



January 2010 Contemplation Theme

Strengths & Weaknesses

by Swami Nirmalananda Saraswati

Your ability to use your strengths depends on your awareness of having them. Without an accurate assessment of your own abilities, you cannot get very far. This is one of the hardest things about updating your resume. You have to describe your abilities clearly, which means you have to recognize that you have them.

It is difficult to recognize your own strengths because your mind tends to belittle you. It is the nature of the mind to focus on problems, fears and negativities. If everything in your life is going perfectly except for one little thing, your mind fixates on the "one little thing" and loses track of all the other wonderful things. Your mind is especially good at this when you turn your attention to yourself. There are so many ways your mind will tell you that you simply don't measure up. To assess your strengths means you must use your mind in a different way.

Harness the power of your mind for an uplifting purpose — make a list of your strengths. Right now, simply list at least three in the margins of this page or on a scrap nearby. Three strengths, talents, competencies or abilities. Three skills, aptitudes, proficiencies or capacities. Three things that you know you are good at. Three things that other people know you are good at. List them. Right now. You could even list a few extra...

You rely on these strengths and aptitudes. They are how you get most things done. You can count on yourself when it comes to these things. Other people can count on you. You may even base your work or your main relationships in these strengths. Of course you have to do other things too, things you're not as good at. Yet everything is easier when you are working from your strengths. Do you have any more strengths you'd like to add to the list you have already begun?

Using your mind to look at your strengths gives you a new way to use your mind. Using your mind to provide an accurate assessment of reality is very unusual! By applying your mind in this manner, you have the ability to see your weaknesses as well. If you hadn't first listed your strengths, your mind would have been in its usual mode of belittling you. Now you've shifted the way you're using your mind, so you can do a simple assessment of your weaknesses.

You will need to work on your weaknesses, but you first need to identify them. Applying your mind to this task is a little tricky, because your mind will want to jump back into the gutter and beat you up in its usual ways. Instead, try assessing your weaknesses this way — what New Year's resolutions should you be making?

Maybe you thought you got through the beginning of the year without having to take an honest look at yourself, but I'm hoping to plant the mirror directly in front of you. What is it that you need to change in yourself, for yourself? This change is something that you decide to do — for you. It's not something you do for other people. They may know you need to do it; often everyone else sees you more clearly than you see yourself. This is why you're cultivating this ability to use your mind in a new way — to have accurate assessment of reality. With this accurate assessment, you can work from your strengths while you work on your weaknesses.

Consider — what is it that you don't want to still be doing when the end of this year comes? When the holidays roll around this year, you don't want to still be unhappy with yourself about that one thing (or several things). You want to march into the holidays with a whole different feeling — feeling good about yourself because you decided to make a change, and you did.

What is it that you know you need to change, but you are afraid to admit to yourself? Admit it to yourself. Pretending it isn't there doesn't work. You try to turn your head so you don't see yourself in the mirror of your mind, but that mirror is there no matter which direction you turn. You know. You know even when

you try not to know. You know that you really need to make some changes. Avoiding them doesn't help. Denying them doesn't help. The longer you put it off, the more you dislike yourself, and then your mind starts up its belittlement again. Now is the time to change.

Any time is a good time to change, but the new year is especially good. Maybe you already got started on your New Year's resolutions, and this is a chance for you to refresh your resolution. Maybe you tried to avoid the whole subject, but I hope to inspire you to a higher level. You truly can choose to improve yourself. You have so many strengths, but you have some weaknesses as well, and you can do something about them.

There are many websites that will give you tips for making successful resolutions, but they all come down to one point. You have to decide to change. Once you've made the decision, following through is easier than ever before.

If following through on your resolutions has not been easy before, perhaps you made a New Year's "wish," or maybe it was a daydream, fantasy or pipe dream. A decision is powerful. A resolution is a decision, with a difference — it is a promise, a pledge, a decree. A resolution is a vow, an oath or a public declaration. When you make a resolution, you step into a new level of clarity and you resolve to live in a new way.

The most important thing about making this choice is that you are using your mind in a new way. You had to use your mind in a new way before you could list a few of your strengths. That clarity helped you look directly at some of your weaknesses, as well as the choices you have available. When you make a choice and then follow through on it, your clarity expands and deepens. Yoga is about clarity. Thus, making resolutions is yoga.

It works the other way around too — yoga practices give you clarity. You can do a few minutes of Ujjayi Pranayama, and you'll be able to see your strengths and weaknesses more clearly. After some asanas (poses), you'll be able to make your resolutions. Your practice will help you keep your resolutions (or get right back on the horse when you fall off). Yoga and meditation keep expanding and deepening your clarity, which supports your new lifestyle; your new lifestyle keeps expanding and deepening your clarity, which deepens your yoga and meditation.

Yoga is about your mind. All the ancient texts describe this clearly, though Patanjali's Yoga Sutras is best known for it: *yogas chitta vrtti nirodah* — yoga is the stilling of your mind's activities (1.2). All the physical practices are just sneaky ways of quieting your mind. Of course, all the physical practices are beneficial for your body too, but their true goal is to give you that wonderful feeling you know so well, from the end of every class — quiet mind. When your mind is truly quieted, and then you apply it to a task at hand, you have tremendous clarity. Ultimately you can apply that clarity to the innermost dimensions of your own being, and know your own Self.

Making New Year's resolutions is an important yoga practice, because making resolutions is about your mind. Your mind needs your help! Give it a direction to go. Work from your strengths while you work on your weaknesses.

With love & blessings, Swami Nirmalananda

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