

## UNSELFISHNESS AND SPIRITUAL GROWTH IN PRACTICE

A conversation with Swami Yogesh Puri

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Recently we have had an opportunity to spend time with Swami\* Yogesh Puri, a Slovene, who has lived and worked in India for more than twenty years. As an architect, he is leading the project of building the OM Ashram in Jadan, Rajasthan. He has renounced private life and, as a swami, dedicated himself to spiritual development through unselfish action – karma yoga. In Slovenia, besides his relatives, he visited some Yoga in daily life centres and shared his precious experience and knowledge with us. He gladly responded to our invitation to share some of them also with the readers of Karma Plus.

### ***What brought a Slovene to India?***

Destiny. They say that nothing in this world happens by chance. A person carries mechanisms within him or herself that start working when the time comes. My time came when I was going through a very difficult period in my life. A book about yoga came into my hands at that time. Although I did not know anything about yoga then, it seemed I was familiar with everything I read. It was like I got a key into my hands, a key to open the pages of my forgotten history. The following day I literally ran to the Yoga in daily life society in Ljubljana.

In half a year I met my spiritual master Paramhans Swami Maheshwarananda – Swamiji, with whom I travelled to India in December the same year. We also came to Jadan. At the time, there was only a big field covered with thorny bushes, nothing else. Swamiji told us that He wants to build a big ashram there. A strong wish to build that ashram awoke in me, which I said to Swamiji. He told me to prepare myself to go to India in a year to build. Soon after my return home, I received an invitation from a Swiss company to take over the projecting and building of a high category hotel in Slovenia. And a couple of days after that an order to project and build a house for our diplomat in Moscow. Not long after that, Swamiji called me and said I could immediately go to India, but only if I wanted to. On one side, I had two tempting offers with a very good profit, and on the other, a possibility to voluntarily build an ashram in India. I chose the latter. It turned out to be a good decision because both projects in Slovenia were brought to ruin due to the war and Yugoslavia falling apart. Later on I understood it was a test: either money or the spiritual path.

### ***Can you shortly present the Yoga in daily life system and its founder?***

Paramhans Swami Maheshwarananda – Swamiji – is the successor of a lineage of realized spiritual masters who lived in the Himalaya and in Rajasthan, India. His Master, Paramhans Swami Madhavananda – Guruji – sent the still very young, but realized Swamiji to Europe 40 years ago in order to bring the science of yoga to the western man. Swamiji started to teach *hatha yoga* (asanas, pranayam, meditation), values of life, non-violence, vegetarian food, karma, reincarnation and the sense and meaning of life. The more advanced disciples who wanted to go further on the spiritual path were introduced to the science of *karma, bhakti, gyan, raja* and *kriya yoga*. He tirelessly travels around the whole world to liberate humans caught in the material world and bring them to self-realization. The Yoga in daily life system, founded by Swamiji, is a high quality school of yoga that safely leads the practitioner from the most basic exercises to the highest yoga techniques and, finally, to self-realization. In our ashrams and centres in all five continents there are tens of thousands of people practicing yoga.

Today yoga is extremely popular in the west. There are hundreds of different schools of yoga. Some are good, but the majority was founded merely because of commercial interests and really does not have much in common with yoga. It is something similar to karate, which is a rather spiritual discipline meant entirely for self-defense, that got degraded by western “masters” to a level of competitive “fighting” in sports halls, and then completely destroyed by the film industry.

Already *hatha yoga* helps the practitioners keep a healthy, flexible and young body and is excellent against stress and the diseases of the modern world. It helps the aspirant understand him or herself and his or her surroundings better, which creates greater harmony in one’s life. However, *hatha yoga* is not enough for a serious spiritual seeker. An enlightened spiritual master is necessary, one who actually leads every step of the disciple. There are not many spiritual masters of that kind in the world nowadays. In Yoga in daily life system, we are truly fortunate that it is lead by an enlightened master, Paramhans Swami Maheshwarananda. And exactly that is the difference between the majority of yoga schools and the system Yoga in daily life.

### ***What is OM Ashram? What is it like?***

OM Ashram will be, when it is finished, the biggest object in the shape of OM in the world. The building surface of the object on all floors is more than 50 thousand square meters. A part of the object is already finished. Because we are building it in India, we followed the design typical for Indian temples of Northwestern India.

The most prominent and richly adorned is the temple dedicated to God Shiva. It is constructed from a pink sandstone wonderfully designed by sculptors. Massive stone pillars and walls are adorned with more than 2000 sculptures of Indian deities and other personalities from rich Indian culture and history. Stony, richly designed cupolas of the temple are 28m high, and Sikar (tower) of the temple is 38m high.

The other very visible part of the OM Ashram is the Sun temple in the shape of a tower separated from the main object. Combined reinforced steel concrete and stone construction will be more than 41m high. That is actually a water reservoir which, as a matter of fact, contains 14 smaller sculpturally designed stone temples.

In the residential part of the object, there are two upper floors meant for residence. The most noticeable features of these floors are also stone pillars, window and door frames, and beautifully carved stone fences. The residents will have 108 spacious rooms with bathrooms and lodges at their disposal. There are also apartments with 2 or more rooms, meant for families and special guests. The ground floor and the basement are meant for public program. 12 classrooms and halls for practicing are there. The biggest one can admit more than 1000 visitors. Reception, offices, assembly rooms, two kitchens with two separate dining halls, store rooms, sweetshop, meeting room, some small shops and many more are included on these two floors.

Daily, the number of people that have worked at the construction of OM Ashram comes to 800, among which are masons, carvers and other workers, which puts our project among the great employment promoters in this part of India.

### ***Can you tell us something about the master-disciple relation?***

The difference between us, ordinary mortals, and the realized master cannot be put into words. When a soul descends from the astral level, it knows everything about its past lives, intention, meaning and aim of the new incarnation on Earth. As a newborn with a new body and mind, as well as because of great pains of learning how to control a growing body, and because of education as we know it in the west, a soul loses the knowledge of its astral period and former lives.

With the realized master the situation is different. The great master comes on Earth usually from higher spiritual levels than the astral. He quickly finds his master and teaching and soon achieves the levels of divine consciousness. He knows all the history and future of all those who descended to the material level with him and for whom he took responsibility to guide them through life and liberate them from the karmic cycle of birth and death. He exactly knows what

is good and what is not good for every disciple. If the disciple completely trusts the master, he quite safely and as quickly as possible leads him or her through life. The disciple who accurately follows the instructions of the master goes quickly through the process of positive transformation of his or her personality, which is visible day by day, year by year. Without the Guru, walking on the spiritual path is for the majority of people like the walking of a blind person who got lost in the jungle and is looking for the way back home. It is painful, long and hopeless.

In India, a Guru is understood as part of the family. They consult him about every decision. His instructions are followed completely regardless of them being understood or not and regardless of what they seem like at first. In the West it is different. Disciples mostly do not trust the master and constantly test him. They do not follow his instructions and accuse him of all kinds of things. Because the human mind, which belongs to the physical level, is not capable of understanding the mechanisms with which the realized master works, it often happens that the disciples turn against the teacher and by doing so cause great harm to themselves and others. The reason for that must probably be sought in European history and, consequently, the teaching of the West which systematically develops fear, mistrust, aggression, greed, attachment, lust and ego in humans. All these are characteristics which lead humans away from self-realization.

### ***What is karma yoga and how can it be done in daily life?***

Karma yoga, also named the yoga of selfless action, is one of the four branches of yoga. Without karma yoga, a healthy spiritual development is not possible, as it is the basis of other three branches of yoga (bhakti, gyana and raja yoga). There are countless descriptions of how realized masters purify the karmas of their disciples through karma yoga (Ramayana, Mahabharata, Milarepa, Swami Yogananda etc.). Karma yoga is not simple because it releases strong psychological processes within us which cause many things to come out – fears, doubts, complexes, ego and also love, understanding, forgiveness etc. In short, everything that has accumulated within us through many lives. Karma yoga is like cleaning the basement in which there are things of many generations. We start by removing the big pieces, then continue with a shovel and a wheelbarrow, and a rough broom, a mop, and, finally, a cloth. When the basement is completely clean, we put things of our own choice in it. Something similar happens to the disciple who “meets” him or herself at karma yoga. It starts with “rough cleanings” that eventually become finer and finer. That can be very beautifully seen at an aspirant who eventually becomes another person that glows of “purity” like a child. The disciple who goes

through karma yoga school successfully the door to the spiritual world is open. Under the caring guidance of the master he or she will soon come to self-realization.

In ashram we work from early morning till night time. We have time for studying and practicing yoga in between. Every person has different duties. Regarding the constructing activities, there are three, four of us who are constantly there and are in charge of building all the objects. Structural designer Danka Bukvićki from Novi Sad, is responsible for calculations on statics, reinforcement\_plans, making the concrete and the construction laboratory. Then there is Swami Niranjan Puri, a botanist from Karlovy vary in Czech Republic, who is responsible for the purchase of materials, cash-box, bookkeeping and accounting; electric engineer Ljiljana Budimčić, and I who design, supervise, arrange our dealings with subcontractors and lead the building process. All the work is done professionally and the majority of standards valid for Europe are achieved. Of course, other disciples help us do the work. To see how arduous our work is you can take into consideration the fact that thousands of tons of concrete are mixed with manual mixers and built in with small construction elevators with which single flat houses are built in Europe. As a comparison, let me mention the information that a business object of similar size in Europe was built by 200 engineers of various profiles with all contemporary mechanization.

***How did you manage in the new environment and how did the local people accept you?***

There is a saying that you will find everything that exists in the world in India. But in the world you will not find that which exists in India. Spirituality is interwoven through all the pores of Indian civilization. In India, a Saint (Mahatma – Great Soul) is an acknowledged and consistent part of the society. Their trust and devotion to spiritual masters, Gurus, are unbelievable. It can be that each member of the family worships a different deity, but when a holy person enters the house, all gather round and listen carefully to his words (and take them into consideration). The trust for the Guru is so big that they consult him about every decision, even the smallest one. They believe in their deities, talk to them, feed them, dress them, wash them and put them to rest. The statuette of Krishna or Hanuman, Ganesh, Lakshmi on their altar is alive for them. And then it happens that these deities from astral or higher levels really work, lead and protect their bhaktas (those who surrender themselves to them with love – commentary of the author).

Indians say that man never knows in what form a holy person or incarnation of God will appear at one's door and, therefore, to make the guest happy is an expression of culture, tradition and devotion. To be a guest in India is an experience which you hardly get in the western world.

It is the respect and consideration of the words of enlightened spiritual masters that are the reasons for the vast majority of Indians to have developed the positive side of personality, which is seen through modesty, morality, respect towards the opposite sex, extreme inner strength, peace, detachment from material goods and omnipresent joy. The high intelligence of Indians is known worldwide. Definitely, it is not difficult to feel good in such an environment. If a westerner is not arrogant, boasting, and shows respect to the world which (s)he has entered, (s)he will very quickly be surrounded with many good, sincere friends.

The western media attempt to present India as an underdeveloped and poor country. India with its 10,000-year rich and flourishing history is, from the perspective of spirituality, far more developed than the western civilization. However, if we measure the state of being developed with the amount of money people have in banks and with the size of houses and cars, that is partly true. Naturally, they withhold the fact that the West entered India exactly with the intention to rob it not just materially, but also (or mostly) to take its spirituality, wisdom, morality, honour and self-respect. Sadly, they are successful in that to some extent.

### ***How can we, individuals, help with the OM Ashram project?***

The motive power for building the OM Ashram is Swamiji, but it is built by disciples and volunteers from all over the world. Some give donations for the project (almost all the money is collected among the members of Yoga in daily life societies from all over the world). Others contribute with voluntary work in different fields: advising, projecting, guiding and supervising construction sites, helping with office work, bookkeeping. Architectural projects were being done by many architects. Some lived and worked in the ashram for some years. The same goes for construction engineers, who helped with the projecting, leading and supervision of the building, as well as joiners, plumbers, decorators, mechanics, tilers etc. They came from Australia, Austria, Czech Republic, Croatia, Canada, Hungary, Germany, New Zealand, Slovakia, Slovenia, Serbia, USA, to name just a few. Through working with the locals, we raised tens of highly qualified professionals of all profiles: from masons to truck drivers, excavator operators and crane operators.

### ***What would you like to say to those who are interested in yoga and to Slovenes in general?***

Life is as it is. Nice and less nice things happen to us according to karma which we cannot influence. Karma is a cosmic law which says that we will get back everything we ever did. It

means that we prepared today's life yesterday (in previous lives). There is a saying: "The way you live today is a testimony of what you did yesterday. And what you do today tells you how you will live tomorrow." The law of karma cannot be escaped. It can only be accepted.

Our reaction to what happened to us (because of karma) is what makes our life easier or harder. If we accept an unpleasant event as destiny, God's will, karma, teaching, purification etc., it is easier for us. In the opposite case, we can suffer a great deal.

On the spiritual path under the guidance of a realized teacher, life, in a way, goes faster, thickens. In a very short period of time, a disciple goes through experiences for which (s)he would need a lot more time in a normal life. That is why a disciple's life is also more intense and arduous. If someone wants to seriously step on the spiritual path, (s)he must, by all means, visit India, and, if possible, stay there for some time. Surroundings, people, energy, way of life etc., all that is a river that carries you further on the path of spirituality. In the West it is quite the opposite, here one must swim against the stream. A lot of energy is used and the results are incomparably smaller than in India. If we are lucky to have a spiritual master, everything is easier.

Those of us who are practicing yoga are very lucky to have Swamiji as a spiritual master. Disciples and practitioners can participate in many seminars and lectures in Europe and elsewhere in the world. As much as possible, His guidance and protection safely guide us past the rocks of life.

The interview was done by dr. Vojka Bole-Hribovšek from the Ljubljana Yoga in daily life society