

THE YOGA OF NINE EMOTIONS

An Interview with Peter Marchand

Author and teacher Peter Marchand gives us an overview of *Rasa Sadhana*, an ancient practice of gaining mastery over the emotions that originated in India and that he learned from his teacher Harish Johari, a great Tantra Yoga master.

Integral Yoga Magazine: What are these nine *rasas*?

Peter Marchand: *Rasa* has different meanings in Sanskrit. The original usage in the *Rig Veda* is translated as, “essence, extract or juice.” We can refer to the *rasas* as emotional essences, or essential emotions—it translates the same way. When we say essence we refer to the energetic level, which is where the *rasas* exist. Another important translation of *rasa* is the blood plasma, the watery liquid of the blood. The plasma contains many nutrients as well as neurotransmitters and other chemicals affecting emotions. This juice reflects the essential energy called *rasa* on the physical level.

The nine *rasas* are: *shringara* (love), *hasya* (joy), *adbhuta* (wonder), *shanta* (calmness), *raudra* (anger), *veerya* (courage), *karuna* (sadness), *bhayanaka* (fear) and *vibhatsa* (disgust).

From each *rasa* various emotions may emerge, but the *rasa* is the same basic energy even though there may be a different chemical makeup and mental aspect to the specific emotion. A good example is *shringara rasa*, in which you may have love for your partner or love of a friend or love of art. These are all different kinds of love, with different chemicals and neural patterns involved, but still the same essential emotion and supported by the same underlying energy, or *rasa* of love.

IYM: Is *Rasa Sadhana* something new or where does it come from?

PM: My teacher said that *Rasa Sadhana* originated thousands of years ago in the ancient *gurukula* (school system) system in India, where children of ages six or seven were sent to live with the gurus, or teachers. There, the normal household life was going on, and the children learned by helping in the household and getting some instruction here and there. It was like what we know as an apprenticeship type of system. When the students reached the age of adolescence, the guru would give them these kinds of emotional exercises. They would say, “Today no one will be angry.” It’s a simple practice. It’s a *rasa* fast; you are abstaining, or fasting, from a particular emotion for a particular amount of time. There’s not a lot of preparation needed but it’s very powerful. Later stages involve purifying and refining the agreeable *rasas*. For example, we can practice by loving everyone for a day or so. The next day, we are free again to discriminate, as people usually do. In this way, we can work with each of the *rasas*.

IYM: In your book you talk about the link between the body, *koshas* and emotions.

PM: There are five *koshas* or sheaths of consciousness. *Pranamaya kosha*—the second *kosha* after the *annamaya* or physical sheath—is the vital, or *pranic*, energy body. (The other three sheaths are mental, wisdom and bliss). The *rasas* exist on the *pranic* level and affect all *koshas*. The *rasas* enable communication between the physical body and the mind (*manomaya kosha*). When the body is in an angry state, we think angry thoughts because our energy body has become enflamed by the *rasa* of anger. Imagine that someone does something that makes us angry: The *rasa* of anger is generated in the mind, and this translates the emotion to the body. The body becomes rigid, we feel tense, the fire element starts dominating and we become red. This may cause us to even identify more with the anger, because we feel it in the body. Likewise, if someone is feeling hot because the weather is hot, it’s much easier for that person to get angry.

So, it’s a feedback loop. The mind and body are able to strengthen each other through the intermediary of the *rasa*. According to Ayurveda, the *rasas* affect the three humors or *doshas* in the body: *kapha* (mucus), *pitta* (bile) and *vata* (wind). For example, you can feel fine one moment and then you eat some garlic, and this may cause a disturbance of the *vata dosha*, making your mind a little more agitated. This may lead you to realize that it’s almost the beginning of the month and you’re not sure how you will pay your rent. You begin to worry and the mind gets deeper into it, the *vata dosha* becomes more and more disturbed, and then it becomes really difficult to stop thinking about your financial situation. That is an example of a negative feedback loop between body and mind.

IYM: Why is it so hard to get out of these feedback loops, and what can we do?

PM: The *rasas* create emotional residues in body chemistry and in the neural patterns of the brain. Imagine that someone has a fight with his wife in the morning and then he is driving to work. The car in front of him is slow to move after the light turns green, and he suddenly reacts in a very angry way. Why? The energy is still in his body from the fight with his wife. If our brain patterns and blood chemistries are already agitated, then it is very easy to become angry. That is why, when we do *rasa sadhana*, it helps to pay attention to our diet and to purifying the body. Ayurveda is very helpful for purifying the body, and it’s quite easy to work on the *doshas* in this way.

IYM: What is the relationship between the *doshas*, *rasas* and *gunas*?

PM: Of the three *doshas*, anger is *pitta* dominated, fear is *vata* dominated, sadness and disgust are *kapha* dominated. Someone who is overheated already, with too much *pitta*, easily gets angry and needs to drink more water and take other cooling substances to balance this *dosha*. If someone is *kapha* dominated and easily depressed or sad, you can give that person more spicy food which will help in removing these *rasas*. With a *vata* imbalance that is causing anxiety and worry, adding more hot spices to the food will also help because they will expel the excess air from the body.

The three *gunas* are the essential qualities of universal energy. When the *sattwa guna* (lightness) is predominant, we feel very contented and pleasant emotions develop. If *tamas* (dullness) is predominant, we may feel depression and sadness. If we are in a *rajasic* or very active state, anger and fear easily manifest. Yoga enables us to work, not only on the body and mind, but also directly on the *prana* through *pranayama*. When we are in a *tamasic* state, we don't have enough energy to cope with our life, and *pranayama* may add the needed energy. We can also engage the senses in positive ways when we are feeling sad by working in the garden, listening to nice music, lighting some incense. This may not *solve* our problems, but it may help lighten the mood and move us into more conducive states of mind in order to work with our problems. In fact, our unpleasant moods are the true source of our problems.

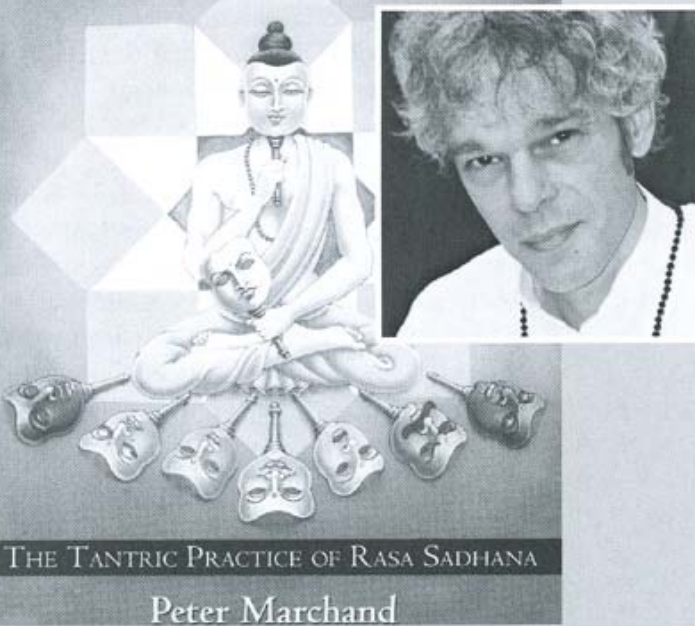
IYM: In your book and workshops you teach *Rasa Sadhana*. How do we practice that?

PM: While it's nice to work in the garden and plant flowers, that's not *sadhana*. *Sadhana* is a *discipline* we do to get more control over our emotions. We start with the unpleasant emotions, because they make it difficult to maintain pleasant emotions. For example, when anger is present in body and mind, it's harder to develop true love. To be truly happy, we have to first stop being unhappy. Many people find this first step hard. They feel, "Well, I can't help it if I get sad, afraid, depressed or angry." They feel they have limited power over their emotions, but, that's not true. You have this power, only you don't feel you have it! By doing this *sadhana* for just a day or two you will see you have this power. You have to learn to do it like you learn to ride a bike—you have to practice and gain self-confidence. My main problem in teaching this approach to people is that they don't believe they actually decide how they feel! If I can make them understand that, it's easy then, 90 percent of the job is done. We do have this control, but you need to be fast. You have to recognize the unpleasant emotions quickly and deal with them right away, before they take over.

IYM: How?

PM: Very simply. You promise yourself: "I will not be angry today. I can be angry tomorrow, but not today." When we do that, a strange thing happens: When an irritation comes and

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The cover of Peter Marchand's book on *Rasa Sadhana* (inset, the author).

anger develops, we remember the promise we made to ourselves and suddenly the anger becomes an *object*. Normally, anger just creeps up and we feel: "I am angry"—the object has become the subject. There is a rapid identification with the anger, and then there seems to be no way out. When, however, I remember my promise, then I am making a *choice* about how to feel. When I do that, I realize that I am *always* making that choice—either consciously or unconsciously. So, that's an important realization.

Rasa Sadhana also gives us certain tools with which to work. If we experience anger, for example, we can ask: "Why am I getting angry? Yes, John went behind my back and that made me angry, but what did I expect?" If you meet a crook and that person does something bad to you, you knew what to expect. But if a friend does something wrong, you get angry. Why? You had the expectation that he wouldn't do that, but he did. You can also ask many other questions to help yourself resist the anger, like "How is getting angry going to help?" But, the main trick is to remember the promise and experience the anger as an object before it takes over.

IYM: Maybe we can do that for a day, but after that how do we avoid just suppressing emotions?

PM: Most people come back to my class and say it was quite easy to do this for a day. So, then I tell them make it once a week. When they feel it's too easy, they can make it two or three days and then a week, a month, a year and then it may become continual. I've been doing this for five or six years. Unpleasant feelings still may come, but I look at them in a different way; I've developed a different

relationship with them. I usually ask: “What are you telling me?” Negative emotions are telling us that something is wrong, and what is wrong is usually something to do with our expectations and desires not being fulfilled. So, the moment I realize what the feeling is about, I say, “Thank you very much and now go!”

Rasa Sadhana is not about suppressing unpleasant emotions—it’s about not having them and especially about not letting them outstay their welcome. The emotions we want to nurture are the positive and health-producing ones. It is healthy and very natural to be happy! Unhappiness is unnatural. The Self, who we truly are, is entirely happy. Personally, I don’t even believe it’s possible to really suppress feelings, even if sometimes people can suppress the memory of some event that caused a very unpleasant emotion. If I am suppressing anger, I am still angry inside. I just don’t let it come out, but, it’s still there, grumbling in the dark. For some people who have a basic timidity in expressing emotions, the first step is to learn to express them. It’s better to let it out. Better to shout. To push these emotions down is entirely unhealthy. The acidity that accompanies anger *rasa* affects the blood and becomes harmful. It can cause arteriosclerosis and many other diseases.

However, there is a clear distinction between suppressing emotions and *eliminating* them. Saying “no” to negative emotions is very natural. Who wants to be unhappy? Those who have that kind of control are regarded as very nice people. Why do we like saints? Because they are so nice! They don’t give us any trouble [*laughs*]. If sometimes they do show anger, it’s to teach their disciples, make them listen, so for them it’s a game, it’s their job. They don’t really feel it. All unhappiness is just the game of the ego. You can have it. It’s your right to be sad, angry and so on—that’s the drama of life. But you also have the right to say, “I’m done with it,” and that’s what the yogi says. For me, there is nothing *unnatural* about not wanting to be unhappy. That’s natural for me.

IYM: Is there a *Rasa Sadhana* of positive emotions?

PM: Sure, another aspect is that when you can get rid of negative emotions, positive emotions can naturally develop. Most people would agree that love is the most important, treasured emotion. But how many people are able to really love? How many are too crippled by negative emotions to love purely and unconditionally? Truly, if we can learn to eliminate our unpleasant emotions, then the pleasant ones will develop and flourish. There is a *Rasa Sadhana* of pleasant emotions, but it’s more subtle. For a period of time, we simply try to stay in one of these *rasas*. To stay in joy for a long time is hard; it’s easy to get pulled out into the “seriousness” of our lives. To love everyone and everything we meet is not so easy, but it’s good exercise. The idea is to learn to let it come out naturally, rather than learning to control it as with the unpleasant emotions.

IYM: How did you get involved in this *sadhana*?

PM: For me it was a slow process. I learned this *sadhana* from my teacher in 1997. After my teacher left his body in 1999, I practiced more seriously. We had tapes of his lectures, and I listened for many years, over and over. Slowly I tried to apply it—often really not believing I could do it for a long period of time—by doing the *sadhana*, I started to gain confidence and by 2002, I was completely rid of all persistent unpleasant emotions. They may still drop in to say “hello,” just to meet my “thank you, bye bye,” but that is all. Of course, when my father died last year, I cried. We have to experience our feelings, but they don’t have to *possess* us. So I had to learn this slowly by myself, while from the experience with my students, I now know that it’s a very easy, fast and powerful tool. Some of them only needed a few months of practice to reach a really durable level of true happiness. You just have to do it.

It’s very nice to go to a Yoga class or to meditate, and when we finish, we feel very peaceful. But, what happens after class or after meditation? When we leave the mat, how happy do we remain? How much are we troubled by unpleasant emotions? By doing *rasa* fasts, I learned I could overcome them. I exercised my ability to keep a distance. And, if I *exercised*, I felt happier and that is the direct benefit of this *sadhana*. This practice also increased my spiritual understanding and allowed me to reach much deeper levels of meditation. I had read and studied about Jnana Yoga for years. I understood the words, the philosophy, the concepts, but only after practicing *Rasa Sadhana* did a true understanding of Jnana Yoga dawn. That later led to my writing the book, *The Yoga of Truth*.

This understanding emerged because of the contentment I felt as a result of *Rasa Sadhana*. When we are content, the ego drops off very easily. It is the ego that makes it difficult to accept the truths that Jnana Yoga teaches. The ego is unhappy because it truly does not exist and knows it. From that unhappiness, desires arise, a want for things that we believe will remove the unhappy feeling or that will bring another feeling. However, things can’t remove our unhappiness, only we can. We just use things as an excuse to be happy or unhappy, while they truly don’t matter. We are happy if we allow ourselves to be happy and stay happy. That is the essence and the fruit of practicing *Rasa Sadhana*.

Peter Marchand is one of the founders of Sanatan Society, an organization of the family and students of Harish Johari. Peter lives in Belgium and teaches Rasa Sadhana and Jnana Yoga around the world. He is the author of The Yoga of the Nine Emotions and The Yoga of Truth (featured in our Fall 2007 issue) available from www.innertraditions.com. For more information about Peter Marchand, visit: www.rasas.info, which contains video clips of him teaching Rasa Sadhana.