



January 2014 Contemplation: Body, Mind & More #1

Relaxation & More

by Vidyadevi Stillman & Swami Nirmalananda Saraswati

“Become aware of your toes, all ten toes, all at the same time...”

Your *Svaroopo*® yoga class begins with these words, while you are reclining in Shavasana. Your teacher guides you progressively through each area of your body in turn. Yet this is not a body inventory. We are not doing this so that you will count your toes and fingers, checking that you have every body part. Also, it is not an analysis of how you look to yourself or others. It is not even about labeling parts of your body as good/bad, painful/not painful, want/don't want, etc. Usually when you look at your body you have some of these types of thoughts: “How do I look? How am I doing?”

The Guided Awareness is a consciousness-practice. This means it is a training in consciousness, a training in pure awareness. Unfortunately when you do a body inventory or analysis, you're mixing thoughts into your awareness. Such thoughts are like a stream of pollutants, actually making the inherent power of your own awareness less powerful. In addition, most thoughts are toxic. Think about it. In fact, I dare you to think a non-toxic thought!

Of course there are many non-toxic thoughts you could think, but the point is that you rarely use your mind this way. Of course, you may have already mastered this and habitually think non-toxic thoughts, almost of the time. Unfortunately, non-toxic thoughts are more prevalent. Yet, to be “aware” (without thought) is a whole different thing. The power of pure awareness.

Vidyadevi shares, “Early on, I discovered that if I was watching TV or my mind was busy, the poses didn't make my body feel better. I had to be ‘in it’ for it to work. Being present makes a difference.”

The Guided Awareness is not a Guided Relaxation. You'll never hear your teacher say, “Relax your feet and ankles,” or, “Let your legs soften.” In a Guided Relaxation you are relaxing, which is a type of doing, trying to relax the areas of your body that feel tense. How can that ever be successful?

Try it this way: right now, relax your shoulders. You can even speak directly to your shoulders. Say, “Shoulders, Relax!” Does it work?

Not really. Bottom line: thinking is not relaxing, in case you haven't noticed. When you think of your toes, your toes are not going to relax. But when you become aware of your toes, something amazing happens. Of course, it may take a little bit longer to become aware of your toes, but that's merely because you are not well practiced at awareness. Swami Nirmalananda says, “You have had a lot of practice with thinking, but you are not yet that good at awareness.”

When you cultivate awareness of your toes, they relax! From this you can conclude that awareness is relaxing. Fortunately, the medical community is now validating your personal findings through their studies of “the relaxation response.”

Under Dr. Herbert Benson, researchers at Harvard Medical School discovered long-term practitioners of relaxation methods (such as yoga and meditation) have far more “disease-fighting genes” active compared to those who practice no form of relaxation¹. Other medical researchers have found that yoga, meditation, and even repetitive prayer and mantras all induced the “relaxation effect,” a phenomenon that could be just as powerful as any medical drug but without the side effects.

One researcher explained it this way, “What you're looking for is a state of deep relaxation where tension is released from the body on a physical level and your mind completely switches

¹ <http://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/relax--its-good-for-you-20090819-eqlo.html>

off. The effects won't be achieved if you are lounging round in an everyday way, nor can you force yourself to relax. You can only really achieve it by learning specific techniques."

It is quite an accomplishment when you still your body and your mind! In the beginning, you can make your body lie completely motionless, but have your mind racing and your emotions churning. We know that sometimes the first Shavasana is the hardest pose of your whole class. You could be lying physically still because you don't want to disturb your neighbors, but inside there is no stillness. You have brought your body to a halt yet your inner speed continues. From time to time this happens for anyone. Yet yoga says that if you just keep your body in stillness, your mind is going to slow down.

Sthira sukham aasanam — Patanjali's Yoga Sutras 2.46

The (yoga) pose is motionless and easy.

While this sutra is really about the seated poses that lay the foundation for meditation, it applies to every yoga pose. In every pose, you are looking for that point of sthira (absolute motionlessness) and sukha (complete ease). When that happens, something more happens. It is the "something more" of yoga that happens. What this means is, just like the researcher said, "...your mind completely switches off." That is the beginning of everything!

Even when your first Shavasana is hard for you, your second Shavasana is quite different — a little slice of heaven! This is because all the other poses got you ready for Shavasana. The ultimate purpose of all those other poses is to get you ready for the stillness and for what happens in that profound inner stillness.

While you may not always hear the words being said, our Guided Awareness in the final Shavasana ends with words that point you inward:

Being aware of your whole body...
or being aware of awareness itself...
or follow awareness into its source...
Rest in That.²

That stillness and ease, which began with your body, gives you more, beginning with your mind becoming still. This is not merely a deep relaxation of your body. It's not merely a respite from your thoughts and emotions. This is a tangible opening to something more, something greater, something more core to your being, something more essential — an opening to the something that is called your Essence. It's called svaroopā, your own Self.

Medical literature has been validating the health benefits of relaxation for 30 years or more. All this research has helped to give yoga's practices a respectable name in the scientific community, for which the yogis are grateful. But consider this: yoga was doing those practices long before science thought they were respectable. Yoga has other practices that haven't yet been documented by science. What might those practices do for you?

While science can tell us a little bit about the health benefits of deep relaxation, it hasn't even begun to catch up with a yogi. Every yogi who begins the science of yoga is doing a scientific exploration within the multidimensionality of her or his own being, using proven methodologies, every time they do their own yoga practice. Do more yoga.

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

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² Swami Nirmalananda, 2009 "Guided Awareness" handout from Foundations of Svaroopā® Yoga course, available by private circulation