The Rasas
Identifying the flavors of life

I. Introduction:

We know by now that a life well lived requires we develop the capacity to regularly experience positive emotions such as joy, gratitude, serenity, curiosity, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe, and love.\(^1\) We also know that creating a life of well-being necessitates filling our lives with meaningful and engaging activities and that we find and cultivate nurturing relationships.\(^2\)

By studying the Tattvas we learn how to increase our ability to bring these things

The word Rasa means “taste” or “essence” and refers to our moods.\(^3\) The Rasas are considered the various flavors of life, the way we emotionally “taste” each experience.\(^4\) By learning about these flavors we can, much like an alchemist, learn to take one emotion, such as fear, and where appropriate, turn it into courage. Similarly, from feelings of wonder we might develop joy or love.\(^5\)

There are nine Rasas and tonight I will identify them and briefly discuss each.

II. The Rasas.

Following is a brief discussion of the nine Rasas\(^6\)

A. Shanta Rasa: Shanta refers to peace. This Rasa involves feelings of calmness, fulfillment, contentment, and relaxation. This is one of the positive emotions (serenity) identified by Dr. Barbara Fredrickson in her book, Positivity.\(^7\) In

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\(^6\) I’ve had the good fortune over the years of studying the Rasas with John Friend and also with Dr. Douglas Brooks. What I share here is my understanding from that study. 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. His website is www.rajanaka.com

\(^7\) Positivity., at Chapter 3.
Chapter 9 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 positive emotion to make its presence felt.

B. **Karuna Rasa:** Karuna refers to compassion. This Rasa involves feelings of empathy, pity, and a light sadness. 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.\(^8\)

C. **Vibhasta Rasa:** Vibhasta refers to disgust. This Rasa involves feelings of repugnance, self-loathing, and heavy depression. I point out in Finding the Midline how my own disgust at a pattern of my behavior led me to make a lifestyle choice that brought me more positive emotion and purpose in my life.\(^9\)

D. **Shringara Rasa:** Shringara refers to love. This Rasa involves feelings of erotic love, desire, devotion, divine beauty, and admiration. Certainly feelings of desire and devotion can lead to healthy intimate relationships but so, too, can feelings of admiration. We can develop the capacity to admire others for their accomplishments, deepening our ability to find and retain nurturing relationships of all types. In times of deep grief or sadness over the loss of a loved one, we can appropriately grieve and at the same time more deeply etch into our memory the feeling of love so that it becomes even more accessible.

E. **Vira Rasa:** Vira refers to courage. This Rasa involves feelings of heroism, confidence, pride, and fiery disappointment. 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. We, too, can find courage to serve a greater good when we choose to interrupt gossip and other divisive talk, as just one example.

F. **Raudra Rasa:** Raudra refers to anger. This Rasa involves feelings of fury, irritation, violence, and hostile rage. Anger can be healing. However, sometimes we need to move along emotionally, rather than allowing anger to needlessly fester. Anger can transmute to courage when we choose to actively engage in tasks that seek to rectify injustice, whether in the workplace or our community.


\(^9\) Finding the Midline, at 133–136.
G. *Hasya Rasa*: *Hasya* refers to joy. This *Rasa* involves feelings of humor, comic happiness, satire, sarcasm, and exuberance.

H. *Adbhuta Rasa*. *Adbhuta* refers to wonder. This *Rasa* involves feelings of curiosity, astonishment, and the thrill of mystery. I find that my curiosity leads me to engage in tasks that allow me to do research, uncovering the mysteries of how things relate to each other. When we can recognize those things that make us curious we then have a guidepost as to how to find engaging tasks to accomplish.

I. *Bhayanaka Rasa*. *Bhayanaka* refers to fear. This *Rasa* involves feelings of worry, anxiety, distress, paranoia, and disabling fear.

III. **Conclusion.**

The *Rasas* can help us create a life well lived. As with the *Gunas*, we need to be aware of the energies and emotions that drive us and influence our choices. To create a life well lived we must learn to make choices which help guide us toward positive emotions, engagement, meaning, accomplishment, and nurturing relationships. Understanding the *Rasas* is just one more way to bring about such a life.

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10 For further discussion of how the *Rasas* can be used as a tool for creating a life well lived, see Chapter 39, *Finding the Midline*, at 133–136. See also, Marchand, Peter (2006). *The Yoga of the Nine Emotions: The Tantric Practices of Rasa Sadhana*. Rochester, VT: Destiny Books.