



September 2005 Contemplation Theme

Yoga – The Discipline of Independent Bliss

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

Back to school — back to yoga. Every yoga teacher knows that September is back to school month (in the USA), and enjoys welcoming back students who got caught up in the lazy days of summer. These annual cycles are very powerful, affecting your choices even when it has been years since you saw the inside of a schoolroom. In September you are ready for a fresh start. So, along with you who are returning to class, many people decide to start yoga for the first time. Welcome to all of you, as well as to those of you who continued throughout the summer.

Whether you are starting, returning or continuing on, when you do yoga, you are developing a discipline — the discipline of independent bliss. Let's begin with the word "discipline." In yoga, the word discipline does not mean punishment. The word discipline comes from the Latin *discipulus*, which is also the root of the word disciple. In yoga it means that you devote yourself to a teacher, to a teaching or to a way of life that uplifts you.

The secret of life is that you make progress in whatever direction you apply your efforts. Your life is shaped by your efforts and you get to choose where you apply yourself — you can memorize the list of movies that your favorite actor has made; you can learn to speak another language; you can train to run the Boston Marathon. You will make progress in any direction you choose to go; the trick is in making the choice, and then sticking to it. Sticking to it is called discipline. Even if the summer interrupted your yoga practice, when you return to it, you are honored as being disciplined.

A musician follows a discipline in order to make beautiful music. Yet every musician I have ever known loves their instrument — even the scales and practice exercises are joyful for them. Is it still called discipline, even when you love doing it and it makes you happy? Yes! This is especially true with yoga, which makes you happy and (I hope) you love doing it. I know that *Svaroopa*® yoga makes your body feel better, which makes you happier. Yet, the spinal opening also makes a change in your mind, your mood and your deeper sense of self, which is the true source of happiness. Ultimately, *Svaroopa*® yoga is a discipline of cultivating happiness.

So far we have discovered that the word discipline doesn't mean punishment, and it doesn't mean that you have to dislike what you are doing. Several years ago, a student told me that she had lots of family visitors planned throughout the summer, so she would see me in September. She did return to classes at the end of the summer and continued on through the winter and the following spring. The next June, she told me she had lots of family visitors planned for the summer, which meant that she really NEEDED yoga so she wouldn't be missing any classes. Same situation — different decision. What was the difference?

The difference was that she had allowed yoga to change her. She could make a different decision because she had changed, inside. In fact, slipping away from the family for her yoga class enabled her to enjoy her family more — and they could enjoy her more as well. This is because yoga does more than simply take care of your body. After nine more months of the discipline of happiness, she knew how she wanted to feel inside and wouldn't accept any substitutes.

When you are not feeling happy, yoga says you are not yourself. Any choices you make that start from a place of unhappiness will have repercussions that you don't enjoy. Yoga gives you the ability to make a choice to reinstate a natural quality of inner ease, openness and joy. When you choose to do this, then you know what yogic discipline is. Your own daily practice, your continuing studies with your local teacher or your in-depth experiences in workshops and retreats lay the foundation for basing all of your choices from inner happiness.

Developing discipline is a process of making choices. When you choose to do the same thing over and over, it is your discipline. Unfortunately, many of the things that people do over and over again are not uplifting. It isn't the things you do once in a while that cause problems — it's the things you do all the time. If you eat the wrong things all the time, you will have health problems; when you eat healthy all the time, the occasional treat is not a problem. If you are always angry, you will be unhappy, even unhappier than the people you are angry with; but when you put yourself forth in a spirit of generosity and helpfulness, your anger simply vanishes, like fog in sunlight. You may have a discipline of worrying — it is always possible to find something you can worry about. You have a choice about what discipline you will follow. The hardest thing is to know you have a choice. It is hard because when you are feeling badly, you cannot remember that you have any options.

One yoga student arrived for a class on an evening when she usually didn't come. I welcomed her with surprise. She said that she came to class because her children sent her! They could tell that she needed yoga, even when she couldn't tell. After a few more months of classes, she was able to recognize when she wasn't feeling like herself. She didn't need others to tell her. She not only learned how to do yoga poses for herself, but she learned to recognize her own state. She learned when to do yoga, as well as how to do it. She discovered that she had a choice about how she wanted to live.

I love seeing the look on people's faces when they come up from the final Shavasana in their first yoga class. They often stammer, looking for words, because they don't know how to describe how incredibly good they feel. They usually end up talking about feeling both relaxed and energized at the same time. But the look on their face tells it all. It is such a pleasure to see their joy, for it really is joy that they are experiencing. As you continue your yoga practice, that joy becomes deeper and more fulfilling. It lasts longer and becomes more reliable. Yoga calls it bliss — yoga is the discipline of bliss. In yoga you discover the inner source of independently arising bliss, an ever-present flow. It flows more and more each time you open your spine. You discover it a little at a time, with a cumulative effect that just keeps getting better.

So I say welcome to yoga! I welcome you because I (quite selfishly) want to share my life with people who base themselves in bliss. I want to see this world full of people who know the inner source of joy, and who make their choices based on that. I want to help transform this world, by sharing yoga with you — and I hope you will want to share it with others. This whole world needs to do more yoga!

Namaste,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rama". Above the name, there is a small heart symbol containing the Sanskrit character "Om".

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