



August-September 2012 Contemplation Theme

Precision with Compassion

by Swami Nirmalananda Saraswati

It's relatively easy to exercise. Of course you have to get off the couch and over the hurdle of your own resistance (or dare I say sloth?), but once you get going you'll even enjoy it. The benefits of exercise are well publicized, with a consistent stream of media reports dating from the early 1800's. But yoga isn't exercise.

It's relatively easy to consider yoga poses to be exercise, especially when you take a yoga class at the local athletic club or YMCA. The class might be held in the same room as the aerobics class and belly dancing, even sandwiched in between them. If the yoga style is a gymnastic style or strength-focused approach, or if it is done in a hot room or taught by a former dancer or acrobat, your impression of yoga as a form of exercise could be complete. Add a few pieces of specialized equipment, including rubberized mats, foam cushions and blocks, and you've got a sophisticated form of exercise with high-tech gear. But yoga is not exercise. It's more than exercise. It's better than exercise.

Yoga describes itself, both in ancient records and by modern-day masters, as a spiritual science, promising that you can use every human capacity to expand your consciousness, even physical movements and breathing processes. When you do yoga, even though it might look like exercise, yoga is not exercise.

It would be hard to classify yoga is a type of exercise if the first class you ever took was a *Svaroopa*® yoga class. It doesn't look like exercise. It doesn't feel like exercise. It doesn't smell like exercise. It doesn't work on you like exercise does. It's easier than exercise and it's harder than exercise, and somehow it's both at the same time. It does more for you than exercise does. How can this be?

Svaroopa® yoga works with precision and compassion. While we are working with your body, we are not working on your body. We are using your body as an access point to your whole being, targeting the single most important structure in your body — your spine. Every pose, every prop, every stage in the process, every angle, every breath you are directed to take and every adjustment your teacher gives you is designed for core opening. This core opening is physical and it is more than physical.

The precision is essential for the spinal decompression. If your ankle bone is not on your thigh bone in Janushirshasana (Crook't Knee — in the chair), you will not get the spinal release; instead you will destabilize your hip joint, which actually increases your spinal tension. It's a little like laser surgery. You don't want them to be even 1/16" off when they are using that laser beam!

A student in our Foundations of *Svaroopa*® Yoga Course told me that, as a structural engineer, the previous evening she went home and did the math, "One-quarter inch change in your tailbone makes a three inch change in your neck." She was surprised that I was not surprised, but I already knew it because I had already gotten those changes in my body. Maybe you have too. If not, you simply need to do more yoga.

We've looked at the precision of *Svaroopa*® yoga, but what about the compassion? The precision of *Svaroopa*® yoga creates core opening, which opens the core of your being, not just the core of your body. In the core of your being, you find your own divinity. You're not going to be able to open into this rich inner depth if your teacher is pushy, impatient or needy. Your teacher must be far enough ahead of you that she or he can be compassionate. Their compassion arises from their own inner experience as well as their training. They have already been where you are at now, and have gone through the process that yoga provides. You want a teacher who is ahead of you on the path!

Svaroopa yoga is not special in this regard. No matter what style of yoga you are practicing, you need a teacher who is ahead of you on the path. But not every style of yoga demands such precision, and not every style incorporates compassion into their teaching protocols. In this, *Svaroopa*® yoga is unique. Our Teacher Training includes training in compassion.

Our Teacher Trainers model that compassion while teaching, and hopefully in their whole lives, but they actually lead class segments on how to treat students compassionately. The first of these lessons is given in Foundations and they continue in every level of our professional trainings. As teachers go through the levels, we teach them how to use their voice, how to use the power of touch, how to support you without criticizing you, how to understand your divinity even while they are working with your body, and how to move you through a step-by-step process that is filled with grace.

Some yogis in Teacher Training don't need to be trained in compassion. They bring their compassion with them when they come. Yet while many people attracted to yoga are already compassionate, some err too far on the other side, becoming bleeding hearts. No one would accuse any of our Teacher Trainers of being wimps! This combination of precision and compassion is rare. It is essential in *Svaroopa*® yoga.

When precision is important, people often lose their compassion. In order to see what must be done, and to accomplish it, too many people sacrifice their heart to the task at hand. When compassion is important, people often lose their precision. Many styles of yoga say, "Just do whatever you can. It doesn't matter if it is right or not." This compassionate statement leaves people stuck — they move what moves and they reinforce the tensions in the parts of their body that are already tight. The compassionate teachers may be popular, but are they really benefitting anyone?

Precision with compassion is an essential combination to bring to your own practice. You need to be precise with your selection of poses as well as how you do them.* The precision extends to the amount of time you remain in each stage of each pose, as well as your frequency and length of practice. If you do a long practice one day and a short one the next, you'll experience relapse: your spinal muscles tightening back to their familiar tension. It's not pleasant!

Yet if you rush your practice or push your body too far, even when you're in the right angles, you've lost the compassion for yourself. Perhaps it's the self-compassion that brings you back to your low-tech yoga props every day, your *Svaroopa*® yoga blankets are definitely not high-tech!

Precision with compassion is a life skill, not just a yoga skill. As you cultivate precision, you become able to see things as they are. Yet you make your decisions with your heart open. You move through the tasks in front of you, even when they are challenging, meeting your own highest standards, but with a quality of compassion that makes it all work. This is yoga in action.

The only question remaining is this: how do you cultivate precision, while you act with compassion, yet having full clarity in every step of the process. Do more yoga!

*For precision, the details of how to practice each pose are in our new Pose Cards, with 13 sets in the process of being published. Check with your teacher or Master Yoga Foundation for the latest themes available.

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