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IN MY OPINION

## Meditating on Meditation

This yogic art should maintain its dignity

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When I picked up the issue of Time magazine that featured the article on meditation entitled Just Say Om (August 4, 2003), the first thing I noticed was that it was written by Joel Stein. I am very familiar with his work with Time. He usually writes a column that provides humorous, often insightful, commentary on modern society. I have enjoyed many of his articles.

However, when I saw his byline on a profile of meditation, I immediately became concerned. I wondered if he would be capable of approaching this subject matter with an appropriate reverence for the religion and culture that comprise its source. After I read the article, I realized that my concern was not unwarranted.

Yet by some cosmic tilt of the universe, perhaps Mr. Stein was the best person to write this piece. He represents a perspective shared by many in this country. He's rather hedonistic, somewhat self-centered and lost in the fracas of twenty-first century uber-consumerism. (I say this based on not only this article, but from what I've seen in his other work as well.) In preparing to write this article, he actually tried to meditate. When a man like this discovers, first hand, the benefits of sitting in silence and writes about it, that forms some pretty powerful testimony. He also includes some wonderful current research on the positive benefits of meditation and its effects upon the brain.

Having said this, I must now acknowledge that there are some deeper issues that must be addressed here: the Hindu dharma continues to be co-opted to fit the whims of Western society. Hatha yoga is taught as a stretching and toning exercise. Meditation is reduced from divine communion to stress relief. And yes, Mr. Stein's reference to mantras as "creepy" is unacceptable. He also makes snide remarks about gurus and incense. All of this can't be ignored.

So how do we respond? Simply becoming indignant will only get us so far. I prefer lighting lights to cursing darkness.

For the past eight years I have served as a hatha yoga instructor at Muskegon Community College here in Michigan. I have always made it a point to convey to my students that these hatha yoga asanas (physical positions) and meditation methods spring from a vibrant, living religious tradition. I do not believe, nor do I teach, that one must follow Sanatana Dharma (an ancient Hindu philosophy) to practice Surya Namaskar (a specific series of hatha yoga positions). But it is important to acknowledge that, according to the teachings of Hindu dharma, a serious meditator can find within himself the great stillness in which the Self, spoken of in the Vedas, may be known.

Finally, let me say that in our local chapter of the Self-Realization Fellowship (a Hindu yoga-based organization founded by Paramahansa Yogananda), a number of people have joined our ranks over the years who initially became interested in yoga presented as very simple meditation techniques or basic physical postures. Some even came from meditation societies that claimed religion had nothing to do with what they taught. Yet from these simple and naive beginnings, they began to experience within themselves something far more profound. As a consequence of this, their expectations began to change. Ritual, practice and higher knowledge claimed their attention and became a new motivation.

I believe that the tension between post-modern, dogmatic Western thought and the soul's natural pull toward's its own Source will catalyze the fruition of Dharma.