



March 2013 Contemplation Theme

Where do You Wear Your Head?

by Rukmini Abbruzzi & Swami Nirmalananda Saraswati

“Vulture-asana.” You’ve probably heard a *Svaroopa*® yoga teacher use this apt and funny phrase to describe how you look with your head pushed forward of your torso. Swami Nirmalananda coined this phrase to describe how most of us “wear” our heads. If you haven’t heard it before, picture a vulture with its wings tucked in, shoulders hunched up, its head and beak pushed forward. This is how most people live in their body.

When your head is pushed forward, you’re living in the future, disconnected from your body and your heart. Your head is forward because of your neck tension, which is caused by the compression in your chest. Of course the tension begins at your tailbone, but you’re increasing it, from top-to-tail, by living in vulture-asana.

When you align your head with your spine, everything changes. You’re more fully embodied, living in the present moment. Your breath is easier, your heart is more open and you’re more blissful. You’re living your life with a whole new quality and presence of being. You are becoming your own Self — svaroopa.

Why do most people live in vulture asana? Until it’s pointed out, you’re probably not aware of it. Until someone realigns your head and neck for you, it’s just where you “wear” your head. While you can learn to move your head and neck back in line with your spine, your habitual spinal tensions push it forward again within seconds. Those tensions begin with the tucking of your tailbone. This is why, in *Svaroopa*® yoga, we always release your spinal muscles from the base upward. It’s organic. When your tailbone lengthens, your sacrum lengthens and widens, which also smooths your hip-line and makes your clothes fit better. Next your lumbar vertebrae (through your waist area) lift and decompress, which lifts and opens through your ribcage, heart and lungs. Now the mound in your upper back begins to disappear. Your collarbones widen, your shoulder blades slide down your back, your neck lifts and your head floats on top of your neck. The back of your head is in line with the back of your rib cage. The weight of your head is balanced on the top of your spine.

This spinal release also makes you able to be embodied, thereby living in the present moment. Your body is always in the present moment; it’s here now. It’s not back in yesterday or off somewhere in the future. But when your head is pushed forward, your mind tends to fly off. Your mind gets entangled in planning, fantasizing and worrying, or it gets lost in recriminations, blame and guilt.

A yogic mind functions in a completely different way. One of the easiest ways to find out what a yogic mind is like is to simply go to a class, have a yoga therapy session or do your own practice. When your spine lifts, opens and realigns, tail-to-top, you enjoy a taste of what a yogic mind is like. Spacious. Easy. Peaceful. Attentive. Unlimited capacity. You are present in your body, present in the present moment, present in your own Presence.

Unfortunately you grab back at those familiar thoughts. You have to push your head forward to be able to do it, tightening all the way down to your tailbone — top-to-tail. Of course, your thoughts also trigger tailbone tension, which then climbs your spine — tail-to-top. It’s a double whammy!

Svaroopa® yoga helps you repattern both body and mind. In certain poses, your teacher may help you soften your neck and head down toward the floor, giving what we call a “Medulla Stroke” to help you release your neck tensions. Your spinal release now tracks from the top of your spine downward. This is a different direction than what we usually talk about: this is top-to-tail instead of tail-to-top. You can tighten from the top downward as well as from the bottom up, and the release happens in both directions. Both releases have always been part of *Svaroopa*® yoga.

Rukmini describes giving a new student a Medulla Stroke in Lunge. Afterwards the student said, “You came over and touched my neck. My thought was, ‘This won’t do anything.’ Then my whole body relaxed!” She was amazed and delighted. She had had her first experience of “Support Equals Release,” one of our primary teaching principles. That little support made her able to release tensions from top-to-tail and from tail-to-top, all at the same time.

Pose adjustments are very important. One of the key features of *Svaroopa*[®] yoga, we give adjustments that ease your body into angles it might not find for years, if ever. This speeds up your process of opening. It makes it easier. Our teachers do hundreds of hours of intensive training to be able to identify which adjustments will take you the next step.

In a seated pose, standing pose or backbend, we ease your head into line with your spine with a “Vise-Grip” or a “Vulcan-Grip” head adjustment. Once you’ve experienced this a few times, your teacher directs you to find the alignment for yourself, saying, “You may need to ease the sides of your neck slowly back, so that the back of your head is in line with the back of your back, and your ears align over your shoulders.” You could even do that now!

The openings you get from the physical alignment and release of tension offer more: opening up the flow of your life energy, with the most powerful flow being through your spine. When your teacher aligns your head, that current is no longer getting blocked in your heart and stuck at your neck. It flows all the way up into your brain. Your brain becomes saturated with the bliss of your own Being. It becomes permeated with Consciousness. The effect is immediate: you feel more present, peaceful, calm and clear. You feel happier!

This has a second, longer-lasting effect: Consciousness leaves an imprint on your brain, a Bliss-Print. Swami Nirmalananda describes it as your mind getting dipped in consciousness the way an Easter egg gets dipped in dye. Just as the egg becomes progressively more vibrant in color, your mind becomes progressively more saturated and illuminated with the light of your own Essence. Every dip has an effect; every dip counts.

This is why daily practice is so important. Every spinal sequence you do, every meditation, dip by dip, you are transforming your mind. These transformations are named “parinaama” in Sanskrit. In the [Yoga Sutras](#), Patanjali describes a series of significant parinaamas your mind undergoes as it becomes progressively permeated by Consciousness.

Your brain grows new synapses. Researchers have begun mapping meditators’ brains and identifying real differences. Your brain on bliss is very different than your brain on anger, anxiety, and fear. Slowly but surely, the new synapses grow in number; you like them better because they’re bliss synapses! Now your old synapses, though familiar, are not so comfortable. You outgrow them, like a child outgrows their favorite pair of pants. They were comfortable and familiar but faded and worn. You got bigger. Now it’s time for new pants. It’s time for a new way to wear your head!

When you bring your head in line with your spine, your spine supports your head the way it’s designed to. Yet the support is so much more than merely physical. This tail-to-top and top-to-tail alignment creates an opening to Grace, which supports your access to a deeper dimension within. The recent group on the trip to India shared what was happening for them ([see their blogs](#)). They placed themselves in an external environment that powerfully reflects Consciousness, making changes from the outside-in. Grace was undeniable. It’s so sweet, so profound and so important to place yourself in an environment like this, whether it’s a pilgrimage to India or a Weekend Workshop, Teacher Training, yoga retreat or Half Day Workshop with your local teacher.

Yet even in an immersion, the experience of your Self does not come from the outside. It arises within you. Every time you align your head with your spine, you align your self with your Self. You align yourself with Grace, the force of revelation, the inner arising that awakens your knowing of your own Self. Do more yoga!

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