

Santosh: Cultivating Consent in an Increasingly Complicated World

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“*Everything is moving perfectly.*”

—Sri Dharma Mittra

One of the most moving films I’ve seen is Jean Renoir’s 1951 lyrical masterpiece, *The River*, based on Rumer Godden’s 1946 novel. The coming-of-age tale takes place at a jute mill in pre-Independence Bengal, India. In my favorite pair of scenes, Captain John, an American soldier and former POW who lost his leg in the war, confides to Melanie, a wise Anglo-Indian teenager, that he feels like an outsider.

“I’m a stranger wherever I go,” he says. She replies quietly, “Where will you find a country of one-legged men?” She too feels like an outsider because of her mixed race.

Later, he asks Melanie what they should do. “Consent,” is her answer. “To what?” he asks. “To everything,” she says. “You don’t like being a man with one leg, but you have only one leg. I don’t like...never mind. Why do we quarrel with things all the time?”

Melanie’s advice—to stop fighting what cannot be changed, and to make peace with one’s present circumstances—is the practice of *santosh*, or contentment, which is the second *niyama* (observance) in the *Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*.

“We should understand the difference between contentment and satisfaction,” explains Swami Satchidananda in his excellent 1978 commentary on the *Yoga Sutras*. “Contentment means to be just as we are without going to outside things for our happiness. If something comes, we let it come. If not, it doesn’t matter. Contentment means neither to like nor dislike.”

This sounds simple on the surface. But it can require some work—especially for those of us who are used to striving or have a sense of entitlement. Here are a few concrete practices that can help.

On the mat

Many of us are guilty of destroying the present moment by wishing it away (yet all we have is the present moment; the past is gone, and the future is not guaranteed). I often see students do this in class. When they are uncomfortable or bored in a pose, they will move on to the next *asana* before the rest of us. Or they will start chugging water or looking around or staring at the mirror (some have even pulled out their phones and started using them).

There is a wonderful antidote to this feeling of discomfort in a pose (discomfort should not be confused with pain; never stay in a pose if it is causing pain and/or takes the breath away). Instead of forcing or coming out of the pose, back off about 50 percent—don’t go into it as deeply—and focus on slowing down the breath. Bringing the focus back to the breath (and, if

relevant, the *dristi* [gaze] and *bandhas* or locks) will almost always make it easier to stay longer in the pose. Learning how to live with discomfort (not pain!) in class, and doing poses we don't particularly like, is a form of *tapas* (self-control) that translates well to life off that mat. Coming back to the breath calms the mind and brings us back to the present moment, regardless of what we're doing. Have you ever judged yourself in class? Perhaps you can no longer get into a pose that once came easily to you, or your body is not opening as quickly as you'd hoped (or you compare yourself to others). My first teacher, Suddha Weixler, used to regularly remind us, "It's not a competition." Learn to accept where your body is on a given day. Play with your boundaries, but never force. Find a teacher who offers variations for different bodies *and* encourages you to explore beyond your comfort zone.

Learn to become an observer, or impartial witness, of your practice. Watch your struggles with compassion, love, and patience. This practice is a type of meditation called *sakshi bhava* (witnessing mood), in which we observe our mind, body, and emotions but do not get caught up in them.

Never skip *savasana* (corpse pose), which gives us the space to spontaneously experience santosh. If thoughts bombard you—your mind keeps making plans or analyzing past events—keep bringing yourself back to the present by focusing on the sound of your breath and the sensations in your body.

Off the mat

Santosh means to detach from one's likes and dislikes, and the following practice from Swami Sivananda is very powerful: Every day, do one thing that you don't want to do and don't do one thing that you want to do. The thing you do should enhance your spiritual practice, while the one you skip can be something that derails it (for example, reading some scripture before bed and skipping the big bowl of ice cream that will make you feel awful the next day). If you have a home yoga practice, do one pose that you don't like, and skip one pose that you do.

To diminish anxiety, keep a notebook and pen next to your bed. Each morning, right after awakening, spend five minutes writing down your foremost thoughts. They can be stupid or profound or neither—it doesn't matter. The key is to write them down, which diminishes their power. I've found that when I do this, my inner critic quiets down and I feel far more content the rest of the day. This practice also helps for insomnia; it's from John C. Parkin's 2007 book *F**k It: The Ultimate Spiritual Way*.

Keeping a gratitude diary for 30 days can reduce the discontent that stems from a sense of entitlement, or nonacceptance of one's circumstances. Each morning after waking, and each night before retiring, write down three things for which you are grateful, but don't repeat anything. When I did this for a few weeks, I found that I was grateful for things that normally would have bothered me. It also made me feel a whole lot more at peace. If that doesn't work, try *karma yoga* or selfless service. Helping others who are less fortunate brings a sense of santosh very quickly.

Turn off the computer, TV, phone, and tablet for a few hours each week. Instead, spend some time in nature, or interacting face-to-face with other people, and notice the effect. (For more on detaching from electronics and slowing down, see my November/December 2014 column, “Holiday Survival: Do One Thing at a Time,” at yogachicago.com/2014/11/holiday-survival-do-one-thing-at-a-time/)

Understanding the laws of karma and reincarnation leads to lasting contentment. Everything we are passing through now is a result of our past actions. As my guru says, there are no accidents (or, as the Bible says, “Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap.”). Although we may understand karma on a superficial level, it can take years of contemplation to realize these laws; the *Bhagavad-Gita* is the primary yoga scripture for exploring these concepts (Eknath Easwaran’s translation is a good introduction). Brian Weiss’s 1988 memoir *Many Lives Many Masters* and the 2009 documentary *Unmistaken Child* are also excellent resources.

As Sri Dharma said in a 2014 interview, “This quality of contentment is derived from the realization of the laws of karma and that there is reincarnation. Also, at least for me, acceptance of the fact that: ‘There is nothing else to be known or done.’”

In other words, *consent*.

Change Your Breathing, Change Your Life

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“When the breath wanders the mind also is unsteady. But when the breath is calmed the mind too will be still, and the yogi achieves long life. Therefore, one should learn to control the breath.”

--*The Hatha Yoga Pradipika*

When I waitressed at a vegetarian restaurant back in the early '90s, we got to know our regulars well. One day Gary, who always sat alone at booth six, seemed a lot more outgoing and energetic than usual; he also appeared to be glowing with peace and happiness. The staff noticed the change right away, and we figured he'd finally found a romantic partner. His answer surprised us.

“I learned to breathe,” he said, beaming at us. “It’s changed my life.”

We just stared at him, uncomprehending. It didn’t make sense to me then—this was a few years before I walked into my first yoga class—but now it does.

Yogis have long known that deep, full diaphragmatic (belly) breathing is the key to calming the mind and maximizing the function of every system of the body. It can also improve brain function, aid digestion and sleep, increase energy, reduce anxiety, lower blood pressure, improve posture, reduce food cravings, and help slow the aging process.

Yet, many of us breathe shallowly, either using the upper front lobes of the chest rather than the diaphragm, doing thoracic (chest) breathing using the intercostal muscles, or doing clavicular breathing using the shoulders and collarbones. This inferior, shallower breathing can lead to increased stress; high blood pressure; and poor posture, digestion, and brain function, sapping our energy and taking a toll on every system of the body.

In Gopala Krishna's book *The Yogi: Portraits of Swami Vishnu-devananda*, Swami Vishnu drives this point home. One day the swami went to see Mohammed Ali sparring at a gym in Florida.

"His sparring partner took many punches, very strong punches," said Swami Vishnu. "Ali kept giving them one after another. Occasionally he would lean against the rope. Why? He was resting. Because his breathing was very shallow, he wasn't able to get sufficient oxygen and a few of his powerful punches took tremendous energy."

"After the fighting, I gave him an autographed copy of my book and said to him, 'You know, your breathing is very shallow. You won't be able to fight long if you don't change your breathing pattern.' I advised him in a friendly way, teaching him how to breathe and telling him, 'Increase your breathing capacity if you want to survive.'"

Deep and conscious belly breathing is the most basic form of *pranayama*, the fourth limb of the Ashtanga yoga or eight-limb system of *Raja* yoga (the royal path of yoga outlined in *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*). Yogis believe that the breath contains *prana*, or the vital life-force. *Yama* means control; the practice of pranayama or control of this life force is one of the foundations of yoga in that it improves health and makes the mind calm and clear and prepares it for meditation.

Deep belly breathing makes full use of the diaphragm (the large, thin muscle that lies between the chest and belly and is considered the major muscle of breathing). When the diaphragm contracts, the lungs move downward, expand, and fill with air—pulling in prana. When the diaphragm relaxes and moves upward into the chest cavity and the intercostal muscles relax, space is reduced in the chest cavity, which forces carbon dioxide-rich air out of the lungs. We all breathed this way when we were babies and small children, before our chest muscles matured.

Ideally, this breathing is done through the nose, which filters, cleans, and humidifies the air before it enters the lungs. (Breathing through the nose can also improve digestion and reduce insomnia.)

Are you breathing consciously or unconsciously as you read this? The average person takes 15 breaths per minute, while some yogis breathe only a few times every 60 seconds.

Yogis believe that each person is assigned a certain number of breaths when they are born, according to their deeds from the past. When these breaths are used up, one's time is over. Therefore, breathing slowly means a longer life.

Indeed, the first thing we do when we're born is inhale; the last thing we do upon expiring is exhale. One of the few things we can control in between is the breath. In fact, breathing is the only physiological process that is both voluntary (you can control it) and involuntary (it will take care of itself if you don't).

“The body can't operate without the breath, so if conscious control of the breath is abandoned, then some unconscious part of the mind reflexively begins to function and starts breathing for us,” wrote Swami Rama and physicians Rudolph Ballentine and Alan Hymes in the 1979 classic *Science of Breath: A Practical Guide*. “In this case, breathing falls back under control of the primitive parts of the brain, an unconscious realm of the mind where emotions, thoughts, and feelings, of which we may have little or no awareness, become involved and can wreak havoc with the rhythm of the breath. The breath may become haphazard and irregular when we lose conscious control of it.”

By the same token, we can calm the emotions by breathing deeply for several minutes—and feel a little bit “high,” like my friend Gary. “Feelings come and go like clouds in a windy sky. Conscious breathing is my anchor,” wrote Thich Nhat Hanh in *Stepping into Freedom: An Introduction to Buddhist Monastic Training*.

Diaphragmatic breathing also has a powerful effect on the body, improving oxygenation of and blood flow to every system. It reduces tension and tightness in the neck and shoulders, and because those muscles are able to relax, it improves posture. It massages the internal organs, which improves digestion and drainage of lymph. Deep breathing also increases the secretion of growth hormone, which may slow the aging process. It helps lower blood pressure and blood sugar and improves mental function by increasing blood flow to the prefrontal cortex of the brain. It's also believed to reduce the stress hormones cortisol and adrenaline and improve the quality of sleep.

If that's not enough to convince you, when my guru, Sri Dharma Mittra, was asked at the 2009 Yoga Journal conference about how to stop overeating, he responded, “Do calm breathing (a simple deep breathing practice) and sing to the Lord.”

Fortunately, it's easy to relearn how to breathe consciously.

Practice

There are many types of pranayama; most, like these, are done through the nose (with the mouth closed). The two listed below are safe, simple, and suitable for just about everyone.

Diaphragmatic breathing

To relearn how to breathe deeply, lie on your back as in *savasana* (corpse pose), with your hands on the belly and the tips of the middle fingers meeting just above the navel. Close the eyes and

exhale through the nose. Now, begin breathing deeply (through the nose) into the belly. When you inhale, the fingers will separate and the rib cage will expand out to the sides. When you exhale, the navel will sink downward and the fingers will move back together. Continue to breathe into the belly for five to ten minutes or longer.

Make it a habit. Set your phone or computer's alarm clock to sound several times a day, at regular intervals. Each time you hear the alarm, breathe consciously into the belly for a minute or two (do not hit the snooze button!). After a few weeks, you will begin to do this automatically—and will have retrained your body how to breathe properly.

Three-part or complete breathing

Three-part breathing brings awareness to the three lobes of the lungs: upper, middle, and lower (we focus on the lower lobe in diaphragmatic breathing). To practice, lie down in savasana with the arms resting alongside the body (or, place the left hand on the belly and the right hand on the chest). Exhale completely. Inhale deeply into the belly. First, fill the abdomen (lower lobe), then the ribcage (middle lobe), and, finally, fill the chest and lift it toward the chin (upper lobe). As you exhale, reverse the order: empty the chest, allow the rib cage to contract, and let the navel sink toward the earth. Repeat 12 times.

Cultivating Detachment

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“Detachment is not that you should own nothing, but that nothing should own you.”

—Ali ibn abi Talib

Life gives us innumerable opportunities to deal with our attachments, or the ideas, people, objects, and experiences that we cling to that don't actually belong to us. I had a wonderful opportunity to contemplate such attachments over one strange weekend last spring.

On Saturday, I learned that the yoga festival I was scheduled to teach at the next day had suddenly been canceled. That evening, the owner of a yoga center where I rented space for the Sunday master class I teach sent me an e-mail informing me that her studio would no longer be available to me. The following afternoon, I was driving to class on Lake Shore Drive when a police standoff closed it down. Traffic slowed down to a complete halt, and all of the alternate routes were also backed up. I finally had to realize I could not make it to class.

When I got home, I wondered if the universe was trying to tell me something. “Maybe I'm not supposed to teach yoga,” I thought, and considered what life would be like without it.

Initially, the mind was agitated. But I sat with the emotions and continued to think about it. After some time, I realized it would be difficult but okay. After all, it was never my intention to

become a yoga teacher (my teachers Suddha Weixler and Eric Powell convinced me to start teaching back in 1998—and over the years, and with each trip to India to study yoga, my work as a journalist diminished and my work as a teacher increased until I became a full-time yoga teacher in 2004). Through the practice of *svadhyaya* (self-study) and *vichara* (self-inquiry), I realized I'd had no choice when it came to becoming a yoga teacher, and that I would have no choice in how long I would continue to be one. Once I figured this out, I felt more calm. I also believe that it helped lessen my attachment to teaching yoga—at least a little bit.

The nature of attachment

In *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*, attachment is considered to be the third *klesha*, which is described as a coloring of the mind, or a cause of pain and suffering (the other *kleshas* are ignorance of our divine nature, ego, aversion, and clinging to life).

Attachment is described as that which dwells in pleasure and personal preference. Yogis believe that attachments lead to pain, because pleasure is ephemeral; eventually it comes to an end—and when it does, we suffer. Yogis believe that real, permanent bliss is our true nature, which comes from inside us—not outside.

“Attachment to pleasure, or *raga*, is another pain-bearing obstacle,” says Sri Swami Satchidananda in his translation of *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. “We attach ourselves to pleasure because we expect happiness from it, forgetting that happiness is always in us as the true Self.”

Sri Dharma Mitra, the guru who initiated me, asks his students to contemplate it this way. “You may notice that your happiness comes from outside: ten percent is from food; ten percent is from your spouse; and then if you have dogs, add another five percent; a nice house, add another five percent; money in the bank—it depends on the amount. If you have a job you like, add ten percent. If you have the latest iPhone, add five percent. If you like the way you look, add another 80 percent,” he says.

Some of our happiness is the result of knowing that we will be able to repeat pleasurable experiences. But not forever. “Deep inside, you know that when you get old all these pleasures are going to be gone, one by one,” says Sri Dharma. He says it is okay to enjoy the objects of the world while we have them—“but don’t be attached.” He also says that the only real, lasting happiness comes from within.

Swami Jnaneshvara (www.swamij.com) says, “Notice the moment just after pleasure: Think of times just after you experience something pleasurable. A good example is some snack food that you enjoy, such as a sweet. Notice what happens when you put a small piece of the sweet in your mouth. There is a burst of that delicious flavor, which brings an emotional joy. But then, remember what happens a second or two later. There is another emotional burst that comes right behind the enjoyment, and that is to repeat the experience. This is the meaning of attachment, or *raga*. . . . It is this *second* wave of emotional experience, or desire, that is the attachment. It is different from the enjoyment from the first piece of candy.”

Ways to practice

In her memoir, *Radha: Story of a Woman's Search*, Swami Radha recalls an incident that happened at Swami Sivananda's ashram in Rishikesh in 1955. "Liz admired a gold locket I wore, which was an old family piece from my great-grandmother. It could be opened and there was a picture of Gurudev [Swami Sivananda] on the inside. Master [Sivananda] glanced up at that moment and said to me, 'Why don't you give it to her? This is the best way to renounce. If you give things to people which they greatly admire, then you will not regret that you gave them away. Renunciation is necessary to overcome attachment.'"

It's not necessary to renounce your belongings—renunciation is mental—but it is important to pay attention to what we're attached to. One way to do this is to observe what causes passion, fear, insecurity, craving, or anger; usually it comes from attachment or unfulfilled desires. Intense attachments can even become addictions. The *Bhagavad-Gita* says, "When a man dwells on objects, he feels an attachment for them. Attachment gives rise to desire, and desire breeds anger.

"From anger comes delusion; from delusion, the failure of memory; from the failure of memory, the ruin of discrimination; and from the ruin of discrimination the man perishes."

To contemplate attachment, sit for a five to ten minutes in meditation and observe what the mind is attracted to. Notice what it craves. Then, do the same observation during your daily routine. "To witness this secondary process during daily life and at meditation time is an extremely useful practice to do," says Swami Jnaneshvara. "It provides great insight into the subtler nature of *raga*, attachment. In turn, it allows a far greater level of skill in learning non-attachment, *vairagya*, which is one of the two foundation practices of yoga. By learning to witness the thinking process in this way, the colorings (*klesha*) gradually attenuates."

You may also take this a step further and contemplate, as I did, what it would be like to live without certain attachments. Because in reality, the things we consider to be "ours" don't really belong to us; we are merely borrowing them.

You can also practice non-attachment with speech, substituting terms like "my" with neutral words such as "the." For example, "my car" becomes "the car," "my cat" becomes "the cat," "my house" becomes "the house," and so on. (During my first teacher training with Sri Dharma Mitra, we were encouraged not to call the students who come to our classes "my" students, since they tend to come and go and don't really belong to us.)

Another powerful practice is to let go of attachment to our pet ideas, or myths we tell ourselves about ourselves. Often these are negative, repetitive thoughts with deep roots that can be silenced through self-inquiry and discrimination.

I remember when I first began practicing yoga, and the teacher told us to try doing a handstand. I heard a familiar little voice in my head—a voice I had heard from others in the past, and which I'd internalized—telling me I was weak, and I thought, "There's no way *I* will be able to do this." But the teacher didn't know about my past, or that voice. He only saw my potential, and

showed me what to do. And I did it, surprising myself, and realized that I was capable of doing much more than I'd thought.

Another very concrete way to practice vairagya, or non-attachment, is to spend some time away from the things that have a tight hold over us. For example, someone who feels attached to comfort may occasionally spend a night sleeping on the floor. (Or go camping. Or stay at an ashram.) Someone who feels attached to their smartphone could spend several hours a week away with it switched off, or leave it at home from time to time. Someone attached to TV could switch it off one night each week. Someone who feels overly attached to his or her family may choose to spend a weekend away from them. Someone who is attached to money could practice giving away a fixed amount each month, or giving a dollar or two to anyone who asks for it.

Sometimes we are attached to habits and doing the same things over and over again, and fall into a rut. One can overcome this by going outside of one's comfort zone from time to time; it can be as simple as taking a different route or form of transportation to work, or trying something new. I once worked with a woman who would go on what she called "fam trips" each weekend. On the "fam trip," she and her husband would visit a store, restaurant, organization, or neighborhood that they'd never been to before. She was one of the most grounded, open-minded people I've ever met.

Even just a little bit of contemplation and practice of vairagya can give you a wonderful sense of freedom and help you realize that you are much stronger than you thought you were. There will still be pain when attachments are initially ripped away, but it probably won't last long. You may also begin to see that our potential is limitless, if we would just give it a chance and take some time for self-inquiry. These realizations can lead to a deep state of *sattva*, or peace and harmony.

As the *Bhagavad-Gita* says, "The man of self-control, moving among objects with his senses under restraint, and free from attachment and hate, attains serenity of mind.

"In that serenity there is an end of all sorrow; for the intelligence of the man of serene mind soon becomes steady."

Make an Offering: The Practice of Karma Yoga

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"Service to others is the rent you pay for your room here on earth."
—Muhammad Ali

Back in 2004, my asana practice at the Ashtanga Yoga Research Institute in Mysore, India, was focused on standing up from backbend. Sharath Jois, then assistant director of the institute, had

told me that once I could do this consistently, I'd be able to practice Ashtanga's intermediate series.

So, every day I'd practice primary series and try to stand up from backbends. One day, when this was unusually difficult, I looked over at the large images of Lord Ganesh and Lord Ram on the *shala* (studio) windows and silently addressed them: "This one is for you."

Next thing I knew I was standing up, as if propelled by an unseen force.

On another day in Mysore, I felt like I was getting sick and went to my pharmacist for some medication. He gave me some digestion medication and said it should work within 24 hours. It did, and when I went back to thank him, he gestured towards the sky and said, "I did nothing."

In other words, he was acting as an instrument of God—or the universe. Something similar had happened to me with backbends; on some level, I'd stopped struggling and let go of focusing on the outcome.

This is the path of Karma yoga, or selfless action, as outlined in *The Bhagavad-Gita*, which says, "To work, alone, you are entitled, never to its fruit. Neither let your motive be the fruit of action, nor let your attachment be to non-action." This means that we should perform our duties without attachment since the outcome is not in our hands. It is similar to the Christian idea of "Thy will be done," or aligning oneself with the universal or divine will.

Karma yoga is one of the four main paths of yoga and the easiest to follow for householders (lay persons) and those who are active in the world. It is said to be the quickest way to dissolve the ego or sense of separation, which is one of the things yogis believe keeps us from experiencing lasting peace and happiness. On a practical level, Karma yoga takes us out of our own heads and helps us see the common thread that binds everything together; it moves us from alone-ness towards one-ness.

In class, we can do this by offering our asana practice to something unselfish, such as dedicating it to someone who is suffering or to an ideal—or the highest practice of all: dedicating it to God or the Supreme Self (the spark of the divine that resides in every living being).

"If you practice any aspect of yoga for selfish reasons, it's not really yoga at all, according to *The Bhagavad-Gita*," my guru, Sri Dharma Mittra, recently said in an interview with *Yoga Journal* magazine. "Anytime we are able to make our practice an offering, our practice becomes really powerful. Experiencing this leads to lots of enthusiasm to pursue and keep at it. The secret of success in yoga practice is constant practice. Success in practice will lead to inner peace, which will have a great effect on everything, eventually leading to peace for all, everywhere."

I recently explained this concept to a group of yoga teacher trainees, and one of them jumped in with a personal example. A criminal defense attorney, he said that he practices a version of Karma yoga every day: he makes the best case he can before the judge and jury, and then must let go of the outcome, or verdict.

“The difference between regular action where there is always expectation and Karma Yoga is truly the mental attitude,” Sri Dharma Mittra said.

As he explained in a 2012 interview, “When I first began doing Karma yoga, I had already heard that it had to be offered as a completely selfless action. In the beginning, even though it looks from the outside as though we renounce any physical benefits or rewards inherent in the actions we are supposedly offering to others, deep down inside we are always interested in spiritual rewards and there is always a ‘little string’ attached. As we grow and evolve spiritually, spend time near the Guru, gain more knowledge and are engaged in constant practice, we come to realize there should be no string at all. We expect nothing and hope to receive no spiritual benefits. With a little bit of Self-Knowledge and as we get a little bit closer to Self-realization, the ego disappears and automatically the Karma yoga becomes perfect and is performed without any expectation. We do everything because it has to be done for the sake of the Self, not expecting anything.”

There’s a wonderful story about oil magnate John D. Rockefeller meeting Swami Vivekananda in 1894. The swami said that the money he’d earned did not belong to him and suggested that Rockefeller use it to do good in the world. Initially annoyed at the swami’s brashness, Rockefeller returned a week later and showed him his plans to donate a large sum of money to a public institution—his first such effort—then waited for the swami to thank him. Instead, Swami Vivekananda said, “It is for you to thank me.”

In other words, Karma yoga does not mean making grand gestures and boasting about them in your bio or doing good for a tax deduction or to secure a wing of a hospital in your name; rather, service is done for the sake of service. My spiritual mother used to tell a story about waiting for a flight at the airport with Sri Dharma when someone near them became ill and began to vomit. Sri Dharma was quick to offer help before anyone else acted.

If you are ever feeling sorry for yourself or have a strong sense of entitlement, volunteering or donating money or helping someone in need can quickly transform those feelings into gratitude. Karma yoga can also mean helping a spiritual teacher or organization.

On a very basic level, Karma yoga means serving others anonymously in small ways, whenever possible, such as letting someone go ahead of you in traffic, giving up your seat to an older person, blessing someone when they sneeze, giving a compliment, or praying or doing your spiritual practice for others. Mother Teresa once said that if you have nothing to offer, give a smile: “Every time you smile at someone, it is an action of love, a gift to that person, a beautiful thing.”

Any activity—including one’s job—can be a form of Karma yoga. The important thing is to do it to the best of your ability and without attachment. (This does not mean you should stagnate in your work or not stand up for yourself or not ask for a raise or promotion when it is due; it means doing what is right and letting go of the results.)

Karma yoga has many benefits. Sri Dharma Mittra says it can be even better than meditation and is an essential step on the path towards liberation. “Acting in this way, one gradually loses all

selfishness and notions such as: ‘I am the doer,’” he explained in a 2010 New Year’s message. “Thus comes total surrender of the ego. Why do selfless service? Because without it, there will be no union, absorption or Self-realization....”

In addition, according to the laws of karma and reincarnation, selfless action creates no new karma that must be paid back later. *The Bhagavad-Gita* says, “He who does actions, offering them to the Absolute and abandoning attachment, is free from error.”

You may find that the more you give up doership of your actions (having the feeling that you are acting alone), the more the universe will start to work with you (rather than against you).

“There is nothing chaotic or capricious in this world,” said Swami Sivananda. “Things do not happen in this universe by accident or chance in a disorderly manner. They happen in regular succession and events follow each other in a regular order. There is a kind of definite connection between what is being done now by you and what will happen in the future. Sow always the seeds which will bring pleasant fruits and which will make you happy herein and hereafter.”

The C Word: Help for Constipation

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“He who is temperate in his habits of eating, sleeping, working and recreation can mitigate all material pains by practicing the yoga system.”

—Bhagavad-Gita.

I’ve had trouble with digestion since I was a child. I remember staying with my grandmother and having my fecal matter being compared with that of my best friend. Her healthy output got the thumbs-up, while my grandmother shook her head at my sad little “marbles.” Then she gave me a tablespoonful of foul-tasting cod liver oil to lubricate my digestive system.

It probably didn’t help that my first food was baby formula, which was soon replaced by the convenience foods that were the envy of my friends—instant breakfast, Space Food sticks, and frozen TV dinners. Although things improved as I cleaned up my diet over the years, it wasn’t until my digestive system went on strike and I wound up in the emergency room some years ago that I really learned how to control constipation. Much of what helped came from my teacher and mentor, Chandra Om. Some of the techniques below are from her, as well as from naturopathy (“nature cure”), *ayurveda*, other teachers, and my own experience.

Yoga practices

Deep breathing into the belly is one of the easiest and most direct ways to improve overall digestion. Many of us breathe shallowly, using the upper, front part of the lungs. To re-learn how to breathe properly, lie on your back with your hands on the belly and the middle fingers touching just above the navel. When you inhale into the belly, the middle fingers should separate. When you exhale, they should come back together. To train yourself to do this in daily life, set the alarm on your phone to go off several times during the day. Breathe deeply into the belly each time it goes off.

I learned sleeping baby pose from my guru, Sri Dharma Mittra. It is practiced right after eating, and is especially helpful for indigestion. To practice, lie on the belly, with the head turned to the right and the left hand turned up alongside the left hip. Frame the head with the right arm, and bend the right knee 90 degrees. This position places pressure on the stomach, which is on the left side of the abdomen. Stay in the pose for at least five minutes after eating (20 minutes is better).

A deep squatting pose such as *malasana* (garland pose) can have a laxative effect on the colon. To practice, stand and place the feet nearly mat-distance apart, toes turned out to the side. Squat down until the buttocks are a few inches from the floor (if this is difficult, stay up higher or place the buttocks on a block). Hold for five to 20 breaths. For better results, bring the feet parallel and rock back and forth.

As its name suggests, *pavanmuktasana* (wind-relieving pose) releases gas from the digestive system. To practice, lie on the back and clasp the legs to the chest, knees together. Make several clockwise circles with the knees, and then go the other direction. This helps massage the colon. The static version of the pose is also said to help dyspepsia and relieve acid reflux.

Spinal twists help push waste out of the body. Just be sure to twist to the right first (twisting to the right compresses the ascending colon, while twisting left compresses the descending colon). To practice *sukha ardha matsyendrasana* (easy seated half-twist), sit on a mat with the legs in front of you. Place the right foot on the outside of the left knee, with the foot flat on the mat. Place the right hand behind you. Clasp the right knee with the left arm, lift the chest, and twist to the right. Hold for five to 20 breaths while breathing into the belly. Then switch sides. This pose is also said to stimulate the pancreas, liver, spleen, kidneys, and stomach.

Other poses helpful for digestion include deep forward folds, *mayurasana* (peacock pose) and on-the-belly poses such as cobra, *dhanurasana* (bow), and *salabasana* (locust). Practices such as kapalabhati (shining skull breathing) and *agnisara kriya* (fire essence cleansing) also help, but should be learned directly from a qualified teacher.

Try to avoid being too rigid in your practice. If you always do the same sequence, mix things up now and then. Try a new pose, or bind your hands or cross your legs in a different way from time.

Diet

Eat at the same time each day. Take your largest meal at lunch, and avoid heavy food after 8 p.m. (to learn more about the yogic diet, see my January/February 2015 column at <http://yogachicago.com/2015/01/eat-like-a-yogi/>).

Start the day with a spoonful of ghee or flax oil, and follow it up with a glass of hot water with lemon or lime (to stimulate the digestive fire).

Digestion begins in the mouth. Chew each mouthful of food 25 times before swallowing, or until it is mushy. Avoid overeating. It takes about 20 minutes for the brain to get the message that the stomach is full. By eating slowly, you will feel full before your meal ends.

Avoid meat, fish, poultry, eggs, and cheese, which are difficult to digest, and stay away from frozen, processed, or leftover food for the same reason. Steer clear of white flour and dry foods such as crackers, pastries, and chips. Cold foods such as salads and ice cream and cold drinks with ice can “freeze” or slow down the digestive process. Avoid alcohol and limit sweets, which steal the B vitamins needed for the intestines to function.

Drink at least eight glasses of water per day, but also consume a lot of ghee or high-quality oils such as olive oil, which lubricate the system. Try not to drink water with meals “as it dilutes the gastric juices essential for proper digestion,” according to *Diet Cure for Common Ailments* by Dr. H.K. Bakhru. Instead, he recommends drinking water a half hour before eating or an hour after eating. Coffee and strong tea won’t help, although they may seem to have an effect in the short term (caffeine is a diuretic that can remove water needed by the colon to process stool). Replace with fresh ginger tea.

Work more warm, moist, and naturally sweet foods into your diet. Whole, natural vegetables, grains, and legumes are best. Fruit should be eaten alone and on an empty stomach for maximum absorption. Avoid bananas, which can bind, and replace them with pineapple, a natural laxative that’s also good for nausea. Grapes, pears, peaches, and plums are also recommended.

For breakfast, have something warm, moist, and sweet. I eat oatmeal cooked with raisins that have been soaked for 20 minutes. For lunch, try *kitcheri* (an easy-to-digest stew of moong beans and rice) cooked with cumin and turmeric. A wonderful snack or light supper is sweet potatoes slathered with ghee or olive oil.

Lifestyle

The body likes a routine. Get up and go to bed at the same time each day. When you feel the urge to defecate, give in to it as soon as possible. Holding the stool only leads to more problems down the road.

Many years ago, a colonic irrigationist suggested I take a daily probiotic, called Primal Defense Ultra. After taking it, my bowels moved better, and I got sick far less often. The ayurvedic herb mixture called triphala can have a similar effect; the recommended dose is 1/2 to one teaspoon at night, taken in hot water.

Exercise every day. Dr. Bahkri recommends going for brisk walks that last at least 45 minutes. Try to do this outside, in nature—the great healer—especially near water. As Swami Sivananda said, “The law of nature operates in the upkeep of the health of man.”

Conclusion

Controlling constipation requires effort and change. But once your bowels move better, you may find that you have more energy and fall ill far less often (according to ayurveda, all disease starts in the colon).

I recommend choosing a few techniques that resonate with you. After integrating them into your routine, add a few more. Be patient, and think of it as part of your *sadhana* (practice). As *The Yoga Sutras* say, “practice becomes well-grounded when continued with reverent devotion and without interruption over a long period of time.”