



April 2009 Contemplation Theme

## Formless and Form

by Swami Nirmalananda Saraswati

The first time I studied at the ashram in India, we chanted a beautiful text to Shiva every evening. The melody captivated me as much as the words, weaving a lyrical poem to the One Ultimate Reality. From the mantra I had been given, I knew the name Shiva but I had never before encountered such rich and beautiful symbolism as this text described. It was echoed in the many statues in the extensive gardens, statues I really knew nothing about. Others explained them, introducing Ganesha, Lakshmi, Shiva, etc., but I really didn't understand them.

Yet each night when I left the chant, the statue of the dancing Shiva drew me close. It was installed at a curve in the pathway back to my dorm room. It was about 4 feet tall and installed on a pedestal almost as high as a bench, so it was taller than me. I slowed in front of it, lingering a bit longer each night. One night I bowed to it. As I tipped forward, my head came to the level of Shiva's feet, and internal heat climbed my spine. I could feel it distinctly, starting at my tailbone and climbing all the way to the top of my head. I knew that inner fire intimately, as I had been having ecstatic Kundalini experiences for over a year.

From then on, I bowed to Shiva every night. Every night I felt that extraordinary fire climb my spine. I realized there was something very real about this statue and, by extension, all the others, so I began to learn about them. Now I love the statues, paintings and batiks and most especially the stories of the gods and goddesses, who are the forms of the formless. The most important reason to understand them is that it helps you understand yourself, as you are a form of the formless as well.

You have always known this innermost reality, since you were a child. Called by many names, there is only the One. Yoga gives it the name Shiva. Other meditative traditions call it by other names, while religions also have their names for that-which-is-beyond-naming. The unique thing about yoga is that it says that you are that One Reality. The formless takes form — as you. To fully understand this radical statement, you have to personalize it. Say it out loud, or even whisper to yourself, "I am the formless, ever-existent Reality that pervades all things and has become all things."

You can practice yoga without ever looking at an image of Shiva. You can do all the poses and breathing practices. You can benefit from the healing *Svaroopo*® yoga provides. You don't have to know anything about Ganesha to grow into the peace and transformation that the inner experience gives you, especially when you sit quietly for a few moments after releasing the tensions in your spinal muscles. Or when you get that really deep yummy Shavasana at the beginning and end of class. You can even learn *Svaroopo*® yoga meditation, to experience the vastness of your own being, and you don't ever need to look at a statue or painting or learn any Sanskrit.

Your inner exploration can take you to the depths of your being, to discover the source of love and bliss within you, and tap into the ever arising flow of creativity and joy. Yet, you will not be able to take that into your life if you don't understand the science of the form and the formless; you will leave your own inner essence behind when you open your eyes. The inside and the outside will become more and more differentiated if you don't understand the form and the formless, which means you understand that you are the form of the formless.

The formless is usually called God in the West. If you are uncomfortable with the word God, you can substitute another term: the One, ultimate reality, the source, essence, infinite being, the highest, consciousness, existence, primordial beingness, etc. Any of these terms is a good start, as it names "that which banged." In 1992, physicists held a press conference to announce that the Big Bang Theory was no longer a theory, as it had been scientifically proved beyond doubt. A journalist asked, "What was there before the Big Bang? What banged?" The lead physicist answered that is a matter for theologians, not physicists. Yet today, physicists are studying the source texts of many religions for help in finding exactly what lies at the base of the universe; what is the source of the energy that becomes matter? Yoga calls it Shiva.

Shiva takes on form, becoming this universe and becoming you, as described in this sutra:

*Chiti samkochaatmaa chetano'pi samkuchita vishvamayah. (Pratyabhijnahridayam 4)*

*Chiti*, by assuming contraction, becomes both the universe and the individuals, who have the universe as their bodies in a contracted form.

The basis of all the yoga practices and teachings is this amazing formula: God becomes you. (Say it this way, “God is being me.”) This includes your body as the tangible, real, material form of the formless. Additionally, your mind is a contracted and conditioned form of the one ever-existent unconditioned consciousness. This is why you can work with your body in certain ways, ways that are different than what exercise-oriented methodology offers, to unravel the contraction and discover the divine essence within. You must also work with your mind, to unravel its limitations, to pour it back into its own source. Yoga promises that you will know yourself to the deepest and fullest extent, recognizing your own divinity and seeing it in everyone and everything else. This world — and everything in it — is the form of the formless.

Ever since I was a child, looking at the sky would attune me to this experience inside. I especially love the night sky! I was delighted when I found sutra 84 in the Vijñana Bhairava that documents this practice, and I now teach it often.

Fix your gaze on the pure cloudless sky to experience the nature of *Bhairava* (Shiva).

You can use the form of the sky, which is almost formless, to find the formlessness within. The point of human life is that you must know both realities: the whole of your own beingness (the formless) and the divinity of your form (your body and your mind). You are already consciousness-itself; now all you have to do is know and experience yourself as you are, outside and inside.

If you have this experience without proper preparation, it doesn't last long. You can have a flash of cosmic consciousness, like being struck by lightening, but it fades away. You can experience the peace that passeth understanding, but your inner turmoil and confusion returns. You may feel yourself expand to fill the whole sky and beyond, but then you return to your familiar limitations so easily that you even forget that you had an experience. Thus yoga is for the purpose to give you the experience of yourself as consciousness-itself, and yoga also prepares you to become established in it as a continuing experience. Your body and your mind must be conditioned to consciousness.

The mainstream Western lifestyle conditions you to unconsciousness. The average person comes home at the end of a busy day and reaches for a glass of wine, drugging themselves into unconsciousness. Television is another drug, inducing a coma-like state within minutes — you're barely breathing and have even lost the capacity for independent thinking. Another favorite methodology that creates unconsciousness is stress. You see, the experience of your own divinity is an experience of effortless beingness. Thus, all your pushing and efforting is taking you in the wrong direction.

Still, you must work. You must be productive. You must get things done. But do you have to strain so hard while you are doing it? Instead, you could bring your yogic peace and innermost joy with you while you are busy and productive. The key is found in understanding the form and the formless. When you see your body, your mind, your work, your relationships and your life as divine, even when they are challenging, then you can see your own inner divinity as well.

This difference is finding the effortlessness in your efforting, and it is built into the *Svaroopa*<sup>®</sup> yoga poses. The effortlessness is obvious when you are lying on mounded blankets, but it is also there in the standing poses and the challenge of abs and backbends. As you learn how to use your body in a new way, you are learning how to accomplish things without efforting, without strain. You are also learning a new way of life. Most importantly, this effortless efforting naturally inclines you to the experience of yourself as the form of the formless. Do more yoga.

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