



September 2007 Contemplation Theme

## Sailing Through Life

By Rama Berch, C.S.Y.T., E-RYT 500

On the day after the fire that destroyed our Pennsylvania facility, I was leading the teachers through their last day of training in *Vichara*, which is a structured process of self-inquiry. We began with a question that probed their feelings about discovering the charred remains of the building earlier that morning. Within a short 45 minutes, the power of their three previous days of training moved them through the stages of reaction to a profound yogic perception.

One of them shared, "I realized I had depended on the building, as though the building were Master Yoga. When I saw that the building was gone, at first I was shattered, as though I had lost the support for my yoga." As she and everyone explored more deeply, they discovered that the support for their yoga practice comes from their freedom of choice. They (and you) are fully empowered to do yoga or not to do yoga; it is your choice that makes it happen or not.

I shared my experience of discovering the burnt hulk. Because I don't depend on a building for my practice or for my yogic state, I move through these events openly and easily. I see the work that needs to be done; I see the money that must be raised. I recognize the impact this has on other people as well as the opportunity for teaching that it provides. But it doesn't shake my world or my being in any way.

This is because my support comes from an internal source, so deep and vast and timeless that it can never be exhausted. It can never be lost. It is impossible to measure its extent, yet it is possible to know it fully. It is essential to know it fully – and to recognize it as your own being. Thus a building is just a building, nothing more.

This is called *vairaagya*, usually translated as detachment or dispassion. Patanjali's Yoga Sutras describes it as a state of freedom, which is a much more accurate description.

Neither detachment nor dispassion is a good word, as they don't truly convey the richness of the experience that *vairaagya* provides. The practice of *vairaagya* is a process of cultivating freedom from your compulsions and dependencies, rather than a way of withdrawing or shutting down. I translate the word *vairaagya* as "freedom from dependency," a literal rendering of the component parts: *vai* – without, freedom from; *ragya* – inflamed desire, dependency, addiction, compulsion.

There are many reasons it is easy to misunderstand the practice of *vairaagya*. The most obvious is that you already want to withdraw from the people and things that cause pain. Thus, when you find a yogic or spiritual teaching that seems to give you permission to cut them out of your life, you feel justified in your decision.

When you experience pain, you look for a way out of it. This is easy when it is a splinter in your finger, but it can be confusing when it is a splinter in your life. Even a splinter in your finger is confusing if you don't realize it is there. You notice that your finger is tender, so you think that you need a new computer keyboard – this old one is making your finger hurt. Or you blame your coworker or spouse, who dropped a box on your hand. You may go to great lengths to protect that sore finger from anyone who might bang into it, or you might simply decide to ignore that sore finger – shutting down your ability to feel the sensation in your finger, numbing out and ignoring it completely.

This is all true in your life as well. You don't realize that there is something festering under your skin, so it seems that those around you cause your pain. Then you want to protect yourself from those people or those types of events, or you may withdraw and shut down, numbing out in your life. You are successful at feeling less pain, but unfortunately you also feel less joy. Your body begins to go numb, which means you cannot feel pain but you also cannot feel pleasure. You are becoming less and less alive.

Sometimes new students look like half-alive zombies, walking with stiff legs while holding their arms away from their sides, while their neck barely turns and their eyes have lost their natural glow. I love watching them come up from *Shavasana* at the end of class with the light restored to their eyes and their breath moving through their whole body again. They are becoming alive again.

When *vairaagya* is translated as "detachment" or "dispassion," you can end up using the teachings to justify withdrawing and shutting down. However, what you are really doing is finding a way to avoid growing up and being fully alive. While it is important that you choose who you want to spend your time with, it is a sign of intelligence that you make these choices consciously. This means that you know it doesn't work when you try to avoid your own issues by manipulating your environment or avoiding people who push your buttons.

*Svaroopā*® yoga is guaranteed to make you more fully alive. This means you will discover some unfinished business inside. You will progressively clear the blocks that have stunted your growth. You will free yourself from the internal layers of tensions – in your body, mind and emotions.

Then you can sail through life, completely open to events as they occur, because there's no unfinished business to fear. You can spend time with the people that used to bother you, and face events that used to disturb you, without being shaken by them. You become more fully alive; you are more open to everyone and everything that comes your way.

So far, I have explained what *vairāgya* is not – it is not withdrawal, distancing yourself or shutting down. So, what truly is *vairāgya*? It is a practice that makes you free from your dependencies and addictions. The purpose is divine – it makes you free from external sources of support by basing you in consciousness. It is based on the knowledge that everything that comes into existence also ceases to exist. Everything that you gain, you will also lose, either during your lifetime or at the end of your life.

When you depend on people or things for your happiness, you will be disappointed – not all of the time, but the percentage is too high to be really comfortable. Even the most committed relationship has peaks and valleys. Even the most reliable person is imperfect; they face their own challenges, so they cannot always meet your needs, even if they want to. Even ice cream and chocolate doesn't always work! To base your happiness in external things is to live in hell.

The human condition is inherently obsessive-compulsive. You probably are not bad enough to qualify for a diagnosis, but you do get lost in the tangle of your needs, desires and dependencies. You are not to blame for your condition, any more than a fish is to blame for breathing water. Yoga describes the human condition clearly – you deny the expansive reality of your own being in order to chase after things that will turn into dust.

To practice *vairāgya*, you quit chasing. Whenever you feel you *must* have something, don't chase it. This does not mean you should quit taking care of your genuine needs – you need to maintain your body, your home, your relationships, your job, etc. But these things probably take less time and effort than you realize, especially when you strip away your dependencies. You can eat less, speak less, shop less; you can make a smaller impact on the environment.

It's easy if you start with one thing. Pick something you do every day – whether it is a cup of coffee, a late-night activity, an indulgence for your sweet tooth, a gossip session that rehashes your opinion again, etc. Just say no. Don't do it. It's even better if you allow yourself to feel the desire for it while you are restraining yourself from doing it.\* Feel the desire – have the experience of desire without acting on it. It is so short-lived! It cannot continue for more than 2-3 minutes.

The Yoga Vasishtha says:

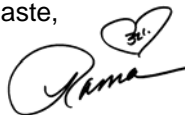
*If you have cravings, don't indulge them.*

*Let them come and go, come and go.*

*Don't become their prisoner; don't become their slave.*

This means, if a desire arises, it will also leave you. You don't have to indulge it – it will leave you. You don't have to suppress it or push it away. You don't have to resist it. Allow yourself to experience the desire, but don't act on it. This is *vairāgya*. The desire will dissolve under the shining light of your own awareness, just like everything else that keeps you from knowing your own divine essence. This is a great way to do more yoga!

Namaste,



\*for more detail on this, read "Experiencing Your Experience," the August 2007 contemplation theme by Rama Berch.

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