



November 2011 Contemplation Theme

Family

by Swami Nirmalananda Saraswati

Your experience of yoga is only understood by another yogi. Try to explain what yoga gives you to your family. They might smile and nod, or perhaps frown and shake their heads wonderingly. They might say, "That's nice, dear." But few of them, perhaps none, will say, "Show me." But when you talk about your experience to another Svaroopis — their eyes light up and they say, "Yes, I know just what you mean!" Other yogis are your family, too. This gives you two types of family: your blood relatives and your yoga-brothers and yoga-sisters.

Family is of primal importance. This is true even when some family members are problematical. Thus you might be curious about how yogis in India handle their families. The answer is, mostly they don't. They leave their families. They hit the road, usually on foot, to go find a teacher who will give them something their family could not give. Essentially, they grew up watching the people around them, who were urging, "You can grow up to be like me!" By leaving, the yogis said, "I see you. You are successful, popular and always have lots to do. But you don't look very happy to me. I cannot see that my attempt to repeat your life will make me happy either. I'm outta here!"

Whether you came from the perfect family or a highly imperfect family, you didn't get what you wanted or you wouldn't be here. The people fulfilled by what their family provides — they stay there. That's an incredible number of people, even if they didn't come from perfect families. Their dharma (life path) keeps them in the familial sphere, both the family who raised them as well as the family they raise if they have children. They usually don't venture far afield; their family is one of the focal points of their life. If this is you, and you are also doing yoga, you are very fortunate.

Yet lots of western yogis have a different experience of family. This may help motivate them to venture far afield, whether moving to take a distant job, amassing thousands of airline miles or pursuing different lifestyle choices. You may be such a person who lives far from your roots or spends as much time as possible traveling to exotic destinations. You may have experimented with lifestyles outside the mainstream's recommendations in your searching. You are looking for something that cannot be purchased, earned or acquired, for it is your own Self. This is yoga's specialty.

When you begin at your tailbone, the core opening opens up your inner experience of Self, even if you didn't know the possibility existed. The yoga of your body and breath are the tip of the iceberg, and they bring you the whole iceberg, even the deeper hidden dimensions — only you're not going to crash and drown, you are going to soar into the bliss of absolute freedom! This is svaroopaa, the Self, your own Divine Essence.

If yoga is about knowing the Self, where does family fit in? You probably have an image stored somewhere in your memories, the nearly-naked man, skeletal in his austerities, with wild hair and beard, sitting in a meditation pose with fiery eyes staring at the camera. This image shows up in the media, but it's not the kind of yoga we practice. *Svaroopa*® yoga is an integrative practice, meaning it integrates your spirituality into your life. Your deepening inward enriches your relationships from your very first yoga class.

Your relatives include those that preceded you and those that follow, the family who raised you and the family you raise. They are related by blood, adoption or marriage. These people are there for you even when they don't understand you or perhaps not approve of how you live. You are there for them, even when you don't want to be. The bond is a powerful tie.

I remember being surprised by how I felt at a family reunion many years ago, sitting in a room with 25 blood relatives, many of whom I hadn't seen in decades. I could feel the bond with them so tangibly, so physically. It's like my DNA recognized their DNA. Thus while we were getting caught up, essentially getting to know each other all over again, there was a wordless bond that made the words almost unnecessary. That bond spans from birth to death. It's earthy. It's real.

You have a similar bond with your yoga family. The people who share your interest in yoga also end up sharing your deep experiences — both because you tell them what's happening for you as well as because they are having similar deep experiences. That's the reason you both practice yoga. The bond you share is physical, it's real, it's earthy. It's like your spiritual DNA.

The iconographic image of the skeletal yogi is a myth. The yogis through the last 10-20 thousand years lived and practiced together. They built their lives around yoga; they built their homes in close proximity to each other; they shared their cooking, shared their child-rearing and shared their lives. They called themselves a kula, meaning family or clan. You belong to the *Svaroopā*[®] kula when you decide you belong. The price of admission is easy — simply your choice to belong.

So many times I've sat in a yoga room, waiting for the moment to begin teaching, and watched a student arrive. Sometimes that student is a returning yogi and they come over with a gleam in their eye. When I realize who they are, or they remind me, we often laugh and cry, both of us doing both all at the same time. What a reunion! It's family.

When I talk to a yogi facing a crisis, or hear of what's going on in their lives or attend a funeral for a yogi who has preceded me into the next step of life, it's family. When I encounter someone that I knew during my years with Baba, it's family. When I lead a retreat or step into a classroom with Svaroopis from all over the globe, it's family.

Yoga's texts clearly describe how your yoga family supports and enriches your practice as well as your life. The living masters intentionally foster their students, like a foster parent raises a child — not as a substitute for the real thing, but serving as a true parent in ways that the child's biological parents simply couldn't manage. Similarly there were things in you that your parents didn't understand, didn't know how to nurture, didn't know how to guide you through — and yoga does. When you find your yoga, it's like coming home. You may know the floor of the yoga classroom more intimately than you know the floor in your own home. It's family.

How does a yogi handle family? A yogi welcomes them all! Whether you had 10 siblings or one, they're all family. Whether the generations preceding you are still alive or the ones that will follow you have been born, they're all family. Whether you know the name of the person next to you on the floor, once you've done Shavasana together, you're family.

A friend in India told me about a family funeral he'd attended a few days earlier. I asked about his family. He said his immediate family was over 200 people, all of whom live within a few miles of each other. I thought about the family I was born into and those whom I had the good fortune to raise — a smaller number. And then I thought about my kula, my yoga family. You are my family!

I came from a huge family! I shared such amazing yoga experiences with thousands of yoga-sisters and yoga-brothers. My Guru brought us together to open up something inside each one of us. We have nurtured it through our practices, each in our own time and own way. That inner opening grows into the one thing you cannot buy, earn or acquire — your own Self. And there is only one Self. That one Self is being all the selves that exist, including you and including me. That makes us all family.

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