



September-October 2011 Contemplation Theme

Cultivate the Opposite

by Swami Nirmalananda Saraswati

St Francis of Assisi said, “Where there is hatred, sow love.” This important teaching was also a key piece of Patanjali’s text approximately 4,000 years earlier:

Vitarka-baadhane-pratipaksha-bhaavanam.—Yoga Sutras 2.33

When your mind is disturbed by improper thoughts,
remedy it by cultivating the opposite.

The sage Patanjali is saying that you have the ability to choose what your mind is doing. For example, let’s say you are in the middle of writing an email, when your phone rings. You answer it and begin an important conversation on a completely different subject. You are able to direct your mind toward the new subject. When you hang up the phone, you can choose to continue thinking about your phone call, or go for a snack or meal, or even return to your email, again choosing what your mind will focus on. No one else is in control of your mind. Only you.

Mind-control is a consistent theme in many sci-fi books and movies. When I was living in my Guru’s ashram, a friend told me that his family was afraid he was being “brainwashed.” With his approval, his parents had him kidnapped and “deprogrammed” by the leading deprogrammer in the country. After a week in a remote cabin, the deprogrammer brought my friend back, also bringing along his parents. They all went to meet Baba Muktananda, with the deprogrammer saying, “You are the only spiritual teacher that is deprogramming your disciples – not programming them.”

To that I will add — you need some deprogramming! The program you’re running is not so good. You need an upgrade. Fortunately, yoga does this for you.

When you learn to relax deeply in Shavasana, you are learning to relax. This is a big deal!

When you learn to breathe slowly and efficiently, using your full lung capacity, in Ujjayi Pranayama, you are opening up your habitually constricted breath. This is a big deal!

When you begin unraveling your core tensions, from tail to top, it isn’t just your body that is changing. Your mind begins to unravel as well. Thank God!

When you read these contemplation articles, which introduce the timeless principles of yoga, you begin to reformulate your perspective on life. This is a very big deal!

Everyone knows that an old computer cannot run new sophisticated programs. Your yoga classes and home practice are the equivalent of upgrading your equipment. In addition, considering how the teachings of yoga might apply to you is the equivalent of upgrading your software. Beyond that, choosing to actively participate in the upgrade is the only thing that’s missing. That would be equivalent to calling in a teenager to teach you how to use the new equipment! Someone can show you the way, if they have already been through the process themselves. That’s what your teacher is for.

Yoga works at multiple levels in you, even when you don’t realize all of what’s happening. When you begin yoga classes, enjoying the physical benefits, you also enjoy feeling calmer, less stressed, more positive and more enthusiastic about life. As you continue your yoga studies, you become more compassionate to others, even while you are getting better at taking care of yourself — a rare combination. Yoga is working on your mind and heart, even when you think you are only working on your body. It’s amazing!

Whether you ever heard about the five yamas, introduced in my last few articles, they begin to work on you and in you. You naturally gravitate toward non-harming, truth-speaking, non-stealing, freedom from sexually oriented obsessiveness and non-greediness, whether you ever heard of *ahimsa*, *satya*, *asteya*, *brahmacharya* and *aparigraha*.

Interestingly, the yogis that Patanjali was teaching several thousand years ago did not start yoga like you did. They did not start with doing yoga poses. The teachers in that era would not accept students

for training unless the students first mastered the yamas and niyamas — yoga’s principles for how you handle the world (yamas) and how you handle yourself in the world (niyamas). The students had to cultivate a yogic mind and yogic lifestyle before they even learned Shavasana & Ujjayi Pranayama.

Patanjali clearly recognizes how hard this is to do, which is why he tells you to cultivate the opposite when your mind is disturbed. Modern day anger coaches say the same thing, citing new research showing that happy people are those who make conscious decisions to be happy. They actively choose to be not-angry. Today’s professionals teaching anger management conclude that you have choice about what your mind thinks. Yoga says, yes! And when you change your thoughts, you change your feelings, and that changes your life.

Use a yoga pose or a few Ujjayi breaths to intervene when your mind boards the bullet train to hell. Or repeat your mantra or say a prayer. Any of these things are helpful, but Patanjali sets the bar a bit higher. Cultivate the opposite. When you see someone’s bad side (again), consider that they have good qualities, even if they never show them to you. After all, someone loves them. When your life is full of storm clouds, look for the silver lining; it’s always there. Cultivate the opposite.

How do you “cultivate?” It is not as simple as thinking a good thought about that person or situation. Remember how many negative thoughts you have run through your mind before you even realize you need to intervene. Now you must think as many good thoughts as you have invested in negativity, dire and doom. These positive and uplifting thoughts will necessarily be repetitive; you’ll have to repeat the same thought in your mind again and again. But your negative thoughts were repetitive. You will have to put some effort into thinking these new uplifting thoughts, but you already put a lot of effort into your negative thoughts. Yes, you have to work at this. It’s called deprogramming and reprogramming. That is why the computer programmers get the big bucks.

What is the “opposite?” There are two steps to figuring out what to cultivate:

- 1) Identify what you are feeling
- 2) Determine what the opposite is for you.

In the heat of the moment, it can be tricky to determine if you’re feeling angry or defensive, grief or regret, jealousy or greed. It is even possible that you are feeling a complex mix of all of these, all at the same time.

Once you discern what it is you are feeling, now determine what would be the opposite. In classes and retreats, I have asked many yogis to name the opposite for different feelings, and their answers are wonderfully diverse.

For this feeling:

Anger
Grief
Fear

yogis named these possible opposites:

love, dispassion, compassion, patience, peacefulness
gratitude, abundance, happiness, acceptance of the inevitable
safety, protected, loved by others, trust in God

The point is that the opposite is different for different people, and it may be different for you in different situations. This means you’re paying attention to what you are feeling and you’re making conscious choices, right in the middle of life. Ultimately that is what yoga is about: making you conscious in every moment, even in the middle of your life. Do more yoga.

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