



March 2015 Contemplation:
Understanding Yoga — Understanding Life #3

Feeling Good

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You probably started yoga because you wanted to feel better. Whether you were motivated by physical pain, tensions or stress, you heard that yoga would help. It did. It does.

The pursuit of pleasure is a popular pathway to happiness. Sex, drugs and rock-and-roll was a 60's motto, but current varieties of pleasure-seeking continue in the same vein. Many yogis opt for healthier pleasures: dried fruit instead of chocolate, organic teas instead of alcohol, Sanskrit chants instead of Lady Gaga and clothing made of natural fibers instead of spandex, but pleasure is still the goal. Even your desire to feel better through yoga is a way of seeking pleasure. Yoga promises more.

The importance of pleasure is documented in the "Four Goals of Life." Life is richly satisfying when you fulfill all four: dharma, artha, kama and moksha. In our last two articles we focused on dharma (right living) and artha (wealth). Now we get to look at the third — kama, pleasure. Yum!

The reason you pursue pleasure is so that you can experience happiness. The dictionary documents this by defining pleasure as "happiness, enjoyment and satisfaction." But yoga defines it differently, saying that the happiness that comes from pleasure is merely a hint or taste of the bliss of your own Divine Essence. Do you want happiness or do you want bliss?

Swami Nirmalananda summarizes the differences:

Pleasure comes from the outside; bliss arises from within.

Pleasure is temporary; bliss is constant.

Pleasure is exhausting; bliss is enlivening.

Pleasure is limited; bliss is ever expanding.

Whatever pleasures you, it comes from outside, lasts for only a short time, drains your energy and leaves you needy and anxious. For example, if one of your pleasures is nature, you could go to the Grand Canyon. You'd enjoy the view for a while, then tire of it and want to go indoors for a snack, a new pleasure to enjoy. After that you'd want yet another pleasure, which keeps your mind busy, even anxious, about which pleasure you might seek next and whether or not it is attainable.

Bliss is different. Whether you are at the Grand Canyon or in your own home, you can use yogic means to turn your attention inward and uncover the ever-arising source of bliss within. Not only is it constant, it is profoundly healing and rejuvenating, plus it is ever expanding. There is no outer limit to your inherent bliss, which is the mystical sensation of your own Beingness.

Yet there is a tie between pleasure and bliss. Pleasure can give you access to the bliss of your own Self. The Vij-nana Bhairava explains how to use taste to get to bliss:

Experiencing the joy of taste arising from the pleasure of eating or drinking, meditate on the joy itself (rather than the taste) to experience supreme delight. — Verse 72

During mango season, you can buy a perfectly ripened mango and slice it up to eat. The first bite of this juicy yellow fruit tastes so good! In the first blush of the joy of the taste, now shift your focus to the joy, not the taste. The joy is the leading edge of the bliss of the Self that is arising within; stay with it and it expands! By contrast, the taste pulls you outward. Following the joy pulls you deep within. Vidyadevi describes, "More and more I look for the bliss after the first bite of food or first sip of a drink. This bliss arises and fills me from the inside."

The experience you think is coming from food, drink or any other pleasures, is actually a spiritual experience. Your own capital-S Self arises from the inner dimensions and blasts your mind and heart open. This is why people pursue pleasure in life — to experience the Self.

Understanding this changes your relationship with pleasure forever. You will still do things that give you pleasure. It could be your pets, a hot bath, a walk in the woods, the smell of freshly brewed coffee and

more. Life is full of pleasures! They don't go away when you become Self-Realized; in fact, more things become even more pleasurable. Yet the bliss of the Self is constant, because it is your very nature.

The yogic science of pleasure is very precise: there is a dharma to kama. Pleasure must be included in your life but in a dharmic way, which means appropriate types and appropriate amounts. You must define the line between enjoyment and obsession. Unfortunately, people obsess on all kinds of things.

Someone can even obsess on good stuff, like organics, exercise and dharma. When someone gets fixated on dharma, they usually want to live by the rules, focused on right and wrong instead finding the inner gyroscope that dharma provides. They don't enjoy life and neither does anyone around them.

Similarly if you obsess on pleasure, you don't enjoy life much either. There are real limitations on how much pleasure you can handle. If you constantly over indulge in food, you end up with health problems. If you seek pleasure in mind altering drugs and liquids, you end up addicted and not very happy or healthy. You can even overdo physical touch. Just stroke the same spot on your skin over & over again. In the beginning it is very pleasurable and then your skin starts to get a little tender, a little raw and will even break and bleed. The human body can only take so much pleasure.

Yoga says yes to pleasure, but in measured and sensible doses. For example, Swamiji's Guru taught taking food in measured doses. Fill your stomach ½ with food, ¼ with water and leave ¼ empty for digestion to occur and for the prana (life force) to circulate. Feed yourself the finest foods and the most delicious of foods, but in measured and sensible amounts.

Rukmini shares, "In other yoga styles, I met inspiring yogis who strived to live a very austere lifestyle. They withdrew from the world, gave up the things they found pleasurable and did their best to focus solely on their yoga practices. They would feel guilty or judge themselves (or others) if they went to the movies or out for an ice-cream sundae. When I tried these practices, my life began to feel dry and uninspiring. Then I found *Svaroopā*® yoga and discovered that there is always a bowl of chocolate at retreats and trainings! The *Svaroopis* I met modeled relishing the pleasures of life, yet without overindulgence."

Svaroopā® yoga is based in the tantric teachings of Kashmiri Shaivism. Tantra means loom, the interweaving of finite and the infinite. More than interwoven, everything that exists is made of the fabric of existence-itself; everything is Divine. You don't have to withdraw from the world to experience your Self. Yet you must apply yourself to discovering independent bliss instead of dependent bliss.

If a particular place gives you pleasure, like a beautiful sunset, you're looking for dependent bliss. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't. When it is cloudy or raining, there are no sunset colors, or the colors can be there but you are so busy worrying that you don't even notice them. If your pleasure comes from food or drink, sometimes your favorite thing will taste good and other times not. If a special person gives you pleasure, sometimes they are warm and loving and sometimes they are not. You already know that depending on externals for happiness puts you on an emotional roller coaster.

When you are aware of the bliss of your own Self, as the *Vij-nana Bhairava* points out, you experience independent bliss, the bliss that is ever arising within from its inner source. Vidyadevi says, "Sure, when I am not experiencing the bliss of my own being, even feeling out of sorts, I can eat a piece of chocolate and feel better immediately. Or I can recognize that I have lost my own Self and do more yoga. Do I want dependent bliss or independent bliss? I have a choice."

You're not bad or wrong to want pleasure, because kama is one of the goals of life. Enjoy it! It's just that relying on external pleasures to give you an experience of your Self is unreliable. You could instead do more yoga practices: do the Magic Four, repeat mantra, do Ujjayi Pranayama or meditate. Each *Svaroopā*® practice is an inner doorway to your own *svaroopā*, the bliss of your own being.

Once you find your Self within, you'll find that everything on the outside is a scintillating form of that same consciousness. Yoga's promise is that you will live in that experience, while being fully engaged in the world. Then every pleasure, even every pain and every type of experience is merely another form of bliss. Until then, follow the dharma of pleasure while knowing you can experience more than simply pleasure — bliss itself, the bliss of your own Self. Do more yoga.

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