

TRANSCRIPT
The Spirituality & Health Podcast
PAMELA SEELIG

Rabbi Rami: From *Spirituality & Health* magazine, I'm Rabbi Rami and this is the *Spirituality & Health Podcast*. Our guest today, Pamela Seelig, is the author of *Threads of Yoga: Themes, Reflections, and Meditations to Weave Into Your Practice*. The book was listed under the section of the magazine called Books We Love. It just got released on the 28th of September. The book is brand new, but Pamela, you're not brand new to yoga.

Pamela Seelig: No, that's true.

Rabbi Rami: Tell us something about how you got involved with yoga.

Pamela: Sure. I've been practicing yoga for a long time. Back in the '80s, I was working on Wall Street in the Financial District and not necessarily living a balanced life. Really overdoing it, being overly competitive, not a healthy lifestyle. It started to take a toll physically and I came down with something I'd never heard of called Bell's palsy one day, which is quite traumatic. I'd never heard of it. Half of your face is paralyzed. I went to the emergency room, found out it's not life-threatening. Most people recover, but it takes a while.

There's really nothing you can do. At that point, I was encouraged to look into more alternative-type medicine, which I didn't know what that was, but especially meditation. Really, out of desperation, I turned to meditation, found that I really loved it. That was my introduction to this whole yoga, meditation, this world. I think I would've really never turned in that direction if I didn't have something quite traumatic happen. I think that's not unusual. I think a lot of people have that story with yoga and meditation.

Rabbi Rami: It was a real life-changing moment. I know something about Bell's palsy. I've never had it. I've had friends who have had it. They were terrified. It looks horrible. It looks frightening. I think if it happened to me, and I was in a job like yours, I would say, "Oh my God. It's the job, it's the stress, it's the madness of this lifestyle. I'm going to try something different."

Pamela: I didn't really want to admit that. For me, it wasn't the right path for me. For some people, it is, for sure, but for me, I realized I was going too fast in the wrong direction. When I discovered meditation and some practices just like breathing and found, deep breathing, I found I couldn't do it, I realized something was wrong and I really had to re-evaluate. It just opened up a whole world. It was a blessing in disguise.

Rabbi Rami: Most of us who are listening to this podcast and listening to you, we understand the physical and psychological benefits of yoga pretty well. We're used to people marketing yoga outside the spiritual or religious dimension in which it was grounded. Your book, even though we've just been talking about these physical benefits, your book goes beyond the material benefits of yoga to reveal, what I think

is, the spiritual ground, its original grounding. Tell us a little bit about how you understand the true purpose of yoga.

Pamela: The physical was the gateway for me and for a lot of people because it brings awareness into your physical body. When I discovered some of the texts, the foundational texts of the yogic philosophy, primarily the *Yoga Sutras* written by Patanjali about 2,500 years ago, when I read that or read commentaries about that for the first time, I was really stunned that it was so beautiful, so simple. I just couldn't believe I had not heard of it before or learned of these things.

Basically, the sutras tell you what is yoga, why we do it, and how to do it in 196 little-- Sutra means thread or little statements. Not quite sentences. You can't really misinterpret them too much. It was just so simple and explained why we do the postures, why we meditate. I found, over the past 30 years, that was getting lost with all the focus on the physical. Again, not to discount the physical, but the reason why we do that was getting lost. That really inspired me to write the book.

Rabbi Rami: Yoga comes from the Sanskrit root Yuj, which means union. As I read Patanjali, the point of yoga, I don't know if that's the right word, the benefit of yoga, the ultimate benefit of yoga is the realization of your union with and then you can say God, you could say Self with a capital S, Brahman, whatever language you want to put to it. That seems to be at the heart of your book. You don't dwell on it. This is not a religious tract, in any sense, in any manner or form, but that really seems to inform the book itself.

Pamela: That's absolutely right. The very first part of the book, I look at really just three sutras. The first is now we begin yoga. The second sutra tells us what yoga is. Yoga is the quieting of the mind. The third one is just what gets me. It just hit me so hard. The third sutra says, "Then the seer abides in her true nature, his or her, their true nature." That's why we do it, so that we can abide in our true nature. That's why we quiet the mind.

Rabbi Rami: How would you define true nature?

Pamela: That's tricky. I think some of the texts, the Upanishads, talk about "words turn back frightened" when trying to describe truth. I love that. It's more of an experience, but there are words, of course, we can use when we glimpse or touch that deeper part of ourselves. It's a feeling of many different things. Maybe peace, bliss, fullness, joy, connection. There's different levels. There's subtle levels of these experiences.

What I think is amazing is even a person new to yoga practice, that does a little practice, can quiet the mind even for a fraction of a second, can experience this. You don't have to be a perfect person or a holy. You can experience this and it can change everything. You become more dedicated because you realize, "Oh, this is who I am. It's not this narrator thought-stream in my head that's telling me what to do or how I should be. There's this part of myself that I should be exploring." That's really the practice of yoga, is this exploration of ourselves.

Rabbi Rami: Yes. It seems to me that the self we're talking about is not the ego, I would imagine. We're talking about Atman or Self with a capital S. You're right. Any

words we use for these things are just going to fail. That's why Lao Tzu opens the Dao De Jing with the Dao that can be named is not what we're talking about, not the Eternal Dao. Given the limitations of language, when we're talking about this Self with a capital S or we could use the word, God, that is such a loaded term. I love the teaching in the book of Acts in the New Testament, where Paul, quoting a Greek source, defines God as that "in whom we live, and move, and have our being."

I come back to that text over and over and over again. If I had to define Dao, I would say, Dao is that ultimate reality in which we live, and move, and have our being. Because we're already in it, living in it, moving in it, it is our essential nature, that's what it means to have our being, then yoga is not giving us something we don't have. It's removing the obstacles that keep us from seeing what we do have or, more importantly, who we really are. Does that fit where you're at?

Pamela: Yes. That's so beautiful. That description, too, from Acts is so beautiful. It's like we practice and practice yoga, but there's really nothing to do, in a way. It's really this remembering or realizing what's already there. Because we live in the modern light, in our modern culture, it's not easy to experience this depth of our being. It's not easy because we're distracted.

Rabbi Rami: All the time.

Pamela: With precision, we're distracted. Advertisers know exactly how to distract our minds and make us think we need this or that to be happy, to be complete, where it's already there. It's a matter of just remembering that. Again, there are ways to do this. There are practices to help us. Teachers have walked the path before in all different traditions and left us beautiful instructions, if you want to call them instructions, or tips, or tricks, or techniques, that are very similar and often in different traditions. They're helpful for us because we are constantly drawn into the world, and our minds are active, and we train them to be active and look outward. If we don't balance that out by looking inward, we might never know who we, in fact, are, which, in the yogic tradition, is the great tragedy.

Rabbi Rami: Absolutely. You and I are talking on October 6th, 2021. Right now, we're in the midst of this whistleblower coming out from the Facebook community and sharing with us, I don't know if distraction seems too weak a word, how Facebook but other social media really try to capture our attention through anger and rage because that's what motivates us when we're in that little S self as opposed to the larger S, the capital S self that you're talking about in this book. Yoga can be, I think, an antidote to social media-driven rage.

I imagine that you can go on YouTube and watch yoga videos and learn postures but ultimately, the practice itself is not only selfless but screenless. It takes us out of that driven mentality. I was going to say places us, but it's not really placing us, because we're already there, and simply allows us to be present to what is always here, which is the joy, what the Hindus call *sat-chit-ananda*, pure consciousness, pure being, pure consciousness, pure bliss. Your book is really incredibly apropos to the moment because it is part of this resistance to the madness that's defining our culture.

Pamela: I like that word resistance. I think it's a radical step to quiet the mind. Many people don't even know, in our culture, that that's even a possibility, to quiet the

mind. If you don't know otherwise, you think that you are the mind. You are this inner voice with your judgments, personality, good and bad. You just assume that you are that. Really, the first step is knowing that that's not who you are. That's just a part of your mind. Not good or bad. Just a part of your mind, and that that can be quieted.

Knowing that, that that even can be quieted and then making this radical maneuver to say, "I'm going to close my eyes and I'm going to quiet my mind." When you do that you find, "Oh, this is not easy. Let's see how other people do this or how to do it." In the *Yoga Sutras*, Patanjali, his yoga sutras are not just philosophy, it's actual instruction. The eight-limbed path, it's eight limbs or ways to quiet the mind.

One of those is postures. One of those is breathwork. Two are meditation. The first two are the ethical aspects because, without having or just trying to be a good person, that's essential to keep yourself calm. The eighth limb, the last one is samadhi, which we don't have to practice that. That just happens. It's also instruction to help us know that we can do it and there are techniques. You don't have to do all of them. The limbs are there to help us so that we can quiet the mind and create this antidote to the modern culture.

Rabbi Rami: I think it's really important that you brought up the notion of ethics as one of the limbs. I think most people who do yoga see it separate from ethics. In fact, there's all kinds of scandals in the yoga world, like every other spiritual tradition, where the teachers are anything but ethical. The importance of ethics to spiritual practice, in general, and specifically, as you say, in Patanjali's eight limbs of yoga is something that you highlight, which I think is incredibly important.

I want to talk to you in a moment. I want to go back to what you were just talking about, but I want to stick something else in between because you're talking about what you call witness consciousness. I do want to go back to that, but you mentioned earlier, teachers. You have or had a primary teacher, Swami Satchidananda. I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit about him, how you came to the Integral Yoga School of Swamiji.

Pamela: Sure. This was when I was living in New York. The main ashram Integral Yoga Institute is in New York. That's how I came upon it. Actually, my brother brought me in it. I was struggling, at that time, with spirituality in general. The religions were not drawing me and so I was in that state. When I saw the door, there was a sign over it that said, "One truth, many paths." I just love that. I just felt that connection, went in. I never met Swami Satchidananda. I was there before he passed, but I never met him. I think he passed in 2002. I immediately felt this very strong connection and I began to train there in their programs and read all his works.

One of the reasons why I was so drawn to him and his teachings was that he said the teachings are the teacher. In other words, you don't have to listen to me or you don't have to give me your power. The teachings are the teacher. His teachings were so universal. There's no better, worse path. These are the teachings. For me, as an American woman, I don't think I would've been able to have a guru in person. I just don't think that would've worked for me. I've just experienced too many men in power. I would never put my trust in any man in power. I just wouldn't, with my experience. It was, in a way, a good thing that I never met him physically because I didn't have that issue.

I just read the teachings and just really felt connected, have been to his ashram in Virginia and San Francisco since then. I find his teachings incredibly-- They're not difficult to understand, yet they're so profound. I read some more challenging yogic information that's out there, and it's beautiful, but I'm always amazed that Swami Satchidananda is saying almost the same thing but in this most simple, beautiful way. That's why I'm very connected to that path. I also love the physical yoga that they teach. It's very calming. It's very restorative. I think like you used that word, antidote, I find it an antidote to the modern culture out there today.

Rabbi Rami: They even speak at Yogaville, that's his center in Virginia, they even talk about Restorative Yoga. That's a major part of what he does. I don't know how old you are. I'm in my 70s. He was a huge impact on the world, the America I grew up in in the '60s and '70s. I've been to Yogaville. You've said that you've been to Yogaville.

Pamela: Yes.

Rabbi Rami: One of the amazing things at Yogaville, besides the practice, is the LOTUS temple. I'm going to try to describe it and see if this does it justice. Swamiji was interested in the mystical heart of all the religious traditions and sciences, for that matter. When you go into the temple, you walk in, you get your cushions, you sit down. I guess it must be down in a basement, there is a powerful light generator and it sends this light up. This is old technology, we would do it differently today, but it follows these bent glass rods that come out of the center of the floor together and then separate with each rod leading to a separate shrine for the different traditions that the temple is honoring.

Each tradition is lit equally with all the others, but they're all illuminated by this central light. Every time I've been there and every time I've sat in that room, that to me, is part of his brilliance, of his vision, of his insight and really speaks to the heart of the kind of spirituality that I'm interested in. One that honors the various traditions, but sees them coming from a central source. It seems to me, and you can tell me what your take is on this, that yoga is a way, and there are others, but yoga is a way to, even though it comes from a tradition, it's a way to get below, beneath, beyond, I don't know what word you want to use, formal, organized religious traditions to that common energy source.

Pamela: I 100% agree. I think that's how I see yoga. I think of it as the truth that undergirds a lot of the religious traditions. That LOTUS temple is replicating that. It's a circular room. That's what's so amazing. How it is circular, and the light is almost like the Kundalini energy that goes up and then down to the different altars around the circle. Even there's an altar to future religions that are not known yet. That truth, and I grew up in the Christian tradition, the truth, the mystical truth that--

Jesus's teachings are so beautiful, simple, profound. Those teachings, you can find them in the other traditions in different words, in different ways. It's just so beautiful. I feel like yoga shows us, in a way, how to quiet the mind so that we can get to those deeper aspects of the different religions, if you're drawn to a religion. You don't have to be, but it's the truth underneath it that, I think, you're then allowed to have access to. As you said, it's there already. We're there already. We are that, but it's covered. It gets covered.

Rabbi Rami: Right. Which is the real work of spirituality is to uncover it again. Part of that uncovering is cultivating the witness consciousness that you talk about in the book. Tell us a little bit about that and why it matters.

Pamela: I think witness consciousness is called many different things. It can be called the seer, the knower. It's the part of us that doesn't change. In yogic terms, there's the real and the unreal. In this realm that we're in, everything changes. It begins, it has a middle, and it ends. Even a thought has a beginning, middle, and end. Everything is in their journey, in its journey, whatever it is. Except, there's a part of us that doesn't change. It's like when you look in the mirror, you feel like you're still five years old. No matter how old you are, there's that part of you that still feels that you're you.

It's the unchanging part of you. That's the witness. It's behind the thoughts or beneath the thoughts. When the thoughts quiet, we can tap into that real part of ourselves. That doesn't change. That's not of this realm because it's not changing. It's real. That's witness. The reason why I think we're here and why we want to go a little deeper, tap into this deeper, true part of ourselves, is because when we do, we can then bring that into this world.

Our lives can be directed from this deeper place. It's a more joyful place. It's peaceful, but it's also-- I think part of the reason why we're here, perhaps, is to bring this true part of ourselves into this world. That's our purpose because we're unique. There's no one here like us. We should be that person as opposed to trying to be somebody that we think we should be. It's quieting that and finding that deeper us, who we are, and then expressing that.

Rabbi Rami: That's beautifully put. Let's talk something practical for a moment. Certainly, asanas, the postures of yoga are practical and one needs to practice them. In your book, you raise a couple of other practices. There's one I wanted to share or have you share with us because it's central to my own spiritual practice. That's mantra japa, the recitation of a mantra. I do this daily. I have a mantra that I was given by Swami Swananda when he initiated me into the Ramakrishna Order of Vedanta Hinduism. I repeat that every day. I've done that for, I don't know, 11 years or something.

I have a Hebrew mantra that I received from another teacher that I also do every day. Those are formal times during the day. Then I repeat a mantra over and over again throughout the day whenever it pops into my head or whenever I remember to do it. Tell us a little bit about why you think mantra practice is important and how somebody might find a mantra, start a practice like that. Especially for people who are going to go, "Yoga. Right. I'm going to not do that," but they could do this.

Pamela: I think for meditation, any kind of meditation, it usually starts with the breath, with somebody just, even if it's just for two minutes, feeling the breath come in, feeling the breath come out. Sometimes in the nose. Feeling the air in the nose, the sensation of the airflow in and out. That's maybe the beginning, but then, what usually is so helpful is layering on a mantra. You have the breath already. You know how to settle down with the breath and then add a mantra on top of that. That seems to be a nice way to do it.

There are Sanskrit mantras, which according to the yoga tradition, have an energetic quality that works on your energy, on your energetic body. You don't even have to know what the Sanskrit words mean. The energy of the mantra is working on you. That's an extra, maybe, benefit from a Sanskrit mantra, but you don't have to use a Sanskrit mantra. You can use your own language, any language, and you can just see what connects with you. There might be a little bit of exploration initially to find a mantra, unless you have a teacher who can give you a mantra.

If you don't know a teacher and you just want to use this tool to help quiet your mind, you can just use a mantra very simply. Inhale, "May there be peace in my heart," exhale, "May there be peace in the world," inhale, "May there be peace in my heart," exhale, "May there be peace in the world." That's a lot of words. That may be too many words. You can just use, "Om mani," inhale, "Shanti meets peace," on the exhale, "Om mani," inhale, "Shanti--"

I offer a few different classic mantras in my book, but you can just explore any words that are soothing to you. "Love," on the inhale. "Peace," on the exhale. Although love might have a connotation that could start the thinking process. Sometimes you have to use more neutral words. It's really just feeling quiet and feeling what resonates with you, exploring a little bit, and then sticking with it and you'll feel the soothing quality. It'll help you stay out of your thoughts.

Rabbi Rami: In the Jewish tradition, mantra work, which isn't called mantra, but the practice is the same, mantra practice, you either find or are given a mantra and you're supposed to work with it for 40 days. If you get through the entire 40 days with your mantra, then the mantra is now ingrained. It's part of you. It'll just resonate and you'll be able to use it for your life. If you only make it to 39 days, the rabbis say, "Well, it's not your fault. It's just the wrong mantra. Find another one and give it another shot." It is a very simple practice. I don't know if it's simple. It's not a complicated practice to do, though it may be challenging to stay with it.

Pamela: It's another tool because what happens is you'll notice you're in a thought and then you just have something to come back to. Sometimes the breath isn't enough. You'll be like, "Ooh, I'm in the supermarket again." That's good that I noticed. It's not bad, and then you come back. It's like a rope to hang onto when your mind is drifting.

Rabbi Rami: Right. When you're suddenly caught in despair, or rage, or anger, or in anything, the mantra is an opportunity to ground yourself so that you can witness the fleeting feeling and not get caught up in it. It's very powerful that way. I've got one last question. Hopefully, it's going to bring the conversation to close on an optimistic note. In your book, you talk about the yugas, and you quote from a book called *The Holy Science* by Swami Sri Yukteswar, a great Indian teacher from the early 20th century.

Swami says, "The Dark Age of Kali having long since passed, the world is reaching out for spiritual knowledge." You explained that he thought Kali Yuga was over in the year 500 CE. My own sense is we're in the middle of it. It's definitely not over. My fear is that spirituality, yoga, meditation is all being co-opted by the darker energies of the Kali Yuga, especially in the way capitalism uses these things and perverts them. Your position is much more optimistic than mine. Let's end this on an

optimistic note. Share that optimism with us and what you see as a teacher of yoga that feeds it.

Pamela: I hope it wasn't confusing in my book. Sri Yukteswar Giri said that the year 500 CE was the darkest point of the Kali Yuga. You're right. It wasn't over then. It still continued but we've moved out of it and we're in Dvapara. I'm probably mispronouncing it. Not as bad as the Kali. We're moving out. I like the idea that it's cyclical. Time is not linear in the yogic traditions. So many of the indigenous cultures see time in a cyclical nature based upon where we are, where the earth is in the universe. These teachings, this ability to connect with our deepest self, our true self gets covered up in the Kali Yuga. It's harder.

As we come out, we can then access these teachings. We can open ourselves more to these higher frequencies and achieve these altered states more easily. I know it's a chaotic time, and it's negativity everywhere. Sometimes it has to get worse before it gets better. I think we're in that worse point, but I do think that more people are interested in this topic now and are being drawn to it. To me, that's what's happening. We're being drawn to this information.

People are understanding, "Wait. I think there's more to life than consuming." I think we can see it. I feel hopeful with the younger generation. I'm in my 50s, my kids are in their 20s. I feel like they're not as hung up on the consuming culture. I think they have more awareness in a lot of areas, including taking care of the earth. I think that's because we're coming out. We're opening up our facilities in a bigger way. That's what I think. That's what I feel. Let's say fingers crossed.

Rabbi Rami: You're right, though. I did misquote from the book. You were clear. I was not. I like the way you understand this. The only thing I would like to suggest to anyone who's listening to this, yes, there's more to life than consuming but before you give up consuming, you should buy this book, because otherwise, you're missing out on a really interesting exploration of yoga. Our guest today, Pamela Seelig, is the author of this book. It's called *Threads of Yoga: Themes, Reflections, and Meditations To Weave Into Your Practice*. You can learn more about her work at pamelaseelig.com. Pamela, thanks so much for talking with us on the *Spirituality & Health Podcast*.

Pamela: Thank you for having me. I so enjoyed the conversation.

Rabbi Rami: You've been listening to the *Spirituality & Health Podcast*. If you liked this episode, please rate and review us in your favorite podcast app. If you enjoyed this episode, be sure to share us on social media and tag us @spirithhealthmag. You can also follow me on the Spirituality & Health website where I write a regular column called Roadside Musings. Don't forget to subscribe to the print magazine as well. The *Spirituality & Health Podcast* is produced by Ezra Bakker Trupiano and our executive producer is Mallory Corbin. I'm Rabbi Rami. Thanks for listening.

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