



October 2009 Contemplation Theme

The Masquerade

by Swami Nirmalananda Saraswati

Halloween is the second biggest retail holiday in the USA. The biggest money-maker for all businesses is (of course) Christmas, with Halloween in second place. Not Valentine's Day. Not Mother's Day. Halloween is much more than a child's holiday now. A giant costume store opened up in my area several months ago. The owners of the local cornfield built their annual maze. Philadelphia's 200-year-old prison began its tours, "Terror Behind the Walls." Many people wear their costumes to work as well as to the multiple parties they attend that night. What is going on here?

We do enjoy the masquerade. It's so much fun to get into the act, even changing your voice or the way you walk in order to express your character. How does it feel when your costume and your act are so good that no one can recognize you? It's tremendous fun! Not only do you get to escape from who you are, you get to pretend to be someone else. This is fun because this is what consciousness is doing, in order to be you. Consciousness is having a tremendously good time being you, just as you have fun being someone else for a while on Halloween.

Students often ask me, "Why does consciousness manifest as the universe? Why does Ultimate Reality choose limitation?" The sages warned that this is the only unanswerable question. It's easy to give the answer, but it's not easy to understand because your mind cannot grasp it fully. Only when you go into the experience does it become understandable. Here's the answer: "Consciousness becomes the universe for fun. For sheer delight. To play within herself." Your own experience on Halloween is basically a taste of what she is doing.

At the end of Halloween, you take off your costume and uncover your real identity again. Yoga works the same way. When you begin with your body, you begin with dissolving the tensions you knew about. Then you discover and dissolve tensions you hadn't known were there, through your body, as well as through your mind and emotions. With every pose, you are uncovering deeper levels of your own being, so that you can experience your essence — which is Consciousness-Itself.

On Halloween, not only do you get to pretend to be someone else, you get to escape from who you are. It takes a lot of work to be you. You have to do so many things and handle so many people along with all the things they need or want. You have to go to lots of places and deal with all the things that come up along the way. Life is full and it seems to be constantly speeding up. All this keeps you churning like the waves on the surface of the ocean. No wonder you want an escape! Whether you choose an afternoon nap, a yoga class or a weekend trip, it's nice to escape from yourself. Yet it is important to distinguish between the different levels of yourself. The self that you are escaping from is not your innermost essence; it is the superficial level of your being.

There is more to you than you let others see. There is more to you than you even let yourself see. When you discover your own innermost essence, you don't lose the superficial level of your being. Many yogis believe they must get rid of their ego, but yoga is not about getting rid of your ego. It is about discovering who you are at the innermost level of your being. The problem is basically with the word "ego" — it is not what you think it is.

In the 1800s, translators began rendering Sanskrit terms into English, translating *ahamkara* as ego. This was before Sigmund Freud was born. It is now impossible for us to use the word "ego" without being affected by the work of Dr. Freud, as well as the works of many who followed him. The dictionary currently defines ego as, "an inflated feeling of pride in your superiority to others..." But in yoga, it means exactly the opposite, "an inner feeling of being small and inferior." This is why I do not use the word "ego" when I am explaining yoga's teachings. It is a misleading term.

Instead I describe feeling "not-good-enough," which makes you work hard to build your sense of self-worth through what you do, who you do it with, and where you are or where you come from. This is your identity. *Ahamkara* in Sanskrit, while often poorly translated into "ego" really means "identity." This is part of what your

mind does for you — constructs your sense of identity. Having a healthy identity is incredibly important, even though your mind can only give you a limited sense of identity.

You will never be without identity. It is very important. In fact, if you know someone who is dealing with dementia or Alzheimer's, you understand the importance of identity. Even when you are enlightened, you will still have a mind, and it will still create and support your identity, though it will do it in a different way.

Returning to the ocean metaphor, your identity is like the ocean's waves; the superficial level of the ocean is like the superficial level of your being. Yoga makes you able to you dive deeper within yourself, so that you know your own inner vastness, fullness, beingness and bliss. The depths of your being are analogous to the depths of the ocean, while the waves on the surface are like the churning of your mind when you are caught up in your superficial identity.

What are the ocean's waves made of? They are made of water, just as the ocean's depths are. In the same way, the superficial levels of your being are made of consciousness, the same as your innermost essence. Just as the ocean will always have waves, you will always have identity, as it is how you project yourself into the world and function within the world.

You will never get rid of ego! Instead, you will know the depths of your being while you are in the midst of life. You will function from all the multiple levels of your being simultaneously. This is called self-discovery (*pratyabhinja*). It is like midnight at the masquerade ball, where you remove your mask and reveal who is hidden inside. You realize that you have always been you.

Halloween's masquerade is only one day a year, so you don't get lost in it. You can play in it without losing yourself. But when you live in the masquerade, it becomes reality. Actors and actresses do this very well, taking on a whole new identity when they step on the stage. Even decades later, they will speak with great love about a character they once played, almost as if it was a person they knew — except it was a person that they actually were being! In the same way, consciousness is being you, described this way:

Nartaka atma. – Shiva Sutras 3.9

Consciousness is the actor.

In addition to the ways described above, this masquerade shows up in your life in another way. There are times when you present yourself to others in a way that is not genuine. You act in a way that will get you what you want, or that will make you able to avoid something. You may do this more often with family members than with anyone else in your life. You are acting a role that you create for the situation, and you are being less than who you really are. In the same way, consciousness is acting the role of being you.

Halloween marks the beginning of a series of holidays that give you the opportunity to test your yogic state. Are you going to be you, or are you going to be what they want you to be? You will decide if the masquerade begins and ends on Halloween, or if it continues through Thanksgiving and Christmas. Make your decision based on how ready you are to show yourself, as well as how ready they are to know you and to see you. You are you, whether you show them or not. You are you, no matter where you are and no matter whom you are with. The most important thing to know is that you don't have to make it hard on the others around you. You can be you, from the superficial levels of your being all the way into your depths, without pushing everyone else's buttons. They don't have to change just because you are finding yourself. You can even love them just as they are — perfectly imperfect manifestations of consciousness, just as you are. Do more yoga — you're going to need it!

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