



December 2009 Contemplation Theme

## Find Your Self in Yourself

by Swami Nirmalananda Saraswati

Sitting in the predawn darkness, I see the empty space inside the marble hall, so vast that the high ceilings seem to recede into the sky. In this spaciousness, my own edges begin melting away so there is only one space: outside and inside, only one space. The kettle drum begins, resounding with a rolling roar, like thunder filling the space with pure vibration. I know how the universe was born.

Bells ringing and candle flames dancing through space as the man in the front raises and lowers the flickering lights in a circle, honoring the divine within the form, within the statue at the front of the room — this particular form of the formless, in this temple to the divine within the human. I have pilgrimaged to many different temples in India, each dedicated to different aspects of divinity, but this one pulls me back again and again. It is where I began. It is where I melted away again, all through the power of grace.

I began Christmas morning in the temple of my Guru's Guru, celebrating the birth of a divine being millennia ago. What a glorious day! Yoga recognizes the divine in every form, from the expanse of the sea to the infinity in a grain of sand, from the light of the noonday sun to the light in another's eyes, and most especially in those who serve as a conduit of grace in our lives.

I can feel the swell of the autumn current that has propelled us along, the American holidays linked like train cars tracking from the end of summer, Labor Day through Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas, yet to culminate in a new year. Whatever the origin of these events, they now provide a seasonal rhythm. It's party time, family time, a few days off from work here and there, plus a chance to buy things or eat stuff you normally forego. Just look a little more closely and you can find the swell of this current and ride it all the way in — in to your own Self.

Labor Day gets everyone back into gear after lazy summer days. Everyone is going back to school, back to work, handling the commute, catching up the backlog of work, handling the myriad tasks at hand. I'll call all of this "work," whatever your day's activities are, wherever they happen and whether or not you are paid for them. Two months of intense work locks down your identity once again, "I am what I do." Your sense of self is fulfilled if your work is going well, but shaky if it is not. You pour yourself into making it work, so you feel good about yourself.

Halloween gives you a chance to be someone else. You can dress up as anyone or anything you'd like to be for a few hours! Beyond the fun of the masquerade, you also get a taste of freedom from your usual locked-down identity. This is why we love it! Yoga acknowledges this experience of freedom from your usual sense of self as the ultimate goal, and defines it as a knowing of your own divine essence.

The "you" that is playing at being Marie Antoinette (or Count Dracula) is the underlying "you" that is doing everything in your life: going to work, being mother or brother, doing the day, eating healthy food (or not), etc. When you wear a Halloween costume, you play at being someone that you are not; as a yogi, you can use this to learn how to play within the rest of your activities. Thus you realize that you are more than what you do, you are more than what you think, you are more than what other people think you are — you are a unique form of the formless, *while* you are doing what you do.

But if consciousness is not yet blossoming within you, Halloween is a merely a play-day, a wonderful social occasion. Play is an important part of life and your time with others expands your focus. It's like the difference between a black-and-white photo and a color shot.

Thanksgiving is family time, whether you welcome the reunion or dread it (or maybe a little bit of both). You gather with loved ones, whether it is the family you were born into or a family you have created for yourself. The giving of thanks is usually handled in a few words, or a few minutes at most. The four-day-weekend is now a great celebration of the incredible abundance that you (mostly) take for granted. With Thanksgiving, your identity expands to include who you are within your family. You began with "I am what

I do” at Labor Day, expanded your sense of self in your play-day with others at Halloween, and now the autumn current carries you along to a deeper quality of relationship. These three bases complete a satisfying sense of self for most people: their work, their social sphere, and their family base. But for yogis, it’s not enough.

The wave swells and crests around Christmas, which can be another wonderful family time or gathering with your own group of intimates. Perhaps you are one who ignores Christmas completely so you can avoid the commercialism, or even avoid the religious part of it, not to mention the iconography of both. Yet an opportunity beckons, whether you look at the Christian roots or the earlier pagan and Roman events on which the modern holiday was built: light shines in the darkness. The star shines over Bethlehem; lights burn through the longest night of the year (in the northern hemisphere); the divine is born into a human life; the light of your own immortal essence shines through your mortality.

Christmas is about the eternal, blissful, inexpressible, ineffable reality — which is the reality of who you truly are. If your recent hectic days did not give you the opportunity to use the holiday for its true purpose, use the next few quiet days to look inward. Sense your own presence within yourself.

All the practices of yoga turn your attention inward, specifically for you to find and experience your own presence within yourself. Whether you begin with drums, bells and candle flames in the predawn darkness, or you simply do your Ujjayi Pranayama before you start your day, you are changed by your yoga practices. This is an inner change, the only type of change that really counts. Whether you are doing poses or meditation, or simply chanting along with the mantras during your drive, you are deepening your sense of self by tapping into your Self. Beyond the physical benefits, *Svaroopā*® yoga makes you feel whole. That’s why it is named *svaroopā*, which means “my own Self.” All of the practices give you the experience of your Self again. Beyond the health, the peace of mind and heart opening that *Svaroopā*® yoga provides, it makes you feel whole again. You become yourself.

Whether Jesus’ life and message touch you not, you cannot deny his impact on the world. His life and teachings have shaped the world you live in and have thus had an impact on you. To understand this is to understand yourself more fully. To live as he taught, to love in the way that he modeled for us, to hear the mystery hidden in his seemingly simple words — this is yoga. As a yogi, you can celebrate the birth of one who lived such a life and brought such teachings into the world. As a yogi, you can model yourself after the best role models available — what are you becoming?

You have a few days left before the new year begins. [If you are reading this after New Year’s Day, you can create a few quiet days for yourself.] Look at yourself. Find the “you” that is living in this body. Feel your own presence. Sit. Don’t jump up and start doing things: sit in the impulse to jump up, and feel the impulse itself. What is it? Where does it come from? Who is experiencing it?

Know your own Self. Honor your own Self. Find and be who you really are, at the deepest level of your own being. Be present in your own presence. Give yourself the gift of your own self, so that you can make new choices in your new year — choices that come from your innermost essence and being. The autumn current propels you through your work, your play and social connections, your family, and into the deeper dimensions of yourself. From this inner base of beingness, you can look at new beginnings. In the coming of the new year: how will you birth yourself into the world this time?

With love & blessings, Swami Nirmalananda

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