



March 2007 Contemplation Theme

# Quiet Mind

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

The hardest thing we ask a new student to do is at the beginning of their first class — to lie in Shavasana. Many things contribute to the difficulty: they don't know what is going to happen, they are in a strange room with some people (who seem really strange), and they don't yet know how to relax. But the most difficult part is that their body is laying there, well propped and cushioned, in comfort and stillness, but their mind is continuing to race. Even after many classes or many years of yoga, you may experience the conundrum of having your body in stillness while your mind continues churning.

All the practices of yoga are to quiet your mind. Frankly, it needs the help. There are two problems with your busy mind — quantity and quality. The sheer number of your thoughts is overwhelming. If you had a grain of rice for every thought, you'd be drowning in the mound within a few days! Your mind is so busy that you cannot really see and hear what is going on around you. As a teacher, I know that I must repeat every important point three times, because only one-third of the people hear me at one time. Your mind is so occupied with itself that you miss two-thirds of what is going on around you.

Do you consider your mind to be average-busy or are you a person with an extra-busy mind? One statistic says that the average person thinks 65,000 thoughts a day, which is about one thought per second for 18 hours. Unfortunately, your mind is actually capable of moving much faster than that. You can think yourself to the moon, walk around the craters for a while and then come back, all in less than a second. Worse, you can actually think yourself into exhaustion, and often do. Even sitting here and reading about it can be exhausting.

A much bigger problem is the quality of all those thoughts. Your 65,000 daily thoughts are not 65,000 new, innovative, creative, exciting, uplifting and inspiring thoughts. Most of them are reruns. Your mind has a very limited repertoire. It replays the same things over and over again. You are spending your mental energy on an endless repetition of the same things. In fact, I have just modeled it for you — I described how your mind repeats itself by repeating myself, using different words to make the same point five times. Only your mind doesn't stop after five; it is truly endless.

Your mind is not replaying the best and most beautiful moments of your life. It reruns the worst episodes. Even television is better — they replay the best episodes. But your mind loves the gutter; it replays the most horrible, most disturbing, most upsetting events, even giving you new and more upsetting ways to look at them. Your mind can actually cause new pain by reviewing old events — reinflicting new wounds on top of old.

Worse, your mind can create pain from events that never happened. When you worry, you live through things that have not yet occurred and will probably never happen. You are a victim of your busy mind, trapped between memory and worry. With all of that going on, your mind hasn't yet exhausted ways to trap you in an inner hell of your own creation. The most powerful of all your mind's ensnarements is desire.

In every moment, you know just how you would like things to be, but this precise moment simply isn't measuring up. The reality of your job doesn't match what you want it to be. The people around you don't do what you want them to do. Most especially, you don't meet your own expectations of yourself. Most of those 65,000 thoughts are about yourself — negative judgments and self-criticisms. If you talked to other people the way you talk to yourself, you would have no friends and family left!

Yet the sun rises every morning and sets every evening. Rain and snow fall to earth and feed the cycle of life. Gravity holds you to the surface of the earth, air moves in and out of your lungs and your heart is beating. Life is so beautiful! So incredibly beautiful. When you stop for even a moment to see the stars at night or the grass growing through a crack in the sidewalk, you experience the miracle of life anew. You see this only when your mind stops. Quiet mind.

If you are walking along with a normal amount of mind activity (busy mind), you don't see the blades of grass growing through the cracks. When your mind is busy, you don't notice the stars at night; you don't notice your breath and the beating of your heart. You cannot see the beauty of a sunset. You cannot delight in the antics of a child.

Yoga does not value a busy mind. Yoga does not value multi-tasking. Yoga does not teach you how to fill your mind with more trivia or how to get better at cutting yourself into little bits and pieces with the sword of your mind. Yoga values quiet mind. All the practices of yoga are for the purpose of quieting your mind.

Yoga is not the only thing that will quiet your mind. You can watch falling snow, walk through the woods, sit by the ocean or in the garden and your mind becomes peaceful. You can even get on an airplane and take a trip to a place of great natural beauty so that you can experience a vacation from your mind. This is why people like to go to the Caribbean, to the desert or to the mountains — it's not just a vacation from everyday life, it's a vacation from busy mind.

One day I was sitting on my favorite bench at my favorite beach in San Diego, watching the sun set into the Pacific Ocean. I had the bench to myself and had tucked my feet up so I could sit in a comfortable yogic pose, with a lovely backrest, facing due west. The sun played the colors across the horizon in one of the most splendid shows I have ever seen. It lasted almost an hour and I sat quietly for the whole thing. About 15 feet away from me, a man was pacing. He had his suit jacket on, his tie loosened. He paced up and down. He turned and paced toward the sun, turned and stomped away, and then paced back toward the sun again. He placed his hands on his hips and uttered an exasperated sigh, and then paced away again. He paced the whole hour, and then stomped away to his car. He never got quiet mind. He came because he wanted the glory of nature to quiet his mind, but it didn't work for him that day. I wanted to tell him, "Yoga will do it for you," but he didn't seem to be receptive at that moment.

The yoga poses (*asanas*) are the most well known of yoga's practices, and they do quiet your mind. Anything you do with your body will quiet your mind, which is why exercise is recommended for those who suffer from anxiety or depression. Any type of physical activity, from sports to working in the yard, quiets your mind. Any type of *asana* practice will quiet your mind, but *Svaroopā*® yoga does it differently. The huge variety of things you can do with your body produce quiet mind because they tire you out. It's a good-kind of tired, different from the exhaustion you get when you think too much. When you use physical activity to quiet your mind, it starts up again when you recover from being tired. You get a wonderful respite from your negative, obsessive, cranky, anxious, picky little mind. Then it starts up again, and runs the same reruns as before. But it is different with *Svaroopā*® yoga, because we use the body to open you up, not to run you down.

As you decompress your spine, you create an inner opening that is both physical and more than physical. Through this opening, you experience the inner depth of your own essence, the reality and vastness of your own being which is beyond your mind. This experience is what you have been looking for in all your frenetic activity, running around as if you are saying to each and every person (and every tree, and every ocean wave and every star), "Stop me! Would you please just stop my mind!" When your mind stops, no matter what you used to stop it, you experience *svaroopā*, the bliss of your own being. With yoga, we go for the inner experience directly, by opening inward and looking inward.

The Pratyabhijnahrdyam names what we are doing in *Svaroopā*® yoga, *Madhya vikaasaach chidaananda laabhah* (sutra 17), which means

By opening into your core, you open into the bliss of consciousness within.

All the *Svaroopā*® yoga practices create an inner opening, and they show you how to live in that openness. This openness is different than what people mean when they say, "I want to open up; I want to be more open." They want an openness to the people and world around them. What *Svaroopā*® yoga gives you is an openness to what is inside — it is an inner openness, not an outer openness. Yet, this inner openness gives you the ability to live in the outer openness. With this inner opening, you don't need the layers of protection that used to keep you distant from the world and from other people.

Each time you open your spine, you stay a little more open and you become more able to live in that openness. You are conditioning your body to consciousness, and you are training your mind how to live in quietude. You really can live with a quiet mind. It will function when you need it, but it won't have the 64,900 unnecessary thoughts throughout the day.

For a quiet mind, do more yoga.

Namaste,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rama". Above the signature is a small heart symbol containing the number "31".

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