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Looking within

My work is to help people reflect on how they interpret reality," says Ananthanarayanan, a management consultant who has studied yoga under yoga experts T. Krishnamacharya and T. K. V. Desikachar. His book Learning Through Yoga has been widely read.

The one thing that repeatedly fascinates T.K.V. Desikachar is the inherent concern and care for society - a message that is in every teaching, be it Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism, everything. He believes that the time has come to address the conflict and despair in society today with the relevance of this message.

In this column, Desikachar will engage in a dialogue with people who have influence over society and who have a vision deeper than material success.

FOR more than two decades now, I have known T.V. Ananthanarayanan. What has impressed me from the first meeting is his honesty and care. He is proud to be an Indian, proud of what it represents. He has always believed in the saying, "Janani janmabhūmisca svrgadapi gariyasi" - mother and the land of my birth are more precious than heaven. He has persisted, against all odds, in his study to find the essence of our great teachings and enquire into its relevance today. To him, he believes that what is confusing are assumptions and what is clarifying is clear definition. Through his books and organisational work, he is opening the doors of ancient

wisdom to the modern context.

With your background of engineering then psychology, spirituality, and your own research, what is the relevance of what is called "spiritual practice", to you?

T. V. ANANTHANARAYANAN: What I would call spiritual today, would be the ability to stay anchored in some form of truth, whatever the circumstance one is in and act from this truth, whatever the consequence might be.

How were you exposed to it?

My first brush with "spirituality" was when my upanayanam was done. I had a deal with my parents - if they could tell me exactly what it meant, then I would follow it, but if they couldn't, I would not follow it. I gave them one year. For one year I practised everything correctly - my sandhyavandanam and everything else. Nobody told me what it meant. I then removed my punal and stopped doing the rituals. It was only after studying with your father, T. Krishnamacharya, that I understood what the punal meant and then I started wearing it again.

The other great moment in my life was at a time when everything was lost in our family. Things were extremely bad and then two things happened to me almost simultaneously. I met J. Krishnamurti and I met you, sir.

It is when things are not going well that people are often driven to temples, to gurus. So, the first spiritual experiences for such people is a relief from the negative. But, simply a relief from the negative, as you know, has its defects. So, would you still call yours a positive spiritual experience? Because when I am in a desert, any water is amrutam for me. But is it really amrutam?

At the time my family was going through difficulties, astrologers and various self-proclaimed gurus were consulted. None of that touched me. In fact, many of them gave me a more negative feeling than before. But I know the difference, with my exposure to Krishnamurti and Yoga.

And what did this exposure do to you?

The first time I did pranayama with you I saw a white light. That is the first time I understood the meaning of the white light. The other important thing was talking to Krishnaji and experiencing the quality of his listening. Spirituality to me is

an understanding of these two experiences, unfolding this in my life.

And these two things are linked to the truth that you talked about?

Yes, there is a clear relationship. Pranayama develops the ability to listen. Krishnamurti leads to listening. This I think gives me a certain kind of anchor within - to be able to perceive without getting disturbed, and to listen carefully to whatever is happening. To me, sir, this is truth.

To many, what Krishnamacharya represents is so different from Krishnamurti's philosophy, and one apparently seems to have no link with the other. Yet to you, there seems to be no dichotomy, you seem to feel you have drawn from both of them... you speak of both of them with the same reverence.

I think I have been extremely fortunate to have known both of them personally. May be if I had just read Krishnaji's books and had only seen Krishnamacharya's photographs with his obvious religious "namam" and known about yoga from far away I might have had a different opinion. But these are extremely superficial differences. When I was listening to Krishnamacharya talk about the Yoga Sutra, not once, to my understanding, was it any different from what Krishnaji has said about anything. When you talk to Krishnaji personally, it is not as though he condemns all religions or prayer or anything like that. So if you go to the essence, where is the question of any dichotomy? It was just a person and I had to know the person.

But tell me, as a father, how do you transmit all this you are talking about to your children?

My wife and children - everyone practises yoga. I think the children have an understanding that comes from their own practice and their own questions and their discussions with me. Their having done their schooling in a Krishnamurti school has also helped. We haven't imposed what we think on them. It is just the context I have created and beyond that I have left it to them to make a choice.

This is very relevant, because today there is a lot of marketing of spiritual programmes. There are a lot of quick fixes and younger people are questioning this. The great wisdom of India is sinking because we don't have great teachers. And those who are there are very busy because they have entered

into expansion- horizontal expansion, not depth.

There is lot of corruption of religion, people just follow it without understanding the meaning. But once you start understanding the symbolic meaning of each of those so-called rituals, then the whole practice starts making sense. And I think what I discovered most in studying yoga and in studying with your father in particular was the quality of the practice behind every one of those rituals. That you can either do the rituals mechanically, without entering the practice, or you can do the ritual and enter into the practice - there is a huge difference between these two.

So what do you see for the future generations... my grandchildren, your grandchildren?

I do work in depth with college students. Many of them are very serious, but the present parenting that they have got makes me ashamed. Many of the parents from my generation have very often given up the practices of their tradition. They have kept with the superficial, empty elements of religion and not really contributed to making it relevant to the current context. No child or person can be immune from the context of his generation. The children have actually faced a vacuum and emptiness. They see through many of the things that are happening, so they feel even lonelier. And yet they have dealt with what they think would be valuable to them. Many of these youngsters are very serious and if they find somebody who can give them serious answers and can take them seriously, they come out with such profound insight.

May I shift to the relationship between your professional work and your personal experience? This is very important. There is particularly an idea that spiritual experience is a very selfish thing, it is my mukti with no concern for the lokam or the samajam. Mama bandhanam; mama muktihi - my bondage and my mukti. How have you utilised this extraordinary experience you have and the conviction that you have to solve problems in the management at the highest level. You try and bring the organisation into a team, in an atmosphere where the only concern seems to be money, power, ego, competition.

The first response I have is exactly the same as I had of Krishnaji and Krishnamacharya. When you go into business organisations, you find that not everybody, even in the top managements, are all the time concerned with power and money. I have met a number of people whose concerns are genuinely environmental, genuinely people oriented and

genuinely value oriented. The second thing is that when I go into an organisation, I speak the truth as I see it. Very often it could be disturbing for the top management, but the only places where I have been invited to work further are places where the top management is willing to address the problem.

What exactly do you do?

The basis of the work I am doing is really to help people reflect on how they interpret reality, how they understand the problems and how they are able to see themselves in the problems - to help them see where they are in whatever they are doing.

I do a lot of listening. Through the process of listening, I think I help them reflect on themselves so they may have some insight as to why they are getting into a muddle. Sometimes by listening I am able to absorb their tension, by just being with them in whatever feeling they are going through at that time. Then we see what insights we can come up with together.

So you start with the individual.

What I find through this process is that tremendous change can happen to an individual. Some people are able to take it back to the organisation and change the organisation. I believe any real organisational change starts from people and ends with people. If a person doesn't value himself then he cannot really show value towards other human beings. I bring in yoga if I need to and if they ask for it.

And is the change in attitudes palpable? Do you see things working differently - here in India and abroad? You also travel quite a bit.

Some of these people whom I meet, actually start taking charge of the organisation and make changes in them which are visible and clear. I know there is a multi-national company in Chennai, today, which does not have a financial audit for its principles but an environmental audit. The motive is clearly stated as not maximising profit, but maximising these things which are human. There are more and more organisations that are willing to state this and live up to it.

I also met people in the Silicon Valley, in the US, who are very deeply interested and deeply inquiring of whatever we are talking about. Many of them practise yoga and the

questions they asked were from books that most Indians wouldn't even know existed, like Yoga Vasishtam. The issue they were looking at was the sustainability of business enterprise. How does one understand and be responsible for the environment. There was a definite seriousness in the questions of these people, a spiritual quality in that place.

We speak of a "spiritual quality", and yet we never used the word God or Brahma in the whole dialogue.

Brahma is a very scientific word. It simply says that which is expanding. I believe in this. Brahma is also a timelessness that keeps manifesting in time. This is also scientific. The way to experience Brahma is to experience the present. The present is full of environment, full of people, so I don't think we need to associate the word "God" with the fantasies of God.

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