



April 2005 Contemplation Theme

## Yoga is About Relationship

By Rama Berch, C.S.Y.T., R.Y.T.

Though much of yoga practice is done in solitude and silence, yoga is ultimately about relationship – both with others as well as with your Self. Your key relationships may be in the family you come from or in the family you create – through marriage and children as well as through choosing friends and life-long companions. I will call all of these people, “family.” Whether your family does yoga or not is not important. What matters is how you are when you are with them. What matters most of all is who you are when you are with them.

The first teacher who showed me that I had a lot to learn about relationship was a miniature poodle. Puffie loved to sit on the threshold of our front door when it was left open. From that vantage point she could watch everything happening both inside and outside the house. When any people walked down the street, she jumped up and ran out as fast as she could. Reaching the sidewalk, she threw her whole body down on her back with her legs sticking straight up in the air and waited. No one ever kicked her. Everyone stopped to rub her tummy.

I watched this happen again and again. I walked out to the sidewalk to laugh and chat with the people, now not strangers at all, because Puffie’s vulnerability had opened all of us. I began to think that maybe I change the way I moved through life – maybe I didn’t need the armor that had gotten me through so many years. But I didn’t know how to make that change.

Then I found yoga. As I let yoga change me, I slowly realized that yoga teaches how to live in complete openness. Only through openness do you discover the true power and beauty of being human. This discovery is called the inner mystery, which is why yoga is called a mystical science. The mystery you explore is the your own being; the hidden dimensions are opened for you to experience and explore every time you open your spine. This is easy to do on the yoga room floor. How do you take it into your relationships?

While your work and other activities are important, it is your relationships that define you most thoroughly and affect you most deeply. Yet it can sometimes be easier to be open with a stranger than with a family member. Before you ask how you can live in openness, you may need to consider if you even want to. You may have some very challenging people in your family. It is a sign of intelligence to know when to open and when not. You can even love someone that you don’t trust, because the human capacity to love is incredibly rich and complex. Even if there are some people in your life like this, there are also many with whom you can be more available, even vulnerable. Maybe you can let your tummy show – it might get rubbed!

With everyone, even difficult people and even strangers, special moments do happen. These rare and beautiful moments are precious. It might be an unexpected meeting of your eyes or a quick sideways smile. It could be a shared moment in the car at a stoplight or when walking in nature or through the mall. It could be a line in a song or a poem that brings you together. This is called intimacy. Intimacy is not limited to the bedroom; it is more important than that. Unfortunately, physical intimacy can sometimes be not intimate at all. Your experience of the intimate connection with another human being is vital – babies will die if they do not get it. Life begins to feel like it has no meaning without it.

Yoga celebrates the intimate moment and shows you how to live in the constant experience of that intimacy. However, it is a little tricky – in two different ways. First I’ll explain some of the intricacies of yoga’s teachings, and then how to apply them in real life.

Yoga’s teachings offer tremendous breadth and depth, ranging from how to help with back pain to how to become enlightened. There are twelve primary systems (*darshanas*), each describing the inner process of transformation in different ways. *Svaroopa* yoga is based in one of these *darshanas*, Kashmir Shaivism, which is a tantric science. Kashmir Shaivism recognizes the infinite in the finite, the divine in the mundane, and the transcendent reality that is present in its fullness in every human being. The purpose of *Svaroopa* yoga, as a tantra, is to open you to the vastness of your own beingness and to show you how to see it everywhere and live it all the time. Technically, this is called applied mysticism – how to open to the inner mystery and then apply it to your day-to-day experience of life.

In *Svaroopa* yoga, we cultivate openness in stages. First you learn how to lie down and breathe (*Shavasana* and *Ujjayi Pranayama*). Then you learn how to sit up, how to prop yourself in that openness and how to open it further. Next you learn how to stand up while remaining open, and then you work your way into more challenging poses

while maintaining (or deepening) that openness. Each step of the way, your spine opens more fully – giving you both physical strength and profound mental/emotional clarity, while you discover the deeper levels of your own being inside. You learn how to live in openness: openness to your own depth on the inside, openness to the world on the outside. Every time you create the inner opening, you experience a moment of profound connection. It is actually a taste of enlightenment and a promise of how you can live full-time. In mystical terms, *Shakti* merges into *Shiva*.

There is one Reality, the ever-existing all-pervasive existence, which extends through the universe and beyond. Yoga calls this *Shiva*. This one existence manifests everyone and everything within itself, by generating movement of itself, within itself. The movement is called *Shakti*. *Shakti* is the movement or energy that becomes the atoms that make up this world and everyone and everything in it. *Shakti* is moving *Shiva* – energy is moving essence. They are not different, though they play at the game of being two even while being One. Yoga calls their meeting “recognition.” The purpose of yoga is to make you able to live in this recognition of *Shakti* meeting *Shiva* – it is your own Self.

In real life, whether the other person does yoga or not, the same experience of recognition occurs in those precious moments of genuine intimacy. How wonderful this is! This connection with another human being pierces the resistances in you and in them simultaneously, so the essential beingness of each of you connects in a moment of unity.

In the day-to-day, you feel separate from your own inner infinity, caught up in the play of the world. The people and things in your life take over the radar screen of your mind and you chase them and your thoughts endlessly. This play of *Shakti* is intentional; it brings the world into existence and keeps you spinning in it. It all comes to a glorious instantaneous halt in the precious moment of intimacy, propelling you into the *Shiva*-ness of your own being – into sharing the One *Shiva*-ness together, which is an experience of being not-two, but being One. This experience of intimacy is called recognition, and it makes relationship work. It makes life full and rich and meaningful. Without it, life is a desert.

Yoga is about living in the moment of recognition in every moment. The openings you create in your yoga practice give you the inner experience of recognition, and make you able to carry it into your life and your relationships. Ultimately you discover that every moment is a moment of recognition; everyone you see is *Shakti* meeting *Shiva* again. The experience of this inner and outer openness is indescribably ecstatic, and it is the goal of human life.

However, most of what we experience as “relationship” is what happens when you are not in the moment of recognition. much of relationship is based on accommodating (or avoiding) the ways you are each not-yet-enlightened. While you try to avoid pushing each other’s buttons, you also keep trying to find those moments of connection again – *Shakti* searching for *Shiva*. What gets you through the tough times is called loyalty and commitment. You stay because you care and because you promised, whether it was a vow you made at some point along the way or whether it is an unspoken gift (or both). Relationship is based mostly on loyalty and commitment, while hoping for those moments of recognition.

Yoga helps with this day-to-dayness of relationships, too. Your familiarity with the inner opening, from your yoga practice, makes those moments of recognition happen more often in your relationships. the dry periods are shorter, the intimacy becomes deeper and more frequent, and your relationships become more fluid – filled by the *Shiva-Shakti* connection.

yoga helps with your not-yet-enlightened moments as well. those moments are caused by your sense of self being shaky. Your sense of self momentarily depends on the other person’s approval, their support, their validation or even their rejection of you. As you open more and more to the deeper dimensions of your own being, you become established in stitha-prajna, a steady inner state. This gives you a sense of self that supports you from inside, in all circumstances. Your ability to walk through the tough parts of relationship changes dramatically because you are able to stay present in a whole new way. When you cannot, then you know that you still need to “Do More Yoga.”

Namaste,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Rama". The signature is stylized and includes a small heart shape above the letter 'a'.

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