Rasa: Cultivating the Juice of Yoga

I first learned about rasa from Gandhi's grandson, philosopher Ramachandra Gandhi while studying at Delhi University. We were watching an outdoor rehearsal of a Manipuri dance troupe while sipping chai tea at the open courtyard of the Triveni Art Center Café. I noticed the way he inhaled their graceful circular dance as if it was a natural form of prana. I too was enjoying the dance casually while we spoke. At one point he stopped talking, and took in the movement with utter reverie through his body. Silently, we digested everything that surrounded us. The wind that was moving through the trees, the liquid concentration pouring through the dancers. The sound of the drum with its increasing tempo that left us suspended at the top. The buzz of conversation and whiz of traffic. The smell of the jasmine growing nearby. Ramachandra said something that I have never forgotten and that has lived within me ever since: "When you taste the Rasa of life, you drink from a well that is never dry." Rasa (literally juice, essence, taste, transformational state) is the rejuvenating juice of life that is present all around and within us if we know how to tap into its source.

Rasa has become essential part of the how I live and practice yoga for it has nourished my love of yoga and given me a way to enjoy micro-moments of yoga all day long. Rasa anchors me in a receptive relationship to life that transforms a 21s century tendency towards lack of feeling or connection to action where the activities of daily life become something to "get done" – a kind of going through the motions of existence. Eating without really tasting food. Listening without being present. Doing yoga without really en-joying the process. As Ayurvedic teacher, Robert Svoboda puts it, "Existence without "juice" is dry and tasteless". Rasa is life's fluid reality, life's juice, in every sense of the word;". Rasa from the Ayurvedic perspective refers not only to the care of the juice of your life-energy but also to the satisfaction of the way in which we live and experience life.

To understand rasa is to understand how to harmonize the inner feeling state known as *bhava* so that we are not only present to life put fully participating and receiving the prana of each moment. The roots of rasa are found in the arts of India where sensitivity to the heart of action gave birth to rasa theory as the method of unification for the artists with their art form and the audience. First written about in Bharata's Natya Shastra (circa 400 A.D.), rasa theory has been guiding the arts of India – music, dance, visual arts and poetry as the way of creating a state of complete absorption for both the artists and the one who perceives the art form (rasika). It is said that a dancer can have all the outer technical brillance, but without rasa – the inner juice - the dance is just mechanical movement.

The Self Tasting the Self

If the state of yoga or unification is the goal of a yogin, the transforming state of rasa is the goal of an artist. As I experienced with Ramachandra, the taste of the rasa experience occurs when the self-consciousness of both the artist and the audience is dissolved into a heightened experience of being alive and a state of yoga as a unified state of consciousness envelops. This is what the great Tantric yogin, Abhinavagupta refers to in his celebrated work on rasa, <u>Locana</u>. To paraphrase his view, rasa becomes 'the delectable savoring of the Self by the Self'. It is the space where the art of yoga as communion comes alive. This can be a rare intensity in a performance that we never forget or as natural as taking in a streaming sunset. Cynics need not apply for rasa belongs to the poetic realm where a subtle restoration of our senses to perceive essence is required.

Cultivating Rasa

To anchor this understanding of rasa to apply to our experience of living yoga, let's look at one example in Indian classical music. If you are a sitar player, you choose what raga (melodic scale) to practice or perform according to the *muhurta*, the cycles of the day. The ragas for the awakening of early morning dawn are different from the sunset rags or midnight rags. So first, you harmonize with the energy of life around you. You then connect to your own bhava or mood and choose one of three main rasas used within music and dance (although there are nine archetypal rasas): vira (heroic, energetic), sringara (love, union of masculine and feminine), shanta (peace, tranquility) that reflects the state of being that you are cultivating.

Raga means to color, and thus an artists works with their bhava through the combination of notes (swaras), and rhythm (tala) just like a painter chooses certain mixtures of tints to invoke an emotional resonance. Vira rasa ragas in general are used to invoke courage and inspiration and energetically relate to the challenging and activating "vira" asanas such as Virabhadrasana (Warrior One) or any asana that stimulates one's inner fire and strength. On the opposite pole, Shanti Rasa ragas are spacious with a slower, meditative rhythm. Like shavasana at the end of a yoga practice, most ragas complete themselves in this state of shanti. Sringara rasa, the predominant rasa in all art forms and bhakti yoga stirs open our heart through ascending and descending melodies, representing the interplay of the lover and the beloved. As Swami Sivananda shares, "rasa of love is liquid mellowness. It is the essence of feeling. God Himself is rasa and by attaining this essence one becomes blissful (Andrea – we could cut that last sentence and substitute. It is the essence of feeling...and breaks the shell of ignorance which envelops a devotee".

Bhava-Rasa in Yoga and Life

I use to teach and practice yoga with a non-attachment to my feeling state emphasizing the flow of concentration and attention as a way of dutifully "stilling of the fluctuations of the mind" as interpreted from Patanjali's Yoga Sutra. As a recovering academic, this unknowingly was reinforcing the intellectual divide between mind and heart. I became very good at being present and witnessing my sensations with less reaction in difficult asanas, activities and relationships but I started to feel as if I was on the sidelines of life. From my own experience, I recognize this tendency in the students that I encounter – wanting to know how to do yoga: "right", thinking about "not thinking", "doing" a pose".

It is here that rasa can offer a tonic for living yoga as a form of mindfulness with heart or "heartfulness" where rejuvenation in the moment is available if we can be subtle rasikas (seekers of rasa) in the face of routine, the busi-ness of life, and the dulling of our senses. Bhava – the mood or feeling state—from the Sanskrit root "to be or to become" is the soil of rasa, it is where satisfaction in being flowers. In my yoga practice, it is where I start now both receiving and teaching yoga. Like an artist, listening for the *bhava* is being sensitive to the natural inherent energy of the cycle of the season, time of day, and quality of the body-mind-heart. It affects the lighting of the room, the music I play, and the poses and form of meditation that forms the raga in which the bhava will develop upon.

These variables upon the "mood" can be assessed according to the gunas or energetic qualities. Do we feel hot or cool, stable or mobile, soft or hard, heavy or subtle, dull or sharp? If we want to increase a quality then we use the elements of the same. If we want to balance a certain state then we cultivate its opposite. The slogan of the past decade "just do it" may have us checking off the activities of living but in our productivity the satisfaction in the process can be lost. Bhava within yoga suggests that we can work with the sensations of our feeling state so that there is harmony and rejuvenation in action.

On a very practical level, if you are tired from sluggishness or stagnation and not because you need to rest then rather than just drinking a cup of java and forcing yourself up the hill, on your mat or on with your day, you can cultivate the appropriate bhava. The opposite of "heavy" or contraction is lightness. From my own experience, in working privately with students, besides nutritional suggestions, I would suggest choosing time a bright time of day such as mid-morning to practice and get yourself in the mood through practicing in a light space, playing invigorating music, wearing bright colors. One could focus on cleansing pranayamas and choose asanas and vinyasas that create circulation. These elements contribute to vira bhava, the solar state that awakens courage to change and gets you "in the mood" for transforming resistance in way that is empowering and satisfying. I have observed the same with students who begin a practice with stressful agitation and then "try" to relax with their mind still racing. Using the qualities of shanti bhava, the state of peace, one can start to slow down rather than make an abrupt stop, and channel the heat and mobility of agitation into stability like a wind settling in the branches of a rooted tree.

Our yoga practice then becomes the field in which to explore this interconnection of thinking mind with feeling mind and action rather than the place to deny our feeling state. An artist learns to how to attune themselves to the energy that is present and find the resonance within their heart to transform the self-doing of art into the that inexpressible flow of presence, of rasa. If we find the juice of life is diminished, look to restoring your inner participation in life, the taste in each moment - to recover the rejuvenation in being.