



October 2006 Contemplation Theme

Your Mind Needs Yoga

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

You can think yourself into exhaustion. You have proved this to be true so many times in your life already. You can actually tighten your spine with your thoughts faster and more effectively than any type of physical activity you do. I sometimes make this point in a workshop or course, and you can try it out now for yourself. Just get down on the floor and do a Lunge.

On the first side, do a normal Lunge — you probably need it anyway. Get lined up nicely with your belly on your thigh and your ribs scooted forward, so your spine is aligned. Stay there for 30 – 45 seconds and allow the pose to provide you with the familiar and reliable spinal release. Push with your hands and arms to start your movement back and out of the pose.

Now, on your other side, move into Lunge and wait for 10 – 15 seconds so your body can begin to settle into the familiar release. On the second side, you have already gotten some benefits from doing the first side, so your spine begins to release more easily.

Now while you are in your Lunge, worry. Give yourself at least 10 seconds of worry time, or simply list the catalogue of all the things your mind usually obsesses on. Continue worrying for at least 10 seconds — you'll be surprised how long that really is. Notice what happens to your Lunge.

That pain or tension is your body's experience of your thoughts. Whatever you think, your body experiences as if it were happening. Your body can actually live through experiences that you will never have, all because of what your mind does to it. If you want to improve your physical condition, you must retrain your mind.

Even if you aren't ready to look at the effect your mind has on your body, you must look at the effect your mind has on your life. The quality of your life is determined by how you use your mind, not by external events and situations. One person can feel crushed about losing her or his job, while another person feels grateful for the chance to reinvent herself or himself. When you lose someone dear to you, a person or even a pet, you can focus on the loss or you can focus on your gratitude for the way they enriched your life for so long.

Because of the complexity of the mind, yoga offers many tools to help you with your mind. Yoga has more tools for your mind than for your body. One of the most important yogic techniques for your mind is substitution. Whenever you notice that you are caught up in thoughts that tighten your body or upset you, you can choose to substitute something better. For example, you may be a worrier. Instead of worrying, you can say a little prayer or send a yogic blessing.

This is a very simple, yet sophisticated technique. It is based on the understanding that you only worry about people or things that you care about. The worrying is a way of reminding yourself that you love them. Unfortunately, every worry makes your body live through the experience of the thing you were worrying about, as though it is really happening, even though it probably never will.

When you say a prayer or send a blessing, you attune your body and whole being to the flow of divine grace. If you want to see what that is like, I suggest another Lunge. Do a normal Lunge on the first side, and try prayer or blessings on the second side. While the physical benefits are tangible, obvious and wonderful, what happens to your mind and heart are even more important. They become imprinted by this flow, which is a big improvement over being imprinted by worry. This makes the technique more than merely mental substitution — you are creating a *parinama*, a transformation of mind.

Perhaps you are not a worrier. Maybe instead your mind reviews certain memories over and over again, even though they are not the most beautiful and uplifting experiences of your life. The reason that your mind obsesses on these memories is that it hopes that if you think about it one more time, you'll finally resolve it and be free from it. There are easy and powerful yogic techniques that can help you with that, but it takes more than a page or two to learn them. In the meantime, you can try substitution.

What you do is remember one of the many good experiences you have had in your life. It can be a big moment or a small one, from long ago or even from today. I was walking along a path earlier today and the ground was covered by multicolored leaves, so beautiful that I couldn't find words to describe it.

You may need to invest as much time in remembering the beautiful experiences from your life as you have been in remembering the worst moments. Whenever your mind plays reruns, change the channel inside and rerun one of your greatest experiences. It is best if you even plan what you are going to use as a great memory. You can even use the same great memory over and over again; after all, that is what your memory has been doing all along.

When you are remembering unpleasant experiences, your body is actually reliving them. When you are remembering beautiful experiences, your body is reliving those. Plus, your expectation of what will happen in your future changes dramatically when you use your memory in this more beneficial way.

You might have a different type of mind. If you are not a worrier and you are not reliving your past, you are probably plagued by endless mental activity, seemingly random thoughts or never-ending "to do" lists. You are always strategizing about what to do next, "If I turn right at this corner, I can avoid the signal ahead that looks like it is going to turn red." Or maybe you strategize about people, "If I talk to (insert name) about this, then she will..."

All these strategies are an attempt to maximize your life by getting everyone and everything set up perfectly. You are approaching life like it is a contest and you can win if you just line up all the marbles. Technically, you are living for the future. You need to substitute another mental process for your strategizing — live in your body.

Stay in your body, or at least keep your mind with your body. Don't allow it to go somewhere you are not physically located. Your body is always in the present moment — it is not in the future. It is not even two blocks ahead, at that intersection with the signal that looks like it might turn red by the time you get there.

If you keep your mind with your body, you cannot project what will happen even two minutes in the future. Even if you will be in the same physical location in two minutes, you cannot project ahead, because your body does not exist two minutes in the future. It means you might have to sit at a few red traffic lights. It's really OK.

You might also discover that you cannot manage everyone else's mind or life. It's OK. In fact, managing your own mind and life is challenging enough.

So far, I have given you three different substitutions to work with. Please don't try to do them all. You don't have to figure out which one you need to do at 8:05 am, and then which one you should do at 8:06 am, etc. Just pick one and do it every time. I only gave you variety so you would have choice and could see which one is most relevant for you.

Ultimately, the most powerful substitution is repetition of mantra. This is not merely a substitution for thinking, but it has a more powerful effect than any of the practices we teach in yoga classes. If you have received a mantra from a master, use it. If not, you can begin your exploration by repeating "Shivo'ham." It means "I am Shiva," or "I am consciousness." Maybe another Lunge would make it clear — repeat Shivo'ham 20 – 30 times on the second side and see what happens!

Namaste,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rama". Above the name, there is a small heart symbol containing the number "36".

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