



August 2007 Contemplation Theme

## Experiencing Your Experience

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I was standing next to the curb, waiting for an airport shuttle, when a woman walked by me, pulling a suitcase on wheels. A few feet past me she stopped, made a loud and frustrated, "Aaargh!" and threw her hands up in the air. I was concerned that something was seriously wrong and turned to speak to her. She turned away from me, put her foot up on the edge of a planter, and proceeded to retie her shoelace. This is called overreaction.

Most of your problems come from overreaction. What is really happening in your life is usually not that serious, and even when it is, you handle it better when you are less reactive. When you live your life in overreaction, going from one seeming crisis to another, you are exhausted. It comes from carrying around so much residue from previous experiences that you live in anxiety and are hyper-reactive to everything. If it was just about reactivity, it would be easy. The real problem is much more insidious — it is about how you perceive things.

Everything you have ever experienced has left an imprint in you. These imprints overlap each other, like footprints in wet sand. They overlay your perceptions, so that you do not perceive anything as it really is. You perceive everything through your internal filters; they distort your perception of life. This traps you in a perpetual cycle, a karmic cycle. Here's how it works:

- #1. The hidden content of your mind **colors your perceptions** – you don't actually see what is happening accurately because you overlay your own content or you screen out important information.
- #2. This makes you **perceive the situation with a certain slant** – your perspective on it is different than others have because you added or eliminated information (as did they).
- #3. Your slanted perception **creates your experience**. When your slant on the situation is trusting or positive, you have a good time. When your slant is one of anxiety or dislike, you experience pain. Different people facing the same situation have different experiences; your joy or pain comes from your perceptions, not from the situation itself.
- #4. That **experience leaves another imprint**, which perpetuates an endless repetition of the same experiences. Even when the events change, you still feel the same way, over and over again.
- #5. These impressions are called *samskaras*, contracted bits of energy that you carry from one lifetime to the next. They **are stored in your spine, and determine the condition of your body and mind**.
- #6. These stored impressions **color your perceptions**, and we are back at #1...

You must intervene somewhere in the karmic cycle or you will run endlessly like a hamster on a wheel. You don't even have to believe in reincarnation; you can see the cycle functioning within one lifetime as you repeat certain types of experiences over and over again. The core opening practices of *Svaroopa*® yoga intervene by clearing the *samskaras* out of your spine, changing both your body and mind. Yet yoga offers many practices that empower you to work more deeply by working directly with your mind.

The first thing to do is actually experience what you are experiencing. Experience what is happening for you, whether you are going through a situation in your home, your work or your life or even if you are discovering a new layer of tension in your body. For example, when you are well aligned and propped in a *Svaroopa*® yoga pose, the pose reaches into the tight areas of your spine. This is one of the ways that *Svaroopa*® yoga is different from other types of exercise and other styles of yoga poses — we target the tight deepest tensions in your body; we are not simply moving what already moves.

This means that you begin to feel things you never felt before. Usually the pose releases those deep spinal tensions before you are able to feel how tight they are, so your experience is one of profound release. It is an amazing sensation, to feel the deep internal unraveling — it is amazingly blissful. But sometimes your ability to perceive expands into that tight layer before it releases — then you feel new aches and pains before you get the release. What happens next is up to you.

If you are alarmed by this new sensation, your muscles tighten more. This means you instantly feel more pain. It also means that the tension won't dissolve, because your reaction prevents the release. What you need to do is *experience what you are experiencing*. You have found a deeper level of tension because the pose made you able to find it; the pose is working on dissolving it but it needs another 30 – 60 seconds to do its work. Your reaction is preventing your own improvement.

For those who have been practicing for some time, this whole process is easy. You know that the pose will make the change for you because you have been through it before. But when you are new to the *Svaroopa*<sup>®</sup> yoga practice, it is a little harder because pain can be a warning signal. So your teacher backs you out of the deeper angles, provides extra props, or even realigns you or gives you an adjustment — so you will get the internal release without pain or discomfort. When you learn to trust the process, you can work a little deeper in those tight layers. You can even discern the difference between a harmful pain and a “good hurt.”

You are able to discern the difference because yoga develops your ability to perceive without adding the overlay of reaction and interpretations. This also applies to your life, not just to your yoga poses. The key is to perceive what is going on at both levels. Identify the difference between perception and the overlay.

For example, somebody says, “I disagree with you.” See if you are simply hearing them and understanding their perspective — OK, they disagree. More likely, you will find that your mind has added a layer — “Oh no! If they disagree with me, they don't like me!” Or perhaps you feel like you have to defend your position or to convince the other person to change their perspective. Identify the difference between what is actually happening and what you are adding to it.

This means you may have to be silent for a few seconds and breathe. Back down from the heat of the moment so you can discern the difference. Now that you have caught your mind in its act of self-sabotage, don't do anything about it. Don't do anything about the situation and don't do anything about your mind's ravings.

Simply notice what you are experiencing without doing anything about it at all. You don't have to change what your mind is doing, simply notice it. You may be uncomfortable for a few minutes, but it will pass. You may feel defensive, or scared, or misunderstood, or needy. Stay with the feeling. Don't act on it.

This means that you don't take it out on the other person. They didn't cause your feeling – your own *samskaras* caused you to have an internal reaction that is out of proportion to the external reality. Since the other person didn't cause it, you don't have to make them feel responsible. You don't have to get them to change what they are doing.

This is very important because you usually spend a lot of time and energy, especially in your most important relationships, trying to get everyone to tiptoe around you so they help you avoid your hot spots. Yoga shows you how to walk right into your hot spots, for the purpose of clearing them and freeing you from the old knee-jerk reactions.

So you stay with the feeling and don't act on it. Don't make any decisions. Don't run away (unless you are in genuine danger — then make a quick exit.) If you have to say something, buy time; tell them that you are really affected by what they said and you need some time to sort it out. But don't let that brief statement distract you from what you are experiencing. Catch onto your feeling and stay with it.

This is already a change in the karmic cycle listed above. The cycle depends on you being unconscious of it. As soon as you notice your experience, you are conscious, and that changes everything. This is called, “experiencing your experience.” When you do this, you begin to understand yourself. You are shining light into the dark spots within yourself. Just seeing what is there makes huge changes.

I know that this can sound a little bit scary, but think of it this way — you have been feeling that fear, anger, sadness, resentment or rebelliousness throughout your whole life, so a few minutes more of it won't really be a big problem. Especially once you discover what happens when you do this yogic practice — experiencing your experience.

This practice works on your mind and emotions in the same way that a pose works with your body. Each pose creates an angle of access to the tightest muscles in your body. Once you angle in there, you wait. Within a minute or two, those muscles begin to soften. The same thing happens with your mind and emotions — within a minute or two, the disappointment, jealousy, blame, disgust, lust or loneliness will

begin to dissolve. It's like morning fog dissolving under the sunlight; the light of your own awareness shines through and dissolves something you used to get lost in.

This is described in sutra # 14 from the Pratyabhijnahridayam:

*chitivahnir avarohapade channo'pi maatrayaa -meyendhanam plushyati.*

*Chiti* (consciousness) does not lose Her nature even  
when She becomes the individual,  
but partly burns (like fire) the fuel of objective knowledge.

This means that your own personal awareness has the full power of Consciousness shining through it, which dissolves whatever you perceive, in the same way that fire burns fuel. When you catch hold of your internal experience and stay with it, it is like a stick of wood that is incinerated by the power of your perception. This is a powerful yogic practice that changes your experience of yourself and your life. It also dramatically changes your body and revolutionizes your relationships.

Normally, you don't actually experience your experience — you project it out on everyone else. You blame others for the way you feel; you try to manipulate others into doing things that will make you feel better; you want to control what they do so that you will feel safe, loved, appreciated, etc. Your self-esteem depends on other people's opinions of you; if they like you, then you like you. It is epidemic, especially in the yoga world in America, because everyone thinks that yoga is about being happy and peaceful and pretty.

Yoga is not really about happiness or peace at all, and it is not about beauty. Yoga is the scalpel that will cut away the cancers growing inside you. The process is almost painless, especially compared to anything else you have tried! Once you realize how it works, it becomes joyful and liberating. Consider the alternative. If you don't look at your own experience, you continue to blame everyone around you for not making you happy. At the same time, you continue to turn somersaults in your life, trying to make everyone else happy so they will like you. It is very important that they like you, because your liking of yourself depends on it.

If you decide to expand your yoga practice to work on clearing your mind and emotions in this way, you simply make a decision that you are willing to experience what you are experiencing. You step fully into your experience, but you don't act on it. The wonder of this practice is that it will free you from those old samskaras that have been mucking up your relationships and creating the tensions in your spine.

The first few times you give it a try are a little awkward, though you quickly get better at it. If you catch hold of a feeling and it doesn't go away within 2 – 3 minutes, you aren't really experiencing it. You have a subtle internal resistance to it, even though you think you are experiencing it. You are trying to manipulate your experience by pretending to experience it, but all along you have the underlying motive of making it go away. This means, while you are experiencing it, you are watching the clock and saying, "How much longer will this go on?" It won't work when you approach it that way. To experience what you are experiencing is like stepping into the shower with your clothes on. You will get wet.

Ultimately, this is training for something much more important. By learning how to experience what you are experiencing, you become able to experience your own divine essence ever more fully — which is svaroopā, the ever-expanding ecstasy of your own Self.

Do more yoga.

Namaste,

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

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