



October 2007 Contemplation Theme

Free Will

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Freedom of choice is all you've got. Everything else in your life and in your being comes from it. When the phone rings, you choose to answer it or not. When the alarm goes off in the morning, you choose to get up or not. When a mealtime comes, you choose what to eat (or whether to eat). When someone speaks to you, you choose whether to answer and what you'll say. Every moment is a choice-full moment, whether you are conscious of it or not.

Unfortunately, too much of life is lived as a knee-jerk reflex. Your words and actions rise up out of you so fast that they sometimes surprise you. You are reacting to what is going on around you before you even recognize you can make a different choice. You are jump-started into action before you decide what you'll do, even if you are simply going to do what you usually do — yet to do it more consciously.

These are unconscious reflex reactions, which arise out of the old "unfinished business." It is easy to see how it works in real life. If you are unhappy about something that happened at work, you will be touchy and reactive at home. You don't even realize that you are behaving so differently until someone says, "Are you OK? You seem really touchy and reactive today." Your answer is, "I'm fine! I'm not reactive!" Because you are still simmering from earlier events, which I call "unfinished business," you unconsciously take it out on everyone around you. This is true for the events of the day, the events of your whole lifetime, and even the events that stretch through from previous lifetimes.

This is why yoga emphasizes the importance of pairing two key practices: conscious choice and *vairaagya*. As we explored last month, you practice *vairaagya* by staying in the situation but changing your response. You cultivate a sense of freedom within your activities and relationships.

Vairaagya is often translated as dispassion or detachment, but is best understood as "freedom from dependency." It means that you quit chasing things that you thought you needed for your happiness, and you quit running away from things that you dislike or fear. You consciously and systematically peel away the layers of unfinished business that keep you locked into the knee-jerk reflexes; you begin by stopping your relentless pursuit of the endless list of desires. This gives you an incredible lightness of being, because you are no longer bound by the whimsies of your taste buds or your genitals. You are no longer locked into the old, too-familiar, repetitive patterns. Can you imagine what it is like to no longer be driven by compulsion, need and fear? What a tremendous feeling — to not be carrying the weight of all that unfinished business around with you any more.

I remember the first time I tried to get free of all that unfinished business. I ran away from home. My parents brought me back within a couple of hours, but I wasn't happy about it. Of course, my understanding wasn't very yogic back then, pre-teen that I was. I thought my problems were their fault. It took many decades, a lot of yoga practice, and the grace of having a few enlightened beings working on me before I understood how I created my own pain and how to get free. Before I got there, I ran away a few more times. It never worked.

Once I decided to stay, even in the midst of the chaos and uncertainty, I was able to apply yoga's teachings to my real life. Even today, as Master Yoga begins recovering from the fire that destroyed our Pennsylvania facility, I live and work in the midst of chaos and uncertainty. Back then, in the midst of the everyday challenges as a single mom of three, running a business, dealing with the whole extended family, I discovered I had choice. I could choose to react or to bide my time. I could choose to create something or to remain still within myself. I could choose to set my life up differently than I had been taught to do — to live a yogic life.

Your power of choice is called *svataantrya*. It is free will; you do have free will. In every moment, you are making a choice. Right now, I am choosing to continue sitting on the floor, typing away on my laptop, creating this contemplation article for you. I could get up and go for a walk or pop into the kitchen for a snack. I could return the pending phone calls or emails, or even go back for a second morning meditation — what a yummy possibility!

In every choice, you are giving up the other possibilities. In order to continue typing, I am practicing *vairaagya* — letting go of the other possibilities. In every choice, you are sculpting your life, moment by moment, day by day and year by year. You sculpt time through your power of choice. This is called free will.

Unfortunately, the reality is that your will is not very free. True *svataantrya* is a quality of vast freedom and joy, arising within itself in choosing to act — or arising within itself in choosing not to act. It is an undeniable sense of freedom. As it is now, your will is driven by motives instead of freedom. Motives arise from needs, habits and fears.

For example, let's say you have three phone messages. You decide to return two of them. Your decision to return each of the two calls has an underlying motivation — something you want to get or something you want to avoid. Your choice to avoid the third call also has a selfish motivation. This is not having your choices arising from freedom. Ultimately, you must practice *vairaagya* in order to discover the true power and joy of *svataantrya*.

It is a partnership. You use *svataantrya* (free will) to decide which phone calls you will return, while practicing *vairaagya* (freedom from dependency) in order to deal with them consciously — without coming from fear, need or greed. Your response to the calls, coming from a place of freedom (*vairaagya*) changes the way you feel inside, but it also changes what the other person feels and says and does.

However, yoga says that the most important part is that you feel differently, within yourself. You feel more free. Out of that freedom arises the spark of life itself. It shows up as tremendous creativity, an insight and ability to see and understand everything more clearly, and as a vitalizing spontaneity that meets every moment with an embrace. You sail through life, but the wind that fills your sails comes from within yourself.

Ultimately, only one word is needed to translate both of these Sanskrit terms — freedom. *Vairaagya* is “freedom-from” and *svataantrya* is “freedom-to.”

Freedom-from is freedom from the unfinished business that weighs you down and makes you live your life in repetitive and reflex reactions. Freedom-from is freedom from fear, freedom from compulsion, freedom from dependency, freedom from your old limiting sense of who you are.

Freedom-to is freedom to laugh, freedom to cry, freedom to love and create, freedom to be still within yourself or to be running around under the sky with your arms spread wide. Freedom-to be the eternal ever-arising internal source of your own being, which is the source of the universe.

This world is founded in *svataantrya*. Free will is the basis of the universe and it is the basis of your life. Free will means that you must choose; you can not avoid making choices. Even when you think you are not making a choice, you are choosing to not choose. Free will is your own nature — and the key to finding and using it is *vairaagya*.

One of the best uses of *svataantrya* is to do more yoga.

Namaste,



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