



April 1994 Contemplation Theme

What Kind of Yoga?

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I am often asked, “What kind of yoga do you teach?” How can we describe an experience of the wordless place of perfect being that is inherent in every person? Is it possible to describe the way we use the body and the breath to help open the doorway inside? The bodily sensations and physical changes we work with are virtually incomprehensible to the caller on the phone. It is only in class that the newcomer can experience some of what we are pointing out.

Yoga’s resurgence of popularity has created a well-educated public who has heard of different “types” of yoga. These name brands are simply different styles of the generic hatha yoga, though the new yogi may not know that. Each style is a different approach to the same poses, and is a reflection of the personality of the founder. It’s similar to spaghetti. If we each make a pot of spaghetti, they will be quite different. Yet, they’re all spaghetti. When you are shopping, name brands are useful, offering a reliable flavor each time you buy a certain brand of spaghetti sauce.

The need to describe our style of hatha yoga has been intensifying over the years. Thus, I have been contemplating for some time what name should specify our style. I enlisted the help of several key advisors, members of our Board of Directors and experts in yoga philosophy. Through research, contemplation, meditation, and prayer, one name has arisen: Svaroopa Yoga.

To understand its meaning, begin with the word “yoga”. It comes from the Sanskrit root yuj, which means to unite or to yoke together. Thus, yoga means connection or union of the mundane with the spiritual, of the self with the Self, or of the individual (you) with the divine. However, the Pratyabhijnahridayam makes it clear that yoga is not a connection, but a reconnection. The word “yoga” does not mean union of two separate things, but the reunion of those things which only seemed to be separate. The text states:

Chitivahnir avarohapade channo’pi maatrayaa meyendhanam plushyati.

Chiti does not lose Her nature even when She becomes the individual, but like fire burns the fuel of objective knowledge.

- Pratyabhijnahridayam #14

This means that, while you experience yourself as being separate from everything, you have a deeper sense of your true Self behind the scenes. Just behind the thoughts and activity of your mind, there is a deeper knowing which is an inner certitude of Being that you rarely access. This is Chiti, which is Consciousness-Itself. This is who you really are. As an individual, you identify with specifics that define you, as being limited by the circumstances of your birth as well as and what you have done since then. Yet, your true Self is not limited. The word “yoga” means the reunion of your seemingly limited self with your true Self, Chiti. This deeper knowledge is always burning inside, propelling you onto the path of rediscovery.

The word “yoga” is often used to refer to the practices, including poses, breathing, meditation, chanting, focusing techniques, and more. These practices give you access to the inner experience of true Self. Along the way you also become stronger, more flexible, healthier, happier, and more positive about life. Thus, many people are drawn to yoga for these obvious benefits. Some name brands of yoga even characterize these practices and their physical benefits as the goal of yoga. But yoga does not mean exercise, or even meditation. Yoga means the inner experience of union that is your birthright as a human being.

I am very fortunate to have been introduced to yoga by a Master who showed me the true meaning of the word “Yoga” at once. I have since understood how the practices are used both to find the inner experience and to live in this inner certitude of Being. So, everything we offer at Master Yoga is designed to take you home again, to the inner reunion that is the only thing that really matters.

Now consider the word svaroopā, a compound of sva- and roopā. Sva means Self—the Truth or Reality of your being. Roopā means form or shape, and refers to your physical body. This is particularly relevant in hatha yoga, because you are working with your body in the poses, breathing and guided relaxations. Modern physicists have described how our physical world is actually comprised of swirls of energy moving at incredible speeds through vast amounts of empty space. Your own body is part of the physical world, made of the same energy, moving through empty space.

In Svaroopā Yoga, we use the physical body (roopā) as the gateway to perceive this other level of Reality (sva), the energy which is manifesting as your own body. This energy (“Chiti”) manifests as the world, emanating from the Source which is ever full, whole and perfect. All the omni’s apply: omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, and eternal. All of them apply to you. Chiti, manifesting as you, never loses that divine nature, never becomes something less. Consciousness only seems to take on the limitations and the sense of separateness that characterize your human experience. By delving into and through your own body, you come to know your true Self, which is the Source of all Existence.

In the Yoga Sutras, Patanjali uses the word svaroopā to describe the purpose of yoga practice. First, he explains that yoga is the stilling of the activity of your mind. Why? Because as soon as your mind stops, your essential nature (svaroopā) bursts forth in all its glory. It was always there behind the scenes, but you were distracted by the activity of your mind.

The name Svaroopā Yoga describes both our goal in yoga, and the means we use to attain it. We use your physical form (roopā) to access your true form (svaroopā). We are practicing yoga for its original purpose, described by the sages thousands of years ago.

Now, when someone asks you what kind of yoga you practice, you can answer: Svaroopā Yoga. But, keep in mind that Svaroopā Yoga could be considered a redundancy, for both words mean the same thing: reunion with your own true nature.

Tadaa drashtuh svaroope ‘vasthaanam.

Then the Seer is established in his own essential and fundamental nature (svaroopā).

- Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras 1.3

Namaste,

