



June-July 2009 Contemplation Theme

# Practice & Purpose

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Two Sanskrit words are very similar, *upaya* and *upeya*: practice and purpose. It is important to distinguish the difference, especially since it is easy to confuse them. A better translation is path (*upaya*) and goal (*upeya*). Yoga says the goal is unchanging, but the path or practice changes along the way, depending on where you are in the process.

The goal is unchanging. More than this, the goal is the unchanging essence of your own being — Beingness Itself. Your experience of this all-pervasive, divine reality is a cosmic reality, but at the same time, it is your own experience of yourself, which is why it is called Self. It is easy to attain because it is your own self, which pervades all levels of your being. This is why you love Shavasana, not because it's a nice nap, but because that nap is a dive into the deeper dimensions of your own self.

You are used to looking at the superficial levels of yourself, which are validated by your success in the world, the intricacies of your relationships, or your place in the world. These are important aspects of your being and you will never lose them, but yoga will give you a deeper experience of your self, so that you can see these as they truly are — just the outer levels of the multidimensional reality that is you.

Every time you experience your inner dimensionality, you want to go “in there” again. As you develop your ability to dive deep within your own being, you are able to go deeper and stay longer. You become based in your own beingness, so you carry that essence into your life, into your relationships and into your activities. This is the one unchanging goal. Practice is what you do to get there. And to get there again. And again. And again and again — until again turns into always.

You are making progress when you notice that the same old things in life don't upset you in the same old ways. The physical changes you get from even a little bit of *Svaroopa*® yoga are an important step in the process, but your ability to face the uncertainties of life from a deeply centered place inside is much more valuable. You may even find that you can use your physical condition to monitor how your mind and emotions are doing. Your body is not your problem when you notice one of these things:

- your breath is short or interrupted,
- your head and neck are creeping forward,
- your tailbone is tightening and tucking under,
- your shoulders are hunching toward your ears,
- your heart hurts,
- you have less spring in your step,
- you are tired before the end of the day has arrived.

Your problem is not your body. Your problem is your mind. These are all symptoms that you have lost your own essence. You are distracted by your own thoughts, which create emotional disturbance as well. Your mind is so powerful!

Thus, all of yoga's practices are actually for your mind. Even when you begin with Ujjayi Pranayama or by releasing tailbone tensions, your real target is your mind. Actually, your real target is the Self — the experiential knowing of your own beingness, which is Beingness Itself. But your mind gets in the way, just like the tops of the trees in my backyard that have grown so high, they obscure my view of the valley just beyond. Thus, your practice of Ujjayi Pranayama and the poses (*asanas*) use your breath and body to pull you magnetically inward, deeper into your own being, by quieting your mind so you can get past it, to your own beingness. The goal (*upeya*) is unchanging. It is to know your own essence (*svaroopa*), the unchanging Reality at the deepest dimension of your own multi-dimensionality.

Unfortunately, the practices are seductive. You can get completely enamored with trying to perfect your body. It's easy to see how you could get caught up if you were doing a more athletic practice. Millions of yogis look at the covers of the yoga magazines and think, “I want to do that with my body! I want to look like her (or him)!” This particular delusion is easily avoided in *Svaroopa*® yoga, but another one is readily available, “If only I could live with my tailbone long and soft, and my breath open, easy and free.”

So far as delusions go, this is not a bad one. However, cultivating this physical openness and aliveness can become your goal (upeya), though it is meant to be only a practice (upaya).

If you are seduced by the wonders of an open, breathing, enlivened body, it won't last long. There are two reasons for this. First, you discover very quickly that you can tighten your spine and shut down your breath with merely a thought. So you realize you must do something about this monkey inside your head (your own mind).

More importantly, the deeper experiences that unfold within become much more seductive than mere physical perfection. Shavasana doesn't even provide you with the best inner experience; instead savor the moment when you are sitting still, after having done Seated Side Stretch on both sides. Just sit there. Stay. Let it steep. Let it deepen. Base your sense of self in the Self. Then you know that the goal is much deeper than mere physical perfection.

As you cultivate your affection for this inner experience, your practice changes. You spend more time in meditation, and the practices that direct you more deeply inward. These practices include mantra repetition and chanting, as well as Ujjayi Pranayama (which is one of the reasons we emphasize it so much). A curiosity grows within, propelling you to read the texts and teachings of the masters, to apply your mind to the process of going beyond your mind. Your body still needs maintenance, like your car needs a regular lube and oil change, but that is easily accomplished with a short time expenditure. Your path or practice changes along the way, depending on where you are in the process.

If you still harbor the thought that physical mastery is the goal, consider this — do you really expect to be able to perfect your body in the years you have left? The ancient tradition of yoga recommends you begin your physical practices at the age of 15, so you can cultivate a physical perfection as your body approaches maturation. If you began a few years (or a few decades) later, you'll get a lot of physical improvement — but it's not the same as if you had begun at 15. So, consider this carefully: is physical mastery truly your goal?

The truth about your body is that you have some genetic abnormalities. Everyone does. There are some imbalances brewing in there, maybe even some illnesses at a latent level that will take time to bloom. Fortunately, the breathing and asanas work on these latent diseases, even bringing them to the surface early, before they have a chance to develop fully. Your physical practices keep the imbalances at a low level or even rebalance them. You can cure or check existing diseases, prevent new diseases from developing, and even prevent injuries. This all happens because your body develops the healing power and resiliency of a child. When you fall, you bounce instead of breaking. But this still is not the goal.

When you confuse the practice with the goal, it's like you've gotten enamored with the bus you are riding on. The bus becomes more important than the destination. People do this with their cars — the kind of car they drive is so important! It tells other people who they are. It's no longer restricted to the archetypical mid-life crisis of the executive, buying a little red convertible. Now it's the hybrid that tells everyone how great you are. Beware the sense of self worth that comes from a possession, or from someone else's assessment of you!

As you become more based in your core essence, your sense of self worth arises from that inner source. This is the true goal. So don't confuse the practice with the goal. Practice your practice in order to reach your goal — independent unending bliss and beingness.

If that seems too lofty right now, then settle for inner peace. Settle for an ease in facing life. Settle for an ease in breathing through the big events and the small ones. Settle for a quality of inner joy that just keeps getting stronger and glowing more brightly. Settle for feeling more like yourself, because the deeper you explore within, the more you truly feel like your own self. Do more yoga.

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