



January 2007 Contemplation Theme

Choosing to Change

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

It's that time of year again. It's time to take an honest look at yourself and see if there are any improvements you would like to make. An honest assessment of yourself is called for. This is not a snap judgment or even a continuation of the inner stream of self criticism. This is a clear-eyed look at how you are, who you are, what you do, and even whether or not you even like yourself.

A new year is beginning; it is a fresh start. Yes, you might be saying that you could make resolutions any time of the year. True, but this is THE TIME. It's like the surfer on a cresting wave — it's time to go! The only reason you don't make New Year's resolutions is because they haven't worked for you in the past, and the only reason that they haven't worked for you in the past is because you need training and practice. There is a yoga to New Year's resolutions. There are many tricky parts to this process. First, how do you choose what to work on? Then, what do you decide to do about it? Lastly, what is a "resolution," and how do you actually DO it?

The first thing you need to do is to slow down your decision-making process. Take it step by step. You could even allow a few hours or a few days for each step.

Step #1: Choosing What To Work On.

Make a list of possible areas of change. Don't list the change that you would like to make yet; just list the arena of life involved. For example, don't write down, "Change jobs." Instead simply list, "Job." By Step 3, you may decide that changing jobs is the resolution you want to make, or you might decide to handle your job differently, or even to handle yourself differently. So just list the areas of life you'd like to work on. The easiest way to discover what you need to work on is to identify the painful areas of your life. Whether it is your body, external events or your own internal processes, pain is an indicator that change is needed.

There are three primary areas of life that you will find popping up on your list — your body, relationships and work. Yet there are many possibilities in each area. Under body, you could list your health, your pain level, your eating habits or your wardrobe. Under relationships, you could simply list a few names, or you could write down a recurring emotion like sadness, anger, feeling needy or abandoned, etc. For work-related issues, you might list a few people's names, or note that you'd like more challenging work, more meaningful work, less work or less challenging work, more recognition, etc.

Of course, many other things could make it to your list. You might decide you want to be more environmentally conscious, which could lead to decisions in Step 2 like using a different type of transportation or doing more recycling. You may want to be more politically aware, to become active for causes you believe in, or get involved in volunteer work. You might decide you need to focus on your finances or that you want to get rid of the stuff you have stored in your garage or basement.

Another whole arena of possibilities opens up when you look at your thoughts and feelings. You have a habitual mood and an approach to life that can create some of your most plaguing problems. You may know that you are impatient or quick to anger. You may even have people in your life who let you know that you forget to consider their needs or that you put too much pressure on them. You may give too much of yourself away and consistently undervalue your time and your talents. You may be inconsistent and undisciplined, which then shows up in multiple areas of your life.

There are so many possibilities that you may need a few days to list them as they come to mind. What you will find is that certain ones come up more than others. You could even put a little check mark next to an item every time it comes to mind.

Then it is time to pick one. Pick only one! I guarantee you that when you work on that one thing, everything else will begin to shift in the direction you want to go. When you aren't sure which one to pick, use this simple guideline — *it doesn't matter!* As I said, any one of them that you pick will affect all of them, because it will change you. That is the point of New Year's resolutions, to choose to change. So if you cannot figure out which one to choose, simply put them all on little slips of paper and draw one out of a bowl — and stick with the first one you draw.

Step #2: What Do You Decide To Do About It?

Again, take a few hours or a few days with this process. Confide in a family member, friend or yoga-buddy — or even a few of them. Don't turn it into a soap opera, but do elicit the support of those you trust the most. You may have already gotten their help with Step 1 and you will certainly need their help with Step 3, so have a heart-to-heart with one or with a few. Make a list of your options. Some of them will be biggies and some of them will be simple little things.

For example, if you have decided to work on becoming more consistent or self-disciplined, you could create a detailed timeline for your daily routine. This is called a biggie. Or you could decide to go to bed by 10 pm every night. This is a little thing. You won't end up deciding to do all of them — that would be too much to tackle. New Year's resolutions are choiceful change, not earthshaking and revolutionary changes.

Accumulate a list of the simple things, the complicated ideas and plans, the in-between-sized ideas and the ones that other people suggest (especially if you don't like their idea!). The nice thing about taking a few days to do this is that the list ripens. It gets longer and matures in the process. The ideas you liked in the beginning will become less likeable as you come up with new ones, or perhaps the contrast with the others makes it clear that your first idea was your best.

Deciding what to do is a conscious, willful process. Don't allow it to become a lackadaisical or whimsical process. You're also not waiting for a lightening bolt from the heavens. You're not even waiting for the mood to strike you. You have tremendous internal resistance to change, even when you know you need to make changes, so if you wait for the mood to strike you, sometime, somewhere, it won't last long enough for anything to happen. That is why New Year's resolutions are not popular. You have to actually generate some *oomph* to get over your resistance.

Deciding what to do is simply choosing. Your ability to make a choice is one of the most important qualities of being human. The human being alone has an ability to choose, beyond mere instinct and desire. Called *svatantra*, it is one of the qualities that shine forth from your own divine essence. On the cosmic level, *svatantra* means that Shiva *chooses* to manifest the world. On a personal level, *svatantra* means you *choose* how your life goes.

Even when life events occur over which you have no control, you do choose your reaction. Ideally, you consciously choosing your own internal reaction, as well as what you will say or do in every situation. When your words and actions arise from animalistic instinct or desire, that is when they are most hurtful to others, and even to yourself.

The process of making New Year's resolutions is a process of developing your power of choice, which is your free will. You have free will — what have you been doing with it? As you choose from the many possibilities you have written down, you are cultivating and refining *svatantra*, your free will. As a yogi, the purpose of cultivating your will is to give you the power to access your own divine essence — ultimately to choose to live from your inner radiance all the time. If you cannot handle a New Year's resolution, how will you attain enlightenment?

So now you choose what to do. Look at your list and choose one or several of the items. If you choose an easy one, you may be cultivating a quick success, which is very inspiring both for yourself and others. But you might get bored with something that is too easy. If you choose a hard one, you might become disheartened before you even give it a good try, or you may appreciate the challenge. You are the only one who knows what works best for you.

You might even want to choose several items that you could do simultaneously. Or you could set up a stair-step process: “In January and February, I’ll do A; in March, I’ll add B; and in the summer I’ll do C. Then I’ll spend the fall and winter enjoying the fruits of my labors.”

Step #3: Making a Resolution.

What is a *resolution*, and how do you actually DO it? To resolve to do something is to make a commitment. What you are more familiar with is the process of fulfilling a *desire*. It can be hard to sort out the difference between desire and free will because you have been using your will to attain your desires. But svatantra is not desire; it is even more powerful than desire.

Desire is a weakening force. When you function from desire, you become weaker and weaker. Desire arises from a sense of being incomplete and needy. Resolution arises from clarity of perception and applying your will — it makes you stronger. Your free will makes you able to attain anything, become anything, accomplish anything! When you apply your will to something, it is very powerful — it is like directing sunlight through a magnifying glass, which can set the world on fire.

Making a resolution is more powerful than setting an intention. This word *intention* has been a buzz word for several years. It is a way of saying, “I want a certain thing, so I will say I want it and wait for the universe to make it easy for me to get it. And if the universe doesn’t make it easy, then I wasn’t meant to have it.” From yoga’s perspective, this is a copout.

A resolution is called *vrtam* – a vow. Instead of saying, “I resolve to do A,” try saying, “I vow to do A.” It’s a pretty big word, *vow*. If that word is hard for you, go back to *commitment*, “I hereby make a commitment to A.” These words probably have more meaning to you than the word *resolve*, but you can say, “I resolve to do A.” The point is to find one that grabs your attention, something that means you are really committing yourself to a process and a goal. This commitment is the key.

It is best if you write it down. It is even better if you tell someone or several people, and ask for their support and reminders, making it clear that you are genuine and serious about this. Not only will you attain what you choose for your New Year’s resolution, but you will develop your ability to make choices and commitments. You will develop control over the vagaries of your mind, which will deepen your inner experience of your own divinity — this is the purpose of all of yoga’s practices.

If you are a yogi, you should make New Year’s resolutions. If you want to improve yourself, you should make New Year’s resolutions. If you want to be happy, you should make New Year’s resolutions. If you want to be a better person, have better relationships, accomplish things in the world, you must make New Year’s resolutions. Now is the time.

Namaste,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rama". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a heart shape drawn above the letter 'a'.

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