Insights From a Woman's Heart: The Feminine Divine in Teaching Yoga

An Interview with Pranada Comtois

As a bhakti yogi *for forty years and as a spiritual activist, Pranada Comtois advocates for the feminine divine and the practice of unconditional love in daily life for personal and community transformation. In this interview, she draws from her rich life experiences to inspire today's Yoga teachers in cultivating a loving heart and conscious practice.*

Integral Yoga Magazine (IYM): What is the feminine divine in teaching Yoga?

Pranada Comtois (PC): Achieving divine love is the goal of Yoga. Balance of mind and body, and hence the asanas, are a necessary part of the whole picture because we're dealing with mind, body and soul. But let's not forget the broad picture. Teachers will be so much more effective, able to draw out so much more, if their instruction comes from the heart, from a genuine place of love. To inform that place of love, to augment that place of love, to get unconditional love kicking in will give us a positive charge that will electrify everyone's practice. This is a spiritual state of being, the feminine divine, and Yoga practice can assist us in achieving this exalted state.

In the mundane world, feminine qualities are a *reflection* of the feminine divine, known in the *bhakti* tradition as Radha. Radha embodies the qualities and character we aspire to imbibe in our Yoga practice: pure love for the Self, others, our environment and the divine. Selfless love in this world, such as the love a mother feels for her child, shows us a reflection, or a shadow, of the pure qualities of the feminine divine. Look at the feminine in this world and imagine it balanced, pure and a most intense degree and we get a glimpse of the feminine divine that we can call into our lives by practice.

IYM: What qualities should we hone within ourselves so we may develop as great teachers?

PC: Yoga teachers would do well to move deeply into their pure hearts and intuition. The feminine divine is a main character trait of all great Yoga teachers. Today, most Yoga teachers are women. Teach then as you would in affectionately loving your child, or a younger sibling or an elderly parent, with the kind of love that brings tears to your eyes. Give your students all the affection you didn't get and you needed; give it to people you're teaching. You'll get it back in boundless quantity, your creative teaching pump will be regularly primed and your own practice of Yoga will deepen exponentially. Then you're really teaching, for real teaching incorporates continually learning.

IYM: How can we teach in a more open-hearted way?

PC: Opening our hearts wide is the only way to experience ecstasy. Yet we're so afraid to give wholly and fearlessly because of the pain an open heart can bring us. The great irony is that closing our hearts to avoid suffering creates more suffering. When we fully develop our capacity for continuous, unconditional love, suffering ceases. That doesn't deny that there's a lot of suffering. In loving and opening the heart we become vulnerable. We are opening up to the experience of emotion and the experience of emotion is multi-faceted and it will include suffering. To really love deeply, we're going to go through a multitude feelings.

When Yoga and life are based on love, we get to the core purpose of each. The drive of every human being is to be loved and accepted and to give love. When we get to the essence of it all, when we take apart the dogma and the rituals, the Self wants to be accepted and loved and to offer love. There's a tight relationship between one's own wellbeing and giving service and unconditional love to others. We require practice and we need examples of people living life with unconditional love. The practice of heartfulness—reciprocal giving and receiving pure love, or *bhakti*—begins by loving ourselves. Unconditional love is not narrow; we're meant to offer it to ourselves. Understanding we need to give pure love to ourselves helps us balance the demand of giving unconditional love as we take it further and further out into the world.

IYM: Does constructive criticism play a role in the student-teacher relationship?

PC: There needs to be constructive feedback and criticism. How else can we grow unless there is tension? The tension of being molded and forced to grow moves us out of our comfort zone. It is a process of life and human evolution. How much more joyous and truly transformative criticism would be were the advice given with deep love? As Yoga teachers, it helps if we go into our classes thinking: "The person I am instructing is a spiritual being, a brilliant soul, who is already on his or her journey. I'm on my journey, and it's a privilege that I can serve students on their journeys."

If we connect with love and are open to our students, sharing back so that we, too, may learn, then our exchange is beyond criticism. You could call it criticism, but the feedback is informed with real seeing, and the mood of love draws us into our challenging work. We become inspired. We require inspiration and creative individuality for the human spirit and the Yoga enterprise. The questions on which Yoga teachers and students can meditate are: How can I give? How can I serve?

IYM: In your memoir, *A Swan's Dive: A 45 Year Odyssey into Love, Choice, Power and Fear,* you talked about challenges

you faced at a time when Yoga was largely dominated by men. How did you deal with these challenges?

PC: I focused on my relationship with the divine. Tests provided me the avenue on which I could walk as part of my movement toward God. So instead of just bracing myself from the assault of experiences, I let them make me stronger in my relationship with the divine, and in my conviction to bring the feminine divine forward in my life. That was an internal state of being I cultivated over decades. In many ways, women have an advantage in achieving the goal of Yoga. We are biologically wired to have greater access to the emotional heart states that foster unconditional love. *Bhakti* is an interesting opportunity for women and its practice empowers us.

The disempowerment of women in Yoga traditions and in the world at large points toward what has been neglected for millennia: our deep lack of understanding what the feminine divine actually is and engaging it. And we don't often understand that the ultimate goal of Yoga is achieving pure love. The bodily and mental work we do in Yoga are to support the development of genuine love. If Yoga teachers grasp this, women are in for a renaissance like we've never seen! According to the *bhakti* tradition, all souls have female consciousness. When we tap into archetypal, pure feminine character traits, we begin to access the spiritual core from which all effective Yoga teachers draw.

IYM: How can Yoga teachers impact others through the love they share?

PC: Teaching Yoga is much broader and intimate than just formally teaching at Yoga studios or retreats. Teaching Yoga is about how teachers live their lives—walk their talk. If I live my teaching in my home with only my family, I am teaching Yoga even if I'm not in a studio with students. Conversely, I could be teaching students, but not as a genuine Yoga teacher, if I'm not practicing yogic principles in my life.

We can't think: "I am going to serve my Yoga students like this," but then not live the practice with our friends and family. No. Yoga has to begin with us, in our immediate world, before we try to share it with the broader world.

Without taking care with this responsibility as a teacher we can create calamities for ourselves and our students. We don't learn Yoga, science, biology or mathematics without teachers. But following teachers in the metaphysical realm can get tricky because we expect them to have a high moral compass and character. To a large degree, we don't worry about the moral character of our college professors. Not so with Yoga and meditation teachers, because we're teaching more than a stretch or a position, we're teaching a way of being. Students have to be wise: eyes wide open, but still humble and open to learning. From the student's perspective it is balance; for the teacher it's a great responsibility and for both an incredible opportunity.

Pranada Comtois

In your own little ways, in your own environment, give yourself an experience of Yoga, and then extend it out. You are the foundation of what you teach. Make it a firm one; base it on divine love. This is the practical aspect of Yoga for every life whether we're physically fit for Yoga postures or not. Yoga is connection with the divine. How do I act in that relationship? It becomes very easy for me to figure out how to act in a loving relationship with divinity, when I cultivate my vision of seeing other parts of divinity as the exalted spiritual individuals with unlimited spiritual potency they are.

Bhakti is about individual *relationships*. Today we're talking about relationships between Yoga teachers and students. It is in relationships that we souls are most active. What are relationships if they are not based on love? The feminine divine—pure affection, forgiveness, non-judgment, compassion, nurturing, patience, caregiving, etc.—are all required for the most effective Yoga teaching. Yoga thrives in loving relationships and it is experiential. When we each learn to connect with this heart of Yoga, the feminine divine, all our practices and personal evolution flourish most naturally. And there is no greater Yoga teacher than one whose life is an example of selfless serving and loving.

Pranada Comtois spent two decades as a contemplative-ascetic in an ashram and the next twenty years raising a family and running two multi-million dollar businesses with the intention of embodying practical spirituality in the world. She brings the wisdom of multiple traditions and lessons from her own practice into her writing and speaking. She blogs at Little Ways of Being™ and is passionate about empowering women to find their unique gifts, voices and strengths and to usher them into the world. For more information: www.pranadacomtois.com.