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1. LESLIE KAMINOFF INTERVIEWS T.K.V. DESIKACHAR IN MADRAS OCTOBER 1992.

*Cover: Jagannāth Dās Jī Yogirāj. Kukkuṭāsana. Haridwar Kumbh
Mela 2010. Photograph by James Mallinson*

NĀMARŪPA uses diacritical marks, as per the chart shown to the right, for the transliteration of all Saṁskṛta words. While many of the articles do contain these marks, it is not a universal occurrence in the magazine. In those cases where authors have elected not to use diacritics, Saṁskṛta words remain in their simple, romanized form. Chart by Vyaas Houston.

अ a	आ ā	इ i ए e	ई ī ऐ ai ऋ ṛ ऌ ḷ	उ u ओ o अं am	ऊ ū औ au अः aḥ
क ka	ख kha	ग ga	घ gha	ङ ṅa	
च ca	छ cha	ज ja	झ jha	ञ ña	
ट ṭa	ठ ṭha	ड ḍa	ढ ḍha	ण ṇa	
त ta	थ tha	द da	ध dha	न na	
प pa	फ pha	ब ba	भ bha	म ma	
य ya	र ra	ल la	व va		
श śa	ष ṣa	स sa	ह ha		
क्ष kṣa	त्र tra	ज्ञ jña			

LESLIE KAMINOFF INTERVIEWS T.K.V. DESIKACHAR IN MADRAS

OCTOBER 1992

Originally posted to e-Sutra on April 24, 1999

LAST WEEK I RETURNED TO THIS wonderful interview for inspiration, and realized it's been nearly 20 years since this extraordinary meeting with my teacher, T.K.V. Desikachar. The conversation took place during a month-long visit to Madras in the fall of 1992. I was having private sessions with him almost every day, and it was a time when I was wrestling with some deep doubts about the most fundamental philosophical issues in Yoga philosophy. Desikachar knew this when I approached him requesting an interview. In retrospect, the invitation I offered that he present at the 1993 Unity in Yoga Conference was merely a pretense to open the conversation. I knew he would never agree to attend but the conceit of asking him

to address a large imaginary future audience lent a timeless quality to many of his remarks.

Two senior students, Adrianna Rocco and Paul Harvey, were also present when the interview was recorded in an upstairs office in Desikachar's family home. Paul's assistance was invaluable in helping me prepare some of the trickier questions and I'm pretty sure Desikachar was able to tell which questions were more Paul's than mine.

Upon returning from Madras in the Fall of 1992, I recruited my friend Eddie Stern to help with the difficult task of transcribing Desikachar's words into a legible document. I can still picture Eddie sitting at the desk in my old apartment on East 7th Street, typing

away on my original Macintosh SE30. When he was done with the raw transcription, it took several more editing passes for me to massage the text to its present form.

It's only fitting Namarupa re-publish the interview on its 20th anniversary for its readers. I write this in the first hours of my 54th birthday and it will be the best possible gift that my teacher's profoundly practical insights have an opportunity to resonate as strongly for you as they have for me.

Leslie Kaminoff
Great Barrington, MA
March 13, 2012



T.K.V. Desikachar's office where the interview took place.



Adrianna Rocco and Leslie Kaminoff in Madras, April 1999

THIS IS AN AMAZING INTERVIEW, and well worth reading. In it, Desikachar and I talk about a wide range of subjects, including the relationship between Yoga and Hinduism, the view of ego in Yoga, the difficulty in preserving tradition, Patanjali's view on the inevitability of suffering, and the future of Yoga in America. Originally posted to e-Sutra on April 24, 1999 (Present also were Paul Harvey and Adrianna Rocco.)

DESIKACHAR: Last week, Leslie invited me to deliver an address at the big Unity in Yoga conference in May of 1993. The theme of the conference appears to be about honoring the people who did so much for Yoga for the last 100 years, and also looking forward to the future of Yoga. I suggested that instead, maybe we can do something here in Madras, as it is easier because we are both here now.

LESLIE: So I have prepared a few things...

DESIKACHAR: Please.

LESLIE: As you've just mentioned, next year in America we've chosen to view 1993 as the hundredth anniversary of Yoga in America. The reason for this is that 100 years ago in September of 1893, Swami Vivekananda presented Vedanta philosophy to a large audience at the World Parliament of Religions. What would you say to the American yogis about the past century of our involvement in Eastern teachings, particularly as it all started with a Vedanta Swami presenting to a parliament of religions.

DESIKACHAR: Well, I am amazed at this interest. In fact, I didn't know it was a 100 years ago that our great master Swami Vivekananda went to your country and spoke. All I can say is it reflects upon that interest in America about our great heritage. Having learned so much from the West, I want to thank the West for the interest. Because of their interest, we have learned a lot about our own heritage, so I am very grateful.

LESLIE: You mention that heritage, yet however there does seem to be a continuing intermixture of Vedanta and Yoga in the way it is presented in the West. There is a Hindu religious association with Yoga that many teachers are promoting, whether implicitly or explicitly. So I'm curious about what you would want people to know regarding the distinction your tradition makes between Yoga and Vedanta.

DESIKACHAR: When I was an engineer, Leslie, my boss was from Denmark, and we always thought he was an expert in structural design, because he was our boss, and this was a company where we were experts in the construction and design of structures. Today it is the best company in India and I always thought that he was an expert in my field, which is structural engineering. So only later I came to know that he was an expert in fisheries! It seems the only way he could come to India was as an expert in a field where we don't have experts! (laughter) So, he got his work permit to come to India and he was our "structural expert". I never knew he was a fishery man. So what I'm trying to say is that when people come to our country from the West, we assume many things -they know a lot about technology -they are experts in computers -they are very good in English -they know everything that the West represents-et cetera. Often with these expectations they try to live up to them, so we can't blame them because we expect them to be like that. Perhaps they don't want to disappoint us. I think this works both ways - you know the more ignorant we are the more this happens. But the facts do remain that Yoga is a different system, Vedanta is a different system, and there are six such systems based on the Indian heritage called the Vedas, and we don't deny that Vedanta is one such system with Hinduism, but it is not Yoga. I must say again and again that for different reasons, including this stress on Hinduism, the Vedanta Sutras refute Yoga. Because of the attitude Patanjali has about God, for example, creation, etc. ...so Vedanta Sutras refute Yoga. The

sutra is "Etena yogah pratyuktah"(V.S. Chap.II, Sec.I, Sutra 3). So there is a clear cut distinction between Hinduism, Vedanta, and Yoga.

LESLIE: What is the literal meaning of that sutra?

DESIKACHAR: "By what we have explained, we have refuted Yoga." What they have said is that Yoga speaks about Ishvara as a teacher, but Yoga doesn't say God created this world, Yoga doesn't say everything goes back to God, Yoga doesn't say there is one thing and only one thing and that is God Brahma. This word Brahma doesn't exist in Yoga Sutra, so these are very fundamental issues. These issues are important for the Vedantins who believe in the reality of the one Brahma. Yoga doesn't have even the word, let alone talking about what Brahma is. Patanjali's Yoga talks about Ishvara as a possible entity, maybe the best teacher, the first teacher, but he doesn't speak of a God who created this world. He only speaks about what we should do with the mind, and if God helps my mind as a point of focus, then O.K., God is fine with me, if God doesn't help my mind, forget about God, look for something else. This is not easy for a Hindu like me. I am surprised that this is not obvious for many people because these presentations are not my presentations, not even my fathers presentations, not even from 100 years ago. Vyasa spoke about that in his Vedanta Sutras (200 A.D.?). This is very important for us to emphasize that Yoga is not Hindu religion. Yoga is a system that helps the mind and Hindus may use it as they have been, and anybody can use it.

LESLIE: Atheists can use it , Agnostics can use it...

DESIKACHAR: Yes, yes. Krishnamurthi used to practice Yoga. People who reject all systems have practiced Yoga. I hope I have made myself clear, and I am sorry for this confusion. My sincere apologies that we Indians have not made this clear.

LESLIE: A related question also could pertain to the different concepts of ego. There seems to be confusion about the concept of ego both from the Yogic perspective and the Western perspective. Is it possible for you to clarify what is meant in Yoga by the term ego or the term that gets translated as ego, and what role it plays in the process and eventual goal of Yoga.

DESIKACHAR: Regarding these questions, my reference is Patanjali. I want to make this very clear because that is the text on Yoga. There are thousands of ancient texts on Yoga but the most important text, the most accepted text, the fundamental text on Yoga is Patanjali. So my response is now based on his teachings, the very practical teaching of Patanjali. Now, because of the proximity between Patanjali's speaking and what is known as Samkhya, which is another of our schools, somehow this word ego has entered the field of Yoga. As far as I understand even if I myself have said it, there is no word called ego in Yoga. The word ego itself does not appear in the Yoga Sutra of Patanjali. Does it ?

LESLIE: Are you referring to Ahamkara?

DESIKACHAR: There is no word Ahamkara in Yoga Sutras. You go from the first sutra to the 195th sutra – there is no Ahamkara in the whole Yoga Sutra . Some people have used that word, but it is not Patanjali's fault.

LESLIE: Has Vyasa used that word in his commentary? ...

DESIKACHAR: Yes, that is what I mean...some people might have used it...I might have used it, but according to the authority (Patanjali) there is nothing. But there is an interesting concept in Yoga and that is association: I associate myself with certain things. For example, "I am the son of a great Yogi, you know", this is an association. "I am a very educated person." "I have been teaching Yoga for so many years", "I am an expert", and so on. We all have these associations. Now these

associations could be good associations or bad associations. For example, I can say, "I am very lucky to have the blessings of my father", these are also associations. "When I think of him I am nobody, he is so great and I am very small", this is a type of association. So Patanjali talks about these associations, the good associations and the bad associations, Asmita, it is called Asmita. So this Asmita could be good, could be bad. Now often the word Asmita is confused to be ego, so when you study the Yoga Sutras you learn that we have good association and bad association. For example, if I am in a state of meditation, I'm completely absorbed in the object of my meditation this also called Asmita. So it is the goal of my life to be in that state. Suppose I have become used to a certain way of behaving, losing my temper, getting irritated, this is also an Asmita because I am strongly associating to some of my bad klesas that are considered not worthy to be kept. Patanjali's very intelligent about this. First, he never used the word ego. Second, he talks about mind only. Mind with good associations and mind with bad associations. One is desirable, one is not desirable. So in Yoga we don't even have this problem.

LESLIE: So, Yoga would speak merely of a collection of associations between the mind and some objects, but not a distinct identity or entity in and of itself which can be isolated as an ego. Am I understanding correctly ?

DESIKACHAR: I don't think ego can be just taken out of my pocket and kept here. I would like to see a demonstration where ego can be taken out of my pocket and kept -"This is my ego." Because the word Ahamkara itself was defined by my father as "where something that is not me is considered as me." According to this, to understand ego I have to understand myself. I have to understand what is not myself. How many people have the good fortune to understand that? So without understanding that how can I even take it out of my pocket and

throw it anywhere? So in Yoga we are not worried about this question. We are quite happy that we don't have an ego problem!

LESLIE: That having been clarified, what then does the Yoga of Patanjali have to say about the nature of an individual's identity?

DESIKACHAR: Yes, that is possible. We have identity and these identities are associated with what has happened to us in the past and what we think about ourselves. How far this identity really represents my true nature- that is basically a peaceful nature, a state of being where there is some happiness, where I am clear about things-I don't know. So identities could be two: wrong identity and right identity.

LESLIE: And the right identity is basically...

DESIKACHAR: Yes. Wrong identity for example is for me to assume that because: I speak English, I have been to a technical education, I am very smart in public relationships, and I have a lot of students, I begin to believe that maybe I am even better than my father. After all, he did not go to engineering college, he did not speak English, he does not have as many students as I have, he never went abroad like I did and he doesn't have the fat bank account that I have, so he is nowhere near me. This is a false identity.

LESLIE: Aren't you glad I wont quote that out of context?! (laughter)

DESIKACHAR: You can do anything because it is black and white and I have no ego problem. (laughter)

LESLIE: Well, speaking of ego problems, in your broad experience these last 20 or 30 years teaching both Western and Indian students one on one, have you found that the concept of surrendering the ego is helpful or harmful for people when they get the notion that surrendering is something that will bring them peace?

DESIKACHAR: Many people have tried it. It has not worked.: (laughter)

DESIKACHAR: The problem, whether it is Indians or others, is because, “What is it that I am surrendering? I don’t even know what I am surrendering!” If it is my army, I know. It is like in a war when what happens is we surrender to the winner. So, we take the sword or the gun and we place it at the feet of the other man.

LESLIE: That’s clear...

DESIKACHAR: Yes, you can take a photograph or a video like in Bangladesh. We often saw how the Pakistani army had to surrender to the Indians. We have that in war, but even then it is not clear sometimes. This is not a very happy situation and I’m sorry if people are trying to surrender and then feel bad about it because first, they don’t know what they are surrendering and secondly they feel they have surrendered. You cannot really verbalize these phenomena because it is something much deeper. Let me give you an example. Some of my friends have promised to give up coffee. I also do semi-medical work as you know Leslie, where we advise people about a few things and for example in some cases we say, “Maybe you have such a bad liver and you must give up coffee because it has side effects.” So they say, “Sir, when you say it is for my own health I am ready to do anything! I am so sick I am ready to give up anything!” I say, “Oh please if you can’t give up don’t give up because I am a very practical person.” They reply, “Yes, no problem sir. I can give up!” The next day they tell their family, “No more coffee!” One or two days go by and then you know what happens? The smell of coffee pulling you – and everybody’s taking coffee – and people even offer you coffee – and you want the coffee – but then you have given it up! So you see for one day, two days, three days, you succeeded to give it up, but slowly, even before you realize it, coffee is coming to you and then you finally take the coffee. Now you feel like a thief taking your own cup of coffee! What a

shame that you have to feel like a thief taking your own cup of coffee! Then you go and meet the teacher and he says, “So, no coffee?” Now you have two choices. One is you tell a lie and feel bad about it, or two is you tell the truth and feel bad about it. So many times people feel so bad. Not because I asked them to give up coffee, they wanted to give up, but they just couldn’t. So the question of surrendering is like this. I must very much inside be prepared for this to happen. It is not simply like giving up a blank sheet of paper- it is not possible. This is why in India great teachers like my father have said the act of surrender is the last stage of a person’s life. It is called Prapatti. Prapatti is not possible for a young boy. One has to go through a lot of evolution – one has to suffer a lot – one has to experience life – one has to enjoy life, and then one has to build up devotion. Then, maybe at the end of the whole story, maybe surrendering is finally possible. So it’s a long project ? it’s not a one-day project for that to be really an act of surrender.

LESLIE: I guess you must actually have something there that you have contacted in your life in order to give it up.

DESIKACHAR: Yes. Well, as you said the other day, “I can only give up what I have and what I know.” If I don’t have it and I don’t know, my giving up is a false thing like when the politicians say they are not corrupt – it is not true.

LESLIE: So if we were to make a radical statement here, could we say then that a useful way for people to practice Yoga would be for the purpose of creating a strong, integrated ego or identity?

DESIKACHAR: Without using the word ego, because I know very little about that.

LESLIE: Identity perhaps then.

DESIKACHAR: All I want to say is; “I must know something about myself before I know what I’m doing with myself.” That I would say.

LESLIE: This reminds me of a discussion Paul (Harvey) and I were having last evening. The question we wanted to ask you is this; “Do you feel that in the West the role of Yoga is emphasizing or needs to emphasize wholeness rather than transcendence?” Since the topic of this interview is the future of Yoga, would you like to see Yoga teachers in the future more be understanding of this need for developing an integrated identity?

DESIKACHAR: What I would like to say about this is to confess that I don’t have the authority to say what is the best thing for the West. I am from India, and I can only speak for myself. I can say what Yoga has done to me. Yoga has helped me to discover my tradition, both the greatness and the weakness of my tradition. Yoga has helped me to know something about myself - my good side and my bad side. Yoga has also helped bring me to my teacher. Because I cannot say Yoga is something I could have picked up myself. I had the help of a great teacher. My associations with my teacher include having stayed with him, lived with him, washed him, and learned from him. What Yoga has also done is reduced to some extent my bad side and it has really given some hope that I have a good side. It also has made me happy to learn that my Indian tradition is very great. It has a lot of good things and I also know a lot of things of my tradition have no relevance today. This is my discovery through Yoga. How can I answer what Yoga can do for the West? Only the West can answer this.

LESLIE: What are some of the things you’ve discovered about your tradition don’t seem to be useful for you, and what do you think of the notion of preserving a tradition primarily because it is old?

DESIKACHAR: For example, the type of discipline my father went through I am unable to do. Obviously the faculties he had I don’t have and probably will never have. At 90 years what he could do with his body -I don’t think I’m able to do it now! So also, the way he would express his devotion to his God – sitting

and offering his prayers for hours – I am not able to do this because my life is so different from his. While I respect him, I don't live like him. Between my father and myself, there is a gap of 50 years, and Yoga is a very old tradition – at least 1000 years, so how can I claim to represent the Patanjali Sutras when I cannot even represent my own teacher? So many things that he expressed through his life are not possible for me. Many things that he did are irrelevant to me. He spoke in Sanskrit and I speak in English. Look at these simple things: I used to sit on the floor with him – I am sitting with you across the table. So things are changed and that is what he always said: “Things are changing—many things, many things.” You see my father's photograph – he would always have his mark on his forehead, he had a tuft, he would wear a shirt only when it was very cold. I don't have a forehead mark. It doesn't make any sense to me – I don't have a tuft because I never had one and I'm 90% Westerner compared to my father. I wear Western clothes, I speak English. So it's clear much has changed though I have lot of respect for the tradition, the details of tradition have lost their meaning. When I see my colleagues and my students it is important to remember that something like this always happens even within India. So, I am now giving you a model where here is a father, a son and student, and there is a lot of irrelevance at every stage. At the same time, there is something constant – that is, we want to improve ourselves and we want to learn something about our tradition. There's something good here, and probably we can help people through this tradition, but not in words, not necessarily even in deeds, but in spirit. Regarding preserving traditions, I don't understand how I can preserve the tradition of my grandfather because I have few palm leaves on which my father's father had written some words in a language I don't understand. My father would read them, cherish them, and he would keep them very carefully. This is something he had received from his father, and now I have kept it, but it doesn't make any sense to me, you

know, so I cannot keep this tradition. There is a sheet a paper in which a beautiful verse is written in the way of my father. He kept it alive by reciting it, meditating on it. Now I am just keeping the sheet of paper, and in fact, if you ask me where it is, I would have to say please give me three days because I have to search for it. So how can the present preserve the past? I don't understand – I can only - as has been said – protect the container. Paul was giving the beautiful example of a container, and preserving the dead container very beautifully. What is inside, I don't know and I don't even know if something exists inside, so what is it I am preserving if it is an empty vessel? Preserving the container without the contents is like a museum. You know I am not talking about archaeologists, I am talking as a living person – a person who is living in the present.

LESLIE: That's a very good analogy. I think many people have become cultural, religious, or Yogic archaeologists rather than people who are capable of creating something by themselves in the present. I'm assuming that what was available to the rishis, or the great teachers of the past is still available now at this moment through our own creative efforts.

DESIKACHAR: Yes- that is the basic idea of Parampara. Parampara is to maintain continuous deeds from the past to the future – not by making my ancestors alive – because it is not possible, my ancestors are dead, and I am going to soon be dead. So how to continue the sutra, the thread that was there – that is there – and will be there; that is Parampara. So the thread is that man is suffering, man is looking for peace – that is the thread. How to make him suffer less – what will help him is for us to find according to the situation. We are a certain way in India- in the West, maybe it is different, so that you cannot help. This tradition of human suffering and seeking happiness will continue, whether we preserve or not, it will always be there, but what I do with that is for me to decide.

LESLIE: Is that how you would describe

what does remain constant as the spirit of the teachings?

DESIKACHAR: My ancestors, myself, and hopefully my children and grandchildren will have something in common. They were concerned about some human problems. They spoke about Dukha (suffering). They spoke about Dukha so many thousands of years ago, now we speak about, it and still tomorrow we'll speak about it. So, these are constants. This need for a person to be happy- this need for a person not to have suffering is a constant thing. Then the details arise out of what has to be done – what means are to be employed according to the present situation.

LESLIE: You just mentioned the seeking of happiness and the avoiding of suffering. Now, to me, those seem to be two distinct motivations. Is there a way of seeking happiness for its own sake-not as an avoidance of what is unpleasant or intolerable in our lives?

DESIKACHAR: With due respects to what you are saying the way I have understood Yoga Sutra is as follows: Yoga Sutra is an extraordinary text for people like us – ordinary people. Yoga Sutra is taking a lot of trouble to explain how we cannot help but suffer, how we cannot escape suffering. No matter which way you go, on this side or that side it will hit you. If you read the second chapter (Y.S. II-15), how because of my own condition – because of evolution – because of my desires – because of the nature of change, there will be guaranteed Dukha. “Sarvam dukham vivekinaha.” That is to say the more you seek clarity, the more you will find Dukha! Sorry about this – Patanjali is very much concerned about Dukha.

LESLIE: What is underneath it all? Which stuff is the basic nature? In consciousness there is no Dukha, just Ananda... (...cuts in)

DESIKACHAR: What do I know about basic nature? If somebody told me there is a pot of gold under my house, but

I don't even know where my house is, what good is that? Now I suffer more because before, I didn't even know about the gold, and now somebody comes and tells me: "You've got a pot of gold – go and dig it up!" If I don't even know where my house is, maybe I am suffering more because of this pot of gold.

LESLIE: That is a brilliant analogy. I can see that is the dilemma of most people who... (...cuts in again)

DESIKACHAR: It is not a dilemma – it is a fact! The more I tell you: "There is something deep inside you that is always happy – there is always Ananda – you are that Ananda – your true nature is Ananda" – it makes you feel much worse!

LESLIE: OK, well, let me rephrase that then...

DESIKACHAR: I hope you forgive my bad English...

LESLIE: No, no! If anything, it's too clear! Sticking to Patanjali and Yoga then, the question is as follows: "Is true happiness possible for human beings on this earth in this reality in this body?"

DESIKACHAR: Happiness is relative, no? Let me give you an example. There was a couple – a very happy couple, two very good children – very happy. They became interested in spirituality so they went to hear a speaker and they liked the speaker. So they thought they will have a darshan and interview with this master. They went to this master whom they have so much reverence for, and this master said, "Who are you?" So the husband said, "I am so and so, and this is my wife." "What!? You are married!? What a pity!" said the master. Three years later the marriage broke up. Now I don't know whether they were unhappy when they were together, or if they are unhappy now. What I mean is these are the people who were very, very happy – then they became unhappy. So happiness and suffering are relative terms, and I don't think you can

measure it. That's why the definition of Dukha is how we feel when there is no barometer. So much money – so many hours of sleep – this is not what makes a person happy or unhappy – it is how I feel. Rich people are often unhappy, and I saw recently in Tibet how those people are, so happy! (D. had recently returned from a pilgrimage to Mount Kailash and Lake Mansarovar in search of the hidden ashram where his father lived for 7 years with his teacher, Rama Mohana Bramachari.) Leslie, you must go to northern Tibet! They have no extra clothes, they are dirty, they don't have toilets, they don't have television,

they eat just some flour – barley flour – and some water with tea – and they're so happy! I think if you bring them here, in two days they will become unhappy. As my father said, happiness and sadness are experiences that only I feel. I often see people unhappy, and I say, "How can you be unhappy?" They say, "How can you understand my suffering?" So happiness is a subjective experience – sadness is also, and they are relative. That's why often when I go to the West I am stunned because they have everything that we don't have. Why are they sometimes saying, "Oh? I am not happy!" And they don't know

T.K.V. Desikachar praying from the banks of Lake Mansarovar as he approaches Mount Kailash, August 1992. © Krishnamacarya Yoga Mandiram

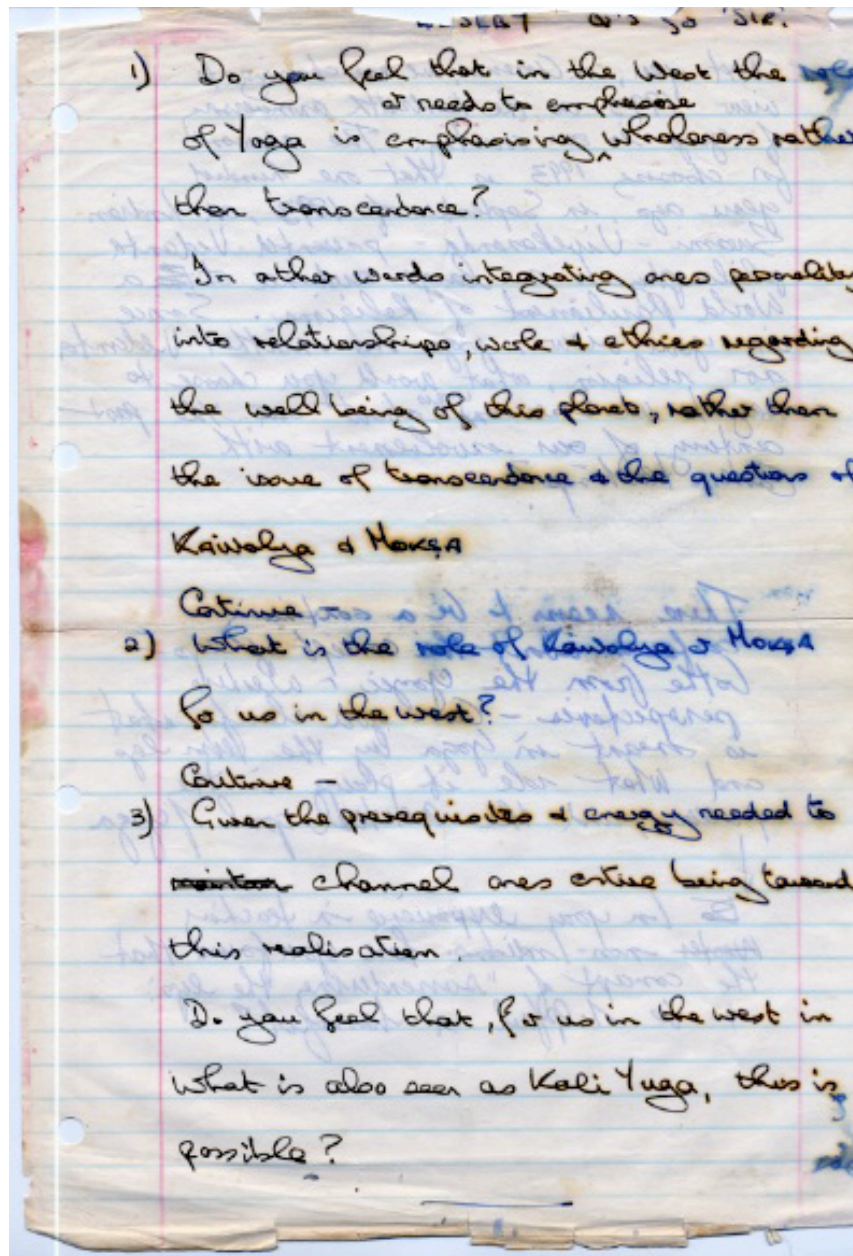


how to smile – I don't understand! I am a fool because I don't understand why these most developed countries can be so miserably unhappy. Having seen Tibet I understand more now, before I start talking about some logic. How happy those men and women were! So, if happiness is not based on what I have, and my feelings are relative, then in brief, Dukha and Sukha are relative terms.

LESLIE: What is beyond this dilemma of Sukha and Dukha? Patanjali, although he may have been accused of being an atheist, hasn't to my knowledge been accused of being a pessimist! So sticking with that idea then, how would you describe what is available through Yoga apart from this constant gap between Sukha and Dukha? DESIKACHAR: Well, this is a big question, and I agree that Patanjali uses Dukha as the first step towards happiness. That is his strategy: "There is going to be Dukha. Don't feel ashamed of that because that is going to take you to a place where you may have less Dukha!" This is the fantastic idea of Patanjali – that there is nothing to be ashamed of! It is the best thing that can happen to me – the moment I recognize I am in trouble! Thus, I want to agree with you and emphasize this. What is the second question? What can Yoga do?

LESLIE: Well, relating the question to the theme we've developed, let's say that someone has managed to develop a sense of wholeness – an integrated identity. Then, in Yogic terms, how you describe that person's experience of happiness in this world? Is this the idea of Kaivalya?

DESIKACHAR: Patanjali has never described these things. He's struggled to explain how difficult it is for him to describe Kaivalya – the word you mentioned so, I repeat it. He's trying to describe that in so many ways – every chapter he's trying to say something about Kaivalya in so many ways. This means that he has difficulty to properly describe that state. So how can I describe it? What he has said somewhere is that: "I know a person is happy or not by



Notes from the interview.

the way he feels when others are happy, and the way he feels when others are unhappy." (YS I:33) It's an important idea. So a happy man is not going around saying, "I am happy! I am happy!" but by his own emotions in relation to what is happening to other people's happiness or unhappiness – then perhaps we can tell this man is a blessed person.

LESLIE: So the best we can say is that this Kaivalya can only be known by it's effects, and how we can observe the way a person is living their life...

DESIKACHAR: As my father said: "The moment I say I am a Yogi – I am not a Yogi!" That's what he said, and I quote my father exactly.

LESLIE: Well, it seems what is also dangerous is the other side of that equation. That is, when other people call you a Yogi and you believe them. People seem to have a need to find somebody to whom they can give up a certain amount of responsibility. We see this happening very much in Yoga.

DESIKACHAR: You see it?! I am on the receiving end! (laughter)

LESLIE: Yes, and I've always admired the skillful way you deflect that sort of behavior – bouncing it back. It is a real skill. Historically, some of the wisest people have been tripped up by the projections of their students and it seems to me that we've seen a lot of this happening in the West. I don't know of any major teachers who have completely escaped this problem to one degree or another. Do you see this as a function of the confusion between Yoga and Vedanta, or is this just basic human nature?

DESIKACHAR: We are all human beings – we like appreciation.

LESLIE: This is another of Paul's questions: "What is the role of Kaivalya and Moksha for us in the West?"

DESIKACHAR: Well, you have to answer that question for yourselves anyway, so... (laughter) Actually, I think the main objective of Yoga is to know about myself – my culture, what we call Swadharma. I think Yoga helps me to identify and learn Swadharma. The question of Moksha and Kaivalya is for when I have transcended Swadharma, so, I think the question is far fetched until I understand myself – what I am, I must not feel ashamed of that. Also, it takes some time to feel not ashamed of what I am because I can't help being what I am, and often we feel ashamed because we compare. So the important thing is, let us first go through all that, and then I'll tell you, my Indians, as well as myself, "We'll cross the bridge of Moksha when we get to it".

LESLIE: So we're back to that same issue-the real work that's ahead of us; the work of building strong, integrated wholeness – identities. Knowing who we are, not trying to skip steps, or in some way contact another dimension separate from the reality we live in, where somehow our suffering is going to disappear.

DESIKACHAR: Some problems will always be there. I won't say suffering will disappear – some contributing factors and some problems will be reduced.

LESLIE: Do you feel that some problems will be increased, or some new problems will appear? Can you give some examples?

DESIKACHAR: Yes. You know, discovering my own tradition – something about myself – is not always a pleasure. Suppose (as I had I found) that there is so much to be known about my tradition – that I want to know – and I need to find some source where I can go and learn. If I don't find it, I am really unhappy – this is a problem. Then I find about myself that I have certain characteristics which are not desirable, and I would like to find a means to reduce these characteristics. If I don't find the means, I will be unhappy. So, it is a part of our growth. I am not saying that by discovering my tradition – my Dharma – that I am going to be permanently happy. All I can say is – at least I am more realistic about myself. Then, I am not in somebody else's territory – I am in my own territory. This, you know, is not what I would call freedom from suffering, but it is definitely freedom from Vikalpa (imagination replacing comprehension).

LESLIE: You told me once, that what you learned from your father was really only half the picture, and the other half had to do with what you've learned from your students. Since your father has now passed away, and he was your teacher for so long, that first half – your father – is no longer present. Where do you turn now to continue your growth and your learning?

DESIKACHAR: Actually, I was lucky. I became a teacher almost the same time I became a student, so I made lot of mistakes as a teacher, but people were very nice. In fact, one of the first things my father did before he asked me to teach, was he first asked me to watch his teaching. Then he would supervise my teaching. It helped me, and I made

mistakes, which he corrected. I accepted that, so I have to acknowledge gratefully both the parties. I had a fantastic situation with lots of feedback. So, here I was, practicing, learning something from father, and I was also teaching at the same time. I fumbled a lot, and I had new questions from that, so I had to go back to him. So this system helped me. If I have learned so much from my father, it is because I was in front of my students and if I learned so much from my students it was only because I had some thing to give them from my father. I've been really lucky because of this situation being there right from the beginning, and it continues with the students now.

LESLIE: Now that he's not here, I know you have said that sometimes all you have to do is focus on him, or his image, and an answer comes. Do you also think of what he would do in a particular situation?

DESIKACHAR: Many things happen. For example, I would not say that I have the capacity to do things the way he would do, nor can I say I would do the style he would do. With all respects, neither would I say that what he would do is what I would like to do. This is because of certain things about the West, for example, or about specific ways of communicating. So, I take some clues from him, and that clue comes to me because of my strong association with him. These days, I don't feel that he's far from me. Anyway, I never missed him before – even when I was very far from my house. Somehow it happens that way.

LESLIE: That association that you are referring to leads me to another consideration, and this is the importance of the individual relationship between the teacher and the student. In Viniyoga in particular, this has been made very clear. Would it be fair to say that in the future, you would like to see more of an acknowledgement of the importance of that association to the individualized nature of Yoga teaching?

DESIKACHAR: This is a very difficult question because of the numbers involved. We learn when we are with a group. At this moment, we are a group of four. I understand the importance of groups and I know what I am saying now may go to many people I don't know, so I am aware of that. Suppose you turn the tape recorder off, and ask the same question. For you Leslie, I would not say it the same way, but now there is this consideration. So both have their value.

LESLIE: I can see that you're taking the nature of my question into consideration in answering it because of who I am as an individual! So in other words, you're not the kind of person who could make a general statement that's intended to be true for everybody or a large group of people.

DESIKACHAR: That is not easy to do, because I would have to be a Buddha or Patanjali! (laughter)

DESIKACHAR: This is very difficult. I am scared when I give the lectures! It scares me – everybody taking notes, you see Paul is taking notes! (laughter) It scares me because they think I represent a great teaching. How can I claim that? There are people who are very serious – its not a very pleasant situation to be where I am, so I am always very careful, and I always pray God to forgive my mistakes. But when I'm alone with Paul, I know I have nothing to worry, no acts to put on – he can always come back and say, "What is that you said?" I can say, "You were right Paul, I was wrong!" I can't do that when I meet somebody casually for two hours and go away! That's what I was telling Adrianna (Rocco): "What business have I to come to Italy? I don't do any good – I only confuse people, then I pack and run!" (laughter) I told her this – we had long discussion about this, so perhaps there is some message that can be delivered in a very, very light way to a group - but each individual? Look at you three! You smile, she smiles, Paul hardly smiles! (laughter) Three

people who I know! They are different in front of me! So what about the strangers? So its a tough job!

LESLIE: Here's an even tougher one. Let's just say that through some magic, this microphone is hooked into the future, and it's next year at our 100th anniversary of Yoga in America celebration. Is there something very, very mild you could say now that would be heard by this group of 500 Yoga teachers and students? Is there anything that you would feel safe about saying to them concerning the future of Yoga?

DESIKACHAR: I think the future of the Yoga is in the hands of those people who are concerned about the future of Yoga! People like you, for example. Now you are the people and, to some extent we are the people. We (Indian teachers) are the people who spoke about Yoga. We are the people who opened the eyes and ears and minds of people to Yoga first. We must accept this. Oh, it is a big responsibility! And then when we speak about the future of Yoga, we are talking about the future of Man. This is very important – we are not talking about the tradition of Yoga for the future, we are concerned about the future of Man. So, if Yoga has to contribute to the future, it should contribute to the future of Man. Speaking in Madras, in my own culture, I cannot envision the future of the United States – it is very difficult. All I would say is, the future of Yoga is safe in the hands of those people who are concerned about the future of Man. Man is one word, but the man of Italy is different from the man of the United States, and definitely different from England! So these people who are concerned about the future of Man also must know that this is a different culture, different traditions. As an Indian, I may not be able to do justice to the future of America. So, I always feel that the future of Yoga in America is safer in the hands of Americans. Perhaps much more so than in my hands, because I am a stranger to America. My culture

is different than America's. Even when I know so much about the West, I am very much an Indian in my heart. This is all I would say: "Let the future of American Yoga be in the hands of those Americans who are concerned about the future of Man!" ❖

