

Surrender

At Ease with What Is

BY CARRIE GROSSMAN

“Surrender itself is a mighty prayer.”

—Sri Ramana Maharshi

Several years ago, in my yoga teacher training, one of the instructors posed a question: What’s the hardest yoga posture? Right away, students fired off ideas. We figured it had to be one of those crazy stand-on-your-skull asanas or something, but once we exhausted our imaginations, the teacher smiled. “Actually, the most difficult pose is *Savasana*.”

Savasana? Some students laughed. How could lying flat on the floor like a corpse be the hardest pose? It didn’t make sense. But as we inquired into the profundity of that possibility, deep insights began to emerge.

While our showoff society may extol yogis who hang out in complicated arm balances and inversions, it turns out that playing dead is a bit more challenging. Unlike many other postures, *Savasana* asks us to give up all effort and to rest, fully embodied and aware. The question is, how many yogis really do this? In truth, dropping the ego and lying like a corpse isn’t so easy for those of us obsessed with ourselves. Most of us don’t want to stop replaying the past and freaking out about the future. Most of us don’t want to let go of our attachments. And, sigh, most of us don’t want to surrender.

Yes, surrender—that’s ultimately what yoga is all about. To experience union, the essence of yoga, we must let go of who we *think* we are to awaken to who we *truly* are. The great sage Patanjali made this clear in the Yoga Sutras, in which he outlined a set of ethical precepts known as the *yamas* and *niyamas*. These 10 precepts form the foundation of the Eight Limbs of Yoga and include nonviolence, truthfulness, contentment, and other lovely principles that aren’t always easy to practice. The last—and perhaps most difficult—of the *niyamas* is *Ishvara-pranidhana*: surrender to the Divine.

Surrender to the Divine? Yikes! Let’s be honest—for many folks that phrase comes with a wee bit of baggage. But we mustn’t sack the



subject before taking a deeper look.

To begin, *Ishvara* is a Sanskrit word that is often translated as God, Supreme Being, Lord, and a host of other loaded words. If you happen to be one of those people who don’t believe in such terms, take heart: it’s all a question of interpretation. In Patanjali’s world, *Ishvara* is how we conceptualize the ground of being, whether we refer to it as Spirit, *shunyata*, or Santa Claus. What matters is our intimate connection to the universe, which each of us fashions according to our unique constitution and conditioning.

After *Ishvara* comes *pranidhana*—surrender. This is where things get murky because Western culture gravely misrepresents the concept. Conventional wisdom tells us that surrender means giving up our power and becoming helpless victims to a force outside ourselves. We need only watch an action movie to get a taste of this. Somewhere along the way we are bound to see a mafia of meanies surrounding some poor soul with his hands up screaming, “I submit!” Scenes like these don’t make surrender look like the most desirable experience on earth. But true surrender, as the sages and scriptures tell us, is never to a person, but rather to life itself.

The irony is, we can’t really *think* about surrender; it’s not something to toss on our to-do

list. Just like we can’t force a fruit to ripen, we can’t surrender on command. Sometimes it takes sustained effort, disappointment, and pain before we stop pushing and unclench the tight fist of ego. Although trying to control every detail of our life may feel helpful, in actuality it is exhausting. Constant worry drains our energy and has no real value. But so often we don’t see this, and we try to mold life into something that feels safe. Still, no matter how organized we are, circumstances don’t always work out the way we want them to. Every now and then life corners us, and we have to admit the truth: “I have no f*cking idea how to make a shift in my life!” The friction caused by this frustration twists the mind in knots. But just like a yogic twist nourishes the organs and brings fresh oxygen to the cells, twisting our mind can have benefits. When we squeeze the knot of the mind, eventually the pressure gets so intense that we have to let go. Once we do, a whole new world opens.

How many artists, scientists, and spiritual seekers have reached a point of utter despair only to experience a huge breakthrough upon letting go? There’s something inexplicable that happens when all of our efforts fail. Though it can be incredibly painful, when the cosmic nail file wears us down, we can no longer manipulate life with our schemes and plans. Humbled

by our inability to figure things out, we have to release our grip and fall into endless space. What's amazing is that—according to Rumi—as we fall, “we're given wings.”

To fully surrender, perhaps what we need more than anything is trust. Trust is the gateway to freedom because when we trust, we have a sense that things are perfect just as they are—even if they don't jibe with our desires and expectations. The challenge is, sometimes trusting life can seem as easy as chopping carrots with a butter knife. We may want to trust—our partner, friends, guru, the Universe—but more often than not, we are filled with doubt. *What if she leaves me? What if all of this spiritual practice leads to nowhere? What if I make the wrong decision?*

Most of us are plagued with worries, but that's not a huge surprise, since we tend to look for security in the wrong places. Society leads us to believe that happiness comes from external conditions, so we constantly search for things to fulfill us. But all external things are subject to change. As soon as we lean on them for comfort, they are knocked out from under us. No wonder it's so hard to trust!

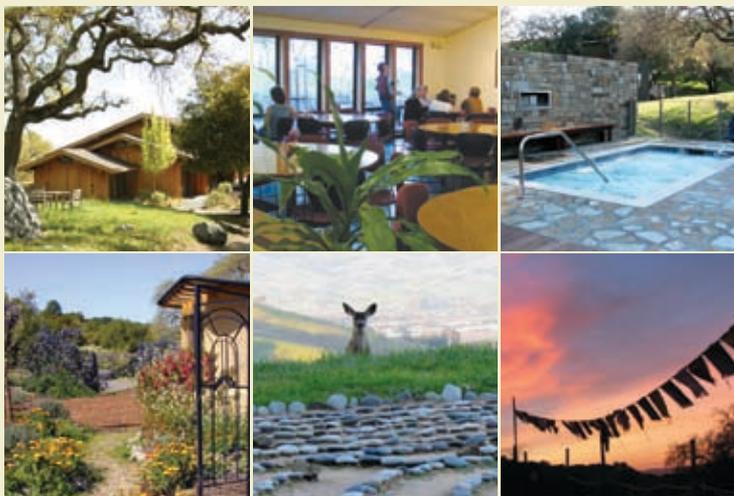
The thing is, we trust all the time without even realizing it. When we get on an airplane, we feel pretty certain that the pilot has a clue how to fly. When we order food in a restaurant, we have faith that the chef hasn't spit in our meal. And when we kiss our lover, we trust that he won't bite our face off. If we didn't trust—and thus, surrender—we wouldn't be able to do *anything* in life. Despite our resistance, letting go is part of our nature—completely natural and innate. If it weren't, the world would be full of exhausted people. After all, most of us shut our eyes at night and disappear into sleep with total trust that we will wake up in the morning.

In many respects, surrender is nothing other than acceptance. When we give up completely we also accept completely. This means we must abandon our preconceived notions about how our life “should” look. We must be willing to recognize the truth in Swami Ramdas's words that “good and bad are according to our mental attitude. Nothing is, by itself, good or bad. Everything happens for the best.” How difficult it is to remember these words in difficult times. Yet the soul knows that such words are true. As we surrender ever more deeply to each moment of our experience, the beauty of life awakens. 🌿

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