

Svaroopa Yoga: Yoga for Every Body

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For the first twenty or so years that I taught yoga, beginning in 1974, I was never quite sure what I was doing. I had my teacher's certificate and a multitude of trainings from a wide variety of yoga styles, and I had plenty of students who seemed satisfied enough. But for me, both the practice and teaching of yoga were more like a pleasant but unpredictable serendipity than a good science. I was teaching a hit-or-miss mix of several styles with the hits usually outnumbering the misses; however, the result was more confusion than fusion.

For that reason, I continued searching for something more sound and reliable. Eureka finally came in 1997 upon meeting Rama Berch, the founder of Svaroopa® yoga. I was attending a yoga conference at the Kripalu Center in Lenox along with my wife, Nancy Nowak, who directs and teaches yoga with me at our studio in Warren, MA. We took Rama's workshops and were literally blown away: soon thereafter we flew to California (San Diego, not Eureka) to immerse in an intensive teacher training program at Rama's academy¹. Three grueling but wonderful weeks later (seven days a week, from 7 a.m. until 9 p.m.), we returned home with a greater understanding and appreciation of yoga and a much more effective methodology for practicing and teaching it.

Once we began introducing Svaroopa yoga to our students, the impact was profound. One student, referred to us by a local osteopath, was able to avoid disc removal surgery after learning a series of movements that released deep-set tension around his lower spine. Several students spoke of how they can now perform their activities more easily and gracefully, without discomfort, whether gardening, golfing, skiing, or shovelling snow. We continue to see many wonderful results. This yoga works like magic.

Speaking of magic, the series of movements taught to the student with the back problem is called the Magic 4. All students who attend Svaroopa yoga classes are taught the Magic 4, which consists of four simple yoga *asanas* (postures) that can be practiced easily at home. The Magic 4, as well as the many other *asanas* taught in Svaroopa yoga classes, brings profound changes to the body as well as transformation for personal growth.

What exactly is Svaroopa yoga? The Yoga Journal magazine says of Svaroopa yoga that it is a "... style of yoga [that] teaches different ways of doing familiar poses, emphasizing the opening of the spine by beginning at the tailbone and progressing through each spinal area. Every pose integrates the foundational principles of *asana*, anatomy, and yoga philosophy, and emphasizes the development of transcendent inner experience, which is

¹ Since then, Rama's training facilities have relocated to Fallbrook CA and West Chester PA.

called Svaroopaa by Patanjali in the Yoga Sutra. This is a consciousness-oriented yoga that also promotes healing and transformation."

The Yoga Journal quote refers to The Yoga Sutra of Patanjali, which was written over 2000 years ago and is perhaps the greatest classical text on the philosophy and psychology of yoga (and perhaps on psychology itself!). Patanjali defines yoga as the quieting of the mind. He goes on to claim that the result of quieting the mind is a clarity that reveals the true form of our Self, which is blissful, loving, and liberating. Think of it this way: as the calm surface of a pond reveals its depths, so a calm mind reveals to us the depths of our own being. But when the mind is not calm—when it is rippled with worries, grudges, and other useless thoughts and ruminations—we get stuck on the surface and lose our ability to connect to the power of our inner Self. Have you ever felt a profound sense of joy, peace, insight, or love when your mind was running like a wild monkey? Most likely not. You probably found yourself going bananas: reacting, snapping, tightening, distressing, and even depressing (you are feeling powerless while simultaneously burning precious energy!).

Patanjali does not focus on yoga as a physical exercise but rather as an inner experience (he gives very little attention to *asanas*). Similarly, although Svaroopaa yoga teaches over 100 different *asanas* (each class typically presenting anywhere from 12 to 18 *asanas*), its emphasis is really the inner experience, the inner opening. Healing is an important part of Svaroopaa yoga, but it is more a byproduct of this opening. As stated in an article in Yoga International magazine (now the Yoga + Joyful Living magazine), Svaroopaa yoga dissolves “the tensions that inhibit your body's natural functioning and inherent healing capacity. The release of the inner blocks allows you to live in an inner ease, in your body and in your self, that is your birthright.”

To promote inner opening, Svaroopaa yoga emphasizes precise alignment and frequent propping in a carefully-selected sequence of *asanas*. This facilitates release of the deepest-held tensions of the body. One of the basic tenets of Svaroopaa yoga is “Support equals release.” Without support, muscles are working instead of releasing. When tension releases, muscles gain strength along with mobility. A tense muscle is weak in comparison, and it is much more prone to injury.

The use of props (chairs, blocks, blankets, and so forth) also serves another important function: they make it possible to tailor *asanas* to fit the unique needs of each body in the class instead of forcing every body to fit equally into the same pose. For a seated posture, Michael might need two blankets to ensure support of his spine, while Mary might need three or four. Both students can then comfortably and safely achieve effective release.

In conversations with strangers to yoga, we often hear their hesitation expressed as: “I can’t do yoga; I am not flexible enough.” Flexibility is not a prerequisite for yoga. Flexibility is a result of yoga, made possible by practicing in a gentle, compassionate, supportive way. That is why Svaroopaa yoga serves so well for so many. That is why I no longer need to search for the perfect style of yoga.

Biography

Phil Milgrom co-directs The Centered Place in Warren, MA with his life partner Nancy Nowak. He teaches there and also in Chelmsford, MA. He is a certified Svaroopa yoga teacher, Registered Yoga Teacher, and certified Laughter Yoga Leader. He is also a motivational speaker and stress management consultant. His yoga website is www.philmilgrom.com/yoga. The Centered Place website is www.thecenteredplace.com.