DRESS and ADDRESS

For designer Donna Karan, finding a spiritual balance is as essential as a sartorial one. Bandana Tewari spends a few Zen-filled hours with the designer in the unlikeliest of places—an ashram in South India.

Photographed by Tarun Khival
BT: Your life’s trajectory has seen some great turbulence, hasn’t it? 

DK: My daughter is born, and [days later] my first business [Annie Klein] dies of cancer. I had a collection due for the next day. And the rest is history. You know, when life throws a curveball at you and you have the chance to discover that you can process that. The regular thought processes leave you. I was planning on going home, being a mom. But that is not how the universe had planned for me.

BT: Like the practice of yoga, guide us through the simplicity of your design aesthetic. 

DK: My design aesthetic didn’t come from a complicated thought process. I was a body suit everyday. Every single year I did the same thing. And then one day I decided that I love tailoring! So I would throw on a jacket. My father was a custom tailor, so tailoring is in my blood. But the

BT: You were born into fashion (your mother was a model, and father a suit designer) and you were the 2004 CFDA Lifetime Achievement Award Winner, credited for bringing up New York City into the mainstream. 

DK: Yes, my parents were into fashion. I was very interested in illustration—the line and the movement. I started selling clothes when I

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The most important realisation was that I didn’t like to change clothes too often. It was too confounding and time-consuming for me. So I worked on a wardrobe that I loved and that could be worn to work and day out. I knew I could design them artistically, but for myself I found, and continue to find, comfort in a specific uniform of dressing.

BT: And you have a very specific Donna Karan woman in mind? 

DK: I didn’t think that women ex-

BT: Your fashion had a lot of philanthropy embedded in it. How so? 

DK: Yes. It started at Donna Karan when the AIDS epidemic broke out. And I brought the community together for seven months. First I was raising money for AIDS, and then I was for ovarian cancer. Fashion has the power to engage conscious consumers; it has the power to address us. We can address global problems with

BT: Tell me about your last collection and how that plays along your philosophy of life. 

DK: I want to be able to say, “Listen, guys, it’s not about a season.” I wanted to bring it back to the basics. Yes, looking back and looking forward were both important, but essentially being in the present moment was my focus. So the collection had a lot to do with the true essence of being Donna Karan. It was about the body, about a scarf, about a body suit—sensual yet day-to-night ease. There were tailoring and sculptural mesures. I wrote a book on my husband, called Connect: The Dots. A big part of the influence came from him.

BT: Do you miss your husband? 

DK: Oh, he’s with me everyday. We get along well, we understand each other in business; he was the love of my life, he is my inspiration and continues to be my protector.