



Svaroopaa® Vidya Ashram

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Focus on Enlightenment #1

You're on Your Way

By Gurudevi Nirmalananda

You're working on enlightenment. This is true whether you are planning for it or not. Life is teaching you lessons even when you don't go looking for them. You're growing and learning, and you're outgrowing stuff that used to hold you back. The point of yoga and meditation is to get the lessons without having to go through life's messy stuff. It's called insight, meaning inner-vision. When you learn how to look inward, you can see all the way to God.

Every *Svaroopaa*® yoga class teaches you how to look inward. Shavasana (Yoga's Relaxation Pose) is an awareness training. You're cultivating your ability to be aware, beginning with your toes, upward through your whole body. It's not because your body is so important; it's awareness that matters.

One new student asked me, at the end of his first yoga class, "How do I be aware of my toes? I remember I saw them when I put on my socks this morning. Is that enough?" I answered, "Yes. That's where you start." Yoga classes empower your awareness more than mere memory can provide. This process begins with your body. It expands into a deepening inner awareness that opens up your inherent multidimensionality.

Every *Svaroopaa*® yoga pose expands your ability to be aware. After one-sided yoga poses, like Seated Side Stretch, your teacher asks about the differences between your two sides. You are not only giving a report of the pose benefits. It is also a training in awareness. As the weeks and months continue, the same pose reaches into new areas, providing profound openings. Along with physical healing, these openings make you more able to be more aware.

This expanding awareness changes your experience of Shavasana, making you able to perceive more of your inner physical spaces as well as begin to explore the deeper dimensions within. When you roll over on your side, you experience a deep, cozy feeling of inner wholeness and fullness. That's coming from what yoga calls "your own Self." It's even quicker and more delicious with meditation; it doesn't take an hour or two to get in there.

You are more than your body. As important as your body is, there is more to you. The "more" is found within. The discovery process is an exploration of the multiple dimensions within. While the yoga poses and breathing help you prepare for the exploration, like a mountain climber does physical conditioning before the expedition, the inner quest happens in meditation.

One of the inner dimensions you will discover is your mind. Its job is to block your pathway, keeping you from seeing deeper inward. This is why we use mantra for meditation, to get you past your mind. It churns up thoughts and images of your life, including your past and possible future, entangling you in all the outer realities even when they are not happening. While your outer realities are real, they don't make you who you are. This is a radical statement, a profound restatement of who you are — you are Consciousness.

Chaitanyam atma — Shiva Sutra 1.1

Your own Self is Consciousness-Itself.

Atma is Self, beginning with a capital-S, a technical term in yoga. It points you inward, toward your essence and beingness. As you deepen into your own essence, you discover your inherent beingness. This Self is being you regardless of where you are located, who you are with or what you are doing. Experiencing your capital-S Self is profoundly fulfilling, so much so that your way of being in the world becomes more free: free of need, greed and fear.

Yoga promises freedom. Stepping into your relationships and activities without anxiety is a great freedom, plus it changes your relationships. When you're not trying to satisfy your own needs through others, you're able to see their needs more clearly, even help them with all of it more effectively. Coming from a place of

inner fullness, you're able to choose how to share that fullness with the world. It's called seva (service): serving others as a sacred act in the world.

Modeled by great beings of all religions and meditative traditions, this way of living is something you're already learning. Life does it to you. You're growing and learning from your life experiences. Theoretically, you're becoming wiser as you get older. This is one of the reasons that elders are revered in all cultures, so they can steer you through life's tricky situations. They can help you avoid the mistakes they made. When you can avoid the potholes in life, you can speed along more smoothly in the direction you want to go.

One day you will be an elder or maybe you already are. Your ability to love grows in direct proportion to your ability to let go. When you're hanging on to how you think it should be, you're the one in pain. That all changes when you learn to let go of your agenda, to see the other person for who they are and to respond to them with an open heart as well as an open mind. You can wait for the decades to pass in order to get to this point, by having life wear you down like dripping water melts stone. Or you can do yoga and meditate. The inner openings give you the depth and dimensionality that support you through everything.

The sages of India explain that human life is precious. All life is to be cherished, one reason for the practice of vegetarianism, but especially human life is prized. In the grand scheme of things, to be born as a human being gives you the opportunity to get enlightened, something you couldn't attain in prior lifetimes. One teaching story describes it this way:

"Please tell me," the yogi asked the sage, "How many lifetimes do I have to go through before I can get enlightened?" The sage replied, "As many as the leaves on the tree over your head." Though the tree was huge, with many leaves, the yogi was encouraged and replied, "Whew! That's all? It's a finite number?"

In his next lifetime, he was born as a virus and lived only a few hours. After many lives as a virus, he incarnated as a single cell. Thus moving through lifetimes quickly, he reached his final lifetime where he was born as a human being. A radiant child, his parents took him to a Meditation Master who could train him while he was still a child.

I didn't have such an easy pathway, I confess. I didn't even hear of such masters until I was in my twenties, then only finding one when I was on the cusp of my thirties. But once I realized what he made possible, I knew I needed the training he gave. That training made me able to live in the awakening he provided.

In the Gheranda Samhita, the sage says there are 8,400,000 species on this earth. Only one of them is the human being. Thus, to be born as a human is a rare opportunity. The value of being human is that you are not governed by instinct. While you have animalistic impulses, you have the capacity to think beyond the box. You can be altruistic or set your sights on a higher goal, something beyond mere worldly accomplishments.

As thrilling as worldly accomplishment can be, the delight wears off. The first study of wildly successful businessmen was done in the 1960's. The key question, buried in the many interview questions, was, "Having attained the heights of success, being 'on top of the heap' you might say, are you happy?" The answer was clear: 100% of the subjects said no. Yogis are not surprised by this response.

While your life's circumstances are important, and you must do your part to maintain or improve them, they will not give you lasting happiness. You can either take decades to figure this out or you can aspire higher. This is the lifetime in which you can get enlightened, should you so choose. Do more yoga. Meditate.

THIS IS AN ARTICLE IN A YEAR-LONG SERIES ON "FOCUS ON ENLIGHTENMENT"

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