

skillful
action

New Year's Resolutions

BY GOPALA KRISHNA

This time of year daily newspapers like to run comic strips about people making and promptly breaking New Year's resolutions. After all, for many people, New Year's resolutions are nothing but a joke—you make them on January 1, break them by January 8, and forget all about them by February 1. But that doesn't have to be the case.

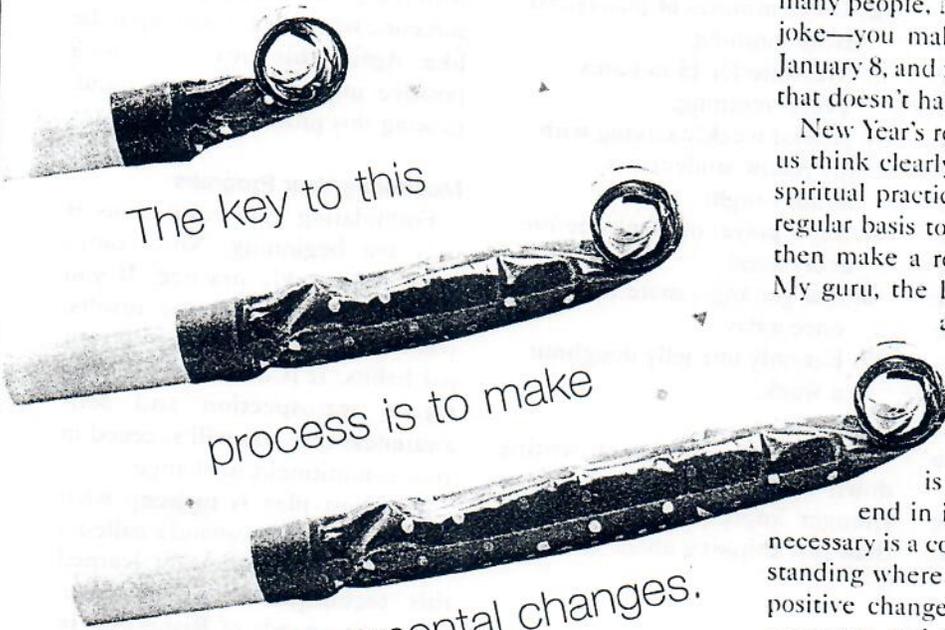
New Year's resolutions can be powerful tools to help us think clearly about our lives, and in particular, our spiritual practice. Plan what you are going to do on a regular basis to change your life in positive ways, and then make a resolution to keep those commitments. My guru, the late Swami Vishnu-devananda, encouraged all his students to make resolutions on an annual basis. More importantly, he taught us the best way to make resolutions and how to keep them.

The key to what Swamiji taught us is that making the resolutions isn't the end in itself; it is only the beginning. What is necessary is a complete process—analyzing and understanding where we currently stand, resolving to make positive changes to better ourselves, monitoring our successes and inevitable failures, and adjusting our personal program accordingly.

Self-Analysis

There is no sense in planning to change if we don't first understand where we stand. New Year's is a good time for self-analysis. The transition from one year to the next is a natural time to take an honest look at what we have done with our lives and what we can do in the coming year to change in some positive way. We can all benefit from doing more sadhana, or at least, doing it more regularly, and we all have character flaws that need work.

It is important to be honest with ourselves, if we want to change and grow spiritually. No one else can make us change for the better. It is up to us. Even the guru can only point us in the right direction, and nudge



The key to this

process is to make

incremental changes.

Many people fail to keep their resolves because they simply forget they have made them. In the hustle and bustle of daily life it's easy to get so wound up that some things just slip away. This is especially true if unexpected events come up that throw you out of your daily routine. Once a few days or a week has gone by it's easy for the mind to say, "Oh well, it's too late now. I may as well give up." Stopping each night to record your progress is a reminder to the mind that, no matter what, regular sadhana is important. In fact, it is probably even more important when unusual events are disturbing your mind, for your sadhana will help keep you on an even keel.

Once a week it is good to take a broader view, and look at your overall progress. Write a few brief comments on how you achieved success or what caused you to fail. Did you actually meet your goals for the week? If not, why not? Did you let yourself get distracted by something that wasn't as important as it seemed at first? Did you just get lazy? How did you do compared to the previous week or to the same week the previous month? Even if you didn't meet your goals, have you made progress toward meeting them compared to previous weeks? Answering these questions honestly will help you understand the reasons for your successes and failures and help you adjust your life to meet your goals.

This process of review can also be repeated on a monthly or even a quarterly basis, to see how you are doing over longer periods of time. These longer term reviews will be useful in helping you gauge your progress. Even if you aren't completely successful, if you are improving over time you will be encouraged to persevere.

Remember, the reason you made these resolves in the first place was to bring about positive changes in your life. As long as you are making progress—no matter how small—

not set your sights high enough. Push yourself a little bit more. It is only by struggling that you'll grow. Once again, remember to write down your amended resolutions.

Once a year, repeat the entire process of self-analysis and goal setting. If you're able to control your anger better now, it may be time to start working on something else, such as your need to always be in control of situations. But don't fool yourself into thinking, "Well, after a year I've finally got my anger under control, so I can forget about watching it for now." If you do, you will inevitably backslide and before you know it end up where you started. Don't stop working on your anger, but add additional things to work on. Similarly, if you've reached the point that you can now comfortably practice asanas for one hour

three times a week more often than not, it's probably time to increase your routine to four times a week, or to an hour and a quarter instead of just an hour.

The key to this process is to make incremental changes, rather than trying to make radical changes all at once. If you make several small changes to your habits and thought patterns every year, over the course of several years the big changes will happen by themselves. By constantly observing yourself and slowly adjusting your sights upward, positive changes occur. More importantly, the changes will be permanent, because they will be grounded in years of steady practice and a habit of self-knowledge.

Gopala Krishna, who began practicing yoga in 1973, met his guru, Swami Vishnu-devananda, in 1978. He and his wife run the Sivananda Yoga Center in Ottawa. He is the author of The Yogi: Portraits of Swami Vishnu-devananda, published by YES International.

WEEKLY SPIRITUAL DIARY							
Jan. 13 to Jan. 19							
Resolution	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat	Sun
1 hour of asanas		✓				✓	
15 min. pranayama	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
15 min. meditation	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Sunday Satsang							✓
Prayer before meals	✓✓	✓✓	✓✓	✓		✓✓	✓✓
# of times angry	1	0	0	3	2	1	1
# of jelly donuts	0	0	0	3	2	0	0

Comments Big problem at work Thurs.
Can't let the boss get to me like that.
Have to find route to work NOT by donut shop.

toward your goal, you are on the right track, whether you actually attain the goal or not.

Adjusting Your Program

If, after a few months, either you are never meeting your goals or you are always meeting them, it would be wise to modify your resolves. Constant failure will eventually discourage you to the point where you will give up, so it is better to accept that you expected too much of yourself and adjust your goals accordingly. Don't be surprised if this happens, especially if this is your first attempt. Don't feel like you've failed completely. You've struggled hard; the only trouble is that you set your goals too high. Now you're simply reevaluating them and being realistic. After you modify your resolves, remember to write them down, amending your original contract.

Constant success, though gratifying to the ego, means that you did