



September 2009 Contemplation Theme

Cultivating Community

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When you begin yoga, you begin an adventure that will take you to places you never dreamed of. The first few classes give you an experience of profound peace and deep rest, as well as a tangible physical improvement and, most importantly, a deep inner sense of fullness for which you don't even have words. While your aches and pains may have gotten you started, it is that deep inner sense of fullness that ultimately brings you back.

Many new yogis are trail blazers, delving into something that no one else in your family or your inner circle does. You are fortunate when a friend or family member shares your experience, but it is unfortunately rare. Usually you are the only one. No one understands what you are talking about when you do try to explain yourself – though that is probably nothing new.

This is one of the reasons why it is so important to make connections with the other yogis in your classes. When you talk with them, you get to share about your yoga experiences with others who understand. Plus you learn from their experiences! You begin to understand how yoga changes your perspective (as well as your body), because the other yogis have already gone through so many stages of their own growth. You find a few yoga-buddies and maybe can even share transportation, go out together for tea or a meal together, or enjoy other outings or get-togethers. Your yoga community is an important part of your yoga practice.

One of the things your yoga community offers you is external reinforcement. You probably think that you should be beyond the need for external reinforcement, but if you are not, then you are not. Society approves of and reinforces so many behaviours that are not good for you. Your friends and family may be providing external support for your most self-destructive patterns. Everyone around you expects you to do certain things, desire certain things, fear certain things, and resist certain things. If you are one who marches to the tune of a different drummer, there's a lot of external pressure to get you to move "back into line."

As a teenager, you found a way to handle this. You rebelled against your parents' standards by becoming as different from them as possible – so you became like all your peers. The Mohawk hairstyle is showing up once again, along with many of the fashions and hairstyles I wore in the 1960's; even some of the music is popular again. In the 60's, we worked hard to become different than our parents by being like our peers. When I found that neither model worked for me, I didn't know where to go! Ultimately I found myself in an ashram, studying with my Guru, who showed me how to become me. I've been working on that ever since, first by unlearning everything I already knew, and then by unearthing the inner reality that had been hidden within for lifetimes.

Yoga is an inner process, which makes it a solitary venture, yet it works better when you have external support. Your yoga community is a big part of your yoga practice, which is why we have asked all *Svaroopa*® yoga teachers to hold community events this fall. When you gather together with other yogis outside of your yoga class, you cultivate these important relationships. When you and your yoga-buddies help your teacher create an event, you deepen your relationships with each other and with your teacher. And you might even attract a few new students – who are potentially more yoga-buddies!

One line in the Statement of Purpose for *Svaroopa*® yoga says, "Cultivating conscious community." This line has a double meaning. Consciously cultivating relationships with other yogis is a conscious decision to step into community. The famous line, "It takes a village to raise a child," is also true about yogis: "It takes a village to produce an enlightened being." Perhaps your goal is simpler, like health, vitality, peace, happiness and the ability to face the challenges and stresses of life in a new way. When you consciously

choose to be in relationship with those other yogis who lie next to you in Shavasana, you are stepping into relationships that support this new way of living.

The second meaning of this line is that your yoga community is made up of conscious people. Can you imagine what your family would be like if everyone in it was working on expanding their consciousness? Or maybe you'd like all your co-workers to become yogis? These communities have the cast of usual characters, thrown together by genes or circumstance – not created consciously, and not about consciousness. Yet everyone in your yoga class has chosen to be there, and may have had to shuffle priorities to get there (just like you). Every other yogi in the room experiences the core opening that *Svaroopa*[®] yoga provides, which gives them a different way of breathing and being. This affects their body, their mind and their life (just like you).

The contemplations that your teacher offers in every class, along with these monthly articles, support the new perspective that yoga provides. The other yogis in the room have their own way of hearing the quotes and reading these articles — and you have a lot to learn from them. Without yoga-buddies, it's hard to continue on the path of yoga. You start yoga and then life takes over. A few months later you remember how good you felt when you were going to classes and doing your home practice, so you wander back in again. Many yogis find that they come and go. You do make progress when you come and go, but your progress could be so much better.

Your yoga-buddies will tell you their stories of coming and going, and how they finally figured out how to prioritize their yoga classes. They have amazing stories of injuries avoided, lightening fast healings, and they probably will have trouble remembering the last time they got a cold or flu. They will tell you how their yogic perspective made them able to handle a person in their life or deal with a challenging situation. They are amazing role models and a valuable support system. And you are part of that community — you are one of the role models and you are part of the support system.

In ancient times, yogis always practiced in community. The iconographic image of the solitary yogi sitting in the snow bank just inside the mountain cave is a western romanticization of a different reality. When a Guru did send a yogi to meditate in a cave, the community set up a support system. Another yogi was assigned to make sure that the cave yogi was getting regular meals and didn't have to deal with any external difficulties – it was the only way that the cave yogi could have the luxury of that deep inner focus. I get the same thing for myself by taking personal retreats in ashrams or locations where all my meals are provided and everything external is taken care of. It's better than a vacation, because the people providing for my needs truly care about me.

This is an amazing community of yogis, and it even has a Sanskrit name: *kula*. *Kula* means clan or tribe, technically your extended family. And you have a yoga *kula*. All you have to do is say, "I do *Svaroopa*[®] yoga." Those who know what you are talking about will say, "Really! So do I!" And you have an immediate bond, a sweet connection, a deep understanding of each other – even if you don't know each other's names yet.

Say hello to the yogi on the floor next to you. Cultivate your yoga community, and you will find it deepens your yoga tremendously. Do more yoga.

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