



February-March 2009 Contemplation Theme

Free of Limitations

by Swami Nirmalananda Saraswati

You've had the experience of your own divine essence so many times. When you see the night sky or watch snow drifting downward, something happens to you on the inside. It happens when you hear a long high note on the flute or violin, or maybe for you it's the cello — for me, the tamboura propels me deep inside. You've stood on a lookout point and felt yourself expand to the edges of the sky and beyond. You've had a deep Shavasana, so deep inside that you didn't know you were "there" until you came out, and then you wanted to go back in. Yoga says you must have this experience of your own Self or you will begin to wonder what the reason for life is. The experience of your own Self is the one essential ingredient in life — more essential than vitamins.

Yet if you tried to describe what this experience actually is, you would be at a loss for words. I confess that I love to see the look on your face when you try! I get to see it in every class because *Svaroopo*® yoga specializes in this inner experience. Everything we do with your body is for the specific purpose of pulling you into svaroopo, your own essence. While you are doing the poses, the slow breathing and the deep relaxations, and while you are getting profound physical and mental-emotional benefits, the real purpose is much more important. But it is hard to describe.

The ancient sages had the same problem. When their disciples asked them to describe the ultimate state, they answered, "it's indescribable." Fortunately for us, they would then try to describe it. Bliss, peace, vast beingness — these terms are all translated from Sanskrit terms, and give us a glimpse of the goal of yoga. Unfortunately, we don't really understand these terms. What does the word "bliss" mean; what is bliss? If you haven't had the experience, then you associate the word with an experience you have had — chocolate, sex, hot tub, etc. The bliss of beingness-itself is far beyond anything you can trigger by physical means. What about the word "peace?" To most people, it means the end of fighting — whether it is the fighting going on between nations, between races, between family members or within yourself. But true peace is much more than the end of the struggle — it is a more dynamic and fulfilling experience.

Knowing that their descriptions were misunderstood, the sages resorted to words of negation. By describing your own essence as being not limited, not fearful, not dependent on anything, not desiring of anything, the sages are pointing out that your own essence is something different than how you experience yourself on a day-to-day basis. Your day-to-day experience of self is limited, riddled with anxieties and worries, dependent on other people or certain results, and propelled by an endless list of desires and needs. To become free from these things is the goal of yoga. If you simply imagine what it feels like to be without these heavy inner limitations, you will feel light, vast and free.

My new name, Nirmalananda, is based on one of these words of negation. It is a great blessing and a great promise, all at the same time. The name describes the Self. Every time I hear it or think of it, it reminds me of who I really am. *Nirmala* means "without mala," which is without internal contraction. *Nir* means "without"; *mala* refers to the three levels of contraction that consciousness assumes in order to become the individual. When you add *ananda* (bliss) on the end, you get Nirmalananda, which means the bliss of being free of the malas. *Vimala* is to be with malas, which means you are normal.

Normal means that you don't know that you are consciousness-itself, as the first mala is how consciousness hides her divine essence from herself. This is *anava mala*, the cloud of unknowingness. Normal includes the second mala, *mayiya mala*, which creates personal and individual identity. This means that you work hard to construct your own unique sense of individuality through your relationships and activities, as well as where you live and where you go. Normal includes the third mala, *karma mala*, which propels you by an inner push to incessant and continuous activity. The third mala keeps you going and going and going. You can even lie down in Shavasana or sit for meditation and, with your body in complete stillness, your mind is still going 90 miles per hour.

Fortunately, that is easy to change by using yoga's amazing technology. It's easy to slow and calm your mind, whether you are opening your spine, working with your breath, chanting ancient mantras, or working with your mind directly through *vichara* (guided self-inquiry) or subtle internal contemplations. Any of these practices can give you an immediate experience by piercing the malas so you have an experience of *svaroopa*, your own Self. With continued practice, you begin dissolving the malas, so you can base yourself in the inner vastness and freedom that the sages describe — that vastness and freedom you have experienced so many times, which is where we began above.

The sages gave many specialized terms to describe your own essence. *Nirmamam* means free of possessiveness. No object can hold you. If a building burns down along with all of its contents, you are not destroyed along with those objects. Your essence is so much more than a collection of things, no matter how precious they are or how much money they cost you. No person defines your being or essence, as important as they are in your life.

Nirahankaaram means free of egoism, meaning that you aren't looking to see what other people think of you. You don't have to worry about getting their approval or about avoiding embarrassment. Your sense of self is rooted in a greater dimension of yourself, so you don't have to prove yourself or even try to improve yourself. You are already the "new and improved version" of yourself — you are the Self, Consciousness-Itself.

Nirvaasanam means that your own Self is free from desires; *niraakaanksham* is free from expectations. When you are filled from within your own being, nothing outside of you is needed or desired, and every situation is free to play out in its own organic way. You are not waiting for some particular thing to happen or some desire to be fulfilled before you are happy. You are supremely happy, *paramamrtam*, all the time.

The important thing to remember about all these words of negation is that they do not negate your existence. This is the crucial teaching in Kashmiri Shaivism. You may have read or studied other philosophies that say that this world is unreal and that the goal is *nirvana* (annihilation of self). *Svaroopa*® yoga is based in Kashmiri Shaivism, which emphasizes that your existence is real. This world really does exist. This is all real. You are real. But you are more than you currently know yourself to be. You need to uncover your own essence. Reading and studying these descriptions of your divine essence help to erase the boundary lines between yourself and God. As these dissolve, you discover who you are, first in the momentary flashes of insight, and progressively more and more in your being and in your life. In the meantime, what do you do? More yoga.

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To reach Rama Berch or to get more information about *Svaroopa*® yoga, contact: **Master Yoga Foundation**
Website: www.masteryoga.org ♦ Email: info@masteryoga.org
1-619-718 -YOGA (619-718-9642) ♦ toll-free 1-866-loveyoga (1-866-588-9642)
Main Campus: Master Yoga Teacher Institute, 42 Lloyd Ave #A, Malvern PA 19355

Administration Office: 4406 Park Ave #C, San Diego, CA 92116-4046 (please send all mail here)