



March 2005 Contemplation Theme

Relationships: Pets & People

By Rama Berch, C.S.Y.T., R.Y.T.

I confess that I am an animal lover. When I am around cats, I feel I am a cat-person, but then I spend time with a dog and I become a dog-person again. I cannot fit into either category because I love both. Whether I am watching the birds outside the window or the squirrels climbing the fence post, I am captivated again and again. There is a particular elephant at the San Diego Zoo that always turns to look at me when I visit. He stays with me for as long as I stay; he is one of my favorite outings! I truly understand how important the relationship with animals can be.

One of the reasons we love animals is because they respond seemingly without artifice, coming from their own uncomplicated nature, without the agendas and manipulation that characterize our relationships with so many other human beings. "My dog/cat loves me," many say. I have seen many pet owners grieve the death of a pet very deeply, for a long time, because that relationship was such an important part of their life. From yoga's perspective, this is not love — this is dependency. This is not relationship — this is avoidance of relationship.

In relationships with human beings, you have to take risks. You must become vulnerable or there is no real relationship. You have to show your imperfections or you don't feel that the other person truly knows you and loves you. If you only show your good side, you feel that they love your act — the act you put on for everyone. The role you play is not WHO you are, it is what you DO. When people love you for what you do, you soon feel trapped into always having to do things to earn their love. Earned love does not really feel like love.

With a pet, you take no risks. While your pets love you fully and unconditionally (or so it seems), the reality is a little less magnificent. You are in charge of your pet's food, water, toilet privileges, sex life, medical care, praise and punishment, and even where they sleep and when they play — no wonder you are the total focus of their life! This is not love, and this is not relationship.

The animals that you are privileged to share your life with are still animals. There is a big difference between an animal and a human being. That difference is what yoga focuses on. You are a human being and you have a capacity to know yourself that animals do not have. You are aware that you are aware; you can see that you see; you know that you know; you think that you think, and this is amazingly profound. While your pet is able to remember the past (remembering where you keep the treats) and plan for the future (letting you know that you should go to that cupboard and give a treat to them), it is not the same thing as with another person. If a person remembers a meal or snack that you served them, and even wants you to serve that food again, it is a very different thing than with a pet. And, you are affected by that difference.

Your reactions to other people are an indication of how clear you are about your own sense of self. When you have a clear and deep inner sense of personhood, other people can do or say anything and you don't feel threatened. You are interested or even curious about what is going on for them. You may be supportive or you may decide that you don't want to participate in the process, but you don't get confused or upset by what is going on. You can see them clearly because you know yourself deeply. This is so much easier to do with your pets than with the people in your life, isn't it?

Your pets do not belong in your yoga and meditation practice. I know that there are now yoga classes for dogs — but dogs don't need yoga. People do. It can be fun, and it can even be funny to teach your dog to do Adho Mukha Svanasana (Downward Facing Dog) on command, but it doesn't bring your dog any closer to enlightenment. It doesn't uplift your dog's consciousness. Even if it did, what would be the point? Yoga is about the upliftment of your own consciousness.

To understand yoga's purpose means that you must understand what a human being is. Every human being, including you, has multiple levels of existence. You are a multi-dimensional reality which is occurring on many levels of your being simultaneously. The Yoga Vasishtha says that there are 35 dimensions that the human being can be aware of. Let's try to count dimensions:

There are the three dimensions of physical reality – height, width and depth

The fourth dimension is time – which includes past, present future

The fifth dimension is... what??

And what is the sixth, seventh, eighth and ninth?

How do you get to 35?

You have to begin to explore inside yourself. Yoga shows you how to fully utilize your amazing capacity to be aware of your own awareness; to see beyond your concepts; to sense without using your senses; to know with a knowing beyond thought. Animals do not have this ability, but you do. Your inner exploration includes all the levels on which animals function, plus many more. Animals function on an animalistic level, based on their senses, their desires, their instincts, their memories and fears, etc. You have all of these going for you as well, plus you have more.

When you include your pets in your yoga and meditation practice, they keep you at the animalistic level. You will get a lot of improvement in your animalistic functions — your body will feel better, you will strengthen your senses (better eyesight, sense of smell, etc), you will strengthen your desires, your instincts will rule you more strongly, you will be more powerfully driven by your memories and fears, etc. And you will not experience the deeper dimensions of your own consciousness.

You have to decide what you want from yoga. If you want your pet to feel better because they lay next to you when you are doing yoga or meditating, then your pet's happiness is more important to you than exploring the inner realms of your own being. You have the right to make that choice. You have free will — be careful how you use it!

I do recommend that you put your pets outside of the room when you are practicing. Enjoy the tremendous contribution they make to your life in so many ways. They are loving, they are playful, they bring great joy, and they give you a safe place to try out your increasing ability to love. Still, you must remember that your relationship with other people is much more important than your relationship with your animals. Your relationships with other people are part of your yoga, in even more important ways. They are a proving ground, where you test your yogic state and see if you can carry it into the world. They are a mirror, showing you the blemishes that you still need to work on.

Your relationships with other people are an important form of support to you, while they are simultaneously the sword that slices away everything that you must let go of. They challenge you to give more, and to give up more and more of your own limitations. They teach you to be authentic. They show you how to be willing to risk everything. You learn to live without guarantees, how to live in limbo. Relationships with other people train you how to be transparent, so that your own radiance can shine through to them — and to yourself.

You must be in relationship with other human beings. Pets are wonderful and your commitment to them is important, but they are not a substitute for your commitment to other people. You do get to choose what form of relationship you want, and with whom. You must discover how to be open and authentic with them, so that you don't need to withdraw. If you need a lot of "alone-time," you are losing yourself when you are with others, so you try to patch yourself back together in that time alone. You need to do more yoga. Yoga will give you your own sense of individual beingness, at such a deep level that another person cannot threaten it. Yoga promises you this, and significantly more. Do more yoga!

Namaste,



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To reach Rama Berch or to get more information about *Svaroopā*® yoga, contact: **Master Yoga Foundation**
Website: www.masteryoga.org ♦ Email: info@masteryoga.org ♦ 1-866-luv-yoga (588-9642)
Training Facilities: 5670 La Jolla Blvd., La Jolla, CA 92037 ♦ 56 Baltimore Ave, Rehoboth Beach, DE 19971