



August 2001 Contemplation Theme

How Am I?

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I love to ask yoga students after class, “How are you?” The answer is considerably different than before class. Before class, the answers are usually information gathering, so I can know what problems or pains I can help with in the class. But after class — the problems and pains are usually gone. What remains is only a feeling — and what an amazing feeling it is!

A student recently said, “I feel so . . . (pause while searching for the word) . . . peaceful! And I have lots of energy, too!” She was really surprised to feel these in combination. You already know how to push yourself and then mistake the exhaustion for peacefulness. You may experience peace only when you are completely drained. Later, when you have energy, you get back into the pushing mode — trying to do more of what you believe will make you feel good. It is called the “rat race.”

The last article asked, “Who are you?” However, this question might be too esoteric to hold on to. It may be that the better question is, “How are you?” Moment to moment — how are you, really? You may be living on an emotional roller coaster. You can ride the ups and downs of constantly changing emotions for your whole life long — it is a “thrill-a-minute.” How you are is in such flux that you cannot make plans or set goals, because what you think you want changes with each mood. There is a built in payoff — you are endlessly entertained by your own emotions, so you don’t need to do much else with your life. You may have even perfected the ability to entertain everyone around you with your comedies and dramas! Perhaps you handle it differently. How you are is not important because you are always the same — flat. I love those beautiful winter photographs on the front of Christmas cards, but the reality of living in numbing cold for months of every year interests me far less. Many people choose the emotional equivalent, numbing out by never feeling anything. The constancy and reliability provides ample opportunity to plan and accomplish things in life, but you never get to enjoy anything. What is the point of doing it if you cannot enjoy it?

You know the ever-present greeting, “Hi. How are you?” Nobody is really asking a question any more. No one is really answering. If you answer anything other than, “Fine,” you create a problem. This is a hello, not an inquiry into your state, or (even worse) your health! Let’s find the yoga in the query, “How are you?” With everything in yoga, you turn it inside — ask yourself, “How am I?” This is very different than what you usually ask yourself. Without realizing it, you have been asking something entirely different. As a yoga teacher, I see this all the time. You bring more than your aches and pains with you when you come to class. You bring your mind-set, too. It shows up this way:

1. “How do I look?” I call this the high-heel syndrome. I remember when wearing the 3” heels was more important than the pain they caused. I was willing to go through the pain in order to get the “look.” While they are in a pose, students sometimes even ask me, “How do I look?” I wish they were asking if they were in the angle that provides the maximum benefit, but they are actually asking if they are getting the “look.”
2. “How am I compared to other people?” Some students look repeatedly around at the other people to see how they compare. One man told me that he did not want to come back because, “Everyone can touch their toes except me.” He did not look at the results he got; he only looked at how he compared to everyone else!
3. “How am I supposed to be?” You already know how to live in the supposed-to’s. You can be so busy analyzing how you should be doing it, you forget to notice how it actually feels.

These patterns do not show up only in yoga class — they are ways that you live your whole life! However, then you are not really living your life. You are living out what you think that other people think of you, or you are living out what you think you are supposed to be experiencing. Stop!

Use this little question, “How am I?” to guide you all the way to enlightenment. When the answer that arises inside is one of negativity or unhappiness, then you have lost the Self. When you feel only worry, fear or pain, you are Velcro-ed to things outside of you, hoping that they will somehow, someday make you happy. Peel off the Velcro and you will find happiness arising from inside. If you cannot peel off the Velcro, then at least do some yoga. Yoga will reliably change your feeling. You will always feel better after yoga. This is why I like to ask you after class, “How are you?”

But you do not have to wait until someone asks you. Check in with yourself, “How am I?” If the answer isn’t good, remember — it is not the situation around you than needs to be changed. Change your internal environment. Use yoga to change the Who you are by monitoring the How you are, and it will take you all the way to the Self.

Namaste,



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