



April 2003 Contemplation Theme

Persona, Personality & Self

By Rama Berch, R.Y.T.

Persona is the face you present to the world. Personality is the aggregate of characteristics that you carry with you through the different personas. Self is the deeper unchanging Reality within, svaroopo. The challenge is to sort it all out on the inside. You get too easily mixed up in the different levels of identity and lost in the superficial levels of life, running around in circles and never feeling really fully complete. Let's look at the three levels of identity.

Yoga recognizes the importance of the fulfilling the different roles and responsibilities of your life, called *dharma* in Sanskrit. Persona is the external sense of self that you create by these roles. It is your whole sense of self when you are at work, how you are when you are with your friends, and who you are at home and with your extended family. You actually have multiple personas, some of them amazingly dissimilar. You might be very quiet at work, yet gregarious at home or vice versa. You could be considerate and loving to those you live with and still be sorting out some old anger with your extended family. You even switch from one persona to another very easily, sometimes several times a day.

You also have personal characteristics that you carry through your many personas. You may have a good sense of humor or you may be quietly insightful. You might be a take-charge person, or you could be a person who prefers to wait and see about things. Maybe you carry a sense of helpfulness everywhere you go, or you are an astute commentator on life and on the people around you. These characteristics comprise your personality.

Your personality provides you with a distinct sense of self, different from other people. It provides a more consistent sense of self than persona does, being made up of enduring qualities that yoga calls *vasanas*, your mental and emotional proclivities. You can change them if you want to, but it takes genuine work. You can decide to become more compassionate or to develop your ability to handle the practical things in life — it will truly be worth it. These unique and individual characteristics (or idiosyncratic quirks) comprise the

way in which consciousness contracts to become an individual — you!

Beyond persona and personality, there is a deeper dimension which is called "Self," *atman* or svaroopo in Sanskrit. This deepest level provides you with the internal sense of continuity while the surface revolves through many selves and an ever-changing external reality. Inside, you already have a deep knowing that you are still the person you were when you were a child. That inner essence is still you. Yoga is the scientific process of finding the Self. Self is defined as Consciousness-Itself being you.

So far, we have looked at three levels of self: persona, personality and Self. You will always have all three. The trick is how you handle them on the inside. Consider this: which one of the many selves are you coming from right now? Whatever answer you give is a good answer — there is no wrong answer. Problems arise only when you get stuck in the superficial levels of self, persona or personality. Yoga helps you let go of the superficial and find svaroopo, the Self, which is your inner essence of being and the source of happiness and love.

You create your persona and personality through your memories. Patanjali explains this in the *Yoga Sutras*:
Chittaantara-drshye buddhi-buddher ati-prasangah smrti-samkarash cha. — Sutra # 4.21

It means that you cannot really know all that is in another's mind, because the memories of both would get tangled together within you, making you lose your sense of individuality. This is because you construct your sense of identity by your memories.

This is true of the memories that you keep reviewing like reruns inside your head, as well as the ones buried too deep for you to access consciously. The more deeply they are buried, the more powerfully they shape your sense of self. Yoga begins to unearth the hidden levels and clear a path to svaroopo, the Self. It can even help you change your past because, fortunately, memories are changeable. What you remember is not what really happened. You have a highly selective memory, which

edits out certain things and remembers others. Worse, what you remember is actually a distorted report of what really happened. This should not be a surprise to you — just check out your childhood memories with someone else who was actually present at the time!

Recent scientific studies have proven that your memory is unreliable. A recent study reported work with a group of people over several years. The scientists had each person do a series of simple puzzles, the “round-peg-in-the-round-hole” type of thing. Every year they returned to do the same puzzles again. Each time, the researchers told the people what their elapsed time was. They kept getting better, because they were getting practice (and you always get better when you practice). Every year, the scientists asked them what their time had been in the prior years. What was really being measured was what their memory. Their memory of their elapsed times changed as their ability to do the puzzles improved. As they got better at the puzzles, they shortened their past times — to show that they were better in the past. In other words, when you feel better about yourself, your memories improve. You really can change your past.

Yoga helps you with this. You already know that when you do yoga, the way you respond to everyday situations improves. More importantly, you can actually change your past and, when your memories change, your whole sense of self changes. This is a profound healing of both persona and personality. These two together are called *ahamkara* in Sanskrit, your externally-based sense of self, also often translated as “ego.” You construct ahamkara through your memories, actions and thoughts. When your thoughts and actions change, your ahamkara changes. This is called healing. It is called transformation. While yoga reliably gives you these changes, they are not the goal of yoga.

The real goal of yoga is to find the Self and to let it shine through all superficial layers. This is because you will always have all three levels of identity. You do not become free from ego (ahamkara) by destroying it, because it is the means by which consciousness becomes you as an individual. If it goes, you go. What happens instead is that you clear out all the gunk that blocks or distorts the way consciousness shines through you. You make your ego as transparent as a sliding glass patio

door, one that is so clean you cannot tell if it is open or closed. Then svaroopaa can shine through without distortion.

This gives you an internal feeling of vertical integrity, all your selves lined up inside. Your personality and persona(s) become means by which Consciousness-Itself expresses itself into the world. You live from the deepest level of your own being, Self, and even your emotions and memories are completely transformed. Getting there is a process of clearing out the old stuff; letting go. Whether you let go gracefully or you kick and scream all the way, you will still have to let go. The best part of this is that you are already on the way. Doing yoga is a way to embark upon the inner journey quite consciously, but even if you aren’t doing yoga, you are on the path. Life itself moves you — haven’t you noticed? This has been especially true in the last few months.

Even without the war, it has been an intense time for everyone. The ancient science of *jyotish* (Vedic astrology) explains that we have been undergoing a powerful transit of Saturn, the planetary energy of creating endings and of bringing things into form. The old must end before a new level of consciousness can be manifested into your life. Things are leaving your life right now or changing dramatically. This necessitates letting go, which changes the outer landscape of your life. It changes the inner landscape as well. It changes who you think you are. You may even be able to let go of your old memories as you go through this internal restructuring. What is being restructured is your inner sense of who you are.

Be conscious about what you are doing, because you can use yoga to support any level of self that you hold dear. Yoga can protect your persona, by doing yoga to recover from the strains of “holding it together” in these current difficulties. You can use yoga to protect your personality, doing yoga to just “get through the hard times.” Or you can use yoga to dive deeper and deeper inside and base your whole inner being, and your whole life on the Self. It’s your choice. I always recommend, “Do more yoga!”

Namaste,

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

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