



June 2008 Contemplation Theme

## When Do I Do my Yoga?

by Rama Berch

As you move into summer's activities, yoga can get lost. On vacation or in your own back yard, nature beckons. A cool lemonade and a warm chaise lounge can make you lose track of time and miss your regular yoga class. Family, whether they are visiting you or you are visiting them, can leave little time for you to do your yoga. The late night or yesterday's full belly from summer goodies can make it hard for you to get up at the traditional yogic hour.

The Svaroopis down under are beginning the winter grind. Summer playtime is receding into memory and the day gets busier. The space in your life disappears as the weather cools, and so many things need to be done that it is hard to take care of yourself.

Whether we are talking about the lazy days of summer or the multi-tasking challenge of the busy day, you must ask, "When do I do my yoga?" If you don't ask, your time will be spent taking care of everyone else. It's important to consider, "How can I get to a class?" If you don't prioritize it, it slips away. Everyone else and everything else is more important than you.

However, you really aren't any good for them if you haven't taken care of yourself. The way you respond to a beloved family member changes when you have done your yoga. The mood you are in when running errands or cooking improves after yoga. You even drive better when you have taken a yoga class. The way you breathe and walk changes. Even the look in your eyes changes and everyone benefits from that inner shift.

Do your practice before everyone else gets up, or at a time of day when everyone else is occupied or napping. Take an evening off from everyone and get to your yoga class. Or tell them all that you are going to take 45 minutes a day alone — for your yoga practice. Close the door. Put on some yoga music; play it loud enough that you don't hear what is going on outside of the room.

While these practical suggestions will help, they are not the real answer, because the question was the wrong question. Here's the problem with the question, "When do I do my yoga?" It's not a yogic question. It's a lifestyle question. The question is about taking a time-out for yourself. It's about taking care of yourself, which is very important, but that's not the purpose of yoga. You can ask the same question — about when you get your weekly massage, a long soaking bath, a pedicure, or when you get to go the library, etc. All of these are ways of balancing out your life, and you can do yoga that way.

Your life does need to be balanced. Most of the things you do are for other people. If your work is full-time home and family care, you are taking care of other people. If you work outside of your home, or even in your home, you are still doing things for other people. Here's how it works: all work is done for other people. It's true, because if you are producing something for yourself, who is going to pay you? By definition, your work (in your home or outside of your home) is for others.

Work takes up the largest part of your day. But you still are taking care of others at the end of your work day. You drive them somewhere or buy something that they need. You phone them to find out how they are, and you see if you can contribute to the quality of their day. Of course, you hope they will help you with yours as well, but you are still doing something for them even when it benefits you. In fact, if you do enough for them, they will appreciate you. They will like you, they will love you — and the benefit of that is huge! Most people structure their whole life around that.

In that context, you can see how your yoga class or own yoga practice balances your life. You take care of yourself. Yoga isn't about pleasing others, or taking care of others, or producing something that they will approve of or pay for... It's *about you* and it is *for you*. But that is also true of a solitary walk in the park or a long shower. So that means we have to ask, is yoga just another way of taking care of yourself? You have to answer that for yourself. It's OK if it is, but is that really what it is?

My own answer is no. Yoga is much more than merely another wonderful form of self-care, though I heartily approve of so many of the other wonderful forms of self care. I especially love pedicures! So, if we began with the wrong question, what is the right question to ask?

Instead of asking, “When do I do my yoga,” the right question is this, “When am I NOT doing yoga?” What part of your day is yoga and what part is not? Consider it this way: When you are driving, are you doing yoga? Or did you leave your yoga behind on the blanket stacks?

It’s so easy to do yoga when you drive. Put the back of the seat up so it’s almost vertical. Since the seat bottom is a little sloped, you may not be able to have the back fully upright, but you can get a 90° angle between the seat and the back. In this angle, your sitbones will sink more deeply into the seat — you’ll actually be sitting on them. Bring your head slowly back toward the headrest, so your neck is longer and more relaxed. As you ease your head and neck back, you are bringing your head more in line with your heart. If the headrest is pushing your head forward, fill in the hollow in the seat-back with a folded towel.

Drive a little slower. Your tailbone will stay longer. Your mind will be less frantic when you drive the speed limit, or even at 5 mph less. You’ll even save on gas money and be kind to the environment. Give generously to the other drivers by letting them in front of you. This is *aparigraha*, non-possessiveness. You don’t own that spot on the road. Give it to that stranger in the other car and improve their day. It won’t make you arrive later. A few days ago, I let a driver pull into the space in front of me and then had to sit through a red light. The other driver got through the light, but I didn’t. Have you timed the red light? Mine took just 45 seconds.

The yoga of driving — you can put on a chanting CD and even chant along with it. Do be careful about your choice of music. Some of the chants get quite speedy and make you drive too fast. Others, including a few of the ones I have recorded, are very meditative, which doesn’t make you a good driver. You can practice yoga when you are driving, but don’t meditate when you are driving.

There are so many places in your day where you can be practicing yoga. When you are walking, practice your yoga walk. Your *Svaroopa*® yoga teacher gives walking lessons. If you haven’t gotten them yet, ask when they are coming. When you are watching the kids in the pool, stand in Tadasana. If you are sitting on the sidelines at a ball game, place your feet in position and lean your elbows on your knees — they probably won’t even notice you’re doing a tailbone release pose. Or pull your feet up on the bench or chair and sit in a nice yogic pose. You can do Ujjayi Pranayama during a movie or even while other people are talking (if you do it quietly enough). You can sneak a few physical practices into almost any part of the day.

However, yoga is not limited to physical practices. Yoga is about you finding yourself inside, and bringing yourself into your life in a whole new way. The self that you find is a deeper level of yourself than you usually operate from. The physical practices of *Svaroopa*® yoga open the core of your body and the core of your being simultaneously. Once you know this deeper dimension of yourself, you can take yourself with you — into your work, into your relationships and into your life.

The two main practices of yoga that focus on this are meditation and seva. Meditation is the process of diving directly into your own deeper essence, which is named *svaroopa*, your own true form. There are many different meditation traditions available in the West. The differences between them are important. Many Buddhist traditions describe the goal as *nirvana*, which means annihilation of self. Patanjali says that the goal is *kaivalya*, which means knowing that you are the One. When you know that, the world disappears for you. *Svaroopa*® yoga is based in Kashmiri Shaivism, which describes the goal as *sahaja samadhi*, the realization of your own Self and the ability to live in it all the time, so you see yourself and everyone else as unique and individual expressions of the one divine Reality.

Because there are different goals, each tradition uses different meditation techniques. Different techniques accomplish different results. To use these techniques effectively, you need some training. Learning meditation from a book (or an article) is like learning to drive a car from a book. Yet you will need to sit quietly, whatever tradition you train in. That’s when you will be glad that you have been practicing the poses — it will be easier for you to sit!

OK — let’s say you have your summer set up. You’ll do your Ujjayi Pranayama, some poses and meditation every morning before the other lazybones in the household get up. It makes you feel so *real*, truly like you are you, as you begin your day. Then, what happens? Bit by bit, you begin to lose it. You get hot or frazzled. Maybe someone pushes your buttons or something you were planning on didn’t pan out. You lose your yogic state. What now? You could take a yoga break. Even five minutes of Ujjayi Pranayama will reset your blown circuits.

Or you could take a good yogic look at your attitude. The reason you are thrown off so easily is because of your approach to the day. You want certain things to happen or you are hoping that certain things won’t happen. You are expecting certain people to act in a certain way. You are trying to avoid certain topics of conversation. You

are dancing around on your tiptoes trying to make everything work for everyone — and at the same time you are trying to get what you want. You have an attitude of neediness. You are walking into your life as though you are empty and you want other people to fill you up. This is called 'normal' because this is how everyone lives, and it is how you were programmed. But it is not how a yogi lives.

When you open to your core essence, svaroopā, you aren't empty any more. You don't need other people to act in a certain way. You don't need to avoid certain things. You are full. You are being ever-filled from your own inner source. This is a familiar feeling because you have experienced it before, in your yoga practice. You felt that way in the morning, before you lost it. You lost it because you see life as being not-yoga. You need to practice seva, also known as *karma yoga* — the yoga of mundane activity.

You probably think that karma means you have some bad stuff coming to you — which is true. But that is only part of the meaning of the word. *Karma* actually means activity that is filled with desire, which includes the repercussions from those activities. When you perform your activities from a place of neediness and desire, repercussions bounce back on you. Yoga describes that repercussions from your actions in previous lifetimes are what brought you back to this birth — some are pleasurable karmas while others are painful. You created those karmas (repercussions) through your karmas (actions) back then, and you are creating more through your karmas (actions) now.

The answer is seva, which means to serve without selfish motive. It's an attitude shift. It's a subtle attitude shift. The more subtle that something is, the more powerful it is. For example, you are dealing with a family member who is cranky and demanding. She or he wants limeade while everyone else is getting lemonade. You lose your temper, but you don't want to show it. You say, "OK, I'll make you some limeade." You're also thinking but you don't say, "...and you better appreciate it." You don't realize it, but your eyes are narrowed, your breath is tight, and your voice is flat and dry.

Now replay the same scene. You say the same thing, "OK, I'll make you some limeade." You are thinking but you don't say, "...if I can do something to help you feel better, I am truly happy to help." Now your eyes are soft and open, your breath is easy, and your voice is warm and caring.

You are saying the same thing and even doing the same thing, making limeade, but the effect is completely different. In the first scenario, you want to be appreciated for what you are doing. You are needy; you need to be acknowledged or you even want to make sure that you get something in return — maybe that person will bring you a flower and apology later in the day. In the second scenario, you don't need to be appreciated. You are concerned and want to help. You don't feel needy; you are already full and whole within yourself, and can offer genuine support.

When you do your mundane activities from the place of fullness within yourself, you don't lose yourself. You can work hard all day long but you don't get depleted. Your work becomes another yoga practice — your life becomes seva. Then it doesn't matter what activities you are doing, or who you are doing it for, because you are not waiting to be appreciated. You're not hoping they will like or love you. You are not trying to earn your sense of personal worth. You are not giving yourself away, hoping that the other person will give you back a feeling of self by having a good opinion of you.

You already found yourself within yourself. You support your own sense of inner being through your yoga practices. One of the most powerful of yoga's practices is seva, which teaches you the attitude you need to carry on with your life, as a yogi. Do more yoga!

Namaste,



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