



Svaroopa® Vidya Ashram

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Focus on Enlightenment #8
Desire, Pain & Freedom
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Desire causes pain. Here's how it works. Let's say it's a beautiful day and you're feeling great. You're cheerful, even happy. Then you find out that a friend or neighbor just won a brand-new car. So you begin thinking about your car. While it's running well, it's not new. It doesn't have all the fancy equipment that's available now. Maybe you'd like a change but you can't really afford it. Your mind is whirling and churning. Your desire for an upgrade has totally deflated your balloon. The day is not so beautiful and you don't even remember feeling happy.

Krishna addresses this directly in the Bhagavadgita, saying "Peace follows renunciation."

...dhyanaat karma-phala-tyaagas
tyagac-chantir anantaram.
— Bhagavadgita 12.12

...better than meditation is renunciation of the fruits of your actions;
peace immediately follows renunciation.

While this is a beautiful and powerful promise, it can be a bit scary. Turn it around to make it easier to understand: desire causes mental anguish, the opposite of peace. When you want something, you obsess on it. You churn inside, even whine and rant about it. You may put forth effort toward getting what you desire, but it works only part of the time. When it doesn't work, you continue to be in pain until you give up the desire. You've been through this process so many times. You've successfully given up many desires that you could not fulfill.

Yoga says you don't have to wait until you discover your desire is unattainable. You can give up your desire right now. This trick is not limited to yogis; the ancient Greeks knew it.

If thou wilt make a man happy, add not unto his riches
but take away from his desires. - Epicurus

This is why "Simple Living" has such a following. Minimalists explain that most religions agree on living a simple life as part of spiritual development. If you have fewer desires, you'll be happy more of the time. Yoga calls it "renunciation," which is one of the most misunderstood of yoga's technical terms.

One yogini detailed her many problems with her sister, telling me, "I've decided to renounce my sister." I asked what she meant. She described her plan to cut off all communication and never have anything to do with her sister again. I responded, "That's not renunciation. That's rejection."

The yogic practice is "renunciation of the fruits of your actions." Karma-phala means "the fruits of your actions" and "tyaaga" means renunciation. This means, if your sister was the one causing so many problems, you simply don't expect your words or actions to change her. You do the best you can with her, protecting yourself if need be, helping her if you can, and don't expect that your actions will bring long-term results. It's a harsh truth but it's true. If you are looking for your words and actions to change her, you've doubled your problem: 1) she probably isn't going to change and 2) you're upset about it.

Maybe it still sounds easier to reject her? The problem is that you will continue to be disturbed by her. Whether or not you hear about what she's doing, you still think of her and she still bothers you. Bottom line, yoga is not teaching you how to get other people to do what you want. Yoga is teaching you how to be at peace even when they don't. Why? Because much of the time, they won't. If your happiness depends on them, you won't be happy very much of the time.

When your happiness depends on anything, you can't be happy. The weather will let you down. The tree you planted will die. The new trinket you bought will break. Even food will let you down, either by not tasting as good as you thought it would or by undermining your health. Once you understand this, you might want to say, "I'm just going to go live in the woods. I can be fine all by myself." Yes, you probably can. But is "fine" good enough? And if it is, why can't you be fine in the middle of the world?

Everyone wants to receive unconditional love but no one wants to give it. Can you love this sister, even while you manage the interactions carefully? Ultimately it's a bigger question — can you love everyone in the world? Every single one of them is loveable. This is renunciation.

You've already renounced so many things. The first time I experienced this was as a young adult. I'd moved out of my parents' home into my own apartment. After a couple of years, they asked me to come pick up the possessions I'd stored in their garage. I pulled out a wardrobe box, not remembering what was in it, and opened it to find 100+ stuffed animals inside. I looked at the few on top, remembering who had given each one to me. What amazed me is that I had no interest in the stuffies anymore. I had simply outgrown them. This is renunciation. You outgrow the things that used to define you.

Do you wait for it to happen on its own? No, you have to work on it. In childhood, you didn't have to work on yourself because growing happened. Your body grew. Your understanding of life developed and your horizons expanded. Once you're an adult, you tend to settle into a groove. Dare we call it a rut? You make it as comfortable as you can and try to avoid changing anything about it. You even try to avoid changing anything about you. You wait for life events to force you to grow and change, like a pandemic can do. Yogis do it differently. Yogis choose to grow. It takes some gumption. Either that or it takes some pain, the greatest motivator of all.

A yogi grows inward. While you may want or need a bigger house or more possessions, that's outward growth. Eventually it leads to downsizing, which is challenging but blissful, as you get rid of all the things that don't define you anymore. Yet neither gaining nor discarding possessions is what I'm calling growth. Yoga grows you into your own Divinity, an inward expansion that deepens and fills you completely. You outgrow all your desires. This is renunciation. Like an adult, you have no interest in childhood things anymore.

Yoga urges you to focus on attaining the highest, greatest and most expansive state, one of deep peace, profound presence and ever-expanding ecstasy. This is an inward quest. Any step in this direction brings immediate results. One of those results is an organic renunciation, simply because you're feeling such inner fullness that you can't muster up petty desires anymore. You can still pursue them: go ahead and eat that chocolate, but it simply doesn't make you happy because you're already happier than happy.

Now desire has no hold over you. Not only are you free from the bondage of desire, you are free to exercise your power of choice. Freedom from desire leads to free will. Right now, your will power is probably chained to your desires, meaning you will apply yourself to something you want or to avoid something scary. When desire falls away, fear also leaves with it.

"My heart is numb," one yogi complained to me, "It's like I don't care anymore." I replied, "You care but you don't need." Shocked, she realized her caring had always been based in her own needs and desires, looking for others to fulfill them. Then she asked me, "How do I make decisions when I don't desire anything?" "Intelligence," I responded. "You have true freedom of choice now, so use your intelligence and choose wisely."

I have described desire as falling away from you, a great freedom. This is the difference between the Sanskrit words, "sannyasa" and "tyaga." Tyaga is a state of freedom from desire. Sannyasa is the personal commitment to becoming free from desire. A sannyasin is honored by the title, "swami," meaning one who is dedicated to God, outside and inside. Such a yoga monk wears orange, for they are a living flame of the fire of yoga.

Yet you don't have to become a swami to become free. Once you've received Shaktipat, your inner experience becomes progressively more expansive and blissful. You don't sweat the small stuff and gradually you realize, of course, that it's all small stuff. Desire and fear fall away. Now you have free will. You can truly decide what to do, plus you can accomplish it more effectively. The only thing that remains to do is give, the giving of your Self from the inner fullness of being. What a glorious way to live! It's not doing more yoga; it's living yoga.

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