



January 2002 Contemplation Theme

Process & Goal

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Enlightenment is what got me into yoga. It was not physical pain or even the stress of my lifestyle, though I had both aplenty. My most severe pain was an existential angst. I had done years of psychology, in personal counseling and as a student in graduate school. The benefits were tangible, but did not reach deep enough to soothe my constant, wordless, inner anguish. What drew me into yoga was the promise of enlightenment. It became my new goal.

I was a goal-oriented person from the beginning. Before getting into yoga, I had achieved almost everything I thought I wanted. Unfortunately, none of it satisfied me. In college, I read a study done by a researcher. He had interviewed the most successful people in America. Each had worked hard to attain the highest pinnacle of success, had earned tremendous wealth and privilege, and wielded incredible power. The researcher asked one pivotal question, "Are you happy?" The overwhelming answer was, "No!" In turn, each one said, "I have achieved everything I ever hoped for, but it does not make me happy."

I was experiencing this personally, before I reached 30. I lived in a constant unnamable pain. I was thrilled to take on enlightenment as my new goal, because I knew that anything else I could achieve would be as meaningless as the other things I had already earned. I applied myself with fervor, for this goal was more important to me than any previous one had been. After all, it promised so much more. If I just did my yoga perfectly, chanted the Sanskrit flawlessly, offered my service extravagantly, dressed in "spiritual" clothes, put my hair up in a tight little bun on the top of my head, and put a red dot between my eyebrows —I could earn my way to enlightenment faster. Or so I believed.

It only took me 20 years to find out that enlightenment is not a goal. It is a process. For that matter, life is not a goal. It is a process. Even the yoga poses do not promise that you will attain a goal. It, too, is a process. Thank God!

This means that what you experience along the way is more important than where you may ultimately arrive. It means that you do not have to perfect your body. You do not have to master your mind. You do not have to learn it all, attain the highest, or become the best. The practice itself is the goal. You get continuous improvement the longer you practice. At the end of each yoga session, you feel better. The effects are cumulative. The "better" you feel gets better and better, the longer you keep at it. When will you arrive at the ultimate "better" that you can get? There is no end point. It just keeps getting better.

This is true of enlightenment as well. You do not earn enlightenment. Your inner sense of being deepens. You develop the progressive ability to live in the beingness that was always there. It is a moment-to-moment experience. You get to where you never look to see if you have "arrived." It doesn't matter any more. The process is the goal.

Everything you have learned about how to achieve your goals gets turned on its ear in yoga. It changes the way you do everything in life. You continue to apply all the tools diligently, consistently and skillfully. Whether you are doing yoga or living your life, you get results every time. The results just keep getting better. If you do yoga to relieve physical aches and pains, it will work. If the ache is a deeper one, yoga will still work. And no matter how much better you think you can feel — your idea of your best is so limited that it is laughable. Do more yoga.

Namaste,

