



January 2013 Contemplation Theme

Alignment with Grace

by Swami Nirmalaananda Saraswati

Core opening is not only a physical opening but a deeper inner opening, to the experiential knowing of your own Divinity. You've had the experience before, or you wouldn't even be interested in reading this contemplation article. So what's really happening when you do the poses? When you track from your tail to top, opening in stages along the way, you get a profound spinal alignment. Along with aligning your spine, you are aligning yourself with Grace.

You might think that it is as simple as good posture, except that good posture is not so simple. You can easily lift up into a good "look," especially if someone is taking your photo, but your spine collapses down into its habitual slump as soon as you forget. When you straighten up, suck in your gut, open your chest and lengthen your neck upward, you do look good. But you are tightening muscles to get there. You can feel it. So is this what good posture is all about? No.

Your spinal muscles are each relatively small, not as big and impressive as thigh muscles or gluteals. The pivotal placement of each of your spinal muscles, attached to your vertebrae, makes even that small muscle very powerful. A structural engineer, taking our Foundations of Svaroopa® Yoga course told me, "One-quarter inch change in your tailbone makes a three-inch change in your neck. I did the math!" She was right.

When your spinal muscles are tight, they compress and twist your spine, creating the universal slump, as well as the scoliosis (side-to-side curvature) that everyone has. Chiropractors and osteopaths cite chapter and verse, explaining the detrimental effects of spinal compression on your nerves, organs and glands. Even your skin is affected! The light in your eyes dims when your spine collapses. The lift in your heart flattens. The upward flow of inner joy sinks down, and your face dries up like a prune.

"Stand up straight," your mother (hopefully) said to you. But what she meant was: tighten your back muscles to overcome the spinal tensions compressing your spine. When you lift your torso up straight, you are layering tensions over tensions. All those layers of tension are exhausting. So you relax, and your spine slumps again. Your head and neck pushes forward and you get a headache. Your belly sags and your digestion begins to degrade. The back of your waist caves in and you get shorter. You get bunions.

In Svaroopa® yoga, we treat the cause of the compression by finding the spinal muscles that are pulling your spine downward. The bones of your spine are amazingly engineered to stack in a way that lifts you up. You don't actually need any muscles to lift and straighten your spine! Unfortunately, your spinal muscles grip your spinal bones and pull them down, twist them sideways and even compress your intervertebral discs.

To understand the anatomy of it, consider what you already know: when a muscle is working, it shortens. Each muscle has two ends, each attached to different bones, so a working muscle pulls those bones closer together. In other words, any time a spinal muscle is working, it is shortening your spine. This is why we teach you, not only spinal release, but how to use your abdominals, arm and leg muscles, so you use different muscles to stand, walk and carry things.

The precision and compassion of Svaroopa® yoga is a laser-beam targeting system, using props and alignments. Specific spinal muscles are released so that your vertebrae naturally realign. Your spine lifts and lengthens, taking pressure off your discs, nerves, organs and glands. No wonder your body becomes healthier and stronger!

If that were the whole story, it would be a great story. Like seeing a great movie, it would be worthwhile to repeat the experience. You could do Svaroopa® yoga every day for the rest of your life, motivated by the physical benefits alone. If that's all you want, you can stop reading here.

Yoga's ancient sages tell us that a perfect body is not enough. Once you achieve physical health, beauty, strength, stamina and vitality, you'll still be looking for something more. You can set your whole life up perfectly and you'll still be looking for something, an indefinable something. You can't find it because you don't know what it is you are looking for. What you are looking for is your own Self. It isn't found outside of you; you find your Self inside yourself.

You need help in this inner discovery. You had help in learning how to look outside. From your earliest days, people wiggled toys in front of your cute baby face. They tweaked your nose, talked in squeaky voices and

marveled at your big beautiful eyes. They did everything they could to draw your attention outward and make you dependent on them. Well, the truth is that you were dependent on them: food, drink, body care — even life itself came from them and still depended on their care.

They took you through the essential steps of human conditioning, training your mind in how to desire, need, fear, grieve, project onto others, get angry, blame and feel guilty. Play came naturally to you. Joy, laughter, tears — none of these needed to be taught. But dependency on others had to be taught. The seeds were already within you, planted by your own actions in lifetimes preceding this one, thus those who birthed and raised you simply nurtured your own karmic seeds, helping you to bring them to fruition. Thus you were inclined toward looking outside for fulfillment and they helped you learn how to do it.

Your inner impulse toward upliftment comes naturally to you. The more you lose your Self, the more your Self pushes up within you, demanding to be recognized. The more lost you get in the outer world, the less happy you are and the more you yearn for that indefinable something. Everyone yearns, but not everyone seeks. You're a seeker. You're looking for what you've never lost, but you're looking on the outside. It's time to look inward.

Let's say that you decide to give it a try. You buy a book or tape on meditation. You sit in the corner, look inward and what you find is your crazy mind. Some meditative systems teach you to watch your mind. Yoga teaches you how to still your mind and look deeper, a profoundly different approach, and (important!) yoga offers more. Yoga makes the inward shift easy, through Grace.

I learned about Grace when I met my Guru, Baba Muktananda. I didn't know that it was possible that someone could help me find me. Through decades of practice, and especially through the way his Guru had propelled Baba into consciousness, Baba was able to give the same gift to me. The gift of Grace makes the inward turning easy, even irresistible. That Grace flows through *Svaroopā*® yoga. That Grace flows through your spine.

The mechanical opening of your spine removes the blocks that suppressed the energy always flowing through your spine. Your core opening makes you feel more alive, more vibrant and clear headed, more positive and ready to tackle life. Yoga calls this flow "prana," explaining that it is your own individual power plant, the energy that makes you alive. Unblocking the flow of prana is profoundly beneficial and happens any time your spine is aligned and lifted. This happens in a *Svaroopā*® yoga class as well as under the ministrations of a professional trained in one of many different therapies.

Thus the physical benefits described above are even more powerful; you get energetic benefits simultaneously. The full flow of your own prana gives you an energy boost. You feel "up." You have more creativity, more compassion, even more time available and more ways to use it. Core opening gives a lift to your spine and to your life. But this is not the whole story. There is more.

Svaroopā® yoga is the yoga of Grace. It comes from the initiation I received from my Guru, so it carries Baba's blessing to the next generation — you. *Svaroopā*® yoga's approach to the yoga poses is so radically different than other styles of yoga because we work your body from the inside out. I learned this from Kundalini, the cosmic power of enlightenment, as She arose from my tail and worked Her way to my top, giving me insight into the body's role in this process. It was Baba's Grace that awakened Kundalini in me, opening me to my own Self.

Thus when you use *Svaroopā*® yoga to align your spine, you place yourself in that flow of Grace. My relationship with my Baba guarantees it. This is why *Svaroopā*® yoga works so deeply and profoundly — this is a path of Grace. I am dedicating all of 2013 to looking at this. I've planned a series of articles plus our October Conference to explore this theme — Alignment with Grace. It's not news because it's been happening all along. Do more yoga.

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