



Svaroopā® Vidya Ashram

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Yoga & Spirituality #3

Following a Path

By Swami Nirmalananda & Vidyadevi Stillman

In 1969 Swami Satchidananda opened the Woodstock Music Festival, ending with teaching everyone to chant Hari OM. A modern-day Guru and cultural icon, he was famously quoted as saying, “All paths lead to the same goal.” This is not the whole quote. Unfortunately, this partial quote is often used to justify spiritual dabbling. What he said was, “All paths lead to the same goal, but you have to pick one and follow it to the end.”

Just like a mountain with many paths, you must pick one in order to get to the mountain peak. If you keep switching trails, you will wander around the mountain forever. You will certainly have wonderful experiences but you’ll never make it to the top. In yoga, the goal is the experience of your own Self, the Ultimate Reality within. Even more, it is about living in that Reality all the time, “Self-Realization.”

You may be motivated by a simpler goal: you do yoga so you will feel better. This is a great reason to do yoga. You get what you want because *Svaroopā*® yoga excels at healing what ails you. Pain and stress melt away as you lengthen your tail. Illness and injury heal more quickly. Yoga even improves conditions that modern medicine doesn’t know how to treat.

Many different styles of yoga poses are available in the West. They all provide dramatic physical benefits as well as stress reduction. However research shows that exercise also provides the same benefits, sometimes even more effectively. If exercise gives you the same results as yoga, then what’s so special about yoga?

Swami Nirmalananda describes, “When I returned from my Guru’s Ashram, I discovered that yoga was changing in America. A teacher of another style told me proudly, ‘We’re taking the mysticism out of yoga.’ I was shocked! I’d given years of my life to learn the mysticism of yoga. They were doing everything they could to make it merely physical. It’s no wonder I had to create a new yoga style.”

This means is that it matters what “brand” of yoga you do. While one will give you beauty and gracefulness, does it free you from anxiety? Other styles make you sweat or jump in and out of poses, but you may still have back pain. You can do yoga poses on a trapeze but still get upset when life brings you back down to earth. *Svaroopā*® yoga is a mystical science, not merely an athletic endeavor. This means it gives you mystical experiences, fulfilling the promise made by the ancient sages of India. *Svaroopā*® yoga is spiritual yoga.

Peace and joy fill you from within as you dissolve spinal tensions. Not only do you get taller, you carry yourself more regally. Your ability to face the realities of life with equanimity grows along with the length of your spine. Like a lotus, you don’t get dirty even when life plants you in the mud.

All these are important life skills, yet *Svaroopā*® yoga offers you more — it offers you “*svaroopā*.” Your own Self, your Divine Essence. The inner opening into consciousness and bliss, inherent within you. The depth and expansiveness within. This is all built into every *Svaroopā*® yoga class. Especially you may have experienced this after Seated Side Stretch. All you have to do is sit, even briefly. Something magical happens inside. It’s all intentional. It’s all purpose-full.

Yoga’s full range of technology goes beyond the physical to incorporate mental, devotional and meditative practices. This is why the study of sutras is becoming more popular, as are chanting and meditation. Each of these disciplines offers you significantly more than poses can ever provide.

Your mind is more powerful than your body. This means that using yogic tools to develop your mental capacity gives you more benefits than poses could ever do. These tools are called *j~nana* yoga, the study of the texts. In addition, we work proactively on unraveling the way you use your mind to tie yourself up in knots with *vichara* (guided self-inquiry). As you understand yoga’s teachings, you better understand life, as well as yourself and others around you. This changes everything. This is why we include contemplations at the end of every *Svaroopā*® yoga class.

Your heart is more powerful than your mind. You develop your heart's capacity through yoga's devotional practices. When your heart meets God, or even turns toward God, consider who is going to be changed — God or you? You don't even have to believe in God for it to work, just like you don't have to believe in gravity for it to work. The yoga of your heart, bhakti yoga, is included in *Svaroopā*® yoga through the background music of Swamiji's chants, as well as in the final pose, Yoga Mudra. In this yogic seal, you place your head below your heart, bowing to your teacher and the whole lineage of teachers that she/he brings to you.

Meditation is the most powerful and most beneficial of yoga's technologies. How amazing that you get so much when you are doing nothing! Modern research is beginning to prove what the sages always emphasized, that this is the cream of the practices, called raja yoga (king's yoga). As wonderful as each of the other practices is, their purpose is to give you easy and deep meditation.

This is the point at which Gurus come into the picture. In earlier stages, the busy-ness of your body, mind and heart kept you focused on the practices instead of where they came from. The doing-ness seemed most important. Yet you got those practices from someone who had already done them. That teacher is called "guru," even if she/he lives in your home town and isn't yet enlightened. Even your local piano teacher is called a "piano guru." In the West, we put the capital-G onto the word when we're talking about the spiritual teacher, one who can take you all the way.

For your spiritual development, you must pick a path and follow it to its end. Every path has a Guru. Mindfulness meditation, Zen, Tibetan, Christian contemplation, the power of now, kabbalah and *Svaroopā*® Vidya Meditation — all have Gurus. If there's no Guru, the path is not true. Someone must have attained the promise or it is false. The one who attains and shares is called Guru.

Do you want to climb with a guide who has only seen satellite photos of the trail? Vidyadevi says, "I have climbed in the Himalayas. I always had a guide. I was protected and took the safest and most direct route to the top. In the same way, I have a spiritual guide: Swami Nirmalananda."

The texts emphasize you must test the Guru. The test is two-fold: inside and outside.

First you check inside to see if you are getting uplifted in the Guru's presence or by their teachings. It's obviously working if you're experiencing the bliss of consciousness, your own svaroopā. But it is also working if you are churning inside, with all your "stuff" coming up in order to be expelled from your system. To test the Guru further, follow their teachings for six months and then reevaluate how this is working for you.

Secondly, you look at those who have been studying with the Guru for the longest. See if they are more peaceful and more blissful, but also if they are becoming more effective in the world. Or are they using their spirituality to escape? Another thing to look for is that they are unique individuals, not all clones of each other and of the Guru.

When the Guru passes these tests, you can apply yourself to their practices for another six months. Swamiji says, "After doing several six month periods, I realized one day that I'd forgotten to check in with myself. I was surprised to see that I'd been studying with my Baba for over six years. It was then that I knew that this path was working for me. It made me able to apply myself more fully."

Svaroopā® yoga offers all the above yogic technologies because it is a maha yoga, one that interweaves all the yogas together. While your *Svaroopā*® yoga class emphasizes the physical practices, every class introduces mental, devotional and meditative processes.

Most importantly, *Svaroopā*® yoga is a Shaktipat yoga. Whether you begin at your tailbone, or with the sutras, devotional practices or meditations, studying with Swamiji guarantees you will receive this inner awakening. This is the beauty of a Kundalini master. Nirmalanandaji will celebrate her 40th anniversary of receiving Shaktipat from Swami Muktananda this year. She knows the path and what it will give. This is why she continues to say, "Do more yoga."

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