



July 2001 Contemplation Theme

## Who Am I?

By Rama Berch, C.S.Y.T., E-RYT 500

The toughest commute I ever had was fifteen feet long. One bedroom was my home office. I closed the door each afternoon to go into the family room and become “Mom” again. The transition time between the two me’s wasn’t long enough without the accustomed thirty-minute drive. It was the first time I realized how completely engrossing an identity can be. It was the beginning of my training in yoga philosophy, though I did not find yoga until two years later. In English we have only one word to translate two different Sanskrit words, atman and ahamkara. We call them both “self.” Atman is your essence of Being, the deeper Reality, existence-itself being you. We call this Self with a capital “S.” Ahamkara is your constructed sense of self, the superficial persona, the ever-changing identity that draws its temporary reality from your activities, that we call “self.”

Compare it to the ocean. The waves are the ever-moving superficial “self,” and your true identity is the whole ocean. The true “Self” is the ocean of consciousness, but you do not yet know it. This not-knowing is the source of all suffering and pain. Since you don’t have the deep knowing of the vast Beingness that is the true Self, you look around for something to be — then you Velcro yourself to what you do, where you live, who you know, etc. Yoga peels off the Velcro so you can know the Self. Yoga makes you able to live in the knowingness and to express it through your life, while you still have a life. You use your multiple identities without being stuck in them.

When life is difficult, it is because you have lost the Self. You are Velcro-ed to one of your multiple identities, and your whole sense of self is being threatened. When you were playing in the sandbox and someone took your toy truck or bucket, you ran to your mommy in tears. But now, those toys have little significance because you play in a larger sandbox. Now, leave the sandbox behind and go into the ocean. In the midst of stuff, ask yourself, “Who am I?” When life tosses you around on the waves of the storm, you have to go deeper. Dive like a submarine. This does not mean that you withdraw or isolate yourself. From the depths of the ocean, you can still see the waves. By deepening into your Self, you can experience everything that life offers, without getting lost in it. “Who am I?” Your answer is a statement, “I am (fill in the blank).” Anything you fill into that blank is limited and subject to change. If you answer with your profession, “I am a yoga teacher,” that describes only part of you, based on your activities, and may change at some point in the future. If your answer is based on your relationships, “I am a mother,” it is still a limited truth that has not always been true. Instead you could say, “I am a musician / skier / licensed California driver / etc.” If you take all of your answers and put them together, you still don’t have the whole.

I had some friends who liked jigsaw puzzles. They would have a big puzzle spread out on the coffee table and everyone would work on it for weeks. When it was completed, they mounted it on a board and hung it on the wall. Their hallway was lined with beautiful pictures of the Grand Canyon, an autumn forest, and a snowy mountain cap, but all the pictures were broken up with these squiggly little lines. Pulling the multiple pieces of yourself together like a jigsaw puzzle is like this. There is something more, something that makes it whole. You must find this dimension of your being, or you will always feel fragmented inside.

There are three primary reasons that most people begin yoga:

1. Pain is a great motivator. Yoga excels at freeing you from pain, whether physical, mental or emotional.
2. Yoga is well known for relaxation and for reliable stress relief. Your first class makes you feel more relaxed than ever before. Each class makes you less susceptible to stress, even in difficult circumstances.
3. Your body needs to move. Flexibility, stretching and exercise may have gotten you started in yoga or be tempting you now. In Svaroopo Yoga, we open and move your spine, giving you back the flexibility, resilience and stamina that you enjoyed as a youth.

All of these reasons are variations on the theme, “How am I?” Yoga answers that question by making you feel better, no matter how you felt when you arrived. Every time you do yoga, whether in class or on your own, you feel better on all levels and in all ways. But this is not the real purpose of yoga.

A few people start yoga for a fourth reason:

4. “There must be more to life, because this is not enough.” This existential angst is reaching epidemic proportions in the USA. A few of you recognize this underlying itch in your life and look to yoga for an answer.

This reason is the asking of the question, “Who am I?” You have a good life, even if there are still a few things you are working on. Your family and your job may not be perfect, but they are still wonderful (in some surprising ways). You are beginning to realize that you can tinker with the externals forever and still never get it right. Ultimately, all of that stuff doesn’t matter. Because those things do not define you. You are much more.

Let yoga help you answer, “Who am I?” instead of “How am I?” Yoga gives you the answer maybe in that closing Shavasana at the end of every class. It is most directly accessed through meditation, which eliminates the middleman of doing poses and other techniques. Even when you think you cannot find it, yoga brings the Self up on the inside. You get good at letting yourself be overwhelmed by the true Self and living in the bliss of your own Being. It pours through you and expresses as joy and love everywhere you go. Do more yoga!

Namaste,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rama". Above the letter "a" in "Rama", there is a small heart symbol containing the number "36".

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