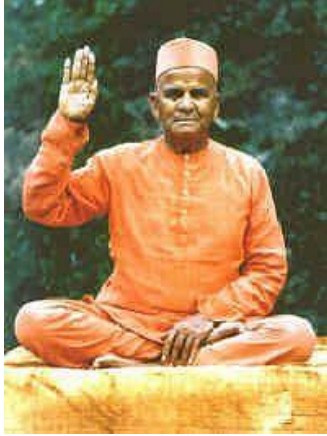


Conversation with Atma Muni Mertens

Interview by Annelize Festen



Last time Atma Muni explained how he was a lonely child who could not play with other children because of his life threatening liver disease. Because of this he focused on inner experiences, started meditating at a young age, had important experiences of consciousness and recovered from his disease. In 1970, when he turned 33, he came upon the book "Science of Soul" by Swami Yogeshwarananda Saraswati.¹

This second article deals with the encounter with this exceptional master, who we will refer to in this article as 'Maharaj Ji', and with the concept guru in general.

"Nowadays meditation has increasingly become a trend. But in those days, the early seventies, few meditation classes were held in Belgium and many yoga teachers opposed. For yoga was practicing asanas; so why add meditation?"

To me, however, meditation has always been the essence of yoga as a spiritual practice. As soon as we started yoga classes in Mechelen, we immediately started teaching and practicing meditation.

I already mentioned the book "Science of Soul". The late Paul Meganck, who owned the 'Yoga-Bookshop', a mail order bookshop specialized in spiritual literature, knew I considered it an exceptional book. As a matter of fact, I bought it at his shop.

One day Paul called me and said: "Maharaj Ji will go on a world-tour. If there is an interest in meditation, he will visit our country."

Needless to say we were very much interested and, after having consulted André Van Lysebeth, we immediately invited him in the name of the Belgian Yoga Federation.

Together with André, who was president of the Belgian Yoga Federation at the time, we welcomed Maharaj Ji at the airport. He was accompanied by Swami Muktananda, one of his disciples, who would act as interpreter Hindi-English.

We saw a little, old man, wearing a funny little cap on his head... and we smiled at each other: "So this is the important yogi? He looks rather funny." But this impression quickly vanished, because during our ride to Mechelen, in those brief fifteen minutes, everything happened. I immediately could discuss my meditation experiences with him, and he actually could explain them in detail, out of his own experience. Later as we had more time, we talked about these experiences at greater length and he called them by name: ultimate samadhi, and the opening of the tunnel was called the piercing of the brahmarandhra¹.

He stayed at my place, together with his interpreter, through whom all verbal contact took place. My wife, as expected, was very much guarded. I will talk about this later, but first something about her attitude towards yoga.

When we were first married I tried to discuss it with her, but she was raised a catholic, virtuous and scared and she did not feel for it. Later on she said: "I do not see anything wrong in what you do, you can do whatever you want to." But she wouldn't allow me to practise asanas in her presence: "Do not do it when I am around; only animals crawl on the floor, people don't." After that we never discussed it, but she always received our Indian guests and went out of her way for them. I have always appreciated her comments on people, because she is a keen observer and reliable touchstone.

With her down-to-earth, discerning mind and her special sense of humor she can shoot her arrows at most unexpected moments... and they always hit home.

Swami Satyananda was the last swami we received. He was accompanied by about forty people, mostly female disciples and they were all over our house, on the stairs, in the bathroom, etc. But when my wife came to greet him friendly, he didn't so much as look at her. She felt very offended. "This is the last time a swami ever sets foot in this house," she said.

I myself had an argument with him. He asked us about our professions. I was a teacher and that was fine: a profession of a Brahman. My oldest brother was a postmaster, fine as well, but to my youngest brother, who was in the military, he said: "You must change your profession immediately." My brother answered that Arjuna, in the Bhagavad Gita, was a warrior as well and belonged to the Kshatrya-caste. But according to the swami the Bhagavad Gita was old-fashioned and obsolete. This was going to far for me and I told him the Gita contains a universal message which will never become obsolete; that it is not just a book, but knowledge, insight and experience, inherent in man, and that it will always be alive as long as there are human beings on earth... Swami Ji became angry because I talked back.

Then I made it clear to him that his orange robe alone was not enough to command respect: "Only when you show you deserve respect..."

He became even more angry at this and said: "Then, I'd better leave," I answered: "The door is open to come in, Swami Ji, and open to go out. It's up to you." He left. This is no place for dictators.

So when Maharaj Ji was coming to Belgium, my wife said: "But not in my house." "All right, we will find him a hotel." But when the arrival date drew nearer she said: "He is too old to be staying at a hotel. And what about his food? Hotel meals won't agree with him..." So she decided to give it another try. And when he visited our house that first evening, she said: "He can stay in my house as long and as often as he wants to. I've observed him and I have never encountered such an exceptional and good human being." But about yoga she wouldn't change her mind: not interested.

After three days Maharaj Ji left and the day after I realized: "I had my guru in my house, and I let him go without asking for an initiation." And while I was thinking about this, my two brothers contacted me with the same message: "I think he is my guru."

But we had the opportunity to receive initiation after all, while Maharaj Ji was in Antwerp. He told me: "From now on I am your spiritual father and you are my son." I told him this was good to hear since our own father had died only one month before. He asked us to show his photograph, but our father hadn't exactly been such a very much loved family father, that we'd carry his picture with us at all times. "Send it to this address in London, where I will stay in two months, and then I will tell you where your father is now." I didn't believe this for a minute, but you mustn't reject something just because you don't know it... so I sent the photograph and three months later we met again in Amsterdam. At that occasion he brought the issue up himself. "This is bad," he said, "your father hasn't led a good life. Towards the end of his life, he had so many regrets. Everywhere you go, your father is with you. He cannot break free. You can safely assume that the first child born in your family will be your father."

Believe it or not, but every time we visited our father, he would look up and start crying: "I haven't behaved properly in this life, and I can't make it up anymore." And this is how he died. Now there was another very dedicated and spiritual person in our group, who asked what Maharaj Ji was talking about. When I explained he asked: "Would Maharaj Ji be able to tell something about my father as well?" Maharaj Ji looked at the picture that was handed over to him and said his father had hung himself. The man turned as white as a ghost: this was true.

In 1973, two years after his last visit, Maharaj Ji returned, and my two brothers and I received an extensive, traditional initiation.

During the ceremony my wife sat all the way at the back, still very much keeping her distance. The ceremony took forever, so I could see it coming that she would be very negative about it. And sure enough, she started by saying: "...I thought it was boring, ridiculous, and after the ceremony... I looked up at him and saw the light radiating from his hands and face and the face of an eighty-seven-year-old turned into the face of a forty-year-old. Now I know he is not only a very good person, but also exceptionally powerful."

The next day she decided to get initiated too."

How was your relationship with your guru?

"I consider Maharaj Ji as a guru because of **what he is**, not because of what he says. We had a very direct, no nonsense relationship. Sometimes I argued with him because I did not share his opinion, but I have also, in the true Indian tradition, lain in devotion at his feet.

I have not become a Shamkya follower, like him, but I have gone my own way and I also discussed this with him.

It is the guru's task to bring experience and insight, to guide someone to his own inner guru. But he told me: "...Actually you do not need a guru anymore, because you already have the experiences. But I have examined everything in a scientific way, and I can still help you." And so he taught me a lot.

There is but one guru, the one inside each and everyone of us. The human guru is very important, however, for he, with his love, correctness and knowledge, can guide the student in a subtle way to his own experience or Jnana. [Jnana means direct knowledge based on experience. Vijnana means analytic knowledge (of the soul and the causal and physical body).]

The last time I visited him in India - a few months before his death - he invited me to stay in India. He prepared everything for me for when he would pass away. If I could stay in India, one of his ashrams would be for me...

I noticed he was somewhat unhappy because none of his disciples followed in his path. Only two young women, my Indian sisters, Aruna and Lalita, had followed him some of the way on his difficult path of scientific, inner experience.

He said: "You have found your own path already, and it is a good path, you have my blessing."

Is yoga something for Westerners?

I do not consider yoga to be oriental or western, but rather universal; only the form can be oriental or western. Yoga is inherent to the human mind. It is an inherent quality you can develop in yourself. This is how I have experienced it. I have had great experiences... before I received teachings. Nowadays it is done the other way around: people use teachings and thus arrive at experience. But here the danger lies in using your imagination too much, so you become conditioned.

Yoga can develop in all cultures, even without exchange. In India however, there has been an uninterrupted rich yoga culture, because yoga has always played a very important role there, unlike in our culture.

Without any doubt India has contributed very much, but a lot of people put too much focus on this: they adhere to a specific system, and thus they come to depend on techniques to gain experiences.

In essence it is all about a purification process. But the majority of the average yoga students is not interested in this. They want to improve their physical condition, seek mental peace, an anti-stress therapy, but do not wish to change their personality in a fundamental way. To the contrary, they want to incorporate yoga in their life with their own personality, belief, conditioning, whereas true yoga goes a lot further than that and eliminates all conditioning. Of course all people should be made aware to go all the way, but this appears to be impossible. You have to carry it in you already (the maturity or the awakening).

For those who have it in them it is important they have the opportunities to develop this themselves. This is where teaching and techniques come in useful, but the danger is that people focus only on this. In our society people are over-rational, so that nearly all perception of the subtle realm has been lost. When a child starts it's secondary school education this receptivity gets destroyed already. Until then a child can keep a certain measure of this spontaneous receptivity. I have examined primary schoolchildren and was amazed by their reaction. From the very first simple guidance, they gained real subtle and causal experiences...

Whether these capabilities can be regained? Only through a different attitude in life. A good yoga teacher can offer you the proper guidance on the path to the inner realm.

And here the old saying applies: "**Every student gets the teacher (guru) he deserves.**" If your interest does not reach further, you will be stuck with a teacher who suffices at your level. However, if you desire more consciousness and insight, nothing can stop you and you will look further. For those people it is important that there is a developed yoga system. We can only be grateful for this.

When translated to the level of faith, this may sound too crass to most people. If your faith really means something to you, then it must serve the truth. If however the truth serves your faith, your faith is not worth much. If you desire more insight, but you are afraid to take action because your faith forbids you to, then your faith is an obstacle. If faith is true, it offers you the freedom to make this direct connection.

I myself have chosen an independent path. I am no follower. Impossible.

I teach meditation, but at the same time also warn for it.

Yoga, going to the essence of things, is to me an essential message which demands great purity. Yoga, as I have explained before, is a process of purification, or in modern terms: a fundamental process of deconditioning. The majority of people cannot take this step: they want the fruits of yoga, without working on themselves.

That is why Patanjali starts with yama and niyama. This is neglected here, and classes go straight on to asana.

Patanjali describes a process of insight. The yamas and niyamas are not to be compared with the ten commandments. It is not possible to put yamas and niyamas to practise on the authority of someone who tells you 'Thou shalt not lie.' No, the insight has to grow in you. The more you purify yourself, the more your insight grows and this helps the purification. So from insight you come to, for example, love for truth. Once you have this insight, practising the love for truth is not an effort, but the most normal of things. It is very important to work on yourself, not through the ego, but through devotion, so that you can take a completely open and receptive attitude, like a child, without pretenses. If you meditate with this attitude, you do not need techniques. It comes naturally.

If your character is not corrected, you meditate with the wrong attitude. Then your meditation serves wrong purposes, and it is highly likely to be strengthening your ego and all your vices."

But when you say this, a lot of people will take this as 'meditation is not necessary'.

"Unfortunately, yes. But I have to tell this just the same.

This also influences my attitude as a teacher. People ask for the wrong kind of guidance from a yoga teacher, they ask him to make decisions for them. Even my own students tell me: "Why don't you ever say to me: 'This is what you should do?'" Then I answer: "Then you should look for another teacher, my friend, then we are not on the same wavelength."

In Satsanga we have the same attitude: 'There is nothing we have to do, nothing we want, nothing we have.' When you start to understand this, you can let go and become independent and strong in life. Constantly meeting expectations, those of other people and of yourself will tie you up, whereas opening yourself can free you of this burden. When I get too involved in something, I tell myself to be careful, there is nothing I have to. And desires? There is nothing I want and who am I to want something? And possessions? You have nothing, you are born naked and will leave this world in the same way. Do not imagine things and do not get too attached to these temporary things, for it will not improve the quality of your life.

Students like guidelines, but I don't give them any, because they should come from within. 'You have chosen me because we are on the same wavelength. You know what I like, that is your guideline.'

It means you will become more independent, stronger in every phase.

A guru helps you develop your freedom (not lawlessness), purity and insight.

In the end it all boils down to love and insight.

The only true moral is: I act based on my insight, with my conscience, no matter what other people think about it.

The morals in society are a straitjacket, devoid of any spiritual value. Society itself has to grow. We have to take society along in our growth.

I do not stick to the morals in society, I do things which are condemned, and I'm also prepared to carry the consequences, because society will not tolerate this. But I am not a battering-ram, either. As long as it does not disturb my conscience, I take rules in society into account. But I do not wish to become a slave to society.

Take for example, someone who decides to get a divorce. There are teachers who refuse such people classes. 'They are not yogis,' it is said and they cry shame over it.

I say: 'I cannot judge, it is his/her problem... I work on myself, you on yourself, that is my moral. I do not want to be a dogmatist.'

Like this, I sometimes ask my students during Satsanga: 'Why are you here? Is it because you feel afraid and uncertain and expect me to give you certainties? Then you shouldn't come here. I cannot provide you with certainties, because I have none. Or do you come here because you feel good here, because you hear things you agree with? Please do not come then, for it will not help you in your growth. It is only when you disagree that you will think deeper about things. I do not want to play up to you, nor do I have rational certainties. My only certainty is that experience (see first interview) and this I cannot simply give to you. I cannot even talk about it! All other certainties are rational certainties, and those are not real certainties. They are not important as far as I am concerned. If tomorrow science should prove wrong what I have thought until today, I will not cry over it, I will drop it and accept the new, correct point of view. And again this will be no gospel, but the biggest probability at that moment. I can live with relative certainties, but my life is carried by this one certainty that most people miss. And therefore, and out of this I teach yoga...'

What would you like to conclude this conversation with?

"In the end the essence of the path is: purification through devotion and growing insight.

Doing by not doing. Fundamental deconditioning... Freeing yourself from all burden, all tension, all hang-ups... Not by getting rid of them one by one (that would be an impossible and endless process), but by constantly fine-tuning to all that surpasses these restrictions. By staying focussed on the essence behind the scenes of life.

And remember: what is important is not yoga, but the person...

He who walks this path with this attitude will discover that the real Truth is true Love... and this will set you free.

We know, humans have many physical, mental and spiritual needs. Hunger is only satisfied by eating, thirst by drinking, tiredness by sleeping. Also the sexual needs call for satisfaction. Our mind wants to understand and know, emotionally we need understanding, friendship, love and tenderness and spiritually there is the big need for truth, for God.

Did you ever notice that your hunger and thirst are not satisfied by giving food and to drink to others, but that on the other side, our needs for friendship, love and tenderness are satisfied the most when given to others?

May I conclude with this message that I have given as a Christmas message a few years ago?

Friendship, Love, Goodness and Tolerance are values that can improve the quality of our live...

Every day, every hour, every minute is unique. The quality of our life depends on how we use them...

The past is gone and no action can be undone...

The future can come, but not necessarily for us...

The only true moment we have in life is the present. So 'now' we decide the quality of our life...

Live so that you never regret what you've done. But this requires a constant alertness, a constant consciousness..."

Source: 'Tijdschrift voor Yoga' 1/97 Volume 8 – March 1997

* Shree Swami Vyas Dev Ji Maharaj, "Science of Soul (Atma Vijnana) ", Yoga Niketan Trust, Rishikesh, India, 1964 ISBN 90 202 4881 2.