



June 2014 Contemplation: Body, Mind & More #6

A Yogic Body

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Many people are interested in perfecting their body, sculpting their body through yoga along with diet and exercise. A common goal in the yoga world is to look like the yoga magazine covers. There is even a formal yoga competition: The World Yoga Sports Championship is being held this year in London, founded on the idea of “spreading interest in yoga throughout the world...” This display of sculpted perfect bodies, capable of doing amazing asanas (poses), is what the modern world calls “yoga.”

Let’s compare this to the ancient sages’ perspective on a yogi’s body. They refer to physical characteristics as an outer expression of the whole person. Swamiji says it this way, “The body is expressing the qualities of the being who is living in it. That is always true, regardless of their physical capacity or condition.”

It can be difficult to understand yoga’s perspective on the body when your mind is filled with an idea of physical perfection, unfortunately based on images that have come from unenlightened beings. You might even beat yourself up with these images, so available in the media, and spend time comparing how your body looks with how you think it should look.

You can uncover what your idea of beauty is. Look in a full length mirror; turn around and look over your shoulder at the back view. What do you tick off on your check list for what is beauty and what is not, according to this internal standard? Your idea of beauty has been planted in your mind by the media, both for female and male stereotypes. It may not take health or happiness into account. It probably doesn’t look at what the magazines call “inner beauty.” And you are especially not considering what the sages say about physical perfection.

Ruupa-laavanya-bala-vajra-sa.mhananat-vaani kaaya-sa.mpat.

— Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras 3.47

Perfection of the body is beauty, gracefulness, strength and lightning-like power.¹

“Beauty” is a very tricky word! The Western yoga world focuses on beauty because it is photograph-able. They cannot photograph inner peace or inner bliss. Additionally yoga magazines promote beauty because yoga does in fact make you beautiful. You are already seeing this happen! You have better posture and, even if you haven’t gained or lost weight, your clothes drape on you more beautifully; your eyes shine; your skin becomes radiant. Your inner beauty shines through.

Thus it is easy to understand how millions of people in America get caught up in athletic and gymnastic yoga styles, pushing or stretching to the limit, trying to reach a standard of model-like beauty. Is this the perfection of the body? Not according to Patanjali. A yoga body is beautiful because the radiance of Consciousness is shining into a physical form.

It’s important to remember that Patanjali didn’t teach women. His sutra is not about whether you look like the magazine covers. All those photographs embed a cultural standard of beauty in your mind. But yoga is about getting beyond the images in your head!

Patanjali also says that a yoga body is graceful, meaning both a physical quality as well as more than physical. “Graceful” denotes an ease and fluidity of movement, along with gentleness of being. This comes from freedom from fear, for you cannot be graceful when you are riddled with anxieties. You become graceful when you access the subtle inner experiences that give you the depth of your own being, which is then expressed through your body as well as your words and actions.

Swami Nirmalananda taught about yogic strength in a series of workshops titled “Redefining Strength.” True strength is not about lifting 1,000 pounds. You do need to be able to lift babies and boxes as well as to do challenging daily activities, but what really gets you through life is

¹ Rendered by Swami Nirmalananda

stamina. Along with stamina, you need vitality. In addition, part of a yogi's strength is radiant health as well as a profound resiliency (the bounce back factor). Maybe you come down with a cold, but you bounce back. It doesn't linger for weeks. Maybe life stops you short, but you get moving again. These comprise true strength.

A yoga body is lightening-like, "vajra" in Sanskrit, which means "lightning bolt." A yogi has a scintillating quality of incredible power, like a lightning bolt. This is because you are the incarnation of Consciousness, shining like a lightning bolt in the night. This lightning-like power is about the brilliance of Consciousness shining through you, which is expressed through an inspired lifestyle and through a physical presence that expresses the scintillating light, without distorting or diminishing it.

While Patanjali promises an extraordinary body with really amazing qualities, he details how to attain it in an earlier sutra:

Sthuula-svaruupa-suuk.shmaanva-yaarthavaatva-sa.myamaat bhuuta-jaya.h.

— Patanjali's Yoga Sutras 3.45

[Perfection of the body comes from] mastery over the subtle elements of nature, by performing the threefold meditation (samyama) on their levels of manifestation.²

It is not the poses that give you perfection of the body! It is by an extraordinary inner attunement, gained through meditation on the subtle processes by which energy becomes matter. Then your mind and body both express the scintillating nature of Consciousness, even if your body doesn't conform to society's standards for beauty.

In *Svaroopaa*[®] yoga, you have already begun the process that will give you access to these subtleties, with core opening being a beginning step. As you progress more and more deeply, especially through *Svaroopaa*[®] Vidya, our meditative practices, you come to see how you and the universe are constructed. Swamiji says, "Within the tantric system of Kashmiri Shaivism, we pierce through all the levels of contraction to an immediate experience of the Self, so these inner unravelings occur organically and progressively over time."

It's important to realize that Patanjali doesn't say you have to sweat. He doesn't say you have to get your heart rate up. He doesn't say you have to become a contortionist. The athletic world emphasizes these things. Patanjali doesn't. Yoga doesn't.

At this point, some of you will be confused. Confusion is a great sign! It indicates you're looking at something in a new way, but your new perspective clashes with your preexisting ideas. It is time to question some of those preexisting ideas. Unfortunately, yoga is often presented in the West in a way that is inconsistent with the ancient tradition.

Western yoga has athleticized the practice, yet still providing tremendous physical and mental benefits for millions of people. These two perspectives do meet, in another teaching from the sages: those most committed to the poses will, after 12- 20 years of intense physical practice, become interested in meditation. At that point, most of them have to find another teacher, one who knows the depth of the tradition, so they can get beyond the physical level to focus on the subtleties through meditation.

But what if you didn't have to sweat for 12 years? Maybe you were interested in the subtleties from the beginning. Is there a way of working with your body and breath to open up these subtleties, even while getting the physical benefits? YES! That is *Svaroopaa*[®] yoga and *Svaroopaa*[®] Vidya meditation. This is why we say, "Do More Yoga."

THIS IS AN ARTICLE IN A YEAR-LONG SERIES ON "BODY, MIND & MORE," OUR CONTEMPLATION THEME FOR 2014, CO-AUTHORED BY SWAMI NIRMALANANDA SARASWATI AND VIDYADEVI STILLMAN OR RUKMINI ABBRUZZI.

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² Rendered by Swami Nirmalananda