



Cooperating with the Process

By Rama Berch, C.S.Y.T., E-RYT 500

It sneaks up on you. You might even keep trying to muster it up, but you really aren't interested in things that you used to like. It might be different music or different types of movies or books. Maybe your leisure activities are less frenetic. You may be less dependent on going shopping or eating out. Perhaps your friends tell you that you are changing, or you notice that you don't enjoy the same things that they like to do, even though you used to. Even the foods you like are changing, and you suspect it is the yoga. It is.

I confess that it amazes me — how powerful a simple thing like core opening really is. OK, I recognize that it isn't really a simple thing, or everyone else would know it too. Clearly we are working off-the-grid here; *Svaroopa*® yoga is not a mainstream approach to the body. Mainstream America still swears by sweat and grunt. "If it isn't hard, then it can't be doing you any good" is basic to the exercise world, in spite of repeated studies that prove it to be wrong. Decades of extensive research prove that going from couch-potatohood to mild exercise (walking every other day at a moderate pace) creates radical improvements in your physical health and your state of mind. What you may not know is that the same studies prove that exercising harder or more frequently does not significantly increase the benefits. So this means that "hard" is not the goal. It's not even scientific. But you had probably started to figure that out already.

Until 20 years ago, yoga in America was "classical hatha yoga." This means that it was taught according to the ancient discipline that still emphasizes stretching, to clear the tensions out of your body in order to quiet your mind and make you able to sit for meditation. The classical seated pose is important because when you can sit comfortably and easily, your mind stills automatically, so you experience *svaroopa*, your own true essence. This is very well described in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras and other texts, as well as strongly emphasized in the oral tradition.

An athletic approach to yoga poses was developed by a teacher in India, by mixing classical *asana* (poses) with British calisthenics. This was introduced in America about 20 years ago and became very popular, because it resonated with the mainstream approach of "no pain — no gain." Specifically, the yoga teachers introducing this approach said they wanted to "demystify the mystical tradition." I had been studying in the mystical tradition of yoga for over 10 years already, so I wondered what you get if you take the mystery out of mysticism; is it like taking the corn out of popcorn?

Now I recognize that any type of yoga is good yoga. I learned this from some amazing yogis with decades of practice in the "demystified" styles, with whom I spent a lot of time with when I was serving as the founding president of Yoga Alliance. I could see that they were opening to a deeper inner experience than mere physical conditioning can ever provide. The classical texts on hatha yoga make it clear that doing the physical practices will turn you inside out — you get interested in cultivating your inner experience, instead of working on your body or relying on everything and everyone around you for your happiness.

However, the core opening of *Svaroopa*® yoga works faster, easier and deeper. It makes changes in your body faster and easier than any other system of physical culture. It changes the way you deal with your mind and your life — faster than anything else you can do. It opens up the inner experiences of your own essence easier and more deeply. Healing, transformation and illumination — they are all faster and easier with core opening. Isn't it wonderful?

What this means is that the changes can sneak up on you. You may have begun yoga to improve your physical condition. Since it works so well, you are continually re-inspired to continue; then you realize that more than your body is changing. One of the earliest changes that many experience is dietary. Without knowing why, you begin to gravitate toward a healthier diet and become less interested in eating meat. This is because of *ahimsa*, one of five yoga principles catalogued in the *yamas*. These are the practices of restraining yourself: things you must stop doing if you want personal healing, transformation and upliftment.

When you understand what these principles are, you can recognize their blossoming within you. You can even choose to actively cooperate with the transformation. This is a process of lightening up the density of your body and mind. You already know how the poses create the feeling of internal space, which includes genuine

internal physical space for your breath and internal organs, while it is also a feeling of spaciousness within yourself. That spaciousness continues to expand, ultimately into the vastness of your own divinity. It is much smoother and easier when you understand what is happening and when you consciously cooperate with the process. You are being “reformatted” on all levels of your being so the radiance of your own inner divinity can shine through, without the density obscuring or distorting it. This is the highest use of a human body, mind and life. Ahimsa is one of the ways you can help it along.

Himsa means causing harm; *ahimsa* means you refrain from causing harm. As the first of the five yamas, it is the most important one. In fact, the ancient texts give us a sophisticated sequence of the personal growth process, beginning with yama, not with asana. The whole program includes asana as the third step, incorporating five more steps beyond it, including pranayama (breathing practices) and profound internal practices leading to illumination. These texts promise the experience of merging into your own source and living an illumined life, if you follow the system that they lay out. It's a science!

Nowadays, most people begin with asana, having never heard of the other related practices, but it doesn't really matter where you begin. The practices are all interrelated. It's like when you pull on the string of a sweater; you eventually unravel the whole sweater. You start where your interest or needs take you. Your interest prompts you to give yoga a try, and it works so well that you keep coming back. Then you start getting more than what you originally thought was available. This is refreshingly different than many other things you have tried. Usually you are interested in something (or someone) and you give it a try; you continue on because you are enjoying it; then you find out there is an undercurrent that isn't so enjoyable. Yoga is the gift that keeps giving — only you give it to yourself.

The classical teaching on ahimsa is very simple — do not cause harm to others. However, this teaching is widely misunderstood, due to the pivotal work done by two important men in modern history: Mohandas K. (Mahatma) Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. They worked to accomplish an important political agenda, using a radical approach — non-violence. Due to their world-altering work, you are already familiar with ahimsa, but your understanding of it is distorted without your even realizing it. They were working to make important changes in the world around them. Ahimsa is about making important changes inside yourself.

When you choose to practice ahimsa, you refrain from harmful actions, words and thoughts. The purpose is to free you from violent impulses, thus quieting your mind. It is important to realize how necessary this is; pay close attention to your mind, and you'll discover many violent impulses arising. The things you say and do are only the tip of the iceberg. They are the outer eruptions that occur when your inner climate gets too toxic. You must refrain from violent actions and words first, because starting with trying to control your mind is impossible!

Now you may be thinking, I'm a yogi, I'm not violent. I haven't punched anyone in years! It may be easiest to spot your tendency toward violent actions in your driving. How do you drive? You can practice ahimsa by slowing down and even letting the other car slip in front of you. In addition, you will improve somebody's day and practice a little kindness to the Earth. Most importantly, you refrain from adding another violent impression to your mind and to your storehouse of karmas.

A primary element of ahimsa is vegetarianism. You may be finding yourself already gravitating toward it without understanding why it is happening. As yoga changes your body, you'll naturally want lighter foods, especially foods that don't cause the death of other living creatures.

There are different kinds of vegetarians, choosing this way of eating for different reasons. The written material on the subject is extensive, explaining it from the various perspectives on healthy eating to environmental concerns. Yoga's vegetarianism is this: no beef, no pork, no poultry, no seafood, no eggs, while dairy products are included because you don't have to kill the cow to get the milk.

There are many reasons for the inclusion of vegetarianism in ahimsa, but the most important one is the recognition of consciousness in all forms. When you allow the killing of a creature for your food, you see the animal as a commodity for your exploitation or enjoyment. This is not recognizing or respecting the multitudinous forms of consciousness. In addition, the vegetarian diet will actually improve your experience of meditation, as your body and nervous system become refined and able to handle the higher energies of your inward absorption.

I recognize that it is risky for me to write about food — I may be stepping many people's toes. There are many ways to be a vegetarian, including Ayurveda, but yoga does not specify one over another — just for you to be vegetarian (no meat, seafood or eggs; yes to dairy). Every type of cuisine has its vegetarian tributary,

including Mexican, Italian, Mediterranean, Oriental, Ethiopian, etc. You can even mix it the different kinds for variety and pleasure.

Ultimately, the practice of the yamas is about refraining from doing things that everyone else normally does, thus it goes well beyond society's standard of morality. This means you restrain yourself from acting on the impulses that arise inside. Every human being has violent impulses, and society even allows you to act on them in certain controlled ways — especially verbally. In practicing ahimsa, as you restrain yourself from saying harmful things, you are not only being more considerate of the people around you, your communication skills improve dramatically. Yet it is not for the purpose of making more friends; it is so you don't indulge your violent tendencies.

This one can get a little complicated because sometimes people will feel hurt by your words or actions. You have to look at what you said or did, but you also have to look at your motivation for doing it. Ahimsa is about becoming free from your violent impulses. You don't have to walk on eggshells because other people get their feelings hurt; sometimes their reactions are more about where they are at than what you are doing. Yet you are responsible for your words and actions, so that you don't intentionally harm another.

The subtlest level of ahimsa is to refrain from violent thoughts. This means that you don't think harmful thoughts about others or about yourself. You have to stop saying, "I'm too fat or too skinny, I'm too slow, I'm not good enough, I'm not pretty enough, I'm too old." It's time to stop yourself when you say, "You dummy, you should never have done that." It's a good thing to realize that you should not have done a particular thing, but do you have to call yourself names?

When you work your way through the levels of ahimsa, you attain Patanjali's promise — that all who are around you become peaceful. This means you can wade into a group of people who are fighting and your deep presence immediately calms them down. You don't have to go to the Middle East to put this to work; you may be able to begin with your own family. It happens because, once the inner war ends, the outer war ceases as well.

If you have been gravitating toward vegetarian eating, you do need to learn how to create a well-balanced diet. There are many books, websites, cooking classes and teachers that can help you with that — especially if you look for one with a yoga connection, you'll find your way easily. Vegetarianism is not only easier, cheaper and healthier, it is yogic.

Lastly, you do not have to be a vegetarian in order to be a yogi. You can go through all the stages and levels all the way to enlightenment and still be a meat eater. There are enlightened beings alive today who eat meat. It is completely up to you, but you still may find that looking at your own violent tendencies is worthwhile. You can cooperate with the refinement of your body and the upliftment of your mind by adopting this simple and powerful yoga practice.

And it is yet another wonderful way that you can do more yoga.

Namaste,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rama". Above the letter "a" in "Rama", there is a small heart symbol with a dot inside it.

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