

Santosha

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"Contentment is a bit different from simply being happy. We usually think of happiness as dependent on a set of circumstances. Contentment, on the other hand, is not dependent on anything, It's a sense of not needing or wanting things to be different in order to be okay".

-Jillian Pransky from her book "Deep Listening"

Today's post will be anchored in the yogic philosophy of Santosh or contentment, one of the five Niyamas of Patanjali's eightfold path for cultivating happiness. This Niyama spawns from the acknowledgment that much of human suffering is a result of existing in dualities of future or past yearnings, expectations, or judgements, striving for something better. The belief that we won't be happy until we have accomplished or become some imagined ideal future self, or living from a place of desiring to return to a "felt experience" of something that brought satisfaction in our past. We experience this in little ways with our consumption habits of food, alcohol, substances, sugar, relationships, money, shopping etc. Where a glass of wine with friends was enjoyable, we might go for a second or third glass to maintain the euphoric lift, only to find that we were enjoying the company much more prior to the additional beverages. Or perhaps a memory of eating a homemade croissant in France fills us with joy. However, upon attempting to reclaim that memorable experience of elation, we might become disillusioned and believe that perhaps eating a croissant on our way to work will make us feel better, only to find no change in our state of well being upon consumption. Following this unmet expectation, our "hungry ghosts" come out, causing us to grab an additional treat, and then another one, in an attempt to reproduce the dopamine surge we expected with the initial croissant.

Santosha, the practice of contentment, is the recognition that the moment of "now" is all we have. Being content with our current situation has immense power and opportunity- opportunity to feel gratitude and acceptance in whatever is presently arising, without the labeling of good or bad. It is in moving out of this precious place of moment-to-moment awareness and acceptance that we slowly start to allow the "hungry ghosts" of our desires, wants, and expectations to creep back in, inducing us with desires and delusions.

What Santosh, or contentment is not, however, is complacency. Progress, evolution, learning, growing and change are all very important- and in fact necessary- to our human development and well-being. The suffering hinges on our expectations, the belief that there is a prize of sorts at the end of all our doing, learning, growing, and changing. It is this “needing results to validate our actions” mentality, or expecting some perfect form of self or experience to be achieved after all our effort, where discontentment arises. When the reality is, once we’ve obtained something we have been working for, we will find that we actually want ten more things, or once we have returned to a place that brought us so much joy in our past, we find the joy no longer prevails with that same experience. Santosha-contentment- therefore, is allowing this ride of human existence to unfold exactly as it is, without any expectation of a certain outcome.

There is nothing more to “do” to feel content. When something is uncomfortable or difficult, let it be difficult, as that is what currently is taking place and rather than look for a quick fix, perhaps inquire, what is there to learn and feel in this discomfort? When things are amazing and fortuitous, revel in that moment without grasping. As each of these moments come, having gratitude for the complex montage of human variety and emotions is what allows us to realize that the only constant we can ever maintain is that of change. Enjoy that very real reality- letting each sensation, thought and sounds come and go, just like the very nature of your breath- and then appreciate it for what it is- as this will change too. As Jillian Pransky says, Santosha allows us to cultivate strength and security with any and all circumstances that arise, whether those circumstances arise inside or outside of ourselves. This is a life-long practice, a practice of resting in “the now” for what it is.

“You don’t have to be good, you don’t have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through the desert repenting. You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves”

-Mary Oliver