

But I Meditate Everyday...: Exploring a Larger Context for a Spiritual Transformation and Realization

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Lets's start this essay off with a riddle. How do you tell someone who is egotistical that they're egotistical? Hmm....

I'll share the answer at the end. Yet this riddle speaks powerfully to the topic of this essay for those who have ears to hear. In fact, if one realizes the relevance of this riddle to this topic, there is no need to read any further...

Let me share what sparked this essay. A guy I know has had a consistent meditation practice for many years: sitting many times a day for at least a total of an hour each day. Over the last few years, he has accompanied this with a disciplined scripture study -- pretty much daily study. But he has yet to experience "enlightenment" or any lasting spiritual awakening. And he was wondering why.

It wasn't coincidental that as we were in the midst of this brief conversation, he pulled out his cell phone a number of times to check it as we spoke. And when we finished, he was off to a friend's house to hang out with "a few of the fellas:" play video games, chit-chat, eat some pizza -- common worldly fare in such social settings. Not to condemn cell phones, video games, social conversations, and pizza; but his engagement of these speaks to a deeper issue as to why he has not spiritually matured despite maintaining elements of a spiritual practice for many years. This speaks to a root cause that afflicts many who have meditated (or engaged in other spiritual practices) for a long time and not spiritually matured.

MEDITATION ALONE HAS NEVER BEEN ENOUGH...

Of the many spiritual traditions I have studied, none has said that meditation alone is enough to spiritually mature. (This is in spite of what some who claim to be teachers within these traditions say.) We should be clear: these spiritual traditions place *meditation as one component within a larger spiritual practice* that is explicitly aimed toward TRANSFORMATION of those who embrace the spiritual path. Traditionally, a comprehensive spiritual practice is not interested in manifesting an "improved version" of those who embrace it. Instead, the "aim" is to have aspirants embrace a process that looks to completely transform them: to relinquish an ego-based way of life immersed in ignorance, delusion, and untruth so we may realize the Reality of Truth that is our natural, inherent way of "being."

I often use the story of a caterpillar as a metaphor for demonstrating the scope of spiritual transformation. The caterpillar has many legs (hint: many worldly attachments) that it uses to crawl about: through fine soil to the muck of mud to plant leaves and so on. Caterpillars are also constantly consuming food, just as many people are constantly engaged in mental consumption: endless mental activity.

When the caterpillar is ready to become a butterfly, it stops eating -- very important to the metaphor. It then hangs itself upside down (important: a different orientation) in a tree and spins a cocoon around itself. In essence, the caterpillar recluses itself from the world to engage an inward process.

Within the cocoon, the caterpillar literally digests / dissolves itself. As the caterpillar body dissolves, components of its butterfly body are revealed: parts that were formed when the caterpillar was developing in an egg and have since laid dormant within the caterpillar body. The dissolved body then serves as “fuel” for the formation of the butterfly body.

When the butterfly body is ready, it emerges from the cocoon as a transformed being. It no longer crawls, it flies. It is no longer a bulky larva with many legs, it is a slender form with colorful wings. Instead of being in endless pursuit of plant (leaf) food as a caterpillar, butterflies feed on the liquid nectar of flowers and pollinate various plants. The butterfly’s life is a totally different existence than its former life as a caterpillar. It’s also worth noting that the butterfly doesn’t emerge as a baby butterfly that must be nurtured to grow into an adult: the butterfly state is a state of maturity.

This speaks as a powerful metaphor for the traditional intent of spiritual practice. We begin as egotistical caterpillars immersed in endless consumption via mind-based activity and ego-based (mis)identification. We do this despite having the components of a butterfly already within us. Then, for those of us who become truly ready, we cease with the caterpillar life. You can tell who is truly ready from those who are not: the caterpillars who are ready hang ourselves upside down in a tree, a place removed from the activity of the world, where we embrace a different (and often contrasting) orientation to spin and remain within a cocoon.

Within the cocoon, we cease with the endless consumption. We surrender our previous forms (who we hold ourselves to be), habits, and attachments to be dissolved away. Such dissolution happens within the cocoon of living a wholistic spiritual practice: an encompassing protective barrier that explicitly separates us from the world and worldly (ego-based) ways. Within such dissolution, the components of our butterfly “body” are revealed; these form a new “body” (a new way of “being”) with which to live a transformed life. Then, when the butterfly body is complete, we emerge from the cocoon to fly: feeding on nectar and pollinating various plants. This transformed life is immersed in beneficence and usually includes some type of service of others instead of our past self-oriented (selfish) consumption.

Meditation is but a part of a wholistic spiritual practice that serves a role in such transformation. Traditionally, meditation was never presented as the whole of a spiritual practice. In fact, in most spiritual traditions, other components of the spiritual practice set the foundation to fulfill the purpose meditation serves. To illustrate in metaphorical terms, let's say meditation is the part of the transformation process that formulates the wings. What would we say of a caterpillar that decided it didn't want to go through the cocoon process, and instead glued some wings onto its larva body? Would we look at that as being wise? Would we call a caterpillar with wings glued on its body a "butterfly?" Would we say that caterpillar is serious about becoming a butterfly?

Most people would respond negatively to the previous questions, understanding that if a caterpillar wants real wings it needs to go through the cocoon process. This process includes the reclusion of a cocoon, the dissolution within it, and the formation of a new body to eventually emerge with actual wings as a transformed butterfly. Yet some people think a meditation practice alone is sufficient to "attain" spiritual transformation: that they can just glue the wings of meditation onto their otherwise ego-based way of life of endless mental consumption. Then they wonder why, even if maintaining a consistent meditation practice, they haven't realized spiritual transformation and maturity.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

Patañjali's *Yoga Sutras*, a renowned scripture in Traditional Yoga, presents a concise overview of a wholistic spiritual practice. The components are commonly called the Eight Limbs of Yoga. The first five limbs are as follows:

- 1) *Yama* - moral abstentions - discipline of restrained behavior;
- 2) *Niyama* - moral observances - discipline of affirmative behavior;
- 3) *Āsana* - physical and mental posture - discipline of how we hold the body and mind;
- 4) *Prāṇāyāma* - discipline of *prāṇā* (vital energy);
- 5) *Pratyāhāra* - discipline of how one uses the senses.

These five "external limbs" precede the "internal limbs;" what we call meditation falls within the internal limbs. In ancient times, to practice meditation without practicing the first five limbs would have been seen as foolish as a caterpillar gluing wings on its back and calling itself a butterfly. These first five limbs set the stage for a sound and effective meditation practice by restraining and then focusing a more limited mind-based consumption. If we do not address our mind-based consumption, and the ego identity that drives it, we literally undercut our own meditation practice and the "fruits" that emanate from it.

The first limb is *Yama*, often called the *Yamas*, are moral abstentions. The foundation of any sound spiritual practice lays upon moral abstentions. These explicitly address our behavior: things we need to stop doing immediately if we are serious about our spiritual practice. Patañjali

presents the *Yamas* as sacred vows that apply to every single aspect of our lives -- no exceptions, no excuses. These vows include the pledges:

- * *Ahiṃsā* - to not harm (physically, verbally, or even to engage thoughts of harming other beings);
- * *Satya* - to not lie (not even “little white lies”) or engage in untruth;
- * *Asteya* - to not steal or take what doesn’t belong to us;
- * *Brahmacarya* - to not be led by the senses (i.e. desires), including but not limited to sexually-oriented activities;
- * *Aparigrahā* - to not be greedy or take more than what we need.

Most spiritual traditions include most, if not all, of the above in their moral abstentions. And moral abstentions are usually the starting point of a traditionally-based spiritual practice: because before we can do what we’re supposed to do (as guided by these spiritual traditions), we need to stop doing what we should not do.

If we reflect on these moral abstentions in the context of mental consumption, we see that they severely restrain the scope of activities for most people embracing a spiritual practice. Similarly, the cocoon is extremely limited compared to the caterpillar’s former endless roaming and consuming. This is by intentional design: if we continue in the bondage of endless consumption and old habits, how can we expect to realistically transform? Especially when such activity often expands one’s ego-based orientation which further veils and becomes an obstacle to Realization of Truth. It is better to bring this orientation and its accompanying incessant activity to a halt, like the caterpillar in the cocoon, if we seek to sincerely embrace the opportunity to transform. And if one is honest, one will see how difficult (as well as illogical) it is to transform in the midst of such activity.

Moral abstentions set the foundation to, first, restrain the ego-based orientation and then dissolve it (like the caterpillar’s body) to reveal the “components” of Realization already within us. But the abstentions only fulfill this purpose when we live the whole of our lives within the restrained space of these abstentions -- just as the cocoon only works if the caterpillar stays within it. Unfortunately, most people don’t live their whole lives within the space of moral abstentions: they may keep a space for these in their lives, to only abandon them when they wish or feel challenged to upkeep them. For example, a person may choose to not lie ninety-nine percent of the time except for when they really-really want something and lying seems the only way to get it. This is not upholding the *Yamas* in the traditional sense.

When we live the whole (one hundred percent) of our lives within the restrained space of these abstentions, we find this starts to quiet and settle the mind. This comes about not just by limiting the scope of our mind-based activities: abiding within the moral abstentions also dissolves the lingering residues that continue to affect the mind after engaging in ego-oriented activities, especially immoral activities. These residues can linger, still affecting the mind, years after

performing such activities -- and sometimes for the rest of our lives if we don't engage a means to be freed from such.

After significantly limiting the scope of our activities by upholding the vows of moral abstentions, the second limb, *Niyama*, presents moral observances. Also called the *Niyamas*, these are things we can do within our now more limited activity: things that shift us toward an "orientation" in harmony with Realization of Truth. These affirmative observances include:

- * *Śauca* - purity and cleanliness, particularly of the mind
- * *Samtoṣa* (also *Santoṣa*) - contentment: striving to find ways to be content with whatever one encounters
- * *Tapah* (also *Tapas*) - self-discipline and austerities
- * *Svādhyāya* - spiritual study and inquiry
- * *Īśvarapraṇidhānā* - devotion and surrender to the Absolute

Just as with the moral abstentions, it is intended that we live the whole of our lives within these moral observances. These virtues support and cultivate the dissolution of the ego-based orientation as well as attune our lives the "components" of Realization already within us. These "components" are more easily realized when no longer veiled by the caterpillar's body and unending, unrestrained activities.

Let me stress, even with the moral observances, we should be doing less activity than before. It is not only certain types of activities that leave residues that affect the mind, but also too much activity that leaves a hindering residue that impedes meditation and Realization. With less activity that is focused and more inclined to cultivating a mindfulness in harmony with Realization, we will see how moral observances combined with moral abstentions go a long way to setting the space of our cocoon (restraint) and dissolving our ego caterpillar body. A consistent, disciplined approach to our behavior is vital to establishing and sustaining a sound and effective spiritual practice.

The third limb is discipline of posture: *Āsana*. There is a direct and literal connection between how one holds and moves the body and how such affects the mind. When we hold the body erect (focused) yet relaxed, and move with a precise gentleness instead of mindlessly plopping it about the world, we find the mind follows with a similar mental posture. And such a mental posture is better suited to meditation -- and even an overall approach to life.

Even with posture, we find there is a connection between physical / mental posture and our behavior. When we engage in behavior that involves harm, mistruth, stealing, chasing desires, being greedy, it literally bends our posture -- physically and mentally. Even the residue of such behavior bends our posture. Therefore, if we are serious about establishing and maintaining a meditative posture, our behavior -- namely upholding the moral abstentions and moral observances -- plays a key role in such.

This limb calls for us to maintain such posture at all times, not just when meditating. This limb also encompasses maintaining a healthy body and mind (including diet and exercise), since good health is vital to sustaining a meditative posture. Disease, physical and mental, is an obstacle to a sound spiritual practice.

The fourth limb is *Prāṇāyāma*: discipline of *prāṇa* (vital energy). Some focus this limb on just the breath (namely breathing exercises); but the breath is simply one of the most common forms of vital energy the body actively engages since the body is constantly breathing when it is alive. *Prāṇa* expands beyond just the breath and is present in all forms of energy.

As long as we occupy a body and mind, we will engage energy. And we can do so in a way that is in harmony with Realization, realizing an innate steadiness and rhythm that supports the mind (and body) to settle into its own steady rhythm. Steadiness of mind is key to deepening meditation, and as the mind deepens into meditation, the obstacles to Realization are removed. So in learning to master the art of breathing -- realizing a breathing that abides in its own steady rhythm, we can learn an approach by which to engage all the energies we encounter within our life of restrained activity. This is of great importance, because whatever energies we engage are likely to influence “our energy” if we are not grounded in how we engage such energies. And these energies often influence us in ways we underestimate or don’t fully realize.

The fifth limb, *Pratyāhāra*, deals with establishing a disciplined approach to using the senses. As long as we occupy a body and mind, using the senses will be part of our experience. Yet we can utilize the senses in ways that are not in bondage to an ego-based orientation and endless mental consumption. One aspect of this limb is withdrawing the senses when there is a danger of being pulled -- literally dragged -- by them in ways that are counter to a steady mind abiding in the rhythm of a meditative posture. A powerful metaphor used to illustrate this is the tortoise pulling its legs, head, and tail inside its shell when in the presence of danger. The metaphor continues to have value even when the tortoise extends its head, limbs and tail to move about: moving with a slow and determined pace with great awareness.

This was a brief overview of the first five limbs, which set the stage for the three remaining internal limbs. The first five are intended to address our ego-based orientation, which fuels the endless activity of mental consumption, and our behavior. The internal limbs, which include meditation, are not designed to address these. In fact, until we have matured into living the external limbs, we will be greatly hindered in our ability to embrace and “progress” in the internal limbs.

The remaining three limbs are:

- 6) *Dhāraṇā* - concentration of mind;
- 7) *Dhyāna* - contemplation;
- 8) *Samādhi* - there really is no good translation for this term but for the sake of this essay let’s describe it as Realization of Truth.

The way we use the word “meditation” nowadays is broader than how it was used in the past. Meditation, which is often defined as focusing the mind, is sometimes used to refer to all of the internal limbs. In ancient times, meditation would apply only to *Dhāraṇā* since *Dhyāna* and *Samādhi* encompass yet expand beyond the mind.

As stated earlier, how we live the first five limbs directly affects our ability to meditate: to focus / concentrate the mind. Meditation isn't just sitting in a quiet place trying to appear relaxed and zen: it is predicated on stilling (the activity of) the mind by having it rest upon a single focus -- concentration. That focus could be the breath, repeating a mantra, holding a visual in the mind (such as the face of a spiritual master / teacher or spiritual symbol). Spiritual traditions have a range of what this focus of concentration could be and, traditionally, one would use the same focus consistently over time -- not change between various things.

As one meditates, one is constantly turning the mind toward one's focus. If other thoughts arise, one acknowledges them and then returns to one's focus of concentration. If a loud sound is heard breaking one's concentration, one acknowledges the sound and then returns to one's focus of concentration. If a memory arises, one acknowledges the memory (without engaging it) and then returns to one's focus of concentration.

Since there is a direct relation between the mind and body, most meditative practices involve holding the body still, steady, and relaxed to support the mind relaxing into its own steady stillness. One of the disciplines of a sound meditation practice is being mindful to prevent the body from slouching, as well as reestablishing a meditative posture if the body is found slacking.

Another discipline of a sound meditation practice is maintaining a daily practice of meditating. Most spiritual traditions have prescribed times set for when one should meditate, even if set to the position of the sun (i.e. sunrise, sunset, etc.); or such prescription is given by one's spiritual guide or teacher. Traditionally, it would not be left to an aspirant to meditate whenever one feels like it since a consistency of set times helps to discipline the mind and restrain its tendency to wander.

With continuous daily practice, as well as upholding the external limbs, the mind starts to settle into its own quietude. Such can occur even if thoughts continue to pass through the mind without being engaged. As the mind quiets, we drop into deeper levels of awareness: *Dhyāna*. I like to use the metaphor that when the mind becomes quiet enough, our attention is drawn beyond the mind to the heart. And our attention is drawn there, we don't make it go there. The heart is significant because the Absolute, that which we truly are, abides in the heart of every being.

Dhāraṇā involves effort, sometimes continuous effort, of constantly turning our wandering mind back to the focus of concentration. *Dhyāna* is effortless, and we literally slip into the heart's awareness when the mind has become quiet enough. For some people, it may take months or even years of practicing *Dhāraṇā* to be drawn into *Dhyāna* -- another reason most spiritual

traditions that embrace meditation advise establishing a consistent daily meditation practice. As the five external limbs dissolve the caterpillar body, *Dhāraṇā* focuses the mind to allow the components of the butterfly body to be realized. *Dhyāna* starts to assemble those components from what has been revealed. And when we start to be drawn regularly into *Dhyāna*, spiritual transformation starts to happen on its own.

Let's use the metaphor of a rose garden to illustrate how spiritual transformation starts to happen. If you go and sit in a rose garden everyday, it is only a matter of time before you start to smell like roses. Just by being in the roses' presence consistently and continuously, their fragrance will effortlessly come to rest upon you, replacing your previous scent. With *Dhyāna*, we are regularly being drawn into the presence of the Absolute who abides in our heart, even if we don't realize It (yet). And when the fragrance of the Absolute comes to rest upon us, we will live differently if we aren't caught up (attached) in the habits of old ways.

Again, the five external limbs are designed to break the bondage of the old habits of (excessive) mental consumption and ego-orientation, not the internal limbs -- not meditation. Sages across time have said we will not be drawn -- granted admittance -- into the rose garden of the Absolute until we have addressed our behavior and ego-orientation. In a similar manner, there is a dress and behavior code we must uphold to be allowed entry into the White House: we will not be admitted if we show up naked, smelly, and are acting wildly.

As one is drawn into the depths of *Dhyāna*, we eventually experience tastes of *Samādhi*: Realization of Truth. But abiding in *Samādhi* goes beyond having tastes of such experiences: the "state" of Realization becomes our way of living. Having a taste is like experiencing the lightness of being a butterfly within the cocoon (after the caterpillar body has dissolved), and getting a sense of what it's like to fly. But when the butterfly emerges from the cocoon and its way of movement is flight, that is the state of abiding as a butterfly: that is flying.

It is helpful to be clear about what spiritual transformation entails. A caterpillar cannot become a butterfly if it doesn't stop living as a caterpillar: it must enter a cocoon to dissolve its caterpillar body to become a butterfly -- this is required. Neither do butterflies crawl on the ground and engage in endless consumption: the butterfly way of life is not that of a caterpillar. Now, a delusional caterpillar can burrow into a log and think it is in a cocoon. Don't laugh: many more of us are doing this than realize. And even if that burrowed caterpillar experiences some of the things that occur in a cocoon, a caterpillar burrowed in a log will not emerge as a butterfly.

IF WE ARE TRULY SERIOUS...

So let's bring things back to the guy I mentioned in the beginning of this essay. He is right, in a way, to inquire why after years of consistent meditation practice with spiritual study he has not attained a lasting spiritual awakening. Just as with most things, one is right to question why one has not reached reasonable results when one is putting in the work. A serious inquiry may reveal

the work we're doing is not suited to the expected results. To meditate daily without a committed living of the five external limbs amounts to putting in work that is not suited to producing the results of spiritual transformation. The five external limbs are suited to setting the stage for spiritual transformation: namely by dissolving the caterpillar body (of endless mental consumption and the ego-based orientation) which veils the butterfly components within us. Meditation without living these first five limbs will rarely result in spiritual transformation.

Traces of this guy's lingering mental consumption and ego-based orientation were evident within the short interaction I had with him. Checking his cell phone numerous times while we talked and heading off to hang out with the fellas strongly suggest he is still operating with a caterpillar framework. In fact, there is a danger that his daily meditation and spiritual studies are being used to fuel a spiritual ego: one which justifies maintaining (and often expanding) one's ego-based orientation and excessive mental consumption by the fact that he's doing some "spiritual" activities that are supposed to restrain and overcome these factors.

If we are serious about our meditation practice, we need to get serious about upholding ALL the components of a wholistic spiritual practice of which meditation is a part. And a wholistic spiritual practice is a way, not the only way, to Realization of Truth. In fact, people throughout the ages have arrived at Realization of Truth by embracing ways that included the first five limbs yet never meditated; whereas there are many people who meditate regularly without fully upholding the first five limbs, only to remain in ignorance. Fortunately, most of us don't have to choose between the first five limbs and meditation: we can embrace the complete package of external and internal limbs as Patañjali presents. But with that said, we shouldn't glorify meditation over the other limbs. In fact, if we are truly serious about our meditation practice, we should not treat it as separate from living the first five limbs with an uncompromising commitment.

If we are serious about realizing the butterfly within us, which is awaiting our realization of it, we need to stop undercutting our meditation practice by not fully living the other limbs. We need to address any lack of discipline: the first five limbs are disciplines that will prove successful if we don't waver in our commitment to uphold and live them all. Yes, there will be challenges in surrendering to live the whole of our lives within the smaller, restrained space of the first five limbs. But guess what: there are challenges and suffering in living unrestrained lives that are in bondage to ego-based ignorance. So let us make our struggle worth it in the end, for the natural outcome of enduring the cocoon process is to become a beautiful butterfly.

Let me briefly address some other common ways people undercut their meditation practice.

We need to stop undercutting our meditation practice (really, our whole spiritual practice) with immoral and excessive behavior. Although these are addressed by living the first five limbs, the importance of our behavior cannot be overemphasized. Checking our behavior means restraining it in the midst of our engagement of the world. The things we know we should do, we should do.

The things we know we shouldn't do, we should not do. No amount of meditation will control our behavior for us, that is something we must do for ourselves.

Morality is the foundation of all spiritual practices that arrive at spiritual transformation. Too many of us put in countless hours meditating, only to undercut the benefits of such with our behavior. And not just with "evil" deeds: I've seen too many people complete a meditation session and the first thing they do is grab a cell phone -- following up what is intended to be a period of mental quietude with mental consumption. I've seen people start to gossip and chit-chat right after meditating, or run off to get a drink and party -- immediately undercutting any fruits of their meditation. The cocoon life is not a worldly life: this is a fundamental aspect of a sound spiritual practice. If we are not willing or ready to enter the cocoon, that is fine; but let's not pretend or play games with a spiritual practice.

Another common way people undercut their meditation practice is the company they keep. Every spiritual tradition I've studied warns about this. In fact, the *Yoga Sutras* explicitly state we should delight in the virtuous and disregard the wicked (Book 1, Verse 33). Contextually, "the wicked" are those who are living in ways counter to arriving at Realization of Truth. It is very likely that the fellas this guy was going to hang out with are not interested in Realization -- such is the case with most people who hang out. Disregarding them doesn't mean we condemn them, but it surely doesn't mean we should immerse ourselves in their company. Most wicked people live in ego-based orientations, and keeping their company usually reinforces and encourages such an orientation in ourselves, even if done with pleasant or clever facades. On the other hand, the virtuous are committed to living in ways that restrain and eventually dissolve their egos. Remember, if you want to smell like roses, go and sit in a rose garden. But that also means you should be looking to live as a rose too. In the same regard, if you continuously sit in a garbage dump, you'll end up smelling like...

Another common way people undercut their meditation practice is by constantly engaging in opinions, especially commentary and judgments -- even if unspoken. We should be heedful of the subtle and clever ways we engage in opinions: offering advice, just "staying informed," complaining, etc. Opinions are a major sustaining force of ego-based orientations and if we wish to dissolve these we need to get out of the opinion business. One of the dangers of opinions is their lingering mental residue: one might be surprised upon reflecting that the majority of things that pop up in one's mind while meditating are things we have opinions about. If we are in the habit of formulating and holding opinions, these things will continue to arise in the mind.

A first step in restraining opinions is to not engage the ones that arise and allow them to pass. Yet a more comprehensive "solution" involves ceasing with formulating and holding opinions. Most opinions are about things other than one's self, so it's helpful to keep the focus on one's self: making sure we're upholding the tenets of our spiritual practice in this (and every) present moment. "Minding your own business" will go a long way to dealing with our opinions. We will then find that the way of dealing with opinions about others -- shifting our focus to

upholding our practice, also works with opinions about ourselves. Thus, we will be able to abide in quietude: silence, externally and internally, is the best language for the cocoon.

Lastly, the importance of diet. Traditional Yoga speaks about the *guṇas*, which are fundamental elements of nature / energy. The three *guṇas* are:

- * *Sattva*: often described as good, pure, transparent
- * *Rajas*: passion-oriented and very active
- * *Tamas*: lazy, dull, destructive, ignorant

Whereas we all have traces of each *guṇa* within us, one is usually more predominant until we transcend the *guṇas*. Most people are caught up in *Rajas* (i.e. endless mental consumption and activity) or *Tamas* (i.e. laziness and ignorance). Traditional Yoga encourages us to cultivate *Sattva* to be the predominant *guṇa*, as this one is most inclined toward Realization of Truth.

With that said, eating is one of the most influential activities we engage: in fact, most people live their lives around food and periods of eating. Many have heard the axiom: you are what you eat. Traditional Yoga embraces this principle by explicitly speaking to the importance of having a *Sattvic* diet: a diet in line with the qualities of *Sattva*. To describe it simply in modern language: a *Sattvic* diet consists of mostly fresh fruits and vegetables, supplemented by other foods that promote health, strength, and (true) happiness. It is also a diet of moderation, where one doesn't eat too little or too much. A *Sattvic* diet also fosters steadiness of mind and body.

Too many people are embracing meditation, or even a more expansive spiritual practice, in unhealthy states: with minds and bodies afflicted by disease. In the ancient context, even lingering aches and pains that many now consider normal would be considered disease because they cause bodily and mental dis-ease. Disease also impedes our ability to concentrate and fulfill other components of spiritual practice. One way to address to this is a *Sattvic* diet, instead of a *Rajasic* diet that is often suited to (ego-based) tastes or a *Tamasic* diet that is insufficient to sustain health and often promotes disease. Having the mind and body in a state of vibrant health goes a long way to establishing and maintaining a sound and effective meditation (and overall spiritual) practice.

If we are truly serious about spiritual transformation, we would be wise to embrace with vigor all the components of a wholistic spiritual practice. We will also find that such an embrace will effortlessly move us toward solitude: where we are content with the self by the self, even if that is in the company of others who are also drawn to the beauty of solitude. We will find ourselves engaging in less activities. The purpose of the cocoon is not to replace an excess of worldly activities with an excess of "spiritual" ones: that instead of gossiping the night away you now spend hours engaged in "enlightening" conversations with other spiritual folk or reading spiritual books and articles. Such can become a means of spiritualizing our ego-based orientations, not dissolving them to be transformed. The cocoon period is a time for less overall activity.

If we are truly serious about spiritual transformation, we will also stop blaming others and situations for why we are not progressing toward transformation. Once we are informed of what constitutes a wholistic spiritual practice, there is usually only one reason why we don't progress: we are not sufficiently restraining our ego and its accompanying activities. There is no greater problem on the spiritual journey than one's own unrestrained ego.

So to close with the riddle: How do you tell someone who is egotistical that they're egotistical? Answer: You don't.... Each person must come to such a realization one's self, if one ever does... But be wise, and make sure that if you encounter such a person that you are restraining whatever remains of your own ego, so it may be completely dissolved. Thus, you may realize who you truly are beyond the fallacy of an imaginary ego -- I mean, a caterpillar who has within it the reality of a glorious butterfly...

There is nothing so simple as being the Self.
It requires no effort, no aid. One has to leave off the wrong identity
and be in one's eternal, natural, inherent state.

from *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*

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