



July 2008 Contemplation Theme

Stages of Bliss

by Rama Berch

Every *Svaroopa*® yoga class begins with Shavasana in order to put the bliss first. Because relaxation is the first stage of bliss. But it is not always easy to relax. This is why there are so many relaxation technologies for those who need help. You can drug yourself into a relaxed state with a beverage or drug (legal or illegal). Comfort food will do the trick. Certain herbs or teas will accomplish the same result. But can you accomplish relaxation without a “helper?”

So we teach Shavasana at the beginning of every class to give you the opportunity to experience true relaxation without any “little helpers” along the way. Perhaps you could consider your teacher’s voice to be your helper, but at least you are not introducing substances into your bloodstream and brain. As you relax, your body produces bliss chemicals instead of stress chemicals — a natural high, or at least the first stage of it. There are some days when you cannot relax into that first Shavasana so easily. We know that it is one of the hardest things that we ask a new student to do — just come in and lie down and do nothing. Even if your body is perfectly still, your mind can be racing. This is why we do the Guided Awareness, to help you settle in, especially once you have experienced it a few times.

You already know the second stage of bliss — sleep. Clearly sleep is blissful, as well as deeply coveted by those who have trouble settling into it. During a stressful time in your life, the relationship between relaxation and sleep becomes clear. Similarly, consider what happens when you do relax deeply — how long do you stay awake? Relaxation clearly leads to sleep. However, your deep state of rest in Shavasana is technically not sleep. It is a profound healing state, a meditative absorption, but you don’t know how deep you are because you are not able to be aware at that inner depth. Yoga’s practices develop your capacity to be aware in these inner stages of bliss, of which relaxation and sleep are only the beginning.

You can also see the first two stages of bliss at work when you take a vacation. First you set yourself up for a relaxing time, with the best spot on the beach or in the woods, the right clothes and sunscreen, all the necessary accessories, a cool drink and lots of time to do nothing. You take off your watch so you can finally lose track of time. Maybe you can even keep time by your belly — it’s time to eat when you are truly hungry, not when the clock chimes or when your taste buds speak up.

You put your feet up and lay your head back, and your relaxation turns into a nap. You truly need it. Daily life is based in pressure and speed, which leaves you living on the edge of a continuous state of exhaustion. This accumulated exhaustion is *shrama*, the collected fatigue caused by a mind full of worldly concerns and a lifestyle that is completely out of balance (maybe even out of integrity). You could have a blood sample taken and analyzed for your level of shrama. They can actually measure the stress chemicals your organs and brain are pumping into your blood. Shrama won’t let you go any deeper into bliss than sleep — you need rest. To go into deeper stages of bliss, you must have cleared out the shrama as well as some of the toxins in your cells, your *nadis* (energetic nerve channels), and in your mind and emotions.

Thus, your first three days of vacation are filled with a lot of naps, along with good food, good company (unless you went away for a little solitude) and open unstructured days. Then you begin to feel restless. You have lots of energy and you’re a little bored, so you ask, “What is there to do around here?” You find lots of wonderful things to tire yourself out on, so you return home with another reserve of shrama and no way to recover from it. You come home from vacation, see the backlog that accumulated in your absence, and think, “I need another vacation.” I’ve been told that retirement works the same way. You take a few days or a few weeks to do nothing, and then you begin to fill your days with lots of “somethings” — until life is busy and hurried again. What happened to relaxing? Where’s the bliss?

The ability to relax is an important skill. Skills require training and experience. How much training and experience in relaxation have you had? So we train you – your class begins with Shavasana, and it

ends with Shavasana as well. The ending Shavasana is a different experience than the opening one — have you noticed the difference? You might want to find out what your classmates are experiencing, too. It's really interesting to discover how similar your experiences are, as well as the differences.

You can call yourself a yogi if you do Shavasana and Ujjayi Pranayama every day. You can even do it in bed, if you can get all the way through 20 minutes of Ujjayi Pranayama without falling asleep (shrama again). Lie on your back and put the pillows under your knees. You won't need as many pillows as you do blanket rolls because the mattress sinks in under your hips, which makes you need less lift under your knees. If you do fall asleep, you can even sleep in Shavasana; you'll get deeper rest, feel more fully refreshed, and discover it all happens in a shorter time period. But if you do fall asleep, you probably didn't get your full 20 minutes of Ujjayi Pranayama — so you may need to lie on the floor for your Ujjayi, or even do a series with five minutes lying down, five minutes seated, five minutes standing and the last five minutes lying down again.

Eventually you become able to deeply relax without falling asleep. You actually get a deeper relaxation than sleep can provide, and you have passed through the second stage of bliss to the third — awareness. Let me recap: the first stage of bliss is relaxation, but you are not very good at relaxing because of the accumulated shrama. You fall asleep, which is the second stage of bliss, and you truly do need the rest. Once you have rested enough to recover from your lifestyle, you have cleared out the shrama, then you are able to relax more deeply and skip stage 2 (sleep) to go directly to stage 3 — awareness.

Now your experience in Shavasana is very different. Before you used to lose the outer sounds, including your teacher's words, somewhere around your knees or hips. Now you hear every word, but you aren't working at it. In fact, the words almost don't matter. This is because you have already arrived at the place where the words are supposed to take you — to yourself. Awareness is one of the technical terms of yoga, *chiti* in Sanskrit, which describes the deeper dimensions of your own being. This third stage is an experience of awareness without thought, without efforting, without the doingness associated with your usual mode of perception. You had been used to going unconscious at that inner depth, and now you are that deep inside, yet you are aware while you are there. It is not yet the fully empowered awareness that is your own divine essence, but it is the beginning of that inner discovery.

The next four stages of bliss are peace, pure joy, physical bliss and ever-expanding ecstasy. Your experience of each gets more fulfilling and more bliss-full, which is appropriate for the process of exploring inner bliss. As these begin to blossom forth within you, it is impossible for anxiety or desire to take hold. First the peace that fills you is so deep that it cannot be disturbed, beautifully described as “the peace which passeth understanding.” That leads to pure joy, which leaves no room for anything else. When that joy is shared with another or directed toward another person, it takes on the texture of love. Then the physical bliss begins to erupt within, radically changing your body as well as your mind and heart. As ever-expanding ecstasy begins to expand within you, you stop keeping track of stages — yet there is more. This is yoga's promise. Relaxation is the doorway into bliss. 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 "ॐ" (Om).

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