

Interview

with Nischala Joy Devi

Nischala Joy Devi is an internationally respected yoga teacher, well known for her heart-centered approach to spirituality and scripture. She was a monastic disciple of Sri Swami Satchidananda for over twenty years and was educated by yoga masters in India and worldwide. She developed the yoga protocols for Dean Ornish's Program for Reversing Heart Disease and co-founded the Commonweal Cancer Help Program, which culminated in the creation of her Yoga of the Heart® certification course for teachers and health professionals. She serves on the Advisory Council for the International Association of Yoga Therapists. Nischala Devi is the author of several CDs and books, including *The Healing Path of Yoga*; *The Secret Power of Yoga*; *A Woman's Guide to the Heart and Spirit of the Yoga Sutras*; and the award-winning audio book of *The Secret Power of Yoga*.

I first encountered Nischala Devi in a workshop many years ago and was deeply impressed by her luminous and warm yet powerful presence. Over the years I have appreciated her bringing to light the feminine, intuitive aspects of spirituality.

In considering this issue's theme, Nischala Devi was the obvious choice to discuss the topic of spiritual competencies in the training of yoga therapists. I am pleased and honored to share our conversation with you.

KB: You have said, "Knowledge can make you a therapist, intuition can make you a healer." Can you talk about that a little?

ND: Yes, I'm referring to not just a therapeutic relationship, but a healing relationship.

It seems what we're moving into with yoga therapy is really more of a Western model rather than the Eastern tradition of yoga. In the Western model, you go to school, and you take courses, and you learn many skills. Then you take those skills, and the knowledge from the courses, and you apply them. That's the basic Western model that I was trained in. And, while it can make you a good therapist, I don't think it necessarily produces a healer.

I don't think the capacity to be a healer necessarily has to be trained—although it can be trained—but sometimes too much training detracts from the intuitive



power. I have known people who have been yoga teachers and massage therapists for some time and who I would consider healers. Then they went back to school, because they didn't think they were good enough, strong enough, whatever it is, and they became some kind of therapist. Either a nurse, a physical therapist, whatever, and they lost some of their healing power, because they started to say, "Well, this isn't proven. I don't know if I should do this, or if it will help."

This is the dichotomy that I'm personally feeling right now in the yoga therapy community; between what is objective and what is subjective. And I think that we have to be really careful with that, so that we have a balance of both. You can learn skills and practice and share what you learned with someone therapeutically. But the *healing* takes place on a spiritual level. Your spirit and their spirit come together and make an agreement to move forward in a certain way. And that, to me, comes from an intuitive sense, a sense that I may not have *learned* what I'm teaching to my client right now, it may have just come to me in the moment. And it turns out to be exactly what they needed—that kind of intuition is a hard thing to teach. And that's why it's not taught in medical school or nursing school, OT school, PT school. I'm hoping, though, that it's going to be taught in yoga therapy school! Because, to me, yoga therapy without intuition is not yoga therapy. It's just another somatic therapy that we're teaching, like OT and PT. You can tell I'm very passionate about this!

KB: Yes, and that's great! And this begs the question: can you teach intuition? How is a yoga therapist to know what's intuition, and what's projection and wishful thinking?

ND: The simple answer is yes, it can be taught. The long answer is, it's not easy. Because, it's a little bit like planting a garden—there's a lot that has to be done before you put a plant in the earth. And there's a lot that has to be done before someone can be taught how to cultivate his or her intuition. For instance, that person has to have an inner spiritual practice. They have to know what it feels like to listen, and intuition may not be a voice. It may be a little twinge in our belly. It may be a little squeeze in our heart. It may be a little lump in our throat. It may be a word or a sound that comes to us. It comes in different ways and we need to be quiet enough, we have to learn to notice it, and then recognize it, and then have the courage to follow it, because if we don't have the courage to follow it, it just goes by the wayside. The more of the left-brain skills that we get, the less the intuition, or the right brain, has a voice, because we're always doubting it. And if we doubt it enough, it's going to say, "Well, I'm not going to talk to you anymore, you're not paying attention to me."

KB: But you're not saying we shouldn't have training and knowledge.

ND: No! Not only am I not saying it, that's a given. We're getting wonderful practical training, but we're not getting enough training to bring in this other intuitive part—it's not a full training. We are a society that gets trained. We get trained in everything. I mean even today, you can't buy a new car without getting training in it, right? So, that is a given. When I say this, I'm talking about making room for intuition in an already well-trained society. If you look at IAYT's standards for training yoga therapists,¹ they're wonderful in so many ways. They really cover gross anatomy, subtle anatomy; all those things that we need to have training in. Yet, I don't see the intuitive part. I don't see the place where when I walk into a room, and there is a person sitting there—how do I create a relationship so that magic happens? I want to know that we are connected, and from us being connected, we then move into a place of healing. Where if I'm teach-

ing her an asana or pranayama or whatever, I'm not just teaching on the surface. There's something else that's happening. And, I think it is essential for people to learn how to bring forth their intuition—after all, they're not *learning* how to be intuitive, they're *already* intuitive. It's the most natural thing we have. Intuition is before knowledge. And I trust it.

KB: So, what you're saying is people can be trained to listen to this intuition, which shows up in different ways. How does one go about doing that? Do you train people in developing their intuition?

ND: I do train people in developing their intuition. I can't give you a fourfold way. I would like to, but I can't, because it depends on the individuals and their trust in themselves. First of all, silence is essential. They have to be comfortable in silence.

Being quiet is the first thing, because external chatter doesn't allow the inner sounds to be there. And then, as we get quieter, we begin to feel the deeper internal silence. You can call it anything you want, it doesn't matter what we call it. It's a part of us that we connect with, that the real knowing comes out of. The real essential us comes out, and love comes out, and compassion. And also, just being quiet, without the chatter, allows the other person to speak. It would be nice to use another word besides teacher or therapist, because a teacher or therapist implies that we do the talking or the teaching. And really, I think the best teacher or therapist is one that allows the person to teach themselves from inside, with gentle guidance.

I was trained and worked in Western medicine for many years, and one of the reasons I left is that people weren't being treated as whole beings. They were being locked into protocol. And that protocol may not work for them. So, I think as yoga therapists, we have to be extremely careful not to make a protocol that we think is going to fit everyone. We have to listen to not only what they're saying, we have to watch how they're acting and we have to feel what's going on in them. All this is happening at the same moment, and that's how I teach people to bring out their intuition. "Stop! Observe. What is happening right now with that person? Do you feel it?" And people look at me, "What are you talking about?" And I say, "Listen, what are you feeling right now?"

I don't believe we can teach well, or for a long time, or be a good therapist, if we don't have a deep, consistent, personal practice. Because when we then walk into a room, we have a choice. Who are we taking into that room? Which part of us are we taking in, which part of us is coming forward?

Sometimes I create mock interviews with trainees, and I'll see that when they think it's a mock situation, they'll just go through and ask a bunch of questions, and I'll say "Stop. Did you see the way she just uncrossed her legs? She just crossed her arms, and that something you said or something that she felt made her uncomfortable. Stop there, don't go on." That's the kind of thing you start to learn by keen observation. And, again, we mustn't be afraid of quiet. Sometimes with a client I may just get quiet for a minute. Listening within to what that other person needs.

KB: Most of us still have work to do on ourselves. At what point are we spiritually competent to sit in the seat of yoga therapist?

ND: Well, it's a very interesting question. Many people have this image of the medical profession as being somehow more enlightened or beyond reproach than others because of the white coat, the apparent omniscience, because they can cut into a human being, take something out, and actually put everything back together. It's amazing. But it doesn't mean that those people don't have their own problems and could even be disturbed in a variety of ways. It just means that when they go into the operating theater or examination room, they put it all aside.

And I think it's the same thing with us as yoga therapists, and this is where I keep getting back to personal practice. Because I don't believe we can teach well, or for a long time, or be a good therapist, if we don't have a deep, consistent, personal

practice. Because when we then walk into a room, we have a choice. Who are we taking into that room? Which part of us are we taking in, which part of us is coming forward? Well, I would hope that the part of us coming forward is not the part that just yelled at our kids or yelled at our husband or cut in front of someone to get a parking space. I'm hoping that when we walk in, what comes forward is that essential loving part we have gotten to know in our practice, in our meditations, and then that part meets the essential nature of the person that we're with.

And I feel this is where being a therapist not only heals the person we're working with, but heals us also. Teaching has a deep spiritual effect on us, as well as the person we're teaching. Because there's something mystical and mysterious that happens when you sit in front of a person or in front of a class that brings out that spiritual part of you. You don't need to be perfect all the time, because in that moment you are perfect. And, I think that the big umbrella in this is a large dose of humility. Your clients don't come to you because they don't know how to heal themselves; they come to you because they can't *remember*. You're there to help them remember. If we all waited until we were spiritually evolved to teach, nobody would be teaching. Even the spiritual masters had their stuff.

All people really want from you is to listen and have compassion, that's all they want. You know, it's nice you give them a little of this and a little that, but what they really want to know is that somebody cares that they get well.

KB: When I was talking with Bo Forbes,² she suggested that there should be a specialty track for the competencies of mental health. Should there be a specialty in spiritual competency?

ND: Yes, I think that there should be. Through some of the schools that I've been teaching with I have been offering a five-day course on healing relationships—and the healing relationship isn't just with your client, it is with yourself, also. You and your higher self, or you and your everyday self, or whoever it is. We really have to find a way to teach yoga teachers how to teach other people, how to talk to other people, and how to talk to ourselves. What do you do to prepare yourself before you go into class? Do you just walk in and be a therapist? Or do you prepare yourself.

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I feel that spiritual preparation or a spiritual relationship should be one of the core courses in yoga therapy training. And I think it should be a required course.

KB: Can you talk a little about the importance of yoga philosophy?

ND: Actually, I don't call it yoga philosophy. I call it yoga wisdom—the wisdom of yoga. One cannot think of teaching yoga practices without knowing the essence of the wisdom that it came from. Why are we doing the practices? I mean if you look at the Yoga Sutras, the first book is about wisdom, and the second book is the practices. The wisdom comes first, and then the practices. And of course we in the West did it the other way, we started with the practices, and maybe now we're learning a little bit about the wisdom!

You know, you're talking to someone who re-translated the Yoga Sutras, right? So obviously I thought they were important enough to spend that time on. And we actually have a weekly sutra that people sign up for, and each week they receive it via email. I think the Bhagavad Gita and the Yoga Sutras offer the wisdom from the Vedas and the Upanishads *distilled*. As the hunger grows, you want to know more and more. But, the basic yoga wisdom tells us who we are and even why we get ill. It's the essence of it.

I have taught the basic yoga sutras class to people who have learned it over and over, and they look at me, "Oh, is *that* what it means? Oh, I didn't realize." So I think that sometimes we have to hear it over and over and over again. Because it's not really the essence of our culture, right? It comes from another culture. People sometimes glibly say, "Oh, the *yamas* and the *niyamas* are like the Ten Commandments," but actually they are very different.

KB: There's a certain depth of understanding that comes when it's real wisdom and not something you've just read in a book.

ND: Exactly. Sometimes I'll go in and start teaching a 500-hour group, so they've already had the basics, and I'll ask them to tell me about the *yamas* and the *niyamas*. They'll start reciting them, and I'll say, "OK, what does this *mean*?" And they'll say "Da da da da da," and I'll say, "What does *that* mean? Did you use that today in your everyday life? What does

that mean to you?" And sometimes they'll look at me blankly because they haven't been taught how to take it from the scriptures and live it. So, they are parroting it, they are not living it. And, to be a good therapist, I think we have to live it. When we walk in the therapy room we want not just the intellectual understanding of *ahimsa* but also to bring in the reverence and a love for that person who's sitting in front of you. So just learning it isn't enough. People say, *ahimsa* means "nonviolence," and I say, "What does that mean? Are you violent?" You have to go deeper into what that really means so that you can actually apply it to your actions.

looking at yoga teachers or therapists, I'm not just observing how they teach a forward bend. I'm looking at how they teach the *experience* of the forward bend.

KB: Can a yoga therapist who is poorly trained in this cause harm on a spiritual level?

ND: Absolutely. For instance, let's say you come in to see me because you've just been diagnosed with heart disease. And you're devastated. You thought you were OK, and all of a sudden you're finding out that you have major heart disease, a major blockage. And you come in for help



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Nischaladevi advises a program participant.

So, some yogic scripture should be taught at all levels so that people can really understand it. Because if it's only taught at the 200-hour level, then they get to the 1000-hour, and they say, "Well, I didn't really need that. What's the use of it? Now I'm a therapist, and I'm working with people."

Well, that's when you really need to know, for example, *satya*: you have to speak with integrity and truth. This is where it comes in, and I think that we are doing a great disservice if we don't do that. Then we are taking the yoga out of yoga therapy!

KB: Thank you. And can that be tested, or is it something that just has to be offered to students?

ND: I don't think that we can test it, but I do think that we can observe it. When I'm

and hope, and I look at you and I say, "Well, what did you do in your life? You've earned it! You're smoking three packs of cigarettes a day, you deserve heart disease!" Wow, you've just devastated that person. You've done more harm to them than the three packs of cigarettes did. You have hurt their soul, their reason for living. Even if you only *thought* it.

And the other thing that we put on ourselves and others is, "Oh, you're a yogi, and you got this?" And, you see, this is where the training comes in—no judgment! You walk in there, you don't see someone with a disease, you see a divine being whose body is going through something. *That's* what you see! You've just hit a nerve with me here. If a doctor says, "You only have two months to live," I ask, "Who gave you the right to say that? Did

you get it faxed directly from the divine?" Of course, people can get into denial. But that's not our business. I always say, we're in the hope business. I bring hope to people. I don't lie to them, but what I do is look through the physical disease and through the emotional disease to the essence of who they are and that's where we start.

KB: I've also heard people assuming that they know what caused someone's condition and that the person is to blame for having it. They haven't done enough spiritual practice! I see this on social media all the time.

ND: In healing relationships, one of the things I teach is scope of practice. It's not up to us to diagnose, to know the origin of disease other than from a yogic perspective. It's not up to us to sit there and pontificate—where's the humility in that? The compassionate heart knows that this person has some kind of disease or problem. They are hurting—and we're giving them this New Age philosophy? It is a subtle form of blame. If you did more spiritual practice, gave more money to charity, then you would not be sick, hurting.... Look, it's not having the disease; it's how we handle the disease. So, for instance, I don't call

people "heart patients" or "cancer patients," I say that they are divine beings whose body happens to have a certain imbalance—that's how I refer to it.

I think the point is, if in yoga practice we are trying to make the body perfect that is a losing battle. The body will never be perfect, and that is not the point of healing.

KB: Any last comments?

ND: The only thing I'd like to say is, always approach people from your heart, and then everything falls into place.

KB: That's beautiful. But, what if you don't feel in touch with your heart in that moment? For example, when my father and sister died close together, I don't know if I could have seen people individually as a yoga therapist.

ND: Let me ask you a question first. When you say not in touch with your heart, I think at a time like that you are so in touch with your heart that you can't feel anything else except this incredible ache in your heart for those that you've lost, and that can be translated into something

positive. We don't necessarily have to pull away when we're in pain, unless it's just too fresh, and then our prana needs to go in to heal ourselves, and not out to heal others.

See, we've all had heartache. I think the pain comes when we try to encapsulate it and think that we are the only ones who've had the pain. So if we can make our pain into *the* pain that's in the universe, and realize that everyone we talk to has had their share of it, that's quite different. So, when I talk to somebody, instead of bringing out the heartache in a personal manner, I allow my heart to be open for their pain in that moment. Not that we encourage their suffering, we don't have to look for it. But it comes to us. If we pretend that it's only our suffering, no one is benefiting from it. But if we say, now I know how people feel when they've lost their mother, now I know how people I feel when they've lost their father, sister, brother. And that gives us compassion. **YTT**

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