



May 2009 Contemplation Theme

Hi, How Are You?

by Swami Nirmalaananda Saraswati

You hear the question and even ask it many times a day, but what does it really mean? It's lost its meaning, just like the Sanskrit word *namaste*. Yogis throughout the Western world say *namaste* with reverence, knowing its meaning is – "I honor the divine within you, from that which is the same within me." Yet in India, the land of yoga's origin, the word means hello and goodbye — and nobody's really listening. The profound and meaningful is too easily turned into the mundane!

As we all know, there's only one acceptable answer to the everyday "How'rya." "Fine." While you can read volumes from the tone of voice with which it is delivered, it doesn't really say much. But if you offer a different answer, it startles the other person so much that they don't know what to say next, though they clearly had an agenda when they began. The worst thing about the whole encounter is that you never check in with yourself to see how you are. Your focus is so completely externalized that you don't pay any attention to how you feel. You might even be someone who forgets to eat, or doesn't even realize that you need to go to the toilet until it's almost too late!

This external focus is yoga's bulls-eye. Everything in yoga is designed to turn your attention inward, so you learn to live with the wholeness of your own being, fully present in the midst of life. Yogic techniques use body, breath and mind; what else do you have that you could use to turn your attention inward? Unfortunately, even these techniques are too easily turned into the mundane! Just look at the photos in any yoga magazine or book about yoga poses — they are 100% effective at making you feel like you don't measure up.

A yogi takes advantage of every reminder to live in wholeness. Every time someone greets you with, "Hi, how are you," this is an opportunity to check in with yourself, "Truly, how am I?" Now is when it gets complicated though, because you have so many different ways of assessing how you are.

If your real answer to the question is, "Better," you are comparing yourself to how you were yesterday. If you say, "Doing well," you are reporting on how well you do things. You might respond, "How's anyone?" which means you are comparing yourself to others. "Gettin' there," means that you are comparing yourself to where you want to be. You might even dodge the question and say, "How are you?" That means that you want to know how the other person is before you answer, because you are comparing yourself to them.

These are all comparisons, assessments of your condition based on external criteria. Yoga says that you need to check in with yourself without comparing yourself to the magazine covers, to your neighbor, or even without comparing yourself to yesterday or to your hoped-for tomorrows. How are you, really?

Stop for a moment right here and answer the question — how are you, really?

The answer you gave tells you a lot about your primary focus. If your answer was about your physical condition, you might have answered — tired, hungry, full, achy, stiff, warm, cold, energized, etc. This means that you evaluate your condition based on your body.

If your answer was about your mood or your emotional state, you might have answered — happy, sad, lonely, peaceful, excited, frustrated, etc. This means that you evaluate your condition based on the state of your emotions, which are created by your mind.

If your answer was about the things you do, you could have said — busy, focused, getting by, having a good time, swamped, chillin'... You are back to an external focus, which means that you haven't yet found a way to actually be who you are and feel how you feel.

Yet there is a deeper level within you, which can be known and *must* be known. Your own existence is a deep, profound and multidimensional reality. According to the ancient tradition, yoga's only goal is to give you the experiential knowing of your own self, which is called *svaroopa*. Translated as "my own divine essence," even the word *svaroopa* turns your attention inward. Try it — just say it out loud a few times, or whisper it quietly to yourself. You have my permission to mispronounce it! Yet, if you'd like to learn how to say it, try this:

sva = say it like it has a "w" instead of a "v" – swa

roopa = say it like it starts with a soft "d" instead of an "r" – doopa.

Say it to yourself — 10 or 20 times.

Now check in with yourself, how are you, really? Did it make a change?

Try out a different word to see what it does for you, like your profession (teacher, accountant, customer service representative), or maybe your family position (mother/father, daughter/son, wife/husband). Try your own name. Do they do the same thing for you?

These ancient yogic terms have an amazing power. They are like little mini mantras. They shift your state, which is the ultimate purpose of every yogic technique. In fact, *state* is another technical term in yoga, *bhav* or *bhava* in Sanskrit. It means you will ultimately fail if you try to separate out your mind from your emotions and your body. Everything you think has an effect on your body and your emotions. Everything you do physically has an effect on your mind and emotions. Every emotion you feel has an effect on your body and mind. It's like pulling on a string and the whole sweater unravels — it's all one thing.

This is why the practices of yoga are so wonderfully effective. You do some yogic breathing or some poses, and your mind and emotions become peaceful and clear. You repeat a mantra in order to clear your mind and focus it inward, and your body changes too. You chant *kirtan* (a love song to God), which shifts your emotional state — and your body and mind are amazingly changed. You meditate and your whole day changes, along with your mind, body and emotions. When you do these things regularly, your relationships change too, which changes everything.

How are you, really? No matter what you answer, even if it is something from one of the lists above, you are reporting your bhava. If you report that you are tired, it is a report of your physical condition, but your mind and emotions are also tired. It is impossible to separate them out from one another. If you are busy, you are physically busy and your mind is racing, with your emotions being like a too-tight violin string, perhaps even on the verge of breaking. That might even be a reason to stay busy, so you don't notice how close you are to collapse.

One of yoga's most powerful practices is to work with your bhava. *Bhavana* is a way of choosing a different state and cultivating that state. It's a creative use of your mind, using it to shift your state. For example, if you are frustrated by the traffic jam you are sitting in, you could trick your mind into a different perspective by imagining that you are in a traffic jam on a Caribbean island. How would you feel if the sun were shining on the open sea, as your car inches along beside the pink sand beaches? You even know the beach will still be there when you get there... Shift your state. Cultivate a different bhava. Your body changes, along with your mind and emotions.

The highest use of bhavana is to imagine you are Shiva. Your own svaroop (divine essence) is also named Shiva — the one divine essence that is manifesting as you is also manifesting as everyone and everything in the universe. When you experience your own inner essence, you truly know that you are Shiva. So you can simply use bhavana to imagine that you already know who you really are. Take a few moments to cultivate this — it's wonderfully effective. Stop and think, "I am Shiva, I am Shiva, I am Shiva."

How are you now? Yoga promises that you can become established in this inner dimension of your own existence all the time. Such masters have a very consistent answer to the question, "How are you?" "Great!" They are reporting on all the levels of their being — their body, their emotions and the mental content they are based on, their activities in life, and most especially the deeper level of Self within. Do more yoga.

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