

Passion & Dispassion

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I was horrified when I first heard that yoga teaches the practice of dispassion. I had been studying intensively for about two years, living in ashrams (residential yoga centers) in India and the USA. I was studying yoga poses along with diving deeply into meditation and the principles of yoga philosophy. Though I had read about vairagya (vay-rah-geeah), dispassion or detachment, one day I suddenly realized that this teaching threatened my whole way of life. I had always prided myself on being a passionate person. It was my passion that had fueled my jets, took me all the way to India and deep into yoga's mysteries. Now, yoga was telling me to practice dispassion. This was frightening, and confusing.

I looked up "passion" in the dictionary. The first definition listed is suffering. I was shocked! Passion had been associated in my mind with pleasure, with motivation, with commitment and with zeal. I was not only passionate about sex, but about everything in life. I had spent years intentionally cultivating a passion for life itself. Now Webster was telling me that passion is suffering. As I read on, the dictionary explained that this was related to the "passion of Christ on the cross." Okay — but what has that got to do with me and with how I have been looking at my life? It took several days of contemplation to illumine the connection — all my so-called passion for life arose out of my suffering. I had been thrusting myself into one experience after another in order to lift myself up out of the pain and despair that had defined my life since childhood. I liked living on the edge. It made me feel alive, which was a big improvement. Passion, for me, was an antidote for suffering.

I then realized there was another level to look at. Everything I was passionate about caused me pain. This included my personal relationships as well as my work, my hobbies and my university studies in psychology. Yoga gave me another tool to dig more deeply into the reservoir of pain that I carried with me everywhere I went. Hey, I could even use the yoga poses to cause pain! This realization uncovered the deepest addiction I had yet found in myself — an addiction to pain. I used pain to define myself and to gauge my progress on the path of self-discovery. If I was not in pain, I felt I was not growing. I truly used pain to feel alive.

By this point, I had only scratched the surface on yoga's teachings on dispassion. Those initial discoveries were really about passion and about addiction, instead of about dispassion. It was then clear to me that this was not an overnight cure for a lifetime of misery. I have now spent over twenty-five years studying and contemplating yoga's teachings. I can testify that the practice of dispassion sets you free from addictions and from pain. Dispassion creates an independent and self-sourced experience of continuing joy that makes life worth living.

However, I think that "dispassion" is a dangerous word. I rarely use it when I am teaching — I translate vairagya in other terms, because it is so easily misunderstood. Dispassion is not the same as disconnection. It is not meant to create a withdrawal from others or from life. Our society is inherently disconnected. We take this word "dispassion," and use it to isolate ourselves, to become insular and lonely. Yoga develops an incredible inner attunement, not an insular, unfeeling, meaningless charade. Yoga's inner attunement makes you vibrate with the bliss of consciousness, found at the foundation of your own existence. Then, you do not depend on anything outside of you to create your experience of joy. This means that you are no longer dependent on talking with a certain person or on having that pint of ice cream at midnight. You do not have a bad day just because your friend or a co-worker was in a funk. You are not waiting for a beautiful sunny day before you can find the light inside. You live in that self-sustaining light all the time, and you carry it with you everywhere you go.

Remember the little kid in the comics that walks around with a cloud over his head — was it not Pigen? What if you changed the cloud into a radiant sun shining over your own head? Let it illumine

your work, your relationships, your whole life. Instead of being passionate about life, live with enthusiasm, with delight, with commitment, with zeal! Instead of passion being your jet fuel, dispassion gives you a life of enthusiasm without pain. The delight on the inside becomes accessible through the practice of dispassion.

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