



October 2008 Contemplation Theme

Facing Uncertainty

by Rama Berch

Everyone reacts differently. You might be tracking every move in the Dow Jones — it shifted from up to down, and back to an upward trend 75 times in one day recently. It could drive you crazy! If you are a worrier, you may already be scripting the worst-case scenario and bemoaning your losses. Perhaps instead you are an ostrich with your head in the sand, just waiting for the whole situation to pass into history. You could be one who planned for the ups and downs, knowing that those who try to make a fast buck will also lose a few. You may have avoided the whole thing by selling high, or simply never investing in the first place. The question really is this, how does a yogi face uncertainty?

For a yogi, the question about facing uncertainty doesn't even arise. My Guru told me, "A yogi always remembers his death." It's a curious phrase. How do you remember your death? You cannot remember something that hasn't happened. I have been peeling the layers on this question for over 30 years; it has been quite liberating!

One thing I discovered through contemplating this teaching is that there is no certainty in life. You know this, even though you don't want to think about it. Everything that is born will die. Everything that comes into existence also comes to an end. If you depend on external things for your sense of self, security and well-being, you will live on an emotional roller coaster, going up and down, and up and down. This is perpetually painful. You may be very familiar with it.

Different people use different strategies. A popular one is to try to control everything and everyone around you. With this, you always want to know what is going to happen next. When you come to a Master Yoga course, we try to help you with this one by leaving you in the dark about what will be happening next. You know that your day is devoted to yoga, starting at a certain time and ending at a certain time, and that you will have meals and breaks. You know that you can use the bathroom at any time. But you don't know what is going to happen next. There are always a few yogis who complain about this on their feedback forms at the end of the program, not knowing that this is part of the yogic training. It is designed to train you to deal with uncertainty.

I got in the car to drive home after teaching several hours today. As I came down the onramp to the highway, I saw a traffic jam ahead of me. It was too late to avoid it, as I was halfway down the onramp. It was completely unexpected on a Sunday afternoon at 4 pm! So I took a breath, slowed down and enjoyed the autumn leaves as I followed the slow moving line of traffic. It took six minutes. I was rather pleased with myself for handling it so well, and enjoyed my normal driving speed for the rest of the way home.

Then, I came around the last curve on the highway before my turnoff and ran into another traffic jam! The highway was completely blocked on both sides, with police cars and fire trucks flashing their lights. I was an eighth of a mile away from my turnoff, but could make no progress at all. Immediately I began to pray for the people who were having a terrible experience, as well as the police and firemen who were there to help them. Slowly the cars began to inch forward as the police opened one lane. Elapsed time — three minutes.

You never know what is going to happen next. I was once stuck on a highway that was blocked in both directions and it took three hours. You never know what is going to happen next. So what does a yogi do? Well, you can begin with a slow long breath. You could even do Ujjayi Pranayama.

Looking at death can put a lot of things into perspective. A yogi told me about the loss of her niece, a 25-year-old woman who died in an auto accident recently. You probably know of others who lost their lives unexpectedly in their youth, or those who died in their elder years, or perhaps after a long illness. When you look at the reality of life and death, the current financial chaos is not quite so riveting. You are alive. Take a breath. You are living and breathing — how wondrous that is! Looking at death can help you get some needed perspective on life.

That's part of what I learned from Baba's instruction, "A yogi always remembers his death." When you always remember that death is ahead of you, life is somehow more precious. Everything shifts into a different perspective. Those whom you love are somehow even more loveable. The things you need are somehow less urgent. The pressure to perform or compete or excel is somehow less important, though you still give yourself fully and offer your

best, but the pressure is ratcheted down a notch or ten.

In this way, you are looking at this amazing thing called life by remembering that you will die one day. This is very powerful, but it isn't what Baba said. He didn't say, "A yogi always remembers that she will die one day." What does it mean, to remember your death? How can you remember something that you have never done?

Built into yoga's teachings is the cosmic paradigm that includes karma and reincarnation. From this perspective, you have died and been born into a new body many times. Though your past lifetimes are hidden behind a thick veil of maya, the most powerful remnants pierce that density and affect you still. You actually do remember having died before. You died peaceful deaths; you died violent deaths; you died at a young age and at an advanced age. You may have taken your own life or the lives of others in your past lifetime(s) — we all have. You do know death more intimately than you have allowed yourself to confess to yourself.

Even if you don't believe in multiple lifetimes, you can read one of the many books on death, especially those who share the stories of people who had near-death experiences. After a few of these stories, it becomes clear that death is not an ending — it is only another doorway. If you have been able to attend the death of a loved one, you know that death is not so fearful. In many ways, it is like being present at a birth — simply a birth into another realm of being that you don't see with your eyes and understand with your mind. The continuity of your own being is assured, for you are eternal. You have always existed. You have never not existed. You are existence-itself. You are consciousness-itself. You are Shiva.

When you have this inner certainty, none of the ups and downs of life can shake you. The purpose of remembering your death — whether you remember a past death or remember that one lies ahead — is for you to know the eternal, vast, blissful essence that is your own Self. Yoga is the science of Self discovery, using tried-and-true techniques to unveil your own divine radiance and learn to live in it all the time.

In recent years, I have continued my exploration of Baba's teaching on death by meditating at cremation grounds in India. I have seen bodies burn, families standing by to attend the process. I have learned so much by facing death in a way that is simply not available in America. I have found my mortality and my immortality, both at the same time. I know death, which means I know life. It has given me the freedom to love, to laugh, to cry and to live in a way I never knew before. I am so grateful to my Guru for his teaching and guidance through the decades.

It is true that times are uncertain, but that is really nothing new. When I lived in Southern California, I loved to go look at the ocean to see what the tides and the waves were like — different every day. Now that I live in Pennsylvania, I step out the front door every morning to find out what the weather is like — different every day. I recently visited Melbourne and someone told me that their weather changes five times a day! The only thing that is certain in this world is uncertainty. The only constant is change.

How do you live in this world of constant change? You find your own innermost essence, which is the unchanging reality. It's like the eye of the tornado. When everything is whirling around on the outside, your own center is always there, supporting you. It never leaves you. You might get caught up in the whirlwind for a while, which means you leave your own essence behind — it's called "loss of Self." Yoga specializes in how to find your Self again. Then you can sail through any storm. You can look around you and see the reality of what is happening, and perhaps even understand it in a whole new way because you have some perspective. But most importantly, you have your Self.

Do more yoga.

Namaste,



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