



September 2010 Contemplation Theme

The Pairs of Opposites

by Swami Nirmalaananda Saraswati

Good – bad, happy – sad, right – wrong, up – down, in – out, yours — mine. You see the contrasts everywhere, as though we lived in a black-and-white world. Yoga warns about living in the pairs of opposites, and offers you another way to live: see God in everyone and everything. There are stages in your process of getting to the ability to see what is already in front of you: the divine fully present within the mundane. The process moves along faster and more smoothly when you understand it, even better when you cooperate with it.

Begin with considering that other people have good reasons for doing what they do, thinking the way they think, and living the way they live. While you don't have to agree with them, you will be better off within yourself if you allow them to have their perspective. When you invest your mental and emotional energy in seeing others as wrong, or seeing yourself as wrong, you are the one who is churning over it. You are the one who has to listen to your negative thoughts. You are the one who has to live with your mind.

The condition of your mind is of the greatest importance, according to yoga. It is not your Self that you need to worry about. Your *svaroopa*, your innermost essence, is already divine. You don't have to uplift your Self. Yoga is about finding your Self, not perfecting your Self. Yoga's practices give you the experience of your own inherent divinity.

You don't need to work on your soul either. Your soul is the deepest level of your own individuality, which reincarnates through lifetimes so you can complete your karmas and learn your lessons. Even though your soul carries your unfinished karmas, your soul is unstained. Your soul is ever pure and perfect.

It's your mind that needs the work. Your mind gets caught up in the pairs of opposites and drags your emotions along with it. Together, your mind and emotions head right into the swamp, where they get muddy and mucky. The result is suffering. You are the one that suffers the most from the condition of your mind, though you usually are quite willing to share your suffering with others. Thus yoga says you must work on your mind.

Once you know your own Self, it is easy to see the divinity shining in everyone and everything. Then you cannot label anyone as bad or wrong. The labels disintegrate in the light of consciousness. Yet you don't need to be concerned that the state of Self-Knowingness is a state of drunken romanticism. While you see the divine in the mundane, you also have clarity about whether something is working well or not. It is obvious whether someone is focused on their own selfish purposes or giving themselves to a higher purpose. You can easily see if they are entrapped in their mind and memories or if they are living in the reality of the here-and-now. And you can see if they are making mistakes — but it's OK if they do. After all, how did you learn most of your lessons? You made a few mistakes along the way, too.

At this point, it's easy to understand that when you become enlightened, you will stop judging others. You will be more understanding. You'll know when to help and when to back off. When you look at the situation this way, you could conclude that all you have to do is more yoga and you'll eventually "get there." But there is no "there" to get to. It's all here, right here.

It doesn't work to just keep doing your yoga practices, because you need to see that life itself is yoga. Relationships are yoga. Food is yoga. This is because yoga is about the way you use your mind, which can be yogic or unyogic. It's time to take yoga off your plaid blankets and begin addressing your mind. If you cannot yet see God in everything, then at least see that it's not a black-and-white world. It's time to see the shades of grey. Get beyond the pairs of opposites.

This can be hard if you have always been an achiever. Those who have gotten ahead by getting things right can get stuck in the opposites, "right vs wrong" — and they work hard to make sure they are always right. Those who have earned other people's love and respect by always being good can get stuck in the opposites, "good vs bad" — and they make sure they are always the good one. Those who learned to always be on top in a power struggle are stuck in "my way," and never discover that others have amazingly good ideas too. Those who found that always being bad or wrong was the way to get their needs met can end up living in this trap for the rest of their life (or even many lifetimes).

The pairs of opposites also affect in another way besides the way you use them to trap yourself: how you use them to evaluate other people. When you look at your neighbors, family members, or even the other yoga student on the floor next to you, your mind begins comparing. Your mind does this because of *maya*, the power of delusion that

makes you see this divine world as merely mundane. Maya is a power or force, by which consciousness takes on limits, in order to manifest as the multiplicity of forms and beings in this world. Maya does this by splitting the One into seemingly many — maya does this by creating division and separation. Your mind functions by the power of consciousness, which means that your mind is an agent of maya. Without you having to do anything to get it going, your mind starts measuring, analyzing, comparing and judging on its own.

Everyone's mind does this, but different people deal with the results of their analyses in different ways. You might be one whose mind compares yourself with your neighbor and always finds something wrong with them, or perhaps your mind always finds something wrong with you. Whichever direction your mind goes, it is putting someone on the bottom of the heap. The one who is not on the bottom on the heap is, by default, better than the other person. Your mind usually says that one person is worse than another. It almost never says that one person is better than the other, which is because it is your mind's job to cut things into pieces — not to respect, uplift or value things. This is the nature of the mind, and one of the reasons that you must work on it.

If your mind is one that judges another person as being worse than you, it is giving you a way of feeling good about yourself. Because they are worse than you, you're pretty good after all. This means that people who complain about others are really not complaining; they are finding a way of feeling good about themselves. They pay a high price; they live in a world of incompetents.

If your mind is one that judges you as being worse than the other person, it is protecting you from putting yourself forward. If everyone is better than you, then you never have to invest yourself in anything. You can hang back and let everyone else do the hard stuff. You've found the easy way out; life is about safety and comfort. The price is high — you feel terrible about yourself, but you pretend not to know.

A yogi lives beyond the pairs of opposites. This means you don't judge: you don't judge others and you don't judge yourself. Living in the constant analysis and comparisons is a way to be miserable. But the goal of yoga is bliss! So a yogi must transcend the pairs of opposites.

When you stop judging, however, you don't become stupid. You must continue to use your intelligence to make choices, so you must discern the difference between one thing and another. As a teacher of yoga teachers, I must discern who is learning the methodology well enough to be sent out to work with other people's bodies. As a driver of an automobile, I must discern what a safe driving speed is. As a person who loves food, I must discern what will nourish me well and what will be detrimental. This discernment is a way of using your intelligence to see the shades of grey instead of living in a black-and-white world. Maybe that's why I always loved Ansel Adams.

The best way I've found to back the mind out of the pairs of opposites is to use these opposites: "effective vs not-effective." This will help you discern differences without making pejorative judgments. This is the how we train *Svaroopaa*[®] yoga teachers, so that they can use the tools of *Svaroopaa*[®] yoga to make effective changes for their students and for themselves.

When you consider if your actions are being effective, your focus is on your actions — not on the sense of self they would construct for you. You can cook wonderful dishes without getting caught up in being a good cook. You can drive well without being all caught up in being a "good driver." You can be an effective parent without losing yourself in mothering or fathering. You can do a good job without taking on the identity of being in that industry.

I realize that these statements can be frightening to some. If you are saying, "But I want to be a good parent!" then I need to explain a little more. Yes, you want to raise your children well; you want them to grow up to be happy, functioning adults in a confusing world. Yet while you are being a parent, you are also a spouse or partner, a daughter or son, a friend, a yogi, a movie-goer, etc. So you are not so wrapped up in being a parent that it gives you your sense of self-worth. There is more to you than the parenting you do, as important as it is. Yoga is about that something more.

To find the something more, you need to do well at the things you do. If you are continually struggling, you can't look beyond the immediate need. So you must be effective at the things you choose to do. When you cultivate the ability to be effective, you accomplish those important things, but you don't become "The Accomplisher." There's a "you" in there. You step beyond the pairs of opposites and find the "you" that you already are. That's the Self. That is your own inherent divinity. Do more yoga.

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