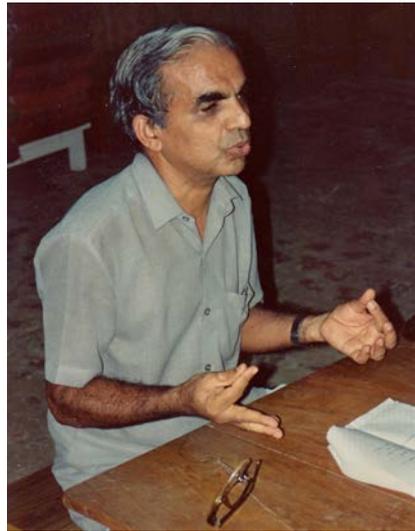


YOGA AND MODERN MEDICINE



TKV Desikachar talks to Dr Uma Krishnaswamy - from 'The Hindu' June 1998

TKV Desikachar: Some doctors like you send your patients to us, though we have not been trained in the field of health and sickness. The patients too come to us and report back to you.

So, I am sure you are not washing your hands of your patients! How is it that you are so confident about us, who are not technically competent in your field?

Dr Uma Krishnaswamy: Despite the fact that modern medicine has made such enormous strides as far as management of illness is concerned, there are certain areas where we are unable to proceed beyond a particular point. Consequently, we as practitioners of medicine and as impartial scientists honestly acknowledge that there are limitations to our system of healing.

We acknowledge the fact that we can go thus far and no further. On account of this, we tend to be always on the lookout to see how else we can help the patient. This may be in conjunction with what we have done or what we hope to do with the patient or it may take the patient completely away from our hands. Either way, it does not matter, as long as the patient benefits. Among the various alternative systems of healing, I feel comfortable with Yoga, because it is a system of healing which concentrates on physical movement very deeply.

Of course one is not blind to the fact that this concentration on the body is towards a spiritual end – but, that is a different dimension altogether. As Yoga teachers, you know more about the physicalities of the body and its requirements for health than most other systems of healing. For example, you know which particular Āsana or posture can relax a muscle or which can help joint mobility.

From my point of view, these are all very well defined and very precise areas of anatomy and physiology that you understand instinctively, by habit, by practice, by study or by tradition! You may not view anatomy or physiology the way we do. But I see that you are working on human anatomy and physiology, albeit in a different manner. This gives me confidence that Yoga has the potential to help some of my patients.

TKV Desikachar: But the patients that you send to us do not merely have physical problems. They may have other dimensions to their illness. Why do you think Yoga can help such individuals?

Dr Uma Krishnaswamy The canvas keeps on enlarging. On the one hand, we may actually be able to see the physical deficit and send the patient to you for help. On the other hand, we have those patients where there are no physical problems to see. They may have emotional problems or stress-related problems that are now so common. I find that Yoga is not just compartmentalised to Āsana or gymnastics of the body, but goes beyond all this to the cultivation of mental clarity.

The techniques that you use to obtain that mental clarity are very useful in that they concomitantly reduce stress. Yoga produces a tremendous impact as far as stress-related illnesses are concerned – whether it is a tension headache, or angina precipitated by the "Monday morning" businessman's stress! I see in my clinical practice that when an individual takes up Yoga, his stress management becomes that much better. This is the other dimension of help that I seek from Yoga for my patients.

TKV Desikachar: I get the impression that you prefer Yoga over other systems of healing. Is this true?

Dr Uma Krishnaswamy: It would be incorrect to say that I prefer Yoga, over other systems. I think I am equally receptive to all systems of healing. There are some illnesses where I may prefer to send the patient to an Āyurveda physician. There are some illnesses where I think the patient may benefit from the Unani or Siddha traditions or even a combination of systems! But it seems as if Yoga offers answers to many of the problems that I commonly face in my clinical work.

TKV Desikachar: Many years ago my father said that Yoga is a simple system that does not require any equipment. One only requires some floor space! It is an inexpensive system of healing. Why is it then that the people who seek help from Yoga or practise Yoga are usually financially and intellectually of a higher strata than the majority of the Indians?

Dr Uma Krishnaswamy: I think there are two very interesting social cultural aspects to account for this state of affairs. Yoga is viewed as an esoteric and abstruse system of philosophy by contemporary society. So it is only the Western-educated intelligentsia of modern society that read the Yoga Sūtra of Patañjali. On the other hand, the traditional or orthodox scholars by and large do not appreciate the physicality of Yoga. They are concerned that Yoga will be translated into a fashionable and shallow physical culture by the non-traditionalists, as in many Western countries. That Yoga uses the body as a mere means to a lofty spiritual end gets forgotten in such situations.

Moreover, there is a narrow sectarian sense of rivalry between the various schools of philosophy. Why study or uphold the merits of Yoga Darśana while there is a compelling sense of duty to foster one's own traditional school of philosophy? Why fritter away one's lifetime on anything less than the study of Vedānta Darśana?

Such attitudes continue to condition society to a very large extent. Until revolutionary teachers such as your father T Krishnamacharya came onto the scene and pointed out that Yoga is a practical science that can help an individual in distress, many were unaware of the healing dimensions of Yoga.

When this truth was endorsed by the spiritual luminaries of our day, such as the Parama Ācārya of Kanchipuram and J Krishnamurti, it served as a catalyst to the process of public awakening. But this awakening unfortunately is only amongst the urban intelligentsia.

In the rural areas, traditional scholars are familiar with the Yoga Sūtra, but if you ask them whether they practise Āsana, they will pooh-pooh it. The uneducated people in the rural areas on the other hand often have not even heard of Yoga, or they may perceive it as a gymnastic exercise that allows one to stand on one's head! Thus there is a dichotomy in our society of thought and of practice.

There are so many systems of healing in our country. You are very fond of pointing out that though they are different, the basis for all systems of healing is the desire to help the sick by the use of whatever technique is available to one. For instance, you will not condemn Āyurveda or Siddha because you know that the Āyurveda or Siddha physician wants to help the patient, just as you do.

TKV Desikachar: Even at the philosophical level, the concern has always been to find a solution to cure the suffering of an individual. If you look at Sāṃkhya Darśana or Yoga Darśana, there is a basic tenet that human suffering must be reduced.

I feel that if something helps someone, then it is right for that person. But because it works for one individual, it does not mean that it will work for everyone. This is why we have to be very careful. Anything that helps must be accepted. The consideration is the person and not the system. The whole objective should be to remove the suffering of the person and nothing else. I sometimes send people to astrologers – if it helps, then why not?

Dr Uma Krishnaswamy: Maṇi, Mantra, Oṣadhi, anything can help! From a very traditional standpoint of Yoga, how is health viewed?

TKV Desikachar: Instead of health, I shall talk about sickness. The first chapter of the Yoga Sūtra of Patañjali says that there are obstacles in the path of both spiritual and personal quests. The most important obstacle is Vyādhi or illness. Vyādhi is an imbalance of the human system.

Sickness produces emotional disturbance, loss of confidence and loss of energy through a lack of Prāṇa or vital energy to function with. There are also certain manifestations at the physical level such as pain. The sage Nāthamuni says that irrespective of whether you are a king or a monk, you cannot pursue your goal if you are sick. In order to reduce these obstacles, many suggestions are proposed by Patañjali.

Dr Uma Krishnaswamy: Certain systems insist on an extremely rigid diet pattern, which is not feasible in today's world. Even if a person is well intentioned and wants to stick to the diet, he or she may not be able to, because of the pressures of daily life. How does yoga view diet?

TKV Desikachar: The discipline of food is defined as Mita Hita Āhāra. That is, one should partake moderately of wholesome food. If I introduce something harmful into the body, then the system will not function well. We must ensure that our food does not add to the problems already present in the system.

Jihva Cāpalya is one of the most powerful Cāpalya of fickleness. I insist on a dietary regime only if it is absolutely essential. For example, if a foreigner comes to India, I ask him to be careful about drinking water.

A lady from Italy was not able to eat due to emotional trauma. In this case I tempted her appetite with chicken soup, because, she was used to it! Food must nourish the person. Hence I would say that diet restriction should be minimum. Once there is dietary discipline, there is very little that we have to do!

Dr Uma Krishnaswamy: Very true! Would the same rule apply to any lifestyle changes also?

TKV Desikachar: I saw a lady from Austria who smoked to cope with emotional stress. She worried that I would ask her to stop smoking. I told her that I would not stop her from smoking. If my insistence of lifestyle change becomes an obstacle for the person to pursue Yoga, then it will not work. It is like getting the camel into the tent. The first thing is to get the animal in! The lady in question stopped smoking on her own when she started meditation. I have seen people with the drug or drinking habit stop on their own after they practice Yoga for a while. This is what Yoga does for them.

Dr Uma Krishnaswamy: I had noticed that when some people undertake a discipline such as Yoga, they start looking at themselves critically. In other words, they want to set right what is wrong by self-help. Why does this happen? Is it because they focus on their body and are more aware of it and its needs?

TKV Desikachar: Yoga initiates Svādhyāya or self study or observation. There are people who are not even aware of the fact that they cannot raise their arms above their head. When we asked them to do so, they found that they could not do it. This triggers a situation where they begin to look at themselves, and sometimes they become too critical about themselves. The teacher has to be very careful. If the teacher is too strict, the student becomes a fanatic or a hypochondriac. This is another sickness!

Dr Uma Krishnaswamy: What you are advocating therefore is moderation in all things. As the divine author of the Bhagavad Gītā puts it: "To him whose food and recreation are moderate, whose exertion in actions is moderate. Whose sleep and waking are moderate, to him accrues Yoga, which is destructive of pain.