

Yoga

The art of developing awareness

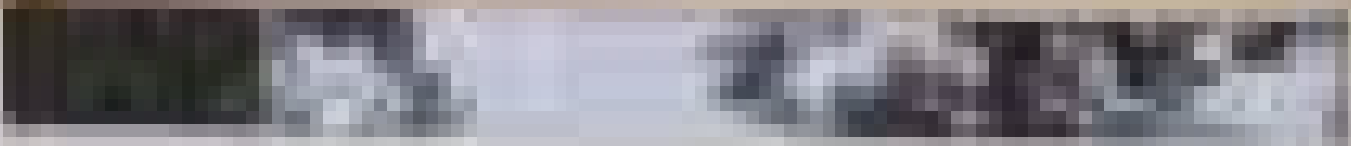
During a recent trip to Australia, Swami Nirmalananda spoke with Associate Editor, Sue Jackson, about where her yoga journey has taken her.

Founder of Svaroopā® yoga, Swami Nirmalananda frequently visits Australia as part of her international travels aimed at helping others get in touch with their inner selves through yoga. Recently initiated into the ancient order of Saraswati monks, Nirmalananda may have been known to some as Rama Berch. She has worked energetically over the past 23 years to help develop yoga in her home country of the United States of America, as well as internationally. Nirmalananda served as the founding president of the US national yoga teaching organisation, Yoga Alliance. While developing Svaroopā® yoga, she also founded Master Yoga Foundation, a not-for-profit organisation that supports the teaching of Svaroopā® yoga; and she is now opening a Svaroopā® ashram in Pennsylvania, designed to support a residential community of yogis engaged in deep practice.

Nirmalananda was trained in a tradition which holds that awareness is the goal of yoga practice. “All the practices of yoga turn your attention inward, specifically for you to find and experience your own presence within yourself. Yoga is about being aware of your own presence, your own self, which is a completely different direction of awareness: inward instead of outward.” Turning attention inwards is transformative, and results in what Nirmalananda refers to as “living consciously”. Known for her catchy phrases, Nirmalananda encourages us to, “Experience your experience as you are experiencing it.” When you do so, you are truly living in the present moment.

When first beginning yoga, Nirmalananda spent much time in her own practice, exploring openings in her spine, and how to facilitate this opening throughout the body. She also discovered that each opening “had a corresponding

opening into a meditative inner realm”. So powerful were Nirmalananda’s experiences in her early years of practice that she now teaches that the purpose of all yoga “is to prepare for the penultimate practice of opening up.” Inspired by her practice, she decided to undertake yoga teacher training. However, despite going through teacher training and in-depth studies in six different asana styles, Nirmalananda was unable to experience what she found through her own immersion in a meditative asana practice. “I could feel myself doing poses by clamping down, on the outside and on the inside, literally shortening and compressing my spine. Then, I’d go back into meditation, and the same poses would unfold absolutely effortlessly. So I lived in this distortion for 15 years. In meditation, I’d get these free-flowing, blossoming asanas; and in my studies – I went through six different styles – I didn’t get it.”



In 1987, following 12 years of teacher training in different styles, Nirmalananda opened a yoga studio in San Diego. Through close observation of her students, she saw they were getting tighter, rather than looser, as they practised: “Their spines were getting tighter, more compressed, from the

Subtraction Yoga

Nirmalananda referred to her approach to yoga as subtracting from what is there – taking away blocks to health, vitality, happiness, and spirituality. “Other systems of yoga I’d learned are what I’d call addition yoga, where you’re adding, making something better, working hard

“Experience your experience as you are experiencing it.”

beginning of the class to the end.” One day, she modified a pose, knowing from her own practice that it would open their spine. Nirmalananda spoke of being filled with apprehension about deviating from what had been instilled in her through her teacher training: “I knew I wasn’t supposed to do that. I stood there with my knees shaking; sweat dripping down my back, my breath quivering. I tried to be really cool about it, but I thought lightning was going to strike me ... and it didn’t”, Nirmalananda laughed, in her captivating way. “And the most amazing thing about it, after the class – I didn’t say anything – every one of my students came up to talk to me, 23 or 24 students. Every one of them said, ‘What just happened? Something was really different!’” The students were keen to understand the changed pose that they did, but more importantly, the opening they got from the pose. In each subsequent class, Nirmalananda introduced variations, and by eight weeks was teaching the modified poses that now form the core of the Svaroopaa® approach to yoga. Central to this approach is a sequential process of opening the spine, beginning from the tailbone.

When explaining her approach to teaching asana, Nirmalananda focused on the importance of opening the core of the body. This is the area surrounding the spine, beginning at the tailbone. “Opening the core is releasing the tension in all the spinal muscles, beginning with the tailbone and unravelling the tensions sequentially through the rest of the spine – tail to top. The most important part of it is that as the core of the body begins to open up, so does your inner experience of yourself.”

to improve yourself.” From studying the works of the ancient yoga sages, Nirmalananda came to the understanding that, “Yoga teaches that we are whole, complete, perfect. We have to clear the things that keep you from knowing your own true essence.” The word ‘svaroopaa’ translates literally as ‘your own true form’, with the compound word, ‘sva’ translating as self, and ‘roopaa’ as form. “Use the body (roopaa) to get in touch with the self (sva)”. This is how the style of yoga that Nirmalananda was developing came to be known as Svaroopaa® yoga. The word svaroopaa was used by Patanjali in the Yoga Sutra to refer to your own full, whole, complete, perfect, divine nature, waiting to be discovered within yourself.

Nirmalananda moved away from teaching classical poses because of the level of tension she saw in people coming to her classes. “I think it’s because we start a class so knotted and we have to unravel the knots. And if we start into the classical poses, I think you’re adding layers of tension over internal tension; trying to force your body into some idea of what that pose is supposed to look like.” While retaining some of the more traditional asana postures, Nirmalananda puts the focus of her yoga on unravelling the deep-seated layers of tension, starting at the tailbone. Props and modifications to classical poses help participants experience a physical opening, which triggers openings into deeper levels of the self.

Although moving away from classical poses herself, Nirmalananda emphasised the parallels between all yoga styles, “We’re all working with the body;

there is something amazing about the body. There’s a variety of ways to approach working with the body. Each one cultivates a different aspect of the mind.” From working with their body, people who practise yoga become, in Nirmalananda’s words, “embodied. ... They become present, so the person living in the body is actually here, present in their awareness. And there’s so many ways you can do that. Within the variety is the underlying principle of making yourself whole, by starting with the body.”

Doing Svaroopaa® Yoga

So, what might one expect when attending a Svaroopaa® yoga class? Classes start with Shavasana, with knees raised on a stack of blankets, to get the back of the waist to sink toward the floor, to help elongate the spine. Each class has a marker pose – a pose performed at the beginning of class, and again at the end of class. The purpose of the marker pose is to help participants assess what impact the ensuing asana sequence has for them individually; what benefits they experience from core opening. Following the marker pose is a slow sequence of mostly modified classical poses, with judicious use of props. Classes end as they began, with Shavasana.

Awareness as the goal

For Nirmalananda, yoga is an awareness practice first and foremost. Becoming aware of your body is the first step inward, with deeper levels of awareness found through meditative practice. Being able to abide in states of higher consciousness, or awareness, is a rewarding experience. “Everyone gets little glimpses into it. If you don’t have little tastes of it every day, you begin to wonder, what’s the point of life? Why am I here? It’s just that little nibble at the source that makes you feel, ‘Okay, I can keep going.’ All we need is a little bit, but what if you have more? What if you live in it all the time?” Opening up to living in higher states of consciousness is taught by yoga’s ancient sages as the penultimate yoga practice, “The goal of life is to open up; the goal of yoga is to open up – to that which is already in you.”

Choosing to be present

If our experience is richer when we practise yoga, why then don’t we retain a

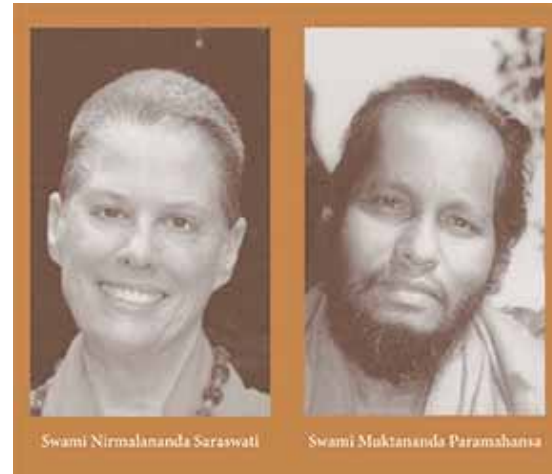
yoga consciousness in our day-to-day living? Nirmalananda teaches that it is because of how the mind compartmentalises everything we do. “It’s not because your yoga practice is once a week, or once a day – it is because the mind compartmentalises. The word ‘mind’ in the ancient Kashmir Shaivism texts, is derived from ‘maya’, which means to splinter, or fragment wholeness into separate bits. The mind, as an instrument of fragmentation, has a tendency to splinter you, to pull you into past and present, to pull you out of your body.”

Worry is one thing the mind is particularly good at. The problem is that your body experiences every thought you think as though it were really occurring. So, when you think about all the terrible things that might happen, you actually have an experience of them, because the mind does not distinguish between an imagined and an actual event in triggering bodily responses. In discussing the chronically negative impact of a worrying mind Nirmalananda quotes Mark Twain saying, ‘I have experienced so many terrible things that never happened’. “It’s

called worry,” she continues. “What are you doing to your body with a speedy mind? You’re burning it up, you’re wearing it out. So, when you’re present in your body, your mind doesn’t speed. Your mind needs grounding, it needs a home base. And as you bring your mind back and use your body as the focus, the centre to base your presence in, not only does your body benefit, so does your mind.” One simple technique that Nirmalananda shared as a way to tame a speedy mind is to consciously ‘sit’ in your seat. “When you ‘sit’ in your seat, your mind settles. You can do it driving, when you’re working; it takes seconds. You can do the same standing, by thinking of ‘standing in your feet’.” The type of sitting and standing that Nirmalananda is advocating is far removed from the unaware positions we might spend hours of the day ‘leaving’ our body in. What creates the stillness and awareness is the conscious intention that accompanies the position adopted.

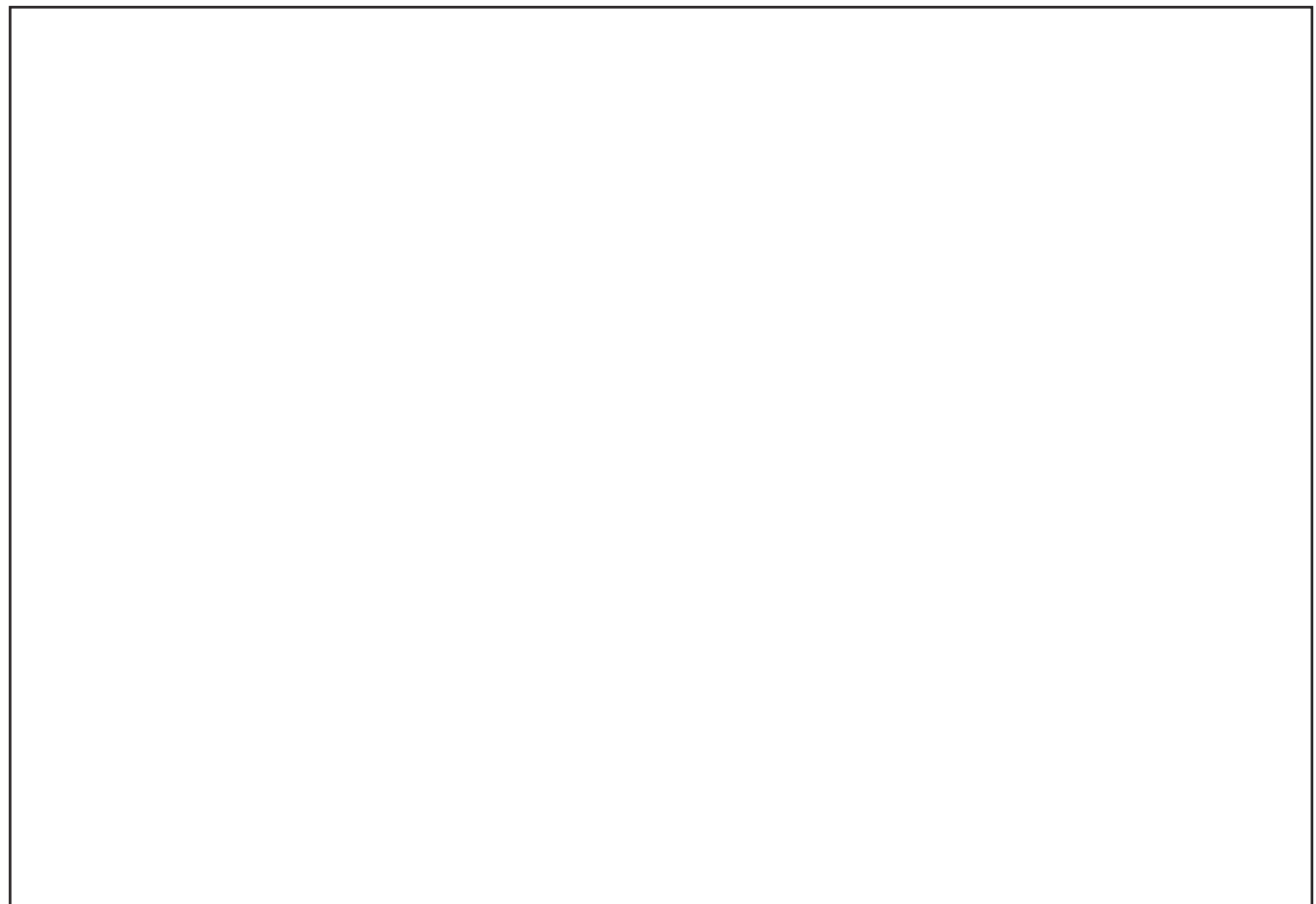
Living in your body

Being present in the body does not mean living in bliss, as Nirmalananda was quick



Caption.

Do more yoga.
Any kind of yoga,
any place,
any time, anywhere:
do more yoga.



to point out. “If you have a body, you will have pain. It doesn’t mean you’re going to have constant, unremitting pain, but you will, for the rest of your life, go in and out of pain, this is true. There’s the opposites: pleasure and pain; you are going to have a certain amount of pleasure, you’re going to have a certain amount of pain. The reality is when you experience the pain, while you are in pain, when you first turn your attention to it, you discover how bad it is. But as soon as you get fully present in it, the pain usually diminishes.” Nirmalananda teaches that pain is around 85 per cent objection, and fear. “As soon as you accept it, 85 per cent of it goes away, leaving you with genuine physical sensation or emotional/mental stuff – and you have to look at that. And you may have to do something about that. But, sometimes, just getting in takes care of it.”

Living in the light

Summing up her teachings about living with or without awareness, Nirmalananda turned to an analogy of light and dark. Recognising that living consciously is not easy, she says, “The dark is so familiar – the negativity, the contraction. Most people live their lives from behind a barbed wire fence that’s called limitation, contraction, identity, sense of self. The rewards of stepping out of habitual comfort zones into the vastness of awareness are immeasurable. What if you could live without the barbed wire fence? What if you could live in the spaciousness of your being, all the time? That’s also called the light of your being.”

How do we get there, to the light of our own awareness? Referring to one of Patanjali’s sutras, Nirmalananda explained: “Through the yearning alone, you find your way, the way to yourself. The yearning alone will take you all the way to your own self. This is the most powerful of all the things you can do, to experience, recognise, cultivate the yearning.” To help us on our journey, Nirmalananda offered another of Patanjali sutras, this one on the benefits of practice. “You do a little bit of yoga, you have a little progress. You do an intense practice, you make rapid progress – I have a free-form translation of this sutra: Do more yoga. Any kind of yoga, any place, any time, anywhere: do more yoga.”

In closing, I asked Nirmalananda her perceptions of how she saw yoga developing in Australia. “Something unique about how yoga is developing in Australia, which gives Australian yogis a base, is a proximity to India.” With the large number of Australian yogis who subsequently travel to India, an understanding of yoga being more than asana has developed in this country. Nirmalananda remarked that she has witnessed this recognition of the depths of yoga in the Australian yoga teachers she has met. Having found great richness of being through her own journeying into deeper aspects of yoga, Nirmalananda has realised that her life’s purpose is to help others to uncover their true, inner essence. It is a path that all can travel along; all that is required is openness to developing awareness.

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