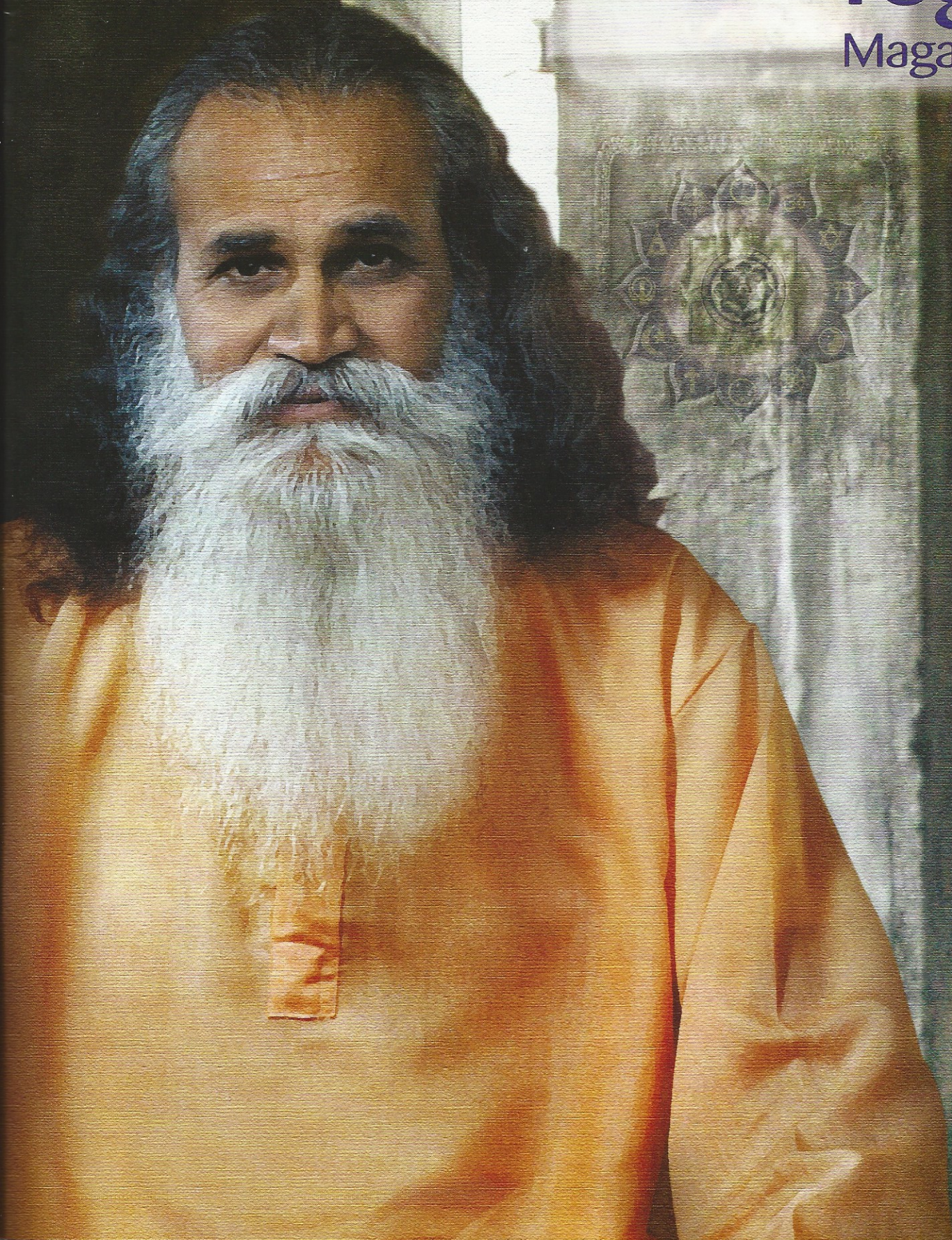


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PRACTICAL ENLIGHTENMENT

An Interview with Robert Butera, E-RYT, M.Div., Ph.D.

Robert Butera has been practicing and teaching Yoga for several decades. He brings a unique perspective from his extensive training in the integration of Yoga's comprehensive psychology to addressing life's challenges. In this interview, he clarifies the difference between the tyranny of the ideal of perfection and a down-to-earth sense of practical enlightenment. He explains the importance of understanding enlightenment as a process of expanded consciousness and how we can begin that process right now.

Integral Yoga Magazine (IYM): What is practical enlightenment?

Robert Butera (RB): Remember the feeling you had after taking a Yoga class? Typically, you feel more centered, more invigorated, more balanced. Now, imagine you have taken that class in the morning. You, like many students, may find that feeling lasts throughout the day. That feeling of purified *prana* may be equated to part of your self-development. If you examine each part of your daily life, and you have an intention of making that aspect of life into a spiritual practice, then that centered feeling could carry on while you are cooking, working, socializing and so forth. Every time we take a step forward and every time we evolve it feels like a step toward enlightenment relative to our present consciousness. The process of evolution within the human heart—that process, that movement, that expansion of consciousness—could be viewed as the enlightenment process. Recognizing that we are already enlightened is what takes a lifetime!

Normally, when we reflect on enlightenment, we think of it leading us to a perfectly happy life. Those who have done Yoga for thirty-plus years know that life won't ever be perfect for anyone. Yoga talks about the nature of reality as one of constant change and flux, so there can never be perfection unless perfection equals change. So, instead of looking at enlightenment as something that occurs when you are a perfected being, some time in the future, we can look at it as being centered in the moment and feel the expanded consciousness as a stream of enlightenment.

IYM: And then, at a point, one becomes established in that.

RB: Yes, over time, when the beginner practices begin to take root, then stability deepens in this more Self-realized state of consciousness. Now your practice is not so much about generating a new state of consciousness but more about just remaining centered, allowing that to take root deeper and deeper into your consciousness. From this perspective—and after many years of practice—you may start to feel that enlightenment is like the eye of a storm. You are standing in the very calm center of the storm and the events around you continue to spin, on some days more than on others. The storm is like the changing external events that happen in *Prakriti*, the material world. The inner, still part of the storm is similar to the unchanging *Purusha*. However, even the more advanced practitioners must be careful of defining enlightenment as perfection. For

example, human beings have hearts, and even though they may be very centered and stable, as things happen around them, their hearts will feel various emotions in response. Consequently, they may laugh or cry, they may be happy or sad, and these emotions will be inescapable. The beginner mistakes the emotional ups and downs, which occur within every human being, as imperfections. However, if I love my wife, my brother, my child, my friend, it would be very unenlightened of me to not feel their pain or to share their joy.

IYM: What are the impediments to enlightenment?

RB: In the *Yoga Sutras* the main impediment is defined as *avidya*, or ignorance. Ignorance is confusing the things that are changing (the ephemeral world) for that which is permanent (the Self). We can pay attention to feelings and emotions, which are the changing states within us, but not confuse them for the unchanging Self. So, the key is to not identify with these changing states, nor to be overly attached to them. For example, when I forget that my body is a changing thing, then as soon as I have an ache or pain I become disturbed. However, if I remember that my body is a changing thing, I may have ache or pain and not be disturbed.

IYM: Can we really feel bliss or happiness 24/7?

RB: One of the dangers of looking at enlightenment as a process is seeking only the *feeling* level of enlightenment. Typically we think enlightenment feels good. Why would we want an enlightenment that doesn't or is uncomfortable? Why then would we want an enlightenment that's dry and boring? The great saint, John of the Cross, coined the term, "Dark Night of the Soul," as a way of describing some of the travails and challenges on the spiritual path. This spiritual stuff can get really intricate and intellectual, so we have to be careful of what the mind does when it grabs onto the concept of enlightenment.

The human mind may not be able to comprehend enlightenment in its fullest. Our minds, which are changing, will continually reduce the meaning of enlightenment down into some intellectual statement. As we do that, we can get stuck. To avoid some of these periods of darkness, or dryness, it's very important to discuss the spiritual path with others who can give us fresh ideas. This feeds our minds, so they won't always reduce the infinite down into finite ideas.

IYM: Are Yoga students today interested in an enlightenment that isn't easily attained? Gurudev used to say that we Westerners like instant coffee and want instant enlightenment.

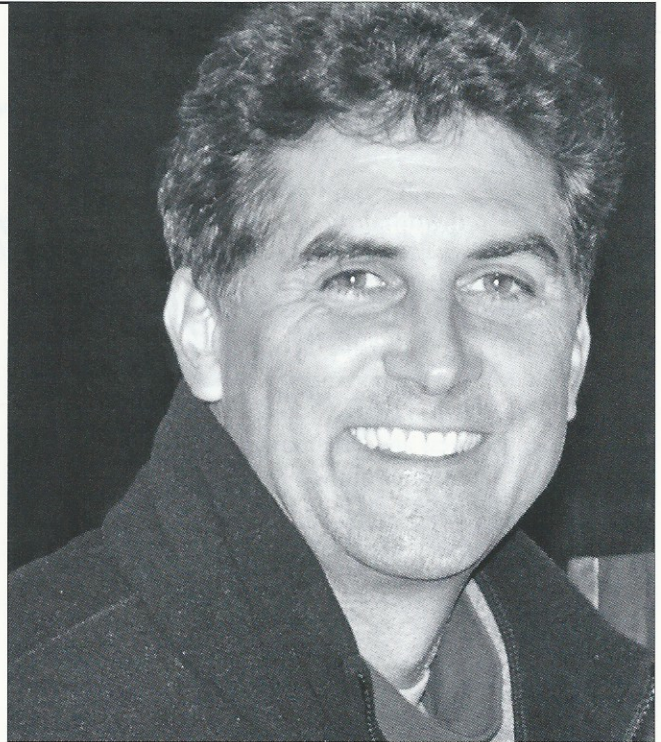
RB: Not many spiritual teachers, when speaking to those who are newer on the path, think to mention to the students that it might take twenty to forty years before you get pretty good at this! Of course, there are exceptions and some don't take that long. Most of us wouldn't be too excited about something that takes that long to be good at. People in the West have the thought that you can get things very quickly. As a college student who studied in Asia for five years, I would hear over and over that, if you're going to learn meditation at a temple, you would need to go in for a minimum of two years just to get started. Everybody in that culture knows that a year isn't very long to practice something like meditation. Three years is what you typically consider a beginners realm. Ten years would bring you to the point at which you would begin to show other beginners how to do the practice. But we want to finish Yoga teacher training in 30 days so we can teach next month.

If I were to give my students a homework exercise on this subject, I would say, write down what you think enlightenment means right now. Then pick apart what you wrote so you open your mind up again. My point to them would be that enlightenment could be viewed as a process vs. perfection. The second part of the homework exercise would be to repeat this in a couple months, then a couple times a year with others on a path similar to your own. That's why sangha, spiritual community, is so important to keep perspectives fresh.

IYM: How does our karma affect the enlightenment process?

RB: In the Yoga tradition, karma is the field and, as we move through our lives, the soil is watered near where we are standing. Then, all the seeds in that soil start to sprout and those sprouts are *samskaras*, or latent impressions, in the mind. We must continue our spiritual work to clear out the weeds that grow unexpectedly during different phases of our lives. Once again, if you view enlightenment as a time of perfection, your perfection will have to be renewed each time you have a birthday!

One thing that happens as a result of continued spiritual practice is that the seeds that would be in the field of karma, start to become burned and no longer able to sprout. As your practice deepens over time, after many years of meditation and peak experiences like *samadhi*, or divine union with God, those experiences start to wipe the field clean and you may then experience more perfection in your life. This image of the *jivanmukta*, or perfected being, is one that many of us have read about in scriptures and have heard about from spiritual masters. So, naturally we long for this perfected state. If you experience that, fantastic; if it doesn't happen to you, fantastic. For we know that even the



Dr. Robert Butera

jivanmukta can be surprised by future karma. So we might as well remain humble, simple people on our spiritual paths.

IYM: What about selflessness in this process?

RB: For the part of our lives that feels perfected, we know that we will immediately serve others. When a person feels they have no problems and nothing is holding them back, there seems to be an automatic compassionate expression that turns into helping others to reach the same state of consciousness. As the Buddha said, no one is really enlightened until all sentient beings are enlightened. As soon as a part of your life is good, open and free, all you see is everyone else's pain. The nature of a spiritual person is to feel compassion and to help others. As soon as one's self-identification ends, you help others. Just as the four year-old child helps his one year-old brother take a step, so too does the five-year Yoga practitioner feel passionate about teaching *asanas* to a beginner. Because spiritual people have an innate compassion, they feel the same compassion to help others. May we share our enlightenment with all.

Robert Butera, E-RYT, M.Div., Ph.D., is the founder of the YogaLife Institute, publisher of Yoga Living magazine and a board member of the International Association of Yoga Therapists. He studied Yoga with Dr. Jayadeva Yogendra at The Yoga Institute of Bombay and later obtained his Ph.D. in Yoga Therapy at the California Institute of Integral Studies and a Masters of Divinity from The Earlham School of Religion. He's the author of The Pure Heart of Yoga: Ten Essential Steps for Personal Transformation and Meditation for Your Life: Creating a Plan that Suits Your Style. For more information, please visit: www.YogaLifeInstitute.com.