

The choice of freedom

My guru, Swami Satchidananda, always underlined his teachings with this basic rule: never do anything that makes you lose your peace. How is this possible, when we are confronted with so many attacks on our plan for what our life should be? And by attack I mean anything the world of form does—a family member, someone at work, a guy on the street, the repairman, whoever or whatever—that irritates us either mildly or severely.

When we are attacked by the world, our mind comes to our defense of self and it's plan for the way things should be. And this defense is either a retaliation with our plan to correct or punish the attacker, or a plan for escape or avoidance of the attacker. But either way, our peace is destroyed by the continuation of conflict our reaction to the attack created.

So, how does one act but still keep the peace? This is the question man has been asking since he started asking questions. Do we have a choice between conflict and peace? From the looks of our world, we could say there is no choice. There is only violence and its continuation.

But there is a choice, and the discovery of this choice for each individual is a life transforming event. An awakening. This discovery happens when one sees that all our defensive reactions to the world, small or large, is a function of our egoic self identity with a "me."

And here is the big discovery: our "me" gets its sense of identity from conflict with the world of form. The world of form here is understood as being both material and mental. Both the apple and the thought of an apple are form, and both are impermanent.

Here is the choice that is available every moment: I can choose to react to the "what is" of this moment with a sense of being separate and against it. For instance, the phone could ring right now and make me stop writing. I could choose to be irritated and snap at the caller. I wouldn't know I had chosen to react this way because I would not know I have a choice.

But when I know I have a choice, then I can keep my inner seat in peace and skip the first choice of reaction. Then in the stillness of non-reaction, I respond to the situation. The response that comes from peace is always creative and always right for that moment. It could be wrong in other situations, but in that situation, it is right. Peace begets peace, and conflict always begets more conflict. Yoga is knowing that we have a choice, and the very act of knowing is the choice of peace.

Don't talk too much

When I told my wife what I was going to share with Tuesday's yoga class, she said with some worry in her voice, "Don't talk too much. They may not be ready for that and you'll frighten them away." And her warning is valid, because I do talk too much, yet I can't be afraid of talking. So where is the balance?

Briefly, (I don't want to talk too much) I explained to the class by using examples in the room how everything in yoga points to stillness: the statue of the dancing Shiva, the Om symbol on the wall and the actual emoting of Om, the mandala that Gurudev drew, and last, although I used this first, the sounding of the singing bell. "And when we relax at the end of a routine, you are going to the edge of stillness," I concluded.

I think what I'm doing now that the classes are past the opening night, is creating an experience of stillness within the structure of a class. Each session should have some new concepts to digest so that the intellectual map of what we are doing is expanded, then there needs to be some physical work with the body that prepares it to relax, and with the release of tension in the body, the mind is softened up so it can stop working so hard. During relaxation, thinking slows down and the mind doesn't talk too much.

Finally, there is homework: that is, some practices to apply to daily life which help the student find stillness in the noise of his or her world. For instance, last night I shared how I find stillness at Wal-Mart.

When I say stillness, (and I haven't followed up on this in class yet) the word is interchangeable with some other concepts that are overworked and misused in our culture. Stillness also means; Being, Peace, Love, Buddha, Christ, God, Kingdom of Heaven, Eternity, and so on. But these are all words that the mind uses to avoid stillness. "We should all have peace or God," the mind says. "Give me enough time and I'll get there." But thought cannot take us to stillness because stillness dissolves thought like hot tea dissolves sugar. The mind given the reins will never go there.

So none of these words have any meaning in stillness because in stillness there is no thought, no concepts, no mental activity. In fact, in stillness there is no ME. So when one goes there, you can't think that you have peace, or Christ, or whatever. In stillness there is just the present moment. Just what is. The first thought in the mind shatters stillness like a rock through a window.

The rock bottom definition of yoga is: yoga is stilling the mind so the dimension of stillness can enter our life.

All fish are impermanent

My beta fish that I've had for over a year is dissolving day by day. One can see his life force pulling back from the form, leaving only a husk, a shell that soon will no longer have an inhabitant. We live in a culture where death is swept up as soon as it appears, as if we are not supposed to look at death. Death makes big news, and now even one death is of national concern. We have become fascinated with the unthinkable and unseeable. By hiding from death, we have come to love it.

In the Eastern teachings, death is to be consciously meditated upon, for death is considered a great teacher. "Go sit in a morgue," the teacher tells the student. It is only through death that we can know life, the teachings say. So embracing death is also embracing life. By embracing the impermanence of all form, we also embrace the permanence of our formless self...and we are free of death. Only the formless can see the impermanence of all form.

When we see death and accept it, including our own, that which sees and accepts is not form or a part of death. That is who we are. We are That which is before and after death....but only death will reveal that to us.

The Lion King

Through the magic of the internet, I'm writing this journal from a motel room in Raleigh, where we came to see the Lion King Broadway production last night. The Arts Center was filled with wonder as the brilliantly costumed characters of the African lion country came to life to tell the ancient story of sleep and remembering. For three hours our minds were propped open by the powerful presence of this production, and most forgot, for awhile, who we were.

One could tell from the standing ovation and the smiles on the face of the audience that they enjoyed being removed from their "me" for awhile. This story of the lion forgetting that he is a king was first read during my early practice of Yoga, but it was a tiger reminding the tiger cub of his true identity. The tiger cub had been raised by sheep and had forgotten his true nature. In Yoga, it is the guru who holds the mirror up to the student to show him his true identity.

Simba, the lion king in the play, looks into a pool of water and sees his original face, and he then returns to his land to remove the ego that has pretended to be king, and harmony once again restored to the kingdom.

The ancient wisdom teachings are everywhere in our culture, coming at us in new disguises everyday. A movie here, a play, a song, a book, even advertisements sing this ancient song of our forgetting and our remembering. We enjoy them, we pay big bucks to see them, but we have little consciousness of what this secret communication is really saying.

Our higher self knows what the message is, and as the "little me" sleeps during the play, it drinks in this brief but powerful ambrosia. The mind labels this momentary forgetting of itself as "entertainment." When we label something like the Lion King "entertainment," that means we can watch the play, but we don't have to give up anything. When the stage lights go off, we are back!

We can keep our ego, our "me" and all its conflicts and problems, for this "me" is our kingdom, and it is all we know. But while the "entertainment" is capturing the attention of our mind and putting it temporarily out of business, our true king can be secretly fed and kept alive...but not awakened.

A play like the Lion King has the power to awaken a soul to its kingship when the separation between the ego and the play (or the world) disappears. One can grasp in a moment of realization that this play is a mirror and that the observer is also the observed.

In such a moment of insight, we become Simba and our soul suddenly feels the energy of Life flowing through the body, and we roar.

As each new yoga class begins I feel as though I'm standing at the beach with the great ocean at my back, and the group of students who have come down to the water are watching a wave wash through my feet and up to their toes. It feels cool and refreshing on this hot day, and I tell them how they can wade in the water to relieve the stress of the world.

Then I talk a little about going in up to the neck and even swimming in the ocean. But we stay focused on the safe little waves washing up to their feet because the ocean can frighten those who don't know how to swim. Most people come to a yoga class with only the desire to wade. They don't know that the small waves of stretches and relaxing are just the fingers of a vast being that reaches out over the horizon of the mind into the silence of eternity.

And this indeed can be scary for the mind that doesn't want to go beyond itself and its known world, no matter how flat and two dimensional that world is.

I guess Columbus had the same feeling with the people of his day as they stood at the beach and talked about the possibility of a round earth.

Peaceful morning

Now that Tilly is back from the beach and the yoga rooms are operational downstairs, our mornings are falling into a very peaceful routine. For me first thing at 4 am is the hot tub, then a shower, then a hour of asanas where the body is stretched and rested in a series of poses that makes the body feel totally free of all aches and stiffness. Then we meditate for 45 minutes, have tea and listen to a few minutes of Echart Tolle. By then it is 6:30 or so, and I write my morning journal entry. Then I'm ready to say hello to the world and give whatever it asks of me this day. I love these mornings.

And I love my days. Each day is an unknown because no matter what I think I'm going to do, I never know what or who is going to walk through my door. The day no longer exists to fit my plan, but I have learned to fit the day's plan. And whatever the day has planned for me comes with a sense of play. I no longer feel the burden of work, even when my photography work piles up and customers call to find out when they can get their albums or whatever. If I do begin to feel stressed, I find that this merely becomes an indication that I'm trying to fit the day to my plan, and I am able to let it go.

This ability to let go begins in the morning practice of yoga, where in the asana one's awareness searches out any tension in the body and lets it go. Letting go is taken to the next level during meditation when awareness watches the mind for thought ripples, and when a thought stream surfaces, by staying centered in the still awareness, the thought is let go.

All during the day, this practice of letting go of any form that the mind pushes away or clings to keeps me centered in my peaceful morning. Whatever I'm doing, whether its walking, doing the dishes, or anything that doesn't require full attention, my awareness is centered and alert for any rising thought form that I can let go of. Thoughts rise in the mind, to be sure, but when they rise in the still field of awareness, they have no power to make me lose my peaceful morning.

Stress, doubt, unhappiness, fear, guilt, confusion, jealousy, envy, self loathing, despair, these are all mental states caused by thought that has been allowed to take away our peace. Like storm clouds, they enter our peaceful morning, and we forget our beautiful dawn where all disturbing feelings and thoughts were washed clean from our horizon.

Yoga is the practice of living in this state of peace throughout the day.

After much preparation both in the house and in the head, the first Yoga class at the Blackstone Yoga Center was conducted without anyone pulling their back out or finding that they couldn't get off the floor. One extra person showed up, and I discovered that we could get nine on our floor instead of eight. But any more and I'll have to get out in the hall.

I told the class that when you start to practice yoga and try to create some private time for yourself, the world in the form of your family will come knocking and want to know where you have gone. And sure enough, a husband called during class to tell his wife to meet him at a restaurant after class. There is no remedy for this phenomena other than to understand that this is what happens and to find solutions.

In Yoga, one learns that there are no problems in life, only solutions. A problem is a mental construct that ties a knot in life's flow of energy; a solution is seeing a way for the energy to flow. In other words, Yoga is skill in action.

Learning this skill only requires than one practices being mindful of what is. This means that we must become aware of what our mind is doing and then relax the mind so that insight can rise. Solutions come from insight, problems come from the thinking mind. Insight sees the whole of a situation, thinking sees only a fragment. There is no way to think our way out of problem because our problem was created by the thinking mind in the first place.

The first step in this practice of Yoga is with the body. Find the tension and relax it. Then comes the mind; find the tension, or the thought loop, and relax it. This is meditation. In this way, one can learn skill in action and become a yogi.

Is Yoga a spiritual path?

The answer to this question is simple. Yoga is a spiritual path if you choose it to be that. If you want an effective stretching and relaxing routine, it will be that and nothing more. If yoga becomes a spiritual path for you, the switch from a routine to a path will happen when you don't expect it. You will be switched by something greater than your thinking mind and your present sense of self.

A spiritual path is not necessarily a religious path. You are not going to be switched into a different religion, which is the fear religious minds have about yoga. And by "religious mind" I mean a mind that is locked in a closed closet of concepts and beliefs that it calls religion, and in this closet there are no windows or doors. So this mind will naturally fear yoga as something more than a stretching routine because it fears what is on the other side of the wall to its prison. A religious mind can be on a spiritual path or it may not. Again, religion, like yoga, will be whatever we choose it to be.

But it is not just the "religious mind" that lives in a closed room. Nor do we have to be gay to live in a closet. If our world is predictable so that everyday is an emotional repeat of the previous day where the situations seems different but the thoughts and the feelings are the same, we live in a closet. If we find certain painful dramas returning like a rerun movie, we live in a closet. If our days are gray, even though the sun is shining, we live in a closet. If life has lost its meaning, we live in a closet.

A spiritual path, no matter what form it takes (it doesn't have to be yoga), begins with a crack of light under the door of our closet. We are aware that there is a greater world outside and that we don't have to live in the darkness of the conditioned life.

A spiritual path says it is okay to open the door, and our walk on the path is the slow movement toward stepping completely out of our closet, whether that happens in one light enveloping moment or a lifetime. There is no time on the spiritual path because light is always happening now. Only darkness has time.

A spiritual path begins when there is contact with another person who is not living in a closet. That contact can come through a book, a chance meeting, through a friend, or through some earth moving event in our lives, like an encounter with death.

A spiritual path begins when we make contact with life. In this sense, yoga as a spiritual path is the awakening of one's life from its long sleep of conditioned existence.

Wake up

We hear these words all the time: "He needs to wake up." We either apply them to others and sometimes they are applied to us. But we only use them in extreme cases where someone is so asleep to reality that they are causing others great pain and concern. But what about our everyday life where we go to a boring job every day, or come home to the same irritations at home that never seem to change.

These are not extreme situations, but just normal situations. Everyone seems to be condemned to some sort of frustration in their life. And this is what we talk about in our daily conversations. We tell and share the stories of our frustrations, disappointments, and how we hope to get out of these situations, but never do, for long.

Sometimes we feel as if we were asleep because when life seems to always be the same old drag, it reminds us of a dream that repeats itself every night. "Oh, if only some hand could just shake my shoulder and say, 'Okay, it's time to wake up,' I would."

But waking up is natural if we become aware that we are asleep, because the awareness of being asleep is a waking awareness. Lets play a little game of waking up.

If you have read this far in this piece, you are in the present moment, and your awareness is conscious of the consciousness that is writing these words. While these words are being written early Friday morning (which is right now), and you are reading them later (which is right now), the awareness or stillness out of which these words come is also present as you read them. Your reading and my writing come out of the same stillness, the same present moment, the same Now.

The time between the writing and the reading is an illusion of the thinking mind. Thought says there is separation between the writer and the reader, time and space, but that is only the dreaming mind. In the truly waking state, there is only Now, this present moment. In the present moment all life is contained and expressed because all existence rests on the stillness of Being, just as all waves rest on the ocean.

So this writing and this reading that is going on is an expression of this ocean of Being. Being is both the writer and the reader and nothing separates Being, no time or no space. Being just is. Being has no beginning and no end. You and I are just Being. All is One Being until thought comes in and separates it so it can think about it.

So in this understanding, you are also the writer of this piece and I am also the reader. And if you directly see this, then in this moment you are awake. Then you may think about this, and then you will be back in the sleep of thought where you are only aware of the thinking and not the Being.

But in the moment of just seeing the total truth of it, time and space disappear...and you are just Being.

Wal-Mart Yoga

Yesterday I went to Wal-Mart for a few things and practiced yoga while there. If one thinks that yoga is only doing stretches on the floor, then you might think this rather odd. But yoga is really about stretching the mind, or I should say, one's consciousness. One gets to the mind through the body in yoga.

When we talk about "stretching awareness," we need to get past the assumption or conditioned idea that we are our thinking mind. If thought says, "I am aware," or like the French Philosopher, Descartes, who said, "I think, therefore, I am," then we have not stretched enough. When the thought rises that says, "I am aware," who or what is aware of that thought? The thought is not aware because the thought is an energy form just like a piece of wood, only at a higher frequency. So when one is aware of a thought, is that awareness another thought form or something else entirely different? So, let's practice Wal-Mart yoga and find out.

Go to Wal-Mart with your list and make the intention that you are only going to watch your breath as you walk and look for your items. Put your breath and body into a rhythm, and feel your body walk, stop, reach for items, and stand, just as you do when doing an asana at home or in class. "What is the body feeling now?"

Really enjoy hanging out with your breath. Watch it like it was a flag moving in the wind, or a current of the ocean moving in and out of a coral reef. As you move through the store put a Mona Lisa smile on your face. That smile is the feeling of contentment, of being fulfilled in yourself in this present moment.

As your thinking mind still operates, and it will, observe how it labels everything as if it were a store clerk putting labels on every package. You see someone and the mind puts a label on him or her. The label can be positive or negative, but you know it's a label because you define that person by your thought, when in fact, you know nothing about that person. So as the labeling mind tries to dominate your awareness, stay with your breath and just be aware of the labeling process. "Isn't that interesting," is the posture you take with your own thoughts. Be careful not to think about your thinking, because that is just more labeling. Become aware of the store as if you had never seen it before. See the store without any labels. Look at the form, the light and the shade, the smells and sounds. Let the mind be fresh and clear.

In this way, you can practice yoga at Wal-Mart and make your shopping not only extremely enjoyable, but also an adventure of self discovery. This is yoga in action.

Tilly returns from her week at the beach with her HS classmates, who gather each year to escape their husbands and the responsibility of feeding them. I know what this responsibility is like because I have fish. If I didn't give my betas four little beta bites each morning, they would die. And some husbands are like that, so their wives can't stay away too long. But most can survive a week.

We did, my son and I. We were well stocked in cereal, peanut butter, and baked potatoes and cottage cheese for dinner. I must say that it is easier keeping the kitchen clean on such a menu. Being a vegetarian makes eating something one does to stay alive, instead of living to eat, so it doesn't matter if there is no variety or special meals to look forward to. And going out to dinner has lost its luster here in our area because the restaurants have nothing but side order of mashed potatoes and a salad for people who don't center their lives around meat.

Giving up meat not only has enormous health benefits, what with all that the industry puts in meat these days, but it also makes one aware of our addiction to meat and the emotional connection our culture has to meat as a status symbol. To be poor means you can't afford good meat. One is rich if one can buy choice cuts of prime for dinner.

But I didn't really have to give up meat. In fact, I was at a point in my life where I could afford the choice cuts and had a stainless steel grill on my deck to cook them just right. Then Yoga came back in my life like a jealous lover said, "Out with the meat. I won't have that dead animal in my house." So the meat left without so much as a thank you and a goodbye. And not a trace of my old friend is left. Now when I see or smell meat, I just see a dead animal, and it doesn't look that appealing.

Maybe that is what happened. Yoga just took away my mental labeling stamp. If you stamp a slice of dead animal with the concept STEAK, it changes the whole meaning and flavor of the flesh. The memory of the experience of STEAK rises up and becomes what one sees. And as the steak is eaten it is compared to past steaks and put in the memory box to be pulled out at the next encounter. "Oh, this steak isn't as good as they one we had the other day, is it?"

But if you take away the label, you see directly what it is, just a piece of dead and decaying cow. One might feel like a vulture, who just loves dead animals.

Yoga also makes one aware of another level of awareness on this subject. Yoga quiets the mind, and foods have a direct effect. We are what we eat, the mantra goes. And this is true. If we eat dead animals, we also eat their animal nature, which is the energy vibration of action and desire, and also the violence with which they were killed. If we want to feed our brain the food that will help it become still, sensitive, and open to insight, then we would eat foods that are living, such as fruits, nuts, and vegetables. On such a diet, one begins to feel lighter, healthier, more peaceful and creative. One also doesn't need to eat as much, so weight is lost.

I can speak with some experience here, now that meat has left me over a year ago. But you know, I'll bet the main reason more people don't quit the meat is that old fear that monitors all our actions: "What would people think if I gave up meat?"

I know that fear is out there because the world of meat doesn't want to lose a single slice of its body. "What? You gave up meat! What in the world for?"

But I'm not here to advise anyone to give up meat. I only advise them to practice yoga, and then watch what happens.