



February 2003 Contemplation Theme

Pleasure & Pain

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I am so fortunate. I recently returned from my eighth trip to India. Each previous trip I had stayed in one place for all or most of the trip. This time, I had a list of pilgrimage sites that I wanted to visit, a list I had been accumulating for over 15 years. Many of these sites are not listed in tourist books, pilgrimage spots not frequented by Westerners. I had many amazing experiences.

Patanjali's Yoga Sutras tells us this is one of the purposes of human life — having experiences: any kind of experiences, all kinds of experiences. The search for experiences has become very sophisticated. It includes the latest in home theater technology, the vast array of gourmet delicacies now available at your local market, many amazing choices for vacation destinations, and more. You are fulfilling one of the purposes of life when you do these things. Reassuring, isn't it?

The Yoga Sutras actually says that there are two primary purposes of life —one is to have experiences. The second purpose is enlightenment, *moksha*. Whether you planned for it or not, you came here to get enlightened. Fortunately, these two are tied together in a wonderfully simple way.

Simply consider what happens when you have a good experience. One recent evening, I ate at a beachfront restaurant. I looked up from my plate to see the eastern sky radiating shades of translucent pink, reflected from the sunset in the west. Soon afterward, the brilliant silver rays of the full moon shone across the pitch-black ocean, an astoundingly beautiful sight. I found myself sitting in an awed stillness, not even breathing, affected by the beauty. A great inner quietude and peace took possession of me. I felt that I would never need to move from that place again. It would be OK if I had died on the spot.

In the moment that you achieve whatever experience you have been seeking, an incredible feeling arises inside. This experience provided me with a profound inner peace and a quiet filling-up with joy. Though words are inadequate, for now I will call it the feeling of inner fullness. You experience it every time you achieve what you had been seeking.

However, if the purpose of human life were fulfilled by simply having happy experiences, you would have a big problem — you would not be fulfilling it very much of the time! Yet even a bigger problem looms because when your feeling of inner fullness depends on outer situations, it is in constant jeopardy. You have little or no control over most of the things around you: your boss' mood today, the amount of sunshine at this time of the year, what you eat, or how traffic is moving (or not). When your feeling of inner fullness depends on the outer things, you are at the mercy of everyone and everything around you. Your moments of happiness and your experiences of inner fullness are too few and too far between.

Moksha is the answer. Various translated as freedom, liberation, enlightenment or Self-realization, Patanjali names it as the other purpose of life. Moksha is the ability to live in the feeling of inner fullness all the time, regardless of what is happening around you. You do not attain moksha through sticking your head in the sand. It is not denial or delusion about how the world really is. It is actually the end of denial and delusion, because it acknowledges that the feeling of inner fullness is an inner arising. Whatever you try to do on the outside in order to stimulate it, the fullness wells up inside. Yoga asks the all-important question, "Where does this feeling arise from?" If it arises from somewhere inside, then you should be able to dive into the source directly. Thus you can live in the independent and ever-increasing feeling of inner fullness, which expands into escalating levels that can only be described as ecstasy. Moksha.

So far, we have looked at happy experiences and at moksha, liberation. But, not all of life's experiences are wonderful. What does yoga say about painful experiences? Every life experience counts toward the completion of life's purpose, whether pleasurable or painful. On my recent trip to

India, I visited 28 places of pilgrimage in only 35 days. Only now do I realize how big an undertaking that was. It was a daunting task. It went fairly smoothly, with only occasional difficulties. I spent many hours traveling in planes, trains and cars, before being able to go into a temple or meditate in an ashram or shrine. There were an equal number of hours in transit for the return. I visited many places and had many experiences. Some were powerful and mystical. Some were unpleasant, even painful.

Pain and joy are both legitimate parts of life. They are not limited to international travel. You don't even need a lot of variety or dramatic events in your life. You can live in one town, work in one place, share your life with a specific and select group of people, and you will still have many experiences. Life guarantees you will have both pleasurable experiences, as well as painful experiences. Usually, the painful ones are the ones that make you grow most powerfully. These life lessons contribute to your increasing ability to be happy in any circumstances. Learning lessons is part of becoming enlightened. Life itself is driving you toward moksha.

Now you have enough basic information to begin to consider where yoga fits in all of this. You may have started yoga to minimize pain or even to maximize pleasure. If you started yoga to help your body or to reduce high stress levels, you wanted to avoid pain. Perhaps your life was already good but you wanted to find something more. You were looking for a pleasurable experience, at least on the physical level, or at the increasingly subtle levels that open up in *Svaroopā*[®] yoga. These are good reasons, even though yoga is ultimately not about transcending pain or finding pleasure. Yoga is about finding the inner source. Yoga is about discovering how to live in the feeling of inner fullness all of the time.

Most important is Patanjali's promise:

Heyam duhkham anaagamam — Yoga Sutras 2.16

The pain that lies in your future can and should be avoided.

To understand how to avoid pain, you must first understand what causes your experience of pain. In order to experience pain, you actually have to deny the source from which the feeling of inner fullness arises. You deny the inner arising by saying, "I'll feel bad unless I get that thing I want to have." Then you wait for the outside thing to happen, so it will prompt the inner arising. When it doesn't work, you experience pain. Any time you look outside of yourself for something to stimulate the feeling of inner fullness, you have set yourself up for pain.

The bottom line is that any time you are not in bliss, you are in pain. The happiness you experience from outer things is a temporary taste of the feeling of inner fullness. Pain is the "cosmic cattle-prod." It tells you that what you are doing and what you are looking for does not work. Pain arises when you think that your pleasure is dependent on the outer things, instead of looking for its source inside.

When you put it all together, you can avoid the pain in your future, by realizing that your ultimate happiness is found in the inner source. You can carry the feeling of inner fullness with you everywhere you go, even when the outer situation is not what you had in mind. Then you can embrace life in its full range of experiences. You really can have it all, experiences and the unending ecstasy of moksha! Do more yoga.

Namaste,

