



Svaroopaa® Vidya Ashram

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A Yogi in the World #1

Being a Yogi in the World

By Gurudevi Nirmalananda

Yogis of yore left the world, the iconic yogis living in Himalayan caves since thousands of years ago. Their approach was to get rid of all possessions, leave their relationships and cease performing actions. They sought freedom. However, they discovered they could carry all that stuff in their mind, especially reactions to what happened in the past. Thus, in their solitude, they realized they had to work on clearing their mind.

Clearing your mind gives you a moment of peace. More than mere peace, they strove to open inner access to the deeper levels of their own being. It's like the sage Patanjali promised:

Tadaa dra.s.tu.h svaruupe 'vasthaanam. — Yoga Sutras 1.3

In the moment your mind is still, you are established in your own Divine Essence.

The rest of his text is about how to quiet your mind, including using yoga poses, yogic breathing, lifestyle changes and meditation techniques. Yet these are not exclusive to yoga. Everyone has their own little tricks for quieting their mind. One of my early favorites was to look at the sky. Something happens when your mind takes on the shape of the sky – blue, expansive and extending into infinity.

When I began studying sutras, I wondered: If the goal is stillness of mind, then how do you manage your life? You have to use your mind to manage relationships, to pay bills and even to drive from one location to another. Patanjali's students didn't have that problem. They didn't have lives to manage. They were forest monks, who had left their possessions and relationships behind. If they wanted to eat, they went into a nearby village and begged for food.

The pandemic was an excellent opportunity to withdraw from society and live a quiet life. The fear that others would infect you was easily managed by staying away from them. Unfortunately, this might not have stilled your mind. You might not yet be enlightened. But you had two years or more to work on enlightenment. What did you do with it?

I know some people who still don't go outside their homes. Their get-up-and-go just got up and left. This means that withdrawing from the world is not the answer. Isolation alone is not enough for spiritual progress. Neither is becoming mindless. I was shocked the first time I saw my Baba driving a vehicle. I wondered, can you be enlightened and still drive? It means that I thought enlightenment would make me stupid and useless.

Instead, enlightenment makes you smarter. Plus it gives you the gumption to work for the betterment of the world. You don't become a leech nor do you become lazy. You have more to offer than ever before.

After Patanjali, it was another thousand years or more before yogis described how to live in the world as a spiritual being. The fullest flowering of yogic philosophy is found in the Kashmiri Shaivite texts, from only 1200 years ago. These tantric sages explained that there is no reason to leave the world, as the world is Divine.

What seems to be only a mundane world is Divinely designed to engage you fully. Each and every person, critter and object is made of the One Divine Energy, shakti, coalescing into a separate and fascinating form. When you step into the marvel, the awe and majesty of this amazing creation, you live in the bliss of Consciousness. It arises from inside, even while it is being reflected from outside-in. The key is finding it inside first. Then you lose your reactivity. You take everything in stride.

In life, you need to be a sailboat, not a kayak. A kayak is rocked by every ripple on the surface. It capsizes easily. Your first kayaking lesson must include recovery from capsizing or you would be at risk of drowning. Sailboats rarely capsize because they have a keel — a flat blade or deep hull that extends down into the water. The bigger the boat, the deeper and heavier the keel.

In this metaphor, the ripples on the water are the thoughts in your mind. When you're floating on the surface, like in a kayak, it's easy to capsize. But with a deep keel, your boat is unaffected by the ripples. You cut through the waves as you continue forward momentum.

You see the same in a tree with a deep taproot. That anchor in the earth gives the tree strength in the storm as well as a deep source of nutrients. The tree doesn't have a desire that the weather be different than it is. The sailboat with a deep keel sails through storms easily. When you ground your sense of self in the deeper dimension of your own being, you are you, even in the midst of life's realities.

I remember when other people determined how I felt. If they liked me or approved of me, I liked myself. If not, not. It was a painful way to live. Once I figured that out, my self-defense mechanism was to withdraw from relationships. I became a loner. Unfortunately, it exaggerated some of my worst psychological tendencies. It was yoga that rescued me.

Once I had a way of getting centered and grounded, I could step back into relationship with others. While yoga gave me effective tools and techniques, I yearned for something more. What had surfaced in me was a profound spiritual yearning. My Baba fulfilled that yearning by giving me Shaktipat, the inner opening to my own spiritual essence. His teachings helped me understand this new inner level.

After I decided to give my life to it, I became a swami. In the initiation ceremony, a swami renounces the world. But the fact is that there is nowhere else to live. So I came back to live in the world. Yet my relationship to it is quite different than before. Now I appreciate it more than I used to. I need it less and enjoy it more.

I adore the world! It is so beautiful, even when it's painful. I don't try to own the beauty nor the pain. It doesn't make me who I am. No matter where I am located, I'm delighted by it. No matter who I encounter, the intricacies of a single conversation fascinate me, with tone of voice and facial expressions adding to the vibrancy. I see the multi-dimensionality of Consciousness that is present in every moment.

This is freedom. It is inner freedom: freedom from reactivity, freedom from blame and guilt, freedom from need and desire, freedom from fear, freedom from being defined by other people's opinions. These are great freedoms! For most people, these feelings dominate their relationships and activities. People ask me, "If I don't have desire or fear, will I ever do anything?" It means that they have been using desire or fear as their motivation for everything they do. And in the pandemic, fear meant you should go nowhere and do nothing. So life went into a freeze-frame.

Losing desire and fear is liberating! You continue to have free will and intelligence. You can see what possibilities are there and make a choice to do one or more of them. You have the capacity to love more, to do more, to give more, to make a contribution to this world.

That's only part of the inner freedom that yoga gives you. Freedom from fear and desire is just the beginning. You also expand into freedom to create, freedom to care and share, freedom to move into life in a way you never have before. You become more alive and joyous. And you bring that into the world with you.

The world needs more yogis. You shine with the light of Consciousness. Your caring comes from a deeper inner source. Your intelligence is quickened by the inner light shining through. Your willingness to play the game makes the game more fun. But you're not depending on the outcome or any person in the game to make you feel better. Why? Because you already feel better than better.

One teaching story describes it this way. The Guru said, "You all need some exercise. Let's play softball." So the yogis chose up sides, went out on the lawn and got a game going. The first team up at bat scored 23 runs before they were put out. So the second team had some catching up to do. But as they ran in from the field, the Guru yelled out, "OK, now let's play soccer. New teams!"

What would you do? Are you in the game or not? And why?

This is called "doing more yoga."

THIS IS AN ARTICLE IN A YEAR-LONG SERIES, "A YOGI IN THE WORLD"

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