



December 2011 Contemplation Theme

Practice Contentment

by Swami Nirmalananda Saraswati

Superlative happiness is the fruit of the yogic practice of contentment, according to Patanjali. While you know what happiness is, the ancient sage promises *superlative* happiness. How is it that contentment is the pathway to this extraordinary state? This is exactly the opposite of what you've been practicing. It's so subversive that it is un-American and could easily undermine the whole world economy. Dare you even consider it?

Everyone you know is practicing discontent, especially during the holiday season. The media works hard to create discontent that is so uncomfortable that you are motivated to buy what their advertisers are selling. Many books have been written on how media works, whether big screen, small screen or in between. You should know what they are doing to your mind and how you participate in the manipulation. Even your computer screen, magazines and novels are designed to activate hidden levels of unhappiness, so you'll keep reading, keep clicking, keep buying, keep eating, keep drinking coffee, keep moving — no matter what. God forbid you should stop!

This is precisely why yoga says you must stop. All the practices of yoga are designed to make you able to sit, and able to sit still, so that you become comfortable in your own skin. More than mere comfort with yourself, yoga makes you know who you are.

When people find out I teach yoga and meditation, they usually say, "I need to do yoga. It's really good for stress, right?" I'm delighted that they should be doing yoga, but few people actually do what they need to do. I'm also delighted because they have a sense that yoga will help them with their stress, yet I know it generally has to get worse before they'll walk in the door of a yoga class. Thus, most people arriving for their first class think that yoga is a place to get some needed rest. After all, we start in Shavasana so they can take a "nice nap," not yet recognizing that the deep inner place they are going to is not the same as sleep. It takes a while to identify the differences.

When people come to yoga to get rest, their "full stop" is brief. They recover from their exhaustion (called *shrama* in Sanskrit) and jump up to speed off again. I've even seen students stop doing yoga when it became clear that it was going to change their lifestyle: yoga was making them lose their capacity to live on the run.

This can lead to great confusion about what yoga really is. You might think it is about stopping the world and getting off. You might think it is about doing less, living slower, simplifying your life, taking it easy. No. Yoga is actually and simply about knowing yourself in the midst of all that you do. In this knowingness and beingness, you are present in your own life, by being present within your own self, and that changes everything. You are actually more capable, more efficient, quicker to see what is going on, and you find it easier to decide what to do and to get it done. Yogis get more done than anyone else, and still have time left over. When you practice yoga, you stop spinning your wheels in the sand. You find traction and begin to live your life in earnest.

Amazingly, all of this happens from doing just the relaxations, breathing and poses. Even more opens up when you incorporate the yogic principles into your lifestyle. This principle, contentment, is very powerful. And very delicious!

As a *niyama*, contentment is one of the practices that you apply your mind and heart to, in the midst of your day and the midst of your life. Practice contentment.

When the traffic signal turns red, practice being content to sit at the intersection for the 20-30 seconds that you've got there.

When your neighbor puts in a new lawn, buys a new car or builds an addition on their home, practice being content in your own home, as it is.

Eat a light meal, leaving your stomach lightly full, and practice being content with the smaller portion.

When a family member tells you about their great news, practice contentment with who you are and how your life is going.

When a family member tells you about their bad news, practice contentment with who you are and how your life is going, including the bad news.

When you are the one who is telling about bad news or great news, practice contentment with who you are and how your life is going.

When you practice contentment, you lose your habitual discontent. That can be scary! If everything you do is motivated by discontent, will you still do anything? The answer is a resounding YES — because you still have free will. You can still choose to do all those things, but now you do it for a different reason. You've chosen to be there and to be doing what you are doing. What a difference!

Now two questions remain: why and how. You must practice contentment because you already know what practicing discontent does for you. It makes you unhappy. It creates your anger, your anxieties, your jealousy and regret. It pumps stress chemicals through your blood, which diminish your ability to digest your food, your ability to hear what people are saying to you, and your ability to open your heart. Every time you think about your discontent, you worsen your mood. You even take it out on others.

Contentment is simply about what you choose to focus on. This is the secret to *how* you practice contentment. In every moment, you can focus on your discontent or you can focus on contentment. You have so many reasons for each; which ones do you keep in the forefront of your mind. Your life is full of many blessings. In the midst of the difficulties, for everyone has difficulties, other things are still is going on. Every cloud does have a silver lining; are you looking at yours?

None of this is really new. You've heard it all before. You don't have to be doing yoga to hear about the value of shifting your perspective.

When life serves you lemons, make lemonade.

Be happy with what you've got.

I complained about not having shoes until I saw a man with no feet...

It is better to want what you have than to have what you want.

The difference that yoga offers you here is twofold: making it a practice (something you do), as well as showing you what you will really get from it. First, you have to actually practice contentment. This means that, when you're not feeling content, you change your feeling. There are three stages to this process:

- 1) Notice you're practicing being discontent.
- 2) Make a decision to practice contentment.
- 3) Here's the yogic key — don't think of something that makes you content. That "something" is somewhere else, or someone else, other than where you are and what you are doing; it is a way of becoming less present. Instead, simply be content with where you are and what you are doing, even if it isn't what you wanted to have happening in that moment. Practice contentment.

This practice not only makes you content, it makes you more present. As I described above, it is about you being "present to your own life, by being present within your own self..." This is what makes it easy for Patanjali to fulfill his promise:

Samtoshad anuttamah sukha-laabhah.—Yoga Sutra 2.42

Superlative happiness arises from practicing contentment.

In the moment you practice being content, even if the situation isn't perfect, you become present in the situation. Your own presence is *svarooopa*, your own divine essence. In being you, and in being there, you experience Self — superlative happiness is only part of what you get. Do more yoga!

To reach Swamiji or to get more information about *Svarooopa*® yoga, contact: Master Yoga Foundation

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