years I could learn from him, he never explained to me how he could stop his heart-beat. If mine would stand still for two minutes, I would sure enough be dead.

In your books you also describe your father as a very strict teacher.

Just an example. In 1961 I requested him to teach me. He said, come to me at 3 a.m. tomorrow. I was young and wanted to go to the films in the evenings. But I woke up at 2.45 and was there punctually. That went on for a year, before he changed the timing to 5 a.m. That's how he wanted to test my earnestness.

How does one teach the capacity to heal?

That is a long process. That knowledge cannot be transported like in a university. I learnt everything by observing my father. 28 years long. I was his assistant, he my teacher who I never doubted. That I studied Ayurveda on the side, helped me a little bit too. Now I try to pass it on to my son Kausthub. He is doing it pretty well for his age. He has a talent. Probably it is also in the genes.

To whom do you turn to, when you do not feel well?

As always I turn to my father. He passed away in 1989 at the age of 101 in Chennai, but I have a room in Chennai where I address him in my meditation or in prayers. After his death many people asked me, "What will you do now without him?" I merely replied that until then I had him at the most for two hours a day, from now on, since he is dead, he is with me forever.

T.K.V. Desikachar, a studied engineer, is one of the greatest contemporary yoga masters. As a son of the now famous T.Krishnamacharya he was his student for nearly 3 decades. Desikachar taught as a guest professor in many universities including Harvard and advised the Indian political elite. In honour of his father he founded the Krishnamacharya Yoga Mandiram (www.kym.org) in Chennai, South India. It is one of the most renowned yoga centres in the world. This non-profit institution attracts students and patients from all over the world. Here yoga is instructed primarily as a method of healing. Desikachar has written many books on the different aspects of yoga, including the standard book, "Yoga, Health of the body and the mind" (Theseus Verlag)

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