

AMMAJI'S INTERVIEW WITH YOGACHARINI LAKSHMI –JAN 2013

- 1. What is the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word “India”? What does “India’ mean to you? How being in India or being an Indian has enhanced your journey within?**

I never really think of “**India**” as such. I immediately visualize “**Bharat**” or “**Arya Varta**”. “**India**” is a word coined by the Mughal invaders, and taken up by the British. The term has no vibratory link with the actual reality of this ancient land mass, this **Punya Bhumi**, this “**blessed auspicious land**”. But I resonate to “**Bharat**” which is the composite of “**Bha**” (**Bhava** –emotional attitude), “**Ra**” (**Rasa-** taste, relish, essence) and “**Tha**” (**Talam-**Rhythm). **Bharat** is the name of our mighty ancient king, son of **Shakuntala** and **Dushyanta**. She herself was the illegitimate daughter of the **Apsara Menaka** and the **Rishi Vishwamitra**. That story encompasses all the mystical nature of this ancient culture! The paradoxes: an arrogant king turning into a **Rishi** lured from **Tapasya** by a celestial **Apsara**. Then producing a child which was abandoned in the forest, brought up by **Rishi Kanva** in his **Ashram**. Then **Shakuntala’s** “love marriage with **King Dushyanta**! The neglect of **Dharma** by **Shakuntala** and the curse of **Rishi Durvasa**. The betrayal, the loss, the valiant son, the reunion! The rise of that son **Bharat** to great prominence as a ruler of the sub – continent!

The very word **Bharat** radiates all these meanings, the triumphs and tragedies of the human incarnation! The role of **Dharma** and the **Dharma Rai** as expounded by the **Rishis**, the codes of life and how those codes are broken! Transformation and reformation, always moving in an evolutionary spiral upwards! This to me is the meaning of **Bharat**, a culture based on the insights of the **Rishis** into the spiritual laws of the **Cosmos**! Living in this land has given a structure to the vague feelings, longings and insights which I have had since childhood. But, in the American society, there was no confirmation of these thoughts: when I came to **Bharat (India)** in 1968 I experienced an immense “**Relief of Spirit**” for I found a culture which gave structure and reaffirmation to my inner search. In the patterns of life themselves all the realizations I had experienced since childhood were expressed. I came home to a place where I felt “at home”. I could “be myself”.

Furthermore, I could “realize” my “**Real Self**”! The Indian culture, which is a **Yogic** culture, gave me the path, the way, which I wanted to follow for the rest of my life. The noble ideals were my ideals! The grant of Indian Citizenship to me on November 29, 1993 was the most important day of my life. This “**Confirmation of Identity**” satisfied a quest which perhaps has been a journey of many lifetimes!

- 2. A certain mental image about India would have brought you here all the way from the USA. Did it change after you came here?**

Actually when I was a child in the 1940’s - 1950’s no one even knew where India was! At most, it was a land of pagans and heathens and idol worshippers, of black people condemned to ever lasting hell in a starving land of dark ignorance which could only be saved by the brave martyrs called **Christian missionaries** who sacrificed everything to travel to that “hellish place” to “save souls for Christ”. This was what we were taught by the nuns in our convent school in the 1950’s. We were compelled to “donate liberally” to the missions in convent school to support this conversion. In my college and University in the 1960’s there

were a few very short unattractive dark skinned people running around the huge University of Minnesota campus in Minneapolis, USA. They were wrapped always in heavy woolen coats, Neck scarves, woolen hats and wore thick glasses. They were quite dull and obnoxious, if you want to know the truth and never laughed or smiled. They were “The Indians” I knew. Zen Buddhism was the rage amongst my college mates and me. We all adored Japanese art and culture! I wanted to travel to Japan to study Zen!

A long sabbatical from my Graduate Assistantship in my PhD programme enabled me and a friend to travel to Europe. There were many young travelers in those days, a few had gone to India and brought back tales of dust, dirt, heat and diarrhea! Due to much Karmic acrobatics, a small book landed in my hands during my six months stay on the lovely island of Crete. The title was “**Teach Yourself Yoga**”. From the first page where I read, “What is That, knowing which we shall know all” and “Yoga is expanding individual consciousness to cosmic consciousness”. I was “hooked”. It was not India so much, as Yoga which pulled me on that long overland journey to Bharat! But the closer I got to India, the happier I felt! When I crossed over the Pakistan border in 1967 and set foot on Indian soil for the first time, I knew I had “come home”. The “India” I entered was the land where all my inner dreams and ideals were manifest! Can I say more!

3. Does Pondicherry mirror your life in any way? If yes, how?

Pondicherry mirrors my life perhaps mainly because it radiates the powers of the many Siddhas who settled here. It is small, yet totally cosmopolitan! It has one the most beautiful seashore. I have literally “grown up here” for 45 years! The city is filled with spiritual seekers and everywhere I go, I meet students of mine... in dance, in Yoga. I have seen two generations mature here and have shared in and witnessed and participated in their growth and lives. The city and I have “grown in Yoga and dance” together!

4. If you had to draw similarities between Swamiji (Gitananda Giri Guru Maharaj) and the Indian culture what would it be? In some ways did He personify the Indian Culture to you?

Not only to me, but to tens of thousands of his students from all over India and the world, Swamiji was the total manifestation of the ancient Rishi. He looked like a Rishi with his impressive stature and flowing white beard and long hair. His bright eyes were totally aware at all moments of everyone and everything around him! His voice had the power of a Lion’s Roar! He spoke with an authority out of self-realization. He especially personified the spirit of Rishi Vishwamitra, the Kshatriya king who transformed himself to a Brahmarishi! His mind was the Akashic record incarnate! He was a magnet who drew people to himself and equally, repelled them away.

As an old German Lady once said: “**My God! He is a living monument**”. He looked like Santa Claus! He was a Kalpa Vriksha – everything one needed for evolution flowed from him! He looked like Karl Marx, he believed in sharing his wealth. He was a medical doctor, a scientist who presented ancient wisdom in a scientific context! He was a great Rasika of Indian Classical dance and music. As a dancer, he was my biggest fan. He would always sit in the very first row to watch my performance. There is an old Zen story which illustrates that aspect of our relationship. It is said there were once two friends, one who played the harp

skillfully and one who listened skillfully. One day the skillful listener died. The harp player cut the strings of his harp and never played again. After Swamiji took Maha Samadhi, I never danced again! Who was there to witness my dance!

5. The last few decades have brought tremendous changes all over the world and in India as well. How do you think India's culture has changed or not changed for good or bad?

Indian culture (Samskrithi) has not changed. How can it? It is Sanathana. It is eternal! But its manifestation, like all manifestations, is getting old. It is in decay. The outward form has decayed! The ancient Mother is old! Her children no longer revere her. The Mother perhaps "is dead"! But! Long live the Mother! Can a mother ever die! Only the outward form passes! The spirit of Bharat Mata, the Samskrithi, is there. Sensitive souls may access that spirit and seek her blessings! She manifests now, here and there, whenever a sincere soul – An Adi Karin– A fit person approaches her with humility and reverence! She cannot die, but she can – and does – hide herself behind piles of plastic bottles, behind the glare of neon signs and harsh screeches of sirens, behind concrete sky scrapers which hide the sun, moon, earth, air, fire, water, behind ego – projections and false sentimentality, and rampant commercialization and consumerism! She is there waiting to manifest in pure hearts and sincere souls.

6. No matter how much one 'Indianizes' oneself, the white skin does generate an anti Indian perception. How do you see it?

Indians are the most colour conscious race on earth. I think this psyche has been conditioned through millennia to experience the "first perception" of "the other" through the "Colour of skin". Skin colour determines caste! Skin colour determines class! Skin colour determines beauty! How many thousands of times have I heard my Indian brethren describe another, fellow Indian as "that black fellow". Or "white one". Some of my light skinned students are taunted when they walk in the market as "white people". My Kashmiri friends are asked, "What is your native place?" Even close friends I have had over decades still see me first and foremost as a "white person". It is, as they say in psychology, "The Unsafe Stranger Quirk" embedded deep within the mammalian complex of our brain. The need to identify the "stranger" as friend or foe, asset or threat! It is a primordial response! This skin colour is truly the "first wall" over which communication must jump! It has "hurt me" in the past to be perceived as such (for better or worse). In fact a few chapters of my book **Rishi and the Rakshashas** are dedicated to this! As I have matured, I have realized that "lower minds" are locked in "walls of skin" and they are happily imprisoned there. If one loves one's cage, who am I to set them free. The new human has a higher vision and sees, "soul to soul", for the soul has no skin! The soul has no colour. It is Pure Light! This is truly an irony for I feel I have penetrated much more deeply into the essence of the true Bharathiya Samskrithi than 99% of the Indians I meet! The covering is only a covering after all.

Now having said all of that, I must also say most emphatically that **I have received nothing but love, affection and respect from my Indian people and it has been my privilege and joy to live and work with them.** As I grow older, I find even more joy, love and affection is showered upon me, which makes me feel very humble. Over the decades, our Indian people have accepted me (even though they may always feel some "other – ness") and have valued my work and contribution towards this great culture, which has come in the form of innumerable titles and awards. Both the central and local Governments have accepted me as

an authority in my field of Yoga and cultural arts which is deeply gratifying. I do feel as though “**I am an Indian**” and identify strongly with that. I often say, and I feel this sincerely, “I was born into the wrong body”! It is perhaps, some Karmic lapse from a past life time. Karma is Karma and cannot be cured, but rather must be endured!

7. The Indian culture has powerful tools embedded in it to build strong, loving and stable individuals and family units in addition to social and spiritual skills. Can you elaborate on your experience in this regard?

As a teacher, writer, lecturer, administration and creative artist, I have worked closely with people of all nations, colours, religions, classes and castes. I have lived for long periods of time in eight countries and have traveled the world extensively. Large numbers of people travel from all over the world to live and study with me in our Guru Kula. Calling on my 45 years of experience, I would say, for all of our defects, our Indian people are the most stable mentally and emotionally. The family structure in India is based on strong values which are rooted in the principles implied in Dharma. Certain behaviour and responsibilities are expected and there can be no excuse for not fulfilling one’s Dharma even at great personal sacrifice. This is the “key stone” of the culture’s edifice. Though the culture has been, is being eroded, still the structure stands, though it wobbles! A stable family creates a stable individual. In the West, there is hardly any normal family structure, and children are literally “left to bring up themselves”. This shows quite clearly in the chaos, confusion and instability of a large number of westerners whose emotional and mental states are very fragile.

8. If India can benefit by imbibing something from the US culture what can it be?

Yes! Ironically there is much to learn from the West – especially its dedication to quality of work! We do not seem to have any “work ethic” here! No one really cares much. Everyone “manages” and “adjusts”. Just take a look at the condition of our roads if you want to know what India lacks! That personal discipline, sense of order, commitment to work well done is badly needed here! The West has that! The West is also more open minded and tolerant and accepts the differences in other people. It is a society of “merit”, where the “best” have a chance to shine! Competency, skill and intelligence are valued and encouraged. Here anyone with such qualities is more likely to be “put down”.

I would also venture to say that on the whole, particularly amongst those who come to me as Yoga students, that the Western students are more conscious and aware, more alert and awake. Our Indians students are heavily conditioned. They live morally and in a disciplined way not because they have consciously chosen to do so, but rather because they are conditioned by the culture to do so!

9. What do you wish for India?

India should blend the best of ancient values with the best of the values of the new emerging realities. But! I wish my dear Indian would become “Real Indians” and not try to be cheap imitations of Western concepts.

10. Your opinion on Yoga festival and its role in taking yoga to a greater audience.

This event is a “Festival”! Festival implies a joyous occasion when people gather to celebrate good fortune and to share good news with each other. The Yogic life is a joyful life in which every breath we take is a “Festival of Life” connecting us to the cosmos. All who enter the “Yoga Lokha” should do so with a smile on their face, a laugh in their heart, and good will towards all!

The First International Yoga Festival was inaugurated in January 1993 in a grand manner by the Lt. Governor and the Chief Minister with all political dignitaries attending. Great Yogic personalities from all over the world participated, including Yogi Amrit Desai of United States of America; Swami Dayananda Saraswathi of Coimbatore; Sant Keshavadas of Bangalore, Dr. John Mumford (Swami Anandakapila) of Australia, Yogacharya Chandra Giri of Ibitsa, Spain, amongst many others. Yoga Maharishi Dr Swami Gitananda was the driving force who had gathered all these great people together and invited them personally to the Festival. More than 200 delegates participated from 20 foreign countries and nearly 800 from India. The International Yoga Sports Competition was held, which was the Second International Yoga Competition ever held in the world. (The first International Yoga Asana Competition was sponsored by in Yogamaharishi Dr. Swami Gitananda Giri in 1989. The International Yoga Sports Competition in 1989 was held with 800 participants from twelve countries and nearly every state in India). Grand Cultural Programmes were held at the First Yoga Festival in 1993 each evening. Highlight was a performance by Yoganjali Natyalayam students under my direction and conducted by my Guru Adyar K Lakshman of Chennai. The event was held at Rajiv Gandhi Stadium and all the 1000 seats of the gigantic pandal were always filled. The goal was to bring Yoga experts together to share experiences and enlighten general public.

I would like to see Tourism Department take the Yoga Festival more seriously and begin preparations in March itself, inviting well known exponents of Yoga at that time. Leading Yoga exponents are busy and plan schedules far ahead. Each of the ten major Yoga traditions well established now in India should be represented and each could give a work shop. This was attempted two years ago in 2010 and was very popular. But it needs to be expanded. Those who visited the Festival could experience in one place all the lineages of Yoga and their different approaches. The Yoga Festival is very well known now and very popular but more “learning and experiencing” in sessions should take place. The infrastructure is very good but Programmes should be set at least nine months in advance and organized well. This aspect needs improvement. More publicity should be given as well. Pondicherry Government and Tourism Department are the only Government anywhere in the world to sponsor a grand Yoga event like this the government deserves all praise for this. Our political leaders have become “Yoga literate” and speak knowledgeably on the stage about Yoga. Pondicherry has a much greater per capita ratio of people practicing Yoga than any other place in the world, mainly because of events like the Yoga Festival.

Ammaji, Yogacharini Meenakshi Devi Bhavanani is Director and Ashram Acharya of ICYER at Ananda Ashram, and Yoganjali Natyalayam, Pondicherry. An internationally acclaimed expert on Rishiculture Ashtanga Yoga (Gitananda Yoga), she has lived a ‘life of Yoga’ for the past 45 years and is an inspiration to thousands of seekers around the world. A prolific author, she edits the International Yoga Journal ‘Yoga Life’ and has served as Yoga expert on numerous councils in the Health and Education ministries of the Government of India. Her magnum opus is her recently published monumental exposition of the “History of Yoga from Ancient to Modern Times”.