

Santosha

Santosha is that point in our journey where we arrive at a true and deep enjoyment of life. It is described in Yoga Sutra 2.42, where Patanjali says: "By contentment, supreme joy is obtained."

Santosha is not consolation

Santosha is typically defined as meaning "contentment". But like so many translations, these words are not a precise match. Contentment in the English language is a passive term. It can be a second-best outcome, where we accept our lot in life without any effort to do better. Santosha is very different. It is an active approach to achieving happiness.

Santosha is not fatalism. Rather, it is quite the opposite. It means rising above external circumstances and being in full control of your life.

Santosha is a pivotal step in our life's journey, where we find everything we need for true and lasting happiness.

"The literal translation from Sanskrit is 'pure contentment', however, santosha holds more depth and poetic beauty within its meaning. Santosha is having and maintaining the ability to flow in life, to have sheer awareness of oneself and the external world, to live fully in the present moment, to be happy and at peace"¹

Overcoming our inherent negativity bias

Santosha applies to the present moment. It means finding happiness now – not sometime in the future, not in the past, but right now in this moment and every moment. This concept is crucial as it addresses a well-known psychological problem – the negativity bias.

Research has shown that people tend to focus more on negative events than positive ones. Our minds tend to dwell on bad memories. We react more strongly to negative criticism than praise. Neuroscience has found that negative stimuli elicit a larger brain response than positive stimuli.

There are techniques to overcome this negativity bias. They can be thought of as effectively rewiring the brain, to strengthen its positive connections. One technique is to observe our thoughts. The moment we observe a negative thought happening, we replace it with a positive thought.

¹ Emma Malarkey (2012) *Santosha*, <https://www.azulfit.com/santosh/>.



Replacing negative thoughts with a positive statement

Think of a positive quality that you want to see in yourself. It can be a Sankalpa, which is a vow that comes from the heart and is a link to the highest truth, or you can use any affirmation. Choose a Sankalpa or affirmation that can be stated in a few words. Say it out loud three times. Commit it to memory.

The moment you feel a negative thought coming on, repeat this statement silently in your mind three times. Do this every time you notice a negative thought.

Another technique is to practice living in the present moment. Dwelling on the past can lead to depression. Worrying about the future can lead to anxiety. By living in the present moment, we avoid these tendencies towards either depression or anxiety. In yoga we practice awareness in the present moment, beginning with awareness of our body and graduating to awareness of our mind. We use our breath as a bridge from body to mind.

Mindfulness Meditation

Sit in a comfortable position. Gently close your eyes. Relax your whole body, starting at your toes and working your way up to your head. Bring your awareness to your breath. Take your focus to the area between the top of your lip and the bottom of your nose. Feel a slight coolness as you inhale and a slight warmth as you exhale. Spend a few minutes in stillness observing this area (you may wish to use a timer). You may find your mind wandering off on all sorts of thought trains. This is natural. When you notice your mind wandering, gently bring it back to observing your breath.

Don't delay happiness

We have all been guilty of delaying happiness. How often have we thought: "I'll be happier when ..." Fill in the blanks: ... when I get to go on a holiday; ... when the house is tidy; ... when I have paid my debts; ... when I get that promotion; ... when I lose a few kilos; ... when I get a new car; etc.

There is no excuse for waiting to find happiness

Santosha means appreciating what we have right now

This does not mean not having any goals to strive for. Rather, it means not being held hostage by those goals. Yes, we strive to achieve something worthy, but if anything goes wrong and we don't achieve that goal, it is OK.



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Non-attachment

My philosophy teacher in India spoke a lot about non-attachment. He explained how important it was for understanding the Bhagavad-Gita and Patanjali's Yoga Sutras.

"Each one has to find his peace from within. And peace to be real must be unaffected by outside circumstances"

(Mahatma Gandhi)

This is the essence of non-attachment – not being affected by outside circumstances. Gandhi, who studied the Bhagavad-Gita extensively, taught and practiced non-attachment beautifully. The following story is provided by Sant Rajinder Singh.²

Gandhi was boarding a train. Just as he was going inside, one of his shoes slipped off and got caught on the track. He tried to pull it but could not. People standing near watched him. When he was unable to pull the shoe from the track, he took off the other shoe as well and threw it on the track right at the spot where the first one was stuck.

The astonished passengers asked, "Why are you throwing the other shoe onto the track?" Gandhi replied, "The poor man who finds the shoe lying on the track will now have a pair he can use."

Look at the vision. There are many lessons in this story. First, most people would be so upset about losing one shoe. They would be upset, hassled and distressed. If they are without shoes, then they would have to go barefoot, or wait to buy another pair. Their whole journey would be affected by the 'loss' of the shoe.

What did Gandhi do? He did not let the loss of the shoe mar his clarity of thinking. Rather, he weighed the situation, and came up with a brilliant idea. If he could not use the shoe, then someone else should get the help. Even in the loss, he was generous and caring. He thought he could use this as an opportunity to make a contribution to some poor person who might need shoes.

How many of us turn a bad situation into a good one? How many of us see the brighter side of a difficult situation? We can learn a lot from Gandhi's way of life.

This anecdote also shows us another aspect of the Mahatma's life, which is non-attachment. When we are not attached to anything, we are free. If someone were attached to his shoes, then his whole train ride would have been caught up in the web of anger, despair and hopelessness. This would have completely drained that person.

By releasing his shoes, Gandhi showed how he was not attached to them. He could give them up and move on. He could spend the rest of his time in productive thoughts, instead of sulking over what could not be regained. Thus, Gandhi freed himself from attachment and gained freedom in return.

² Sant Rajinder Singh (2013) *Lessons from Gandhi*, <https://www.dailypioneer.com/2013/sunday-edition/lessons-from-gandhi.html>



The “to-do” list

How many of us become slaves to our “to-do” list? We look at what we want to do and create a list, then work our way through it. That is a logical way of making progress. But life seems to get in the way of this progress. Bills come in, things break and need repairing, birthdays or other events come up. Things get added to the “to-do” list seemingly faster than we get through the list, so it never ends.

If we attach happiness to the completion of tasks on our “to-do” list, then that sense of happiness will continually be out of reach. There is no need to get rid of our “to-do” list. Rather, we need to get rid of our sense of attachment to its completion. The list is not the problem – it is our attitude that needs to change.

If we are not attached to the outcome, then we no longer are a slave to our “to-do” list. Instead, it becomes the useful tool it should be – reminding us of the tasks we wish to complete and helping us to prioritise these tasks.

Desire

*“There is contentment and tranquility when the flame
of the spirit does not waver in the wind of desire”*

(BKS Iyengar)

Our to-do list is a list of actions to take to achieve things we desire. There is nothing wrong with having desire, or using a to-do list, as long as we are in control and not the other way around. If we worry about our to-do list, then the list is controlling us. As long as our desires are in control, we cannot find lasting happiness.

Think about what you want – a new car, the latest phone, a larger house – the list can be endless. Indeed, the path of desire is endless. Each time we get something we desire, we get a “high”, but it doesn’t last. Desire is like a drug, where you taste fleeting moments of joy, but never experience lasting happiness. Desire is an endless treadmill, where an ongoing want for more means we are never satisfied and this leads to a subtle pervading unhappiness.

Dealing with desire poses a dilemma. Without any desire at all, we would have no motivation to achieve anything. Spiritual growth requires achievement. It requires a desire to progress. So some desire is necessary. What is important is to control desire so that it serves you, rather than having desire control you.

Ego

The key to controlling desire is understanding ego. This means taking an honest look at why we do what we do and want what we want. Is our motivation pure, or is it driven by ego?



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When practicing asana, we see others doing a pose that we want to be able to do – our ego drives us to be competitive. But in the process, we risk causing injury by doing something that is not right for our body. Ego can be harmful in many ways, sometimes physically, but mostly mentally.

Ego can be dangerous. If we compare ourselves with others and think of ourselves as better than others, we risk becoming pompous. On the other hand, if we feel we are not as good as others, we risk being demoralised. Regardless of whether we are better or worse, it is lose-lose.

Ego does have value in terms of providing us with an identity and a sense of self-worth. However, it needs to be carefully controlled. For spiritual growth, it is essential to learn how to control our ego.

Acceptance

To control ego, we need to learn how to accept what we are and what we have right now in this present moment as being totally OK. This means we should stop judging ourselves and stop judging others.

Appearance

Think about yourself. Are you content with how you look? Do you feel overweight? Do you find fault in yourself?

Find someone you know well. Yoga teaches us to see the beauty of the soul – the true beauty within each of us. Can you see the beauty in your friend?

Take a moment to talk to your friend, describing their positive qualities.

We all find fault with how we look, even supermodels do. But if we can see the true beauty within other people, shouldn't we also view ourselves in the same way?

Have your friend describe your positive qualities. Listen with an open heart and acceptance of who you are.

Physical appearance is only skin-deep. Santosha requires acceptance of who we truly are – that beautiful self that is so much deeper than our physical appearance.

There are the many people with severe disabilities. I feel privileged to have taught students with Down's Syndrome. I saw the beauty inside each of them. Most of us are lucky to have "normal" appearance. Learn to see the beauty within others and within yourself.

Instead of desiring change to fix what we perceive as wrong with our lives, we find contentment through seeing what is right.



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Is your glass half-full?

Are you a glass half-full or glass half-empty person? Be honest. These are two ways of looking at the same situation – positively or negatively. It is all a matter of perspective.

People with positive perspectives tend to live longer, happier lives.

We all experience ups and downs throughout our lives. The “ups” are easy. It is how we handle the “downs” that defines our journey to Santosha. We can think of the “downs” as problems (glass half-empty) or as challenges (glass half-full).

Turning problems into challenges is a matter of perspective.

Put all problems into perspective by considering:

1. **Time:** Throughout our lives, problems come and they go. If we bear this in mind the next time we have a problem, we will know that the problem is only fleeting – it will pass.
2. **What is important:** How big is the issue you are dealing with? Is being stuck in traffic really a big issue? Will being a few minutes late have a lasting impact on your life? Don't get caught up in the trivial issues. Don't make a big drama out of something that isn't worth sacrificing your health.

Love – the bedrock of Santosha

When we take a positive attitude to life, learning to appreciate all that we have, seeing the beauty in others and in ourselves – when we practice all of this while living in the present moment – life takes on a new sense of wonder and amazement.

Santosha is so much more than merely being content. The practice of Santosha is the practice of being in love with life.

Analyse feelings

When feeling unhappy, for whatever reason. Think deeply about what is driving this emotion. Where does the sadness or anger come from? When we take an honest look at ourselves, we find that ego underpins unhappiness. Try replacing ego with love. This is Saucha, the Niyama that comes before Santosha.



The Second Niyama

Patanjali described 8 limbs of yoga:

- Yama
- Niyama
- Asana
- Pranayama
- Pratyahara
- Dharana
- Dhyana
- Samadhi.

The first two limbs, Yama and Niyama, guide us in how we think and behave. There are five Yamas and five Niyamas. Santosha is the second of the Niyamas, coming after Saucha and before Tapas. The preceding Yamas plus Saucha prepare us for Santosha.

- Ahimsa (non-violence), the first Yama teaches us kindness. It provides the foundations for everything that follows.
- Satya (truthfulness) encourages honesty in how we look at others and ourselves.
- Asteya (non-stealing) teaches us not to want what others have. It helps us overcome ego.
- Brahmacharya (right use of energy) teaches us self-control
- Aparigraha (non-greed, non-attachment) teaches us to let go of what we don't need.
- The last three Yamas; Asteya, Brahmacharya and Aparigraha, all help us control desire.

The Yamas lay the groundwork for the Niyamas. They teach us to control desire and attachment. This allows us to then achieve Saucha – purity of action and thought. It is where love overcomes ego. When we are able to apply Saucha, when our thoughts come from love, Santosha naturally follows.

Santosha is necessary before we move to Tapas. Tapas means commitment and austerity. It is our personal drive to succeed. Success requires overcoming hurdles. Santosha gives us that non-attachment to outcomes that allows us to stay committed regardless of any setbacks. Santosha prepares us for Tapas.



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