



The Essential Self

האני העצמי

AFTER EATING THE FORBIDDEN FRUIT, Adam and Eve hide among the trees in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:8). They are hiding from God, of course, but also from themselves. Everyone—in different ways, for different reasons, and at different moments in life—hides like Adam and Eve.

While they are hiding, God calls to Adam: “Where are you?” (Genesis 3:9). Rashi says: “God knows where Adam is. Nevertheless, God calls to Adam in order to enter into conversation with him.”¹ God wants Adam to answer with *binéni* (here I am). In the Torah, Abraham, Jacob, Moses, and Samuel answer *binéni* when God calls. It is a response expressing total self-presence and readiness to enter into conversation with God.

Yoga is a way to stop hiding—a way to meet and enter into intimate and holy conversation with God and with yourself.

Where Are You?

Ask yourself, “Where am I?” Listen to your response. Have an unhurried conversation with yourself. Be attentive to all the many aspects of yourself. What are they saying to you right now? Now ask the question again. This time answer with the words “Here I am,” keeping in mind all those aspects of yourself that you just conversed with. How do you feel when you respond this way?





Torah Yoga for the Essential Self

“Where are you?” This is the first question God asks in the Torah. Adam does not directly answer God’s question. He says: “I heard your voice in the garden and I was afraid because I am naked and I hid” (Genesis 3:10). Rav Kook says, “He did not clearly answer the question ‘where are you?’ because he did not know his own soul, because his true *I-ness* [his essential self], was lost to him.”²

Adam’s lack of self-knowledge, his alienation from self, is the first exile. This primordial exile begins even before Adam and Eve are banished from the Garden of Eden. It is marked by the inability to clearly and openly answer the question “Where are you?”

Yoga is a way to meet and know your essential self. Each posture is an opportunity to connect with yourself and to clearly and openly answer “Here I am ” to the question “Where are you?” It is a way home for the self that is in exile.

Find a Teacher—Learn from Yourself

On your way home to yourself, teachers can be helpful. There are traditions in both the Jewish world and the yoga community that advocate having *one* teacher. So who is the one teacher for you, your final authority?

Torah says: *aséi lechá rav*—usually translated as “Find yourself a teacher.”³ However, *aséi* literally means “make.” Therefore, this passage can also mean “Make yourself into a teacher” or even “Make yourself into your own teacher.” In other words, *you* must be the one teacher for you. You are the only one who can truly and meaningfully answer the question “Where are you?” Therefore, ultimately, you must be the final authority for yourself.

Learn from teachers, but do not lose your connection to your own wisdom by focusing exclusively on the wisdom of others. Let the teachings you receive from outside sources deepen your connection to yourself and to your own inner knowing. When doing your yoga postures, trust your own intuitions, your own experience—trust yourself. Yoga will clarify your inner wisdom. Listen to your inner guidance. Eventually, your own body-mind-heart-soul will be your greatest teacher.

Meet and Know Yourself

The first step to knowing yourself is meeting and becoming aware of yourself. Torah teaches: “Greet everyone you meet with a beautiful face.”⁴ When you meet yourself in a yoga posture, you come face to face with your whole self. On any given day, you are a mysterious blend of your physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual aspects. Meet your whole self with a beautiful face of kindness.



Become aware of all the many aspects of yourself. You may sense energy, subtle vibration, heat, or cold. You may feel strong, flexible, tired, or energized. You may discover anger or sadness. You may feel ecstasy and bliss. You may see new colors or interesting shapes. You may feel as though you suddenly drop into water or that you are actually made of vast inner space. You may have a clear memory from your past or receive creative insights.

The Torah says that human beings are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26). In Hebrew, another way to say God is *ein sof* (no end). Because you are created in the image of *ein sof*, there is no end to what you can discover about yourself. There are an unlimited number of postures in yoga. Each posture is an opportunity to become more conscious that you are created in the image of God. Each posture can bring you home to another aspect of yourself. Use yoga to enter into conversation with your divine and mysterious essence.

Torah Study for the Essential Self

The first exile was the alienation of Adam and Eve from themselves while still in the Garden of Eden. Stories throughout the Torah hint at this existential state of exile. God's first words to Abraham are these: "Go from your land, from your birthplace, from your father's home, to a land that I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). The first two words of this passage in Hebrew, *lech lechá*, are often translated simply as "go." Paying attention to the literal meaning of the second word, *lechá* ("to you" or "for you"), the *Zohar* teaches that these two words mean "go to yourself."⁵ God is telling Abraham to go on a journey to himself.

Existential exile also plays a part in the story of Jacob. After his prophetic dream, the Torah says: "And Jacob wakes from his sleep and says, 'Surely God is in this place and *anochí* [I] *lo yadáti* [I did not know]'" (Genesis 28:16). There are abundant commentaries about the apparently superfluous *anochí* (I).⁶ One explanation is that "I" is referring to Jacob himself. Jacob realized that, until now, he did not know himself—"And I, I did not know." Jacob, awakened by God's presence, awakes as well to an awareness of his essential self. Jacob's comment on his dream expresses an inextricable connection between sensing God and knowing oneself.

Exile and External Validation

Exile is most commonly understood as banishment from one's native country. In Jewish history, it refers to banishment from the land of Israel. Exile is a recurring motif throughout the Bible and indeed throughout Jewish history to this day. Rav Kook, however, develops the idea that exile is the existential state of alienation



from self.⁷ He bases his idea on one line from Ezekiel (1:1): “And *I* am in the midst of exile.”

Rav Kook hears in Ezekiel’s words a link to Adam’s state in the garden. He reads this passage with an emphasis on the first word. “*I* am in the midst of exile—the *I* is the inner *essential self*.”⁸ In other words, the essential self is in exile—it has been banished from its home. Rav Kook continues to describe how, actually, all of creation is in exile from its essential self. The individual as well as the community—and even plants, animals, and inanimate creations like the moon—are in exile from their inner essence.

What causes the essential self to be in exile? One answer is that, in all of creation, exile is a result of relying too much on external sources of information and validation. For example, when does Adam become alienated from his own self? According to Rav Kook, it happens when Adam relies on the knowledge of the snake, a source outside himself, instead of relying on his own knowledge. In another example, Rashi teaches that, originally, the moon and sun were both great lights of equal size. As it compares itself with the sun, the moon becomes dissatisfied. It seeks the glorious title of being the only “king of lights.”⁹ In response to the moon’s lack of satisfaction with itself and desire for a glorious title, God diminishes the moon’s light. The moon is exiled from its original fully radiant self when it seeks external validation.

Looking outside of its own essence, the self of all creation goes into exile.

Education and Loss of Self

Rav Kook writes about the role of some educators in furthering the loss of self. “The ‘great’ educators come and they only look at external things. They also distract one from knowing the self. They put straw on the fire, they give thirsty ones vinegar to drink; they stuff up minds and hearts with everything that is external to them, and the self is forgotten.”¹⁰

In other words, some educators offer an “external” education that is ultimately not sustaining or satisfying because people are actually hungry and thirsty to know their own selves. Straw does not feed the fire—vinegar does not quench the thirst—of a soul longing to know itself. Being stuffed up with external information leaves the essential self undernourished.

Rav Kook teaches that study can either fan the flames of each unique soul or put out the fire.¹¹ Sources of information, internal and external, that nourish your unique self are the real fuel for the fire of your soul. They are your satisfying food and thirst-quenching drink.

Rav Kook assures us that the self will return home from exile. With his characteristic optimism, he says, “We will search for ourselves and we will find ourselves.”¹²



Search for God—Search for Yourself

Rav Kook makes a mystical, even radical connection, between the presence of God within and finding one's self. "The breath of our nostrils is the Messiah of God" (Lamentations 4:20). He explains: "God's glory and greatness is that God is not outside of us. God is the breath of our nostrils. Let us search for God. . . . let us search for our own selves."¹³ This is radical because many streams of Jewish thought teach that God is unreachable, unfathomable, outside—completely other than creation. This teaching says that God is also inside of you, as close and tangible as your breath.

The mystics teach that the words God speaks in the Torah transcend the time, place, and particular story in which they are spoken. In other words, God is always asking the question "Where are you?" Find the internal and external teachers and texts that help you answer this divine question. Join the timeless journey of Adam, Abraham, Jacob, and all the exiles throughout history, back home to God, and to yourself.

Yoga Practice for the Essential Self

What is the fuel you need to feed and strengthen the fire of your soul? What is the drink that satisfies your parched spirit? How can you return home from exile? Learning to trust and respect yourself with yoga, you may discover both what nourishes you and how to find your way home.

As well as attending to the detailed instructions given for each posture, remember to tune in to the wisdom of your own body. Trust your intuition to refine your postures. Continue to refer to your inner teacher throughout your practice. There is no final perfect posture. There is an inner dynamic of a deepening connection to your self.



Opening Meditation

Sit on a firm folded blanket with your buttocks on the blanket and your feet on the floor. Cross your legs, and release the tops of your thighs down toward the floor. Inhale and stretch your spine up, lengthening your waist. Roll your upper arms and shoulders back. Draw your shoulder blades into your back, and inhale to expand and lift your chest. Lift the crown of your head up toward the ceiling, and gently lengthen your neck. Rest your hands on your knees (see Chapter One, Photo 1.1).

Close your eyes. Soften your belly. For your next few inhalations, follow your breath, bringing your attention inward. Begin to settle into yourself.

Soften your eyes. Rest your eyes—the eyes that spend so much energy looking outward. Tell yourself that, right now, there is nothing external that you need to see, know, have, or achieve. Letting your outward-looking eyes rest, open up your inward-seeing eyes. Letting your outward-listening ears relax, open up your inward-hearing ears.

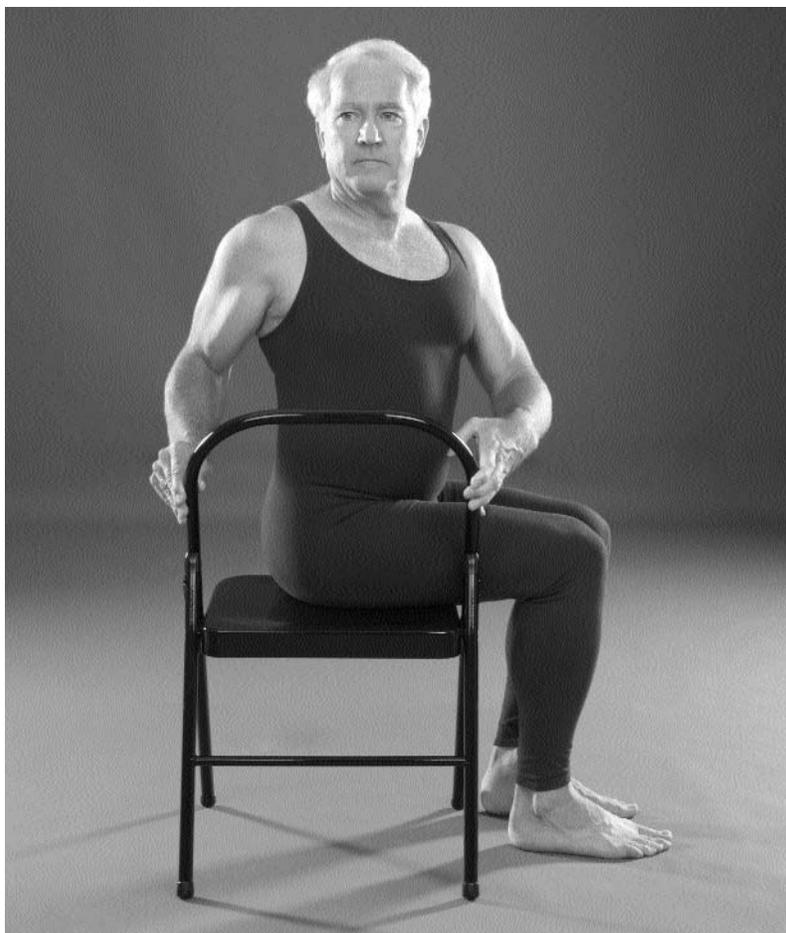
With each inhalation, feel your attention moving inward. With each exhalation, settle yourself more deeply inside your own being. Ask yourself, “Where am I?” Then listen to your answer.

Be entirely attentive to yourself now. Feel the sensations in your body. Notice your emotions. Observe your thoughts.

Attend to yourself in the same way you would attend to a teacher you greatly admire and respect. Consider yourself a source of wisdom.

The raw material of your very essence is wisdom. There is divine intelligence in every cell of your body. Meet your body of wisdom in this moment. Meet yourself.

Breathe and continue to invite your attention inward for a few moments. Then, maintaining the inner connection you are developing, open your eyes.



Chair Twist Posture

For this posture, you need a chair with a flat seat and a backrest.

Sit so that the right side of your body faces the back of the chair. Place your feet on the floor hip-width apart. Your thighs should be parallel to the floor. Place a firm blanket evenly under your feet if you need to, so that your thighs are parallel to the floor.

Pull the flesh of your buttocks out to the sides and diagonally back, and sit evenly on both sides of your buttocks (Photo 22.1). Move your tailbone down, inhale, and lengthen your spine up through the crown of your head.

Begin to turn your torso from left to right. Hold on to the sides of the back of the chair. On inhalations, lengthen your spine even



Photo 22.1



Photo 22.2

more, creating space between each vertebra. On exhalations, turn your torso more from left to right. Have your face turned in the same direction your heart is facing (Photo 22.2).

Press firmly into your left buttock so that your left knee does not inch forward. Keep your knees parallel to each other.

Keep your shoulders down away from your ears. Lift your elbows slightly up and out to the sides to broaden your chest and collarbone.

Pull the left side of the chair with your left hand to help you turn the left side of your torso to the right. Keep your left shoulder back.

Push into the right side of the chair with your right hand to turn the right side of your torso further to the right and to move your right shoulder back (Photo 22.3).

For three to five breaths, spiral your way more deeply into the twist, inhaling to lengthen and exhaling to turn. Do not force yourself. Relax your eyes; quiet your thinking mind; let the intelligence of your own body guide you into the twist.

To release, turn slowly back to center.

Repeat the twist on the second side.



Photo 22.3



Revolved Triangle Posture

Join the inner edges of your feet and stand in Mountain Posture (see Chapter One, Photos 2.1–2.2).

On an inhalation, jump or step your feet three and a half to four feet apart. Turn your toes in slightly and your heels out so that the outer edges of your feet run parallel to one another. Stretch your arms out to your sides at shoulder height, and lift and open your chest.

Turn your left leg and foot about seventy degrees to the right. Turn your right leg and foot ninety degrees to the right. Turn your hips and trunk to the right to face the same direction as your right foot. Press your feet firmly into the floor, and stretch your legs up. Lift and open your chest, and stretch your arms sideways.



Press your left heel down, stretch your left leg up, and turn your left outer hip toward the right. Press your right heel and the ball of your big toe down into the floor, and stretch your right thigh up and back (Photo 25.1).

On an exhalation, keeping both legs straight, revolve the front of your trunk from left to right and extend your trunk out over your right leg. Bring your left hand down to the floor on the outside of your right foot. Use a block under your hand if you cannot reach the floor. Place your right hand on your hip. Press both feet firmly into the floor, and stretch both legs up and back.

On an inhalation, lengthen your spine away from your legs and stretch your right arm up toward the ceiling. Stretch your arms away from each other, and press your shoulder blades firmly into your back. Revolve the front of your trunk from left to right while extending your trunk out over your right leg.

Bring the left side of your chest over your right leg, and roll your right shoulder back. Extend both arms away from each other to help you turn more (Photo 25.2).

Finally, turn your head and look up toward your right hand (Photo 25.3).

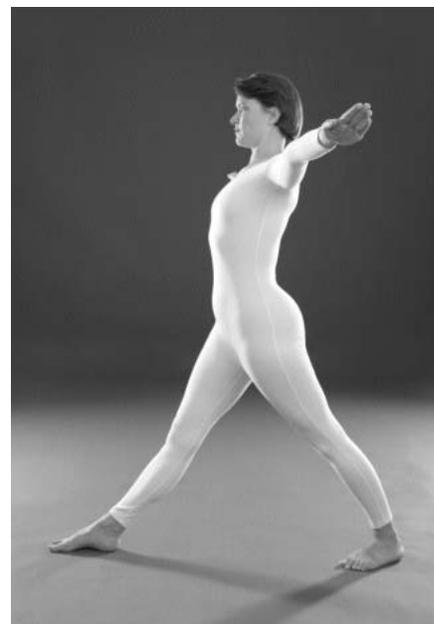


Photo 25.1

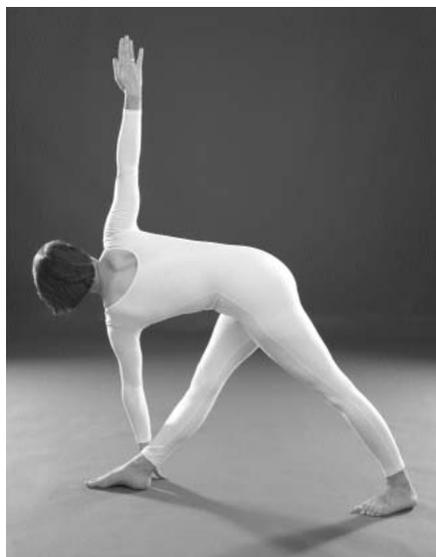


Photo 25.2



Photo 25.3



Breathe evenly as you hold the posture for three to five breaths. This posture has a way of bringing you into intimate and sometimes loud conversation with your whole self.

To release, press both feet firmly into the floor, stretch your legs up, and lift your trunk to stand upright, facing out over your right leg. Then turn your legs and trunk back to center. Rest for a moment.

Repeat the posture to the left.



Hero Posture

Kneel on the floor with your knees and feet hip-width apart, feet and toes pointing straight back.

Bring your knees together and take your feet apart a little wider than your hips. Place your hands in the creases under your knees. Draw your calf muscles toward your heels, and then rotate them outward (Photo 26.1).

As you turn your calf muscles outward, lower your buttocks down and sit between your heels. (Photo 26.2) Quite often, props are necessary in this posture to avoid strain on your knees. If you feel strain, place a firm blanket or block underneath your sitz bones so that your hips are elevated (Photo 26.3).



Photo 26.1

**Photo 26.2****Photo 26.3****Photo 26.4**

Pull the flesh of your buttocks out to the sides and diagonally back. Keep your thighs parallel to each other. Stretch your two feet straight back. Rest your hands on your thighs.

Press your buttocks down, and inhale to lift your spine up. Press your shoulder blades into your back to open and lift your chest. Soften your face, your eyes, and the back of your throat.

Extend your arms out sideways, palms facing down. Rotate your arms so that your palms face up. On an inhalation, raise your arms over your head, palms facing each other. Inhale again, and lengthen your arms even more, raising the sides of your torso up off your waist. Keep your tailbone down, lengthen your lower back, and lift and open your chest (Photos 26.4–26.5).

Relax your face and eyes as you hold this posture for three to five breaths. Let your thoughts dissolve into the sensations in your body.

**Photo 26.5**



To release, slowly lower your arms down to your sides. Lean forward and, placing your hands on the floor in front of you, come up onto your hands and knees. Cross your ankles, move your hips back, and sit down in a cross-legged position.

FREE MOVEMENT

Take a few minutes now to listen to your body and to move in any way you feel like moving. Quiet any external sources of information, and follow the guidance of your own inner teacher. At first, the voice of your inner teacher may be very quiet, almost imperceptible; in time, it can grow to be very strong and clear. There is no right or wrong way to move freely. Trust your intuition—trust yourself.