

THE HIGHER POWER IS YOU

How life lessons from a swamiji nudged me to lasting peace. BY APRIL MOORE

RECENTLY, I SAW AN ARTICLE via Facebook about how adult coloring books are the latest form of meditation. I'm pretty sure I let out a disdainful snort. Don't get me wrong; I love these made-for-grownups coloring books, but to suggest people will find inner peace from meticulously coloring in intricate fairytale forests could be a stretch. However, had I seen this article a year and a half ago, I might have bought into it, thinking I could achieve enlightenment while letting my artistic side geek out. I had after all, been seeking ways to deepen my understanding of meditation and I love to color.

I've always identified with Eastern philosophies of compassion and nonviolence, had dabbled in meditation, and practiced Hatha yoga off and on, but I knew there had to be more. What about patience? Inner peace? Understanding my soul nature? Those aspects seemed out of my grasp and I assumed I'd find them in the yoga studio, but no amount of downward dog could clear my mind (I spent the entire time trying not to fall over and keeping my cute yoga pants from riding up). Surely, I wasn't the only one missing the mark, having met stressed-out and inconsiderate "yogis" over the years who'd spend ten minutes ranting about having to bag their own groceries or complaining about the barista who took too long to make a latte. Then again, perhaps they weren't seeking deeper meaning like I was: answers and solutions to life's big questions and problems amid a fragile world of chaos and uncertainty, complete with emotionally-fraught images. Yes, I've had my moments of complaining of piddly things, of which I wanted fewer and fewer, but I didn't know where to begin.

Then, in July 2015, a friend recommended I attend a class with her called Ancient Healing Wisdom taught by someone she referred to as "Swamiji." It sounded like a rap name. I'd come to learn the word *swami* or *swamiji*, is an affectionate address for a respected Hindu teacher, yogi or guru, and in this case, for Yogacharya Dharmananda, who had dedicated twenty-five years to the International Vishvaguru Meditation and Yoga Institute before moving to Loveland to share his teachings with a Western audience. I decided to sign up.

The class took place in a basement classroom at Poudre Valley Hospital. Swamiji wore a bright orange kurta with matching dhoti, and a couple strands of prayer beads hung around his neck and one on his wrist. I marveled at the juxtaposition of this man, in his colorful attire and calm

demeanor, against the harsh florescent lights and stark hospital classroom. I was immediately struck with a feeling of reverence toward him, as if I could see his vast knowledge and wisdom radiating from his warm smile and peaceful presence. The setting seemed to ironically reflect his teachings, which aim to blend two vastly different worlds to create one of peace, tolerance and compassion.

In the thick Indian accent, his words roll beautifully and articulately—almost mesmerizing, like Morgan Freeman with a British accent. After a couple of sessions, he approached me as I left and asked, "You are April Moore?" To my utter mortification, and for reasons beyond my comprehension, I responded, *in his accent*, "Yes, I am April Moore." It just came

out that way. He chuckled, but I wanted to take myself by the shoulders and ask, *what's the matter with you?*

I chalked it up to nervousness, but I still cringe when thinking about it. Yet I've come to learn Swamiji has a wonderful sense of humor, delights in jokes, and often elicits laughter from the class.

Over the course of six, two-hour sessions, Swamiji covered a number of topics, such as the mind's nature, the power of thought, reincarnation, karma and, of course, meditation or yoga, as it is traditionally known in Indian culture. While these concepts always resonated with me, I lacked a deep understanding of them. I tended to approach them with the same *oh, that sounds good* attitude I'd reserve for midweek happy hour or a seeing a feel-good chick flick. It was during these initial sessions that things began to click. Through detailed handouts, Hindu stories, and modern examples, Swamiji explained these concepts and how to apply them to our daily lives.

Positive affirmations, or mantras, curbed self-deprecating thoughts; learning about reincarnation dissipated any fears I had about life beyond this world; and I stopped letting challenging situations elicit harsh reactions from me once I looked at the encounter as something to learn from—*what lesson am I supposed to take from this?* And, of course, karma presents a pretty good argument against being a jerk. Even when I renewed my driver's license, I couldn't bring myself to lie about my weight. I figured the good karma of a nice driver's license photo would go a long way. Citing Hindu scriptures, such as the Bhagavad Gita and the Upanishads, Swamiji forged a bridge between the ancient Science of Yoga and the disconnect I had been experiencing.



Without these deeper understandings, I could never relax long enough to meditate properly. Previous meditation instructors never touched on these subjects; never taught ways to quiet the mind, so attempts to sit quietly—while thinking of nothing else but sitting quietly—left me more stressed than enlightened, leaving me wondering, *What's the big whoop with this meditation stuff?*

While there are many types of yoga (meditation), Hatha yoga, a system of physical postures, or *asanas*, reigns supreme here in the West. Swamiji acknowledges Hatha yoga is a beneficial practice to build strength and stamina particularly for long periods of quiet, motionless meditation, but hopes to show the spiritual and emotional benefits of Kriya yoga, an ancient form of deep meditation, considered one of the best ways to connect with one's soul. "Meditation is how to listen when the soul speaks," says Swamiji.

And that's what we're all after, right? To connect with our soul?

We often talk of a Higher Power, but what if that Higher Power is you? Hindu philosophy says our soul is the essence of our human personality, a small unit of pure consciousness, derived from an infinite ocean of pure consciousness referred to as God. We're told to listen to our soul. However, our mind (or ego) has a way of talking over the soul to the point where we don't hear what the soul has to say. Which is a shame, because as it turns out, our soul is quite wise. It's been around the block a time or two—thanks to reincarnation—and has gathered a lot of knowledge, but alas, isn't getting an ounce of recognition. We're too caught up in our lives here in the physical plane to notice there's more to us than our jobs and day-to-day existence.

Swamiji urges us to look beyond our physical selves to the "eternal, immortal, blissful light within." Call it the soul purpose of meditation. Kriya yoga is about quieting the incessant chatter of the mind in order to listen to the soul, which has all the answers to our unending questions. It is here we tap into the infinite potentials of the Higher Self; after all, the word *yoga* actually means "union" between the soul and Universal Consciousness, or Spirit. Connecting to the Higher Self will take intense discipline, several hours a day of quiet meditation, while most of us—with regular practice—will experience what lies between: a release of anxiety and stress; eradication of negative feelings of grief, fear, guilt and hatred, self-doubt; profound calmness and

inner harmony and peace—to name a few.

On a physical level, meditation has been shown to improve chronic afflictions such as asthma, depression and substance abuse. It has also been noted as an aide in preventing high blood pressure, heart attacks and strokes. The idea is to train the conscious mind to discipline and regulate its thinking and feelings and free it from suppressed emotions, hurt and wounded feelings, as well as long-standing wrong habit patterns. In a world where we look for fulfillment outside of ourselves, we mispend our energies and wind up feeling drained and depleted. Meditation is meant to direct our energies inward in order to tap into deeper, more subtle levels of awareness that help us understand and solve life's conundrums: Who am I? Why am I here? Sometimes, you just want to slow the perpetual motion of your thoughts and feelings so you can better manage them.

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To accomplish this, Swamiji recommends to start with five to 10 minutes per day; your physical stamina and mental stillness will steadily increase with time. It took me several weeks to tune out birds chirping or the neighbor mowing his lawn, but eventually outside distractions fell away and I could hear nothing but my soft chant of OM. As I became more at peace because of the Hindu teachings, meditation became possible. Even though I haven't quite connected with my soul (we're still playing phone tag), I'm creating an inviting space for when she's ready to chat.

It's remarkable how practicing meditation can translate into monumental leaps in personal growth and awareness. Over the last year and a half of studying Hindu philosophy under Yogacharya Dharmananda and incorporating

his teachings into my life, I can sit still, undisturbed by work pressures and personal stresses. My calm attitude hasn't gone unnoticed. My husband often remarks at how mellow I've become—and he would know, having taken the brunt of my frustrations from time to time. First, it was every week after class he'd note the dreamy, relaxed look on my face. Then three days a week, until every day, a noticeable peacefulness had settled over my day-to-day existence. (And, as a mother of a teenaged boy, I can assure you, it's cheaper, healthier and more sustaining than a massage and a bottle of wine.)

I've seen Swamiji's gift for showing how ancient wisdom can be applied to the daily activities of the modern world, whether it be tuning out volatile political rants, balancing work and family obligations or dealing with a technological pitfall like a computer crash. I'm able to take a step back and view situations with a new perspective that allows me to worry less, reduce stress and even curb any judgment toward others. I could dwell on the twerp who cut me off in traffic and sailed through the intersection of Riverside and Lemay, just missing the train that I'm now stuck at. Maybe he saved me from worse traffic ahead or even getting into an accident. And when the universe has thrown me a curve ball, such as when I wasn't selected for a job I had my heart set on, I wallowed for five minutes before I realized that would accomplish nothing. This "missed opportunity" ended up leading me to purchase a business and organize my first writer's conference. I've learned to accept that things might actually happen for a reason, perhaps making room for something better and more rewarding.

I often think we've strayed from the core teachings behind yoga and what it means to be aware, compassionate, patient, and forgiving. There's an entire lifestyle of cute studio-to-street wear that implies we take our practice with us everywhere, but how many times have you left the yoga studio or meditation room and the second you merge into Fort Collins traffic, the faint smell of incense is the only thing lingering from your yoga session? It doesn't have to be that way.

If I've learned anything, it's that a Higher Power is closer than you think. Soul awareness and inner peace don't have to get left behind at the yoga studio, nor do I need over-priced clothing and expensive studio memberships to reap and sustain the benefits of meditation; all the equipment I need is within. ☐