

The *Rasas*

The flavors of life

I. Introduction:

Today we discuss the *Rasas*, the essences, flavors, or tastes of life.¹ A particularly nice translation of the word is “delectable sublimity,” referring to the single most refined aspect of something, as, for example, how honey is the essence of a flower’s juices.² In the case of our discussion tonight, the “something” we will discuss is essence of each of our raw emotions as identified through India’s classic theory of aesthetics, drawn from the study of drama, dance, and literature.³

II. The context for our discussion of the *Rasas*.

We discuss the *Rasas* because they are another means for fully experiencing the rich potential of our lives, as well as increasing our capacity to connect to Supreme Consciousness.

- A. The focus of this course is learning to use yoga practices and philosophy to create a life of well-being. We’ve identified such a life as one filled with five attributes. The first attribute is positive emotions such as joy, gratitude, serenity, curiosity, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe, and love.⁴ The other four attributes are: engagement, meaning, accomplishments, and nurturing relationships.⁵
- B. We began our study of yoga by looking in some detail at the true nature of Supreme Consciousness, with the understanding that in non-dual Tantric philosophy we share that nature as diverse expressions of the Divine. Supreme Consciousness experiences the world as each of us. This true nature includes attributes such as self-awareness, abundance, creative joy, freedom, and fullness of spirit, to name a few.⁶

¹ Feuerstein, Dr. Georg (2001 ed). *The Yoga Tradition*. Prescott, AZ: Hohm Press, at 289–290.

² Mahony, Dr. William (2010). *Exquisite Love*. The Woodlands, TX: Anusara Press, at 47–48.

³ White, Dr. David Gordon (1996). *The Alchemical Body*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, at 185–186.

⁴ Fredrickson, Dr. Barbara (2009). *Positivity*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press, at 37–53, and discussion throughout.

⁵ See, generally, Seligman, Dr. Martin (2011). *Flourish*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

⁶ See posted outline outline in this course: “Our True Nature.” Dorigan, William (2014). www.findingthemidline.com/midlinetalks/html

- C. Having identified our own true nature, our particular essence as a human being, we turned our attention to a discussion of the 36 *Tattvas* taught by Kashmir Shaivism. The *Tattvas* are categories created well over a thousand years ago by philosophers to identify the many ways that God, or Supreme Consciousness, exists in the world. These categories include the elements, such as earth, fire, and water, our sensory organs, and even our mind.
- D. In non-dual Tantra these categories allow us to locate and remember our true Divine essence at any point on the *Tattva* chart.
1. This occurs when we mindfully focus on any category we choose, using any of our senses, such as hearing, seeing, tasting, touch, or smelling.
 2. When we focus this way we can practice learning to identify the Divine imprint within that particular object. We also use these same skills to identify opportunities to experience positive emotion, engagement, the creation of meaning, accomplishments, and developing or enhancing nurturing relationships.
 - a. For example, we discussed using our ears and sense of hearing, the energy of sound, in *Mantra* practice. We discussed using these same gifts to become more discerning, better able to hear emotions in others.
 - b. Similarly, we discussed using our eyes and sense and energy of sight in *Yantra* practice. Doing so helps us become more discriminating in our interaction with others as we use sight to search facial expressions and body language for signs of invitations to connect and opportunities to be of service.⁷
- E. Even if mystical connection to God isn't our goal, the *Tattvas* also offer us direction for where to look for the opportunities presented in every moment for building our life of well-being. These opportunities, Midlines, are those moments when "life invites us to choose a potentially rich experience where something so special, so enduring, can happen to grant our life greater meaning."⁸
1. Such invitations might be to enjoy a positive emotion, such as a moment of wonder or joy.
 2. These invitations might be a chance to dive into and accomplish a fulfilling, engaging task.

⁷ See posted outline outline in this course: "*Tattvas* in the Material World." Dorigan, William (2014). www.findingthemidline.com/midlinetalks/html

⁸ Dorigan, William (2013). *Finding the Midline*. Winter Park, CO: LuHen Publications, LLC., at 23.

3. The opportunity might be an opening to connect with a new friend or to deepen an existing relationship.
 4. Or, these invitations may involve the chance to do something meaningful for your community.
- F. We've not even scratched the surface in terms of discussing the various forms of practice yoga offers us. A key to any practice, though—including use of the *Tattvas*—is to learn to manage the chattering of our mind. This chattering can cloud our ability to recognize the invitations of Midline all around us so we can awaken to and artfully use them if we choose to do so.
1. We discussed how a major impediment to creating a life of well-being is our inability to reign in ill-serving patterns of thought and behavior that tend to get in our way. We learned that modern behavioral psychologists recommend we develop what is called “emotional resilience,” the ability to recognize and manage such patterns so that they don't cause us to speak or act precipitously, frittering away the potential of the moment.⁹
 2. An obvious example is the pattern of bias. If I go to a party and choose to only talk with people I already know, there is no way I'll meet the new person in the blue shirt who just walked through the door. I'll never know that he is an amazing, interesting person. Worse still, because I didn't bother to introduce myself, he will never get to know me and, thus, he will never offer me the job of a lifetime that he otherwise would have offered me. He won't offer me that job because my bias (or is it fear?) of meeting new people will prevent that introduction from ever occurring.¹⁰
 3. As we study yoga we'll see many examples of how we get in our own way. Patanjali, in his *Yoga Sutras*, discusses many of them in detail. We have already met a few, specifically, the *Gunas*. These are the three emotional qualities or tendencies we all share: *Rajas*, the quality of action or passion, *Tamas*, the quality of darkness and sluggishness, and *Sattva*, the quality of clarity and tranquility.¹¹ When well managed, they are key

⁹ See, generally, Reivich, Dr. Karen and Dr. Andrew Shatte (2002). *The Resilience Factor, 7 Keys To Finding Your Inner Strengths and Overcoming Life's Hurdles*. New York, NY: Three Rivers Press; Siegel, Dr. Daniel J. (2011). *Mindsight*. New York, NY: Bantam Books; and see, Vaillant, Dr. George E. (2012). *Triumphs of Experience*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, at 370.

¹⁰ See posted outline in this course: “What is Success?” Dorigan, William (2014). www.findingthemidline.com/midlinetalks/html (discussion of emotional resilience)

¹¹ See posted outline in this course: “*Tattvas in the Material World*.” Dorigan, William (2014). www.findingthemidline.com/midlinetalks/html (discussion of emotional resilience, with references)

to a life of well-being. When allowed to control us, they are an overwhelming impediment.

- e. We discussed how the qualities of *Rajas* and *Tamas* could cause problems for us, as when, for example, our passion causes us to be overbearing due to yearning or attachment.
- f. Or, the lethargy of *Tamas* can keep us ignorant, in the “dark.”
- g. Conversely, sometimes these energies are helpful, as when, for example, we need energy and passion (*Rajas*) for work or a family visit when we are feeling dull, or we need some restraint (*Tamas*) when we are too hyperactive or passionate and about to do or say something we would later regret.

When we are aware of these energies, we can literally transmute ourselves from an energy that is potentially harmful to an energy that better serves us in the moment. We become, in essence, an alchemist, our own magical, transformative agent of creative joy.

Today we discuss a different set of energies known as the *Rasas*. The *Rasas* are considered the various flavors of life, the way we emotionally “taste” each life experience.¹² By learning about these flavors we develop a deeper capacity to find the Divine imprint in each experience, to awaken to and accept, if we choose, life’s Midlines. We develop our ability to discern. With practice, we can use our knowledge of the *Rasas*, much like an alchemist, to take one emotion, such as fear, and where appropriate, turn it into courage, and even love. Or, we fully savor feelings of wonder and watch them transmute into joy or love.¹³

III. The *Rasas*.

The word *Rasa* has a number of meanings or uses in Indian culture. It has been used at least as far back as the Vedas to represent liquids and has been used in Ayurvedic medicine, yoga, alchemy, and Indian aesthetics.¹⁴

Dr. David Gordon White, Professor of Comparative Religion at the University of California, Santa Barbara, writes that *Rasa* is considered the “fluid essence” of Indian thought, representing the fluid “stuff” of the universe’s pulsating flow.¹⁵ One use of the

¹² Gurumayi Chidvilasananda, Swami (1997). *Enthusiasm*. South Fallsburg, NY: SYDA Foundation, at 2.

¹³ See generally, Dorigan, William (2013). *Finding the Midline*. Winter Park, CO: LuHen Publications, LLC., at 133–136.

¹⁴ *The Alchemical Body*, at 184.

¹⁵ *The Alchemical Body*, at 184.

word, which is the focus of today’s talk, is the use of the term to describe how a person can transmute raw emotions into a more “cultivated” essence of that emotion.¹⁶

Before we look at the nine *Rasas* individually, let’s discuss how these *Rasas* can be used to help refine our emotional responses in life.

- A. According to Dr. William Mahony, Professor of Religion at Davidson College, Indian philosophy teaches that each feeling or mood leads to an emotion that has its own essence, a *Rasa*.¹⁷ He uses as an example, the feeling of fortitude, which, when traced to its essence, emanates from the deep character trait of *Vira Rasa*, courage itself.¹⁸ Another example would be the feeling of worry. When traced to its deepest essence, it emanates from *Bhayanaka Rasa*, fear.¹⁹
1. We are able, with practice, to learn to trace our feelings to an emotional essence. For example, looking at our feeling of sadness, we can learn to trace that feeling to its roots, or essence. We might find that they emanates from *Karuna Rasa*, compassion.²⁰
 2. In time, and with enough understanding and practice, we find that each *Rasa* emanates from a single *Rasa*, the *ekarasa*, the “one essence” of all *Rasas*. As he explains in his excellent treatise on spiritual love, the deepest *Rasa*, the *mahabhava*, is *Bhakti Rasa*, spiritual love. Dr. Mahony explains in detail how our various emotions can, if we become expert enough in refining them, lead back to this deep “affirmation of existence” that lies at our core.²¹ This affirmation of life explains why we could refine the feeling of sadness and see that its essence is compassion. Compassion comes from a loving heart and a love of life in its broadest, spiritual sense; a sense in which we fully recognize the Divine connection of all.
 3. Dr. Mahony goes on to describe how we can develop a practice of refining our emotions, observing them in flow with each other, and learning how to discern one from the other. Out of that practice we learn to isolate them

¹⁶ *The Alchemical Body*, at 186.

¹⁷ *Exquisite Love*, at 174.

¹⁸ *Exquisite Love*, at 174.

¹⁹ Marchand, Peter (2006). *The Yoga of the Nine Emotions: The Tantric Practices of Rasa Sadhana*. Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, at 96–97.

²⁰ *Exquisite Love*, at 175–176.

²¹ *Exquisite Love*, at 174–175.

from each other and learn to calm those that might interfere with our ability to connect with others and with life.²²

4. Author Peter Marchand has written a book teaching how to practice with the *Rasas*, including suggestions for practices to help stabilize the emotions and work with our sensory perceptions. Working this way with the *Rasas* is called *Rasa Sadhana* (practice).²³
- B. Following is a brief discussion of the nine *Rasas*.²⁴
1. *Shanta Rasa*: *Shanta* refers to peace. This *Rasa* involves feelings of calmness, fulfillment, contentment, and relaxation.
 - a. This *Rasa* correlates somewhat to one of the positive emotions (serenity) identified by Dr. Barbara Fredrickson, Professor of Psychology at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, and Director of that school's Positive Emotions and Psychophysiology Laboratory, in her book, *Positivity*.²⁵
 - b. Dr. Fredrickson writes that one of the fastest ways to access positive emotions such as peace is to decrease our negativity, the negative attitudes we carry around with us. She suggests techniques such as challenging the underlying basis of our negative thoughts, refusing to ruminate on negative thoughts, and engaging in meditation to break neural connections between negative thoughts and emotions, freeing a positive emotion to make its presence felt.²⁶ This is similar to Dr. Mahony's advice on refining our feelings, isolating them, and arriving at their essence.

²² *Exquisite Love*, at 175–180. Just like we might choose to read some of the books on behavior recommended in these outlines, this work by Dr. Mahony is a very significant contribution to our study of how to build emotional resilience.

²³ *The Yoga of the Nine Emotions*.

²⁴ I've had the good fortune over the years of studying the *Rasas* with John Friend and also with Dr. Douglas Brooks. I share here my understanding from that study. John Friend is the founder of Anusara Yoga and, later, Sridaiva Yoga, featuring the Bowspring system of alignment. Dr. Brooks is a professor of Religion at the University of Rochester, a scholar of Hinduism and south Asian languages, as well as the comparative study of religions. He holds both a a Masters and doctoral degree from Harvard University. He is the author of *Auspicious Wisdom*, a study of the Goddess tradition of Srividya Tantra. Brooks, Dr. Douglas (1992). *Auspicious Wisdom*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press. His webiste is www.rajana.com

²⁵ *Positivity*, at 42.

²⁶ *Positivity*, 158–178.

- c. Recall our discussion about the need for emotional resilience.²⁷ From that discussion we know we must find a way to stop bias, prejudice, judgment, fear, anger, and other emotions from hijacking our mind and preventing an appropriate response to a situation. When we are challenged, we need to summon the very state of mind represented by this *Rasa*; i.e. feelings of calmness, fulfillment, contentment, and relaxation. This state of mind gives us the opportunity to “think through” the ramifications of preemptive thought and action.
2. *Karuna Rasa*: *Karuna* refers to compassion. This *Rasa* involves feelings of empathy, pity, and a light sadness.
- a. Yoga teacher and author Richard Freeman tells us that a great way to become more compassionate is to direct our energy toward forgiving and understanding ourselves.²⁸
 - b. In Yoga Sutra 1.33 Patanjali identifies four essential practices for creating a clear, lucid mind, one of which is compassion: *Karuna*, compassion towards those in distress; along with *Maitri* (friendship towards the happy); *Mudita* (joy to those who are virtuous); and *Upeksha* (equanimity to the nonvirtuous). By developing compassion towards the suffering, we desire to remove their suffering as if it were ours.²⁹
 - c. The late author and teacher Dr. Georg Feuerstein wrote that the word “compassion” literally means: “to suffer with,” and that we learn compassion through acts of kindness such as charity.³⁰ Citing Albert Einstein, Dr. Feuerstein wrote that in order to cultivate compassion we must get out of the “prison” caused by the delusion that we are separate from each other, widening our empathy beyond the people closest to us to embrace the entire world.³¹

²⁷ See posted outline in this course: “What is Success?” Dorigan, William (2014). www.findingthemidline.com/midlinetalks/html

²⁸ Freeman, Richard (2010). *The Mirror of Yoga*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, at 173.

²⁹ See, generally, Bryant, Dr. Edwin (2009). *The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali*. New York, NY: North Point Press, at 128–130.

³⁰ Feuerstein, Dr. Georg (2007). *Yoga Morality*. Chino Valley, AZ: Hohm Press, at 191–203.

³¹ *Yoga Morality*, at 202–203, quoting from Burke, Thomas (1984). *Einstein: A Portrait*. Petaluma, CA: Pomegranate Communications, at 46.

- h. Recall that in order to make clear, lucid choices, the mind, through *Buddhi*, must be in a *Sattvic*, harmonious state.³² By developing a compassionate attitude, we place ourselves in that state. When that occurs we make choices that foster the attributes of a life of well-being. Casting aside our ill-serving patterns of thought and behavior, we awaken to and embrace positive emotions, engagement, meaning, accomplishment, and nurturing relationships. The practice here is to carefully observe our feelings and refine them, isolating what is at the core of the feelings. Recalling Dr. Einstein’s advice, if we get to what we believe is the “core,” and it is still all about us, we aren’t there yet!
 - i. To cultivate a compassionate attitude we can follow Richard Freeman’s advice and begin with ourselves. We might also consider some of the loving kindness practices of Buddhism.³³
3. *Vibhasta Rasa*: *Vibhasta* refers to disgust. This *Rasa* involves feelings of repugnance, self-loathing, and heavy depression.
- a. Disgust arises from seeing what is not pleasing.
 - b. Self-disgust is often triggered by the way we negatively view ourselves when we react to things people say. Memories of past slights are triggered and negative feelings arise.³⁴
 - c. Exercising compassion allows us to move past our initial reactions of disgust. By practicing the refinement of our emotions down to their essence, we move through whatever temporary negative thoughts are driving disgust until we eventually reach our affirmation of existence, the deep love of life at our core. We remember that each of us is a manifestation of the Divine, in a diverse form. We look for a Divine imprint, whether in another or within ourselves.
 - d. We learn through self-study to appreciate that often those aspects of ourselves that frustrate us are simply the flip side of our greatest strengths. For example, our intensity in one situation might be off-putting to others, but it might also be a reason why our work

³² See posted outline in this course: “*Tattvas in the Material World*.” Dorigan, William (2014). www.findingthemidline.com/midlinetalks/html

³³ See, e.g. Salzberg, Sharon (1995). *Loving Kindness*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, Inc.

³⁴ Marchand, Peter (2006). *The Yoga of the Nine Emotions: The Tantric Practices of Rasa Sadhana*. Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, at 104.

product is constantly top quality. When we recall this, we view others with a more open perspective.

- e. Sometimes self-disgust can have a positive effect, helping us realign our life in a positive direction. I point out in *Finding the Midline* how my own frustration with being out of shape caused me to make life style choices that got me into better shape. This, in turn, made me healthier and better able to participate in activities and make social connections.³⁵
4. *Shringara Rasa*: *Shringara* refers to love. This *Rasa* refers to feelings of mature, affectionate love, but also refers to feelings of erotic love, desire, devotion, divine beauty, and admiration.
 - a. Certainly feelings of desire and devotion can lead to healthy intimate relationships but they can also lead to possessiveness.
 - b. Feelings of admiration can lead to positive emotions such as awe and wonder.
 - c. The love referred to here is somewhat different from the “positivity resonance” discussed by Dr. Fredrickson.³⁶ The “love” she writes about is that which brings us out of our self-absorbed state and allows us to see the connection with others, to feel compassion, and become invested in the well-being of others.³⁷ The essence of Dr. Fredrickson’s “love” as a positive emotion is much like *Bhakti Rasa*, the spiritual love discussed above, a recognition of our common life experience. *Shringara Rasa* has more of an erotic “juice” to it.
 5. *Vira Rasa*: *Vira* refers to courage. This *Rasa* involves feelings of heroism, confidence, pride, and fiery disappointment.
 - a. When I think of the courage and heroism of our military and first responders, it is easy to see how their lives are filled with meaning arising from the courageous service they provide to others.
 - b. We, too, can find courage to serve a greater good when we choose to interrupt gossip and other divisive talk, as just one example.

³⁵ *Finding the Midline*, at 133–136.

³⁶ Fredrickson, Dr. Barbara (2013). *Love 2.0*. New York, NY: The Penguin Group, at 10.

³⁷ *Love 2.0*, at 10–16.

- c. It is important that we are careful not to be so courageous that we engage in foolish risk taking.
6. *Raudra Rasa*: *Raudra* refers to anger. This *Rasa* involves feelings of fury, irritation, violence, and hostile rage.
- e. Anger can be healing. However, sometimes we need to move along emotionally, rather than allowing anger to needlessly fester. We seek to refine our anger by searching for its root cause. Perhaps we discover that the anger arises purely from selfish motives that are frustrated.
 - f. As we work to refine our feelings of anger, we may find that the anger flows from our affirmation of existence, our love and respect for life. We may see that our anger is a righteous anger arising due to an affront to another.³⁸
 - g. We can, when appropriate, transmute anger into courage when we choose to actively engage in tasks that seek to rectify injustice, whether in the workplace or our community.
7. *Hasya Rasa*: *Hasya* refers to joy. This *Rasa* involves feelings of humor, comic happiness, satire, sarcasm, and exuberance.
- e. This *Rasa* correlates to a degree with Dr. Fredrickson’s positive emotion of “joy” in that it includes feelings of lightness and we feel an inner glow.³⁹
 - f. However, the happiness that lies at the essence of this *Rasa* is that of a sense of Divine bliss, the power of joy arising from the pure happiness of being alive. This is when we feel the full sense of the beauty of being manifested in this world as a living soul.⁴⁰
8. *Adbhuta Rasa*. *Adbhuta* refers to wonder. This *Rasa* involves feelings of curiosity, astonishment, and the thrill of mystery.
- a. Wonder correlates with the positive emotion of “awe” described by Dr. Barbara Fredrickson. This feeling arises when we encounter “goodness on a grand scale,”⁴¹ or the deep “affirmation of existence” that lies at our core.⁴²

³⁸ *Exquisite Love*, at 176.

³⁹ *Positivity*, at 40–41.

⁴⁰ See, generally, *The Yoga of the Nine Emotions*, at 48–49.

⁴¹ *Positivity*, at 46.

- b. Dr. Fredrickson describes this state as one in which we stop in our tracks, totally absorbed in something that feels bigger than ourselves. This sense of wonder can be due to witnessing something in nature, or perhaps even some amazing human feat.⁴³
 - c. Awe or wonder sometimes brings us to the edge of fear, as when there is some negative or frightening aspect to what we are witnessing, like a tornado.⁴⁴
 - d. If we think back to Dr. Mahony’s discussion about *ekarasa*, the “one essence” of all *Rasas*, each emotion can be refined so as to lead us back to our core essence of *Bhakti Rasa*, spiritual love, our sense of goodness and affirming of life.⁴⁵ In the case of a threatening tornado, it is a true wonder of nature to behold while at the same time it threatens to take from us the precious gift of our life. It’s possible to see, safe from the tornado, how the emotions we experienced while threatened can be refined from awe through fear and thus to our essential love of life.
9. *Bhayanaka Rasa*. *Bhayanaka* is the essence of fear. This *Rasa* also involves feelings of worry, anxiety, distress, paranoia, and disabling fear.
- a. Fear exists in different ways for each of us. Many fear death.⁴⁶ Maybe we fear getting injured if we do something risky. These are more obvious examples of fear.
 - b. Sometimes, our deep fears are not so obvious. Perhaps we are the product of a cold, non-loving upbringing. As a result, we learn to fear intimacy or connection in any form. We may not even know that this fear exists within us, wondering why we don’t feel intimacy in our life. This hidden fear over time forces us into patterns of thought and behavior that limit our chances for the types of connections necessary to live a full life of well-being. We “push people away.” Fortunately, with emotional resilience work

⁴² *Exquisite Love*, at 174–175.

⁴³ *Positivity*, at 46–47.

⁴⁴ *Positivity*, at 47.

⁴⁵ *Exquisite Love*, at 174–175.

⁴⁶ *The Yoga of the Nine Emotions*, at 96–97.

such as mindful yoga practice, including *Rasa* work, and perhaps therapy, these neural patterns can be changed.⁴⁷

- e. Deep fears can so drive our patterns of thinking that we become blinded to logic. The fear of being alone can cause us to settle in relationships that aren't nurturing. The fear of failure can prevent us from even trying things we would love to do. Our fears can even cause us to vote for people that our common sense, rendered mute by our fears, would tell us to run from. These are but a few examples.
- f. Working with our fear, examining it, isolating it, and “distilling” it from other feelings as we refine our sense of it; these are ways to work with the *Rasas* to get to their essence and, in doing so, understand ourselves.⁴⁸ When this happens, fear loses its command over our thoughts and behaviors. We can then recognize Midlines, opportunities for connection, and make our choices without fear's blinding control.

III. Conclusion.

The *Rasas* are another important tool for use in creating a life of well-being. They can help us develop emotional resilience, an ability to manage negative thought patterns so that they don't force us into saying or doing something that pushes people away or destroys opportunities. They also help us to be more discriminating by helping us refine our thoughts. Finally, through this refinement and ability to discriminate, we are better able to recognize and experience positive emotions.

We will now turn our attention to how the brain actually works; how “patterns” of thought form and gain power.

⁴⁷ See, generally, Siegel, Dr. Daniel (2011 ed). *Mindsight*. New York, NY: The Random House Publishing Group; at 102–119 (92 year old lawyer establishing right-left brain connection to enable feelings of intimacy).

⁴⁸ *Exquisite Love*, at 175–176.