

Chapel Talk
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Pause and Enjoy Rasa

I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud
by William Wordsworth

I wandered lonely as a cloud
That floats on high o'er vales and hills,
When all at once I saw a crowd,
A host of golden daffodils,
Beside the lake, beneath the trees,
Fluttering and dancing in the breeze.

Continuous as the stars that shine
And twinkle on the Milky Way,
They stretched in never ending line
Along the margin of a bay:
Ten thousand saw I at a glance,
Tossing their heads in sprightly dance.

The waves besides them danced, but they
Outdid the sparkling waves in glee:--
A poet could not but be gay
In such a jocund company:
I gazed—and gazed—but little thought
What wealth the show to me had brought.

For oft when on my couch I lie
In vacant or in pensive mood,
They flash upon that inward eye
Which is the bliss of solitude,
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the daffodils.

I have a confession to make this evening. Over the past two years, I have been having a regular rendezvous during Wednesday long lunches. Sometimes it is with a vegetarian sushi roll; sometimes it is leftovers from the previous night's dinner; sometimes it is with my best invention ever—peanut butter and home grown sprout sandwiches.

The reason why I think the word "rendezvous" can best describe my practice of Wednesday lunch meditation is because my weekly work and chores can be so endless that I have to steal some time and intentionally make it available for myself on a regular basis. Some of you might ask: "What is the pleasure of eating peanut butter sprout sandwiches all by yourself?" In order to answer this question, I have to explain the concept of "rasa."

Rasa is a Sanskrit word, which can be literally translated as "juice, essence, taste, plasma or transformational state." According to Shiva Rea, who is a yoga teacher, "the concept of rasa originated in India with performing artists who wanted to create a transformational state for themselves and their audiences...Rasa is the state of complete absorption on the part of both the artist and the audience, or the one who perceives the art form. When rasa has been cultivated, the thinking mind quiets and pure feeling pulses through the body." In other words, it is a perfect communion between ourselves and the world surrounding us.

What went on that day between William Wordsworth and those ten thousand daffodils was rasa. It is a kind of experience that opens our "inward eye" and it is often a bliss that comes when we experience solitude in the deepest sense. That is, the interconnectedness of all beings. Rasa can arise during any of life's activities such as looking at the one you love in the eyes or watching the sunrise on the T dock. It can also happen when you and your teachers are both fully present and focused in classes. It can happen when you do dishes or fold your laundry. What matters is not WHAT you do, but HOW you do it.

Two years ago, I was fortunate to witness my son Jiadi experience a moment of rasa on the soccer field. It was in the middle of an exciting 4-year-old three-on-three soccer game. The art of passing was beyond them. All the players did was to gather around the ball and hope that the ball would somehow go into the goal by some random shots. All of a sudden, I saw Jiadi squatting down in the middle of the soccer field and picking up a white feather and just stare at it. He was oblivious to the game that was still going on, the cheers from excited parents and the amused smile on his mother's face. For at least a whole minute or two, he just looked at the feather with such intensity and focus, as if he was having a very intimate conversation with the feather. When his patient coach finally woke him up from that blissful moment, he got up and

walked toward me and asked me to keep the feather for him. But there was no need to keep that feather as a souvenir. He had already experienced it in the fullest sense, just as the feather had already given him fully what it could offer. Obviously I cannot say that I was a proud soccer mom then, but I was definitely the happiest mother. I was happy for my son because he was innocent and brave enough to pause in the middle of a passionate pursuit and to just be himself. To a mother, the smile on his face when he gazed at the feather is far more important and valuable than a hundred goals he might be able to score through his entire soccer career. All the goals in life can be achieved and forgotten, but the true self is hard to find.

The opportunity of experiencing *rasa* is in every moment and is everywhere, but the key element is to pause to enjoy it. There is a Zen story about a man on a galloping horse. Someone watching him ride by shouts to him, "Where are you going?" The rider turns and yells, "I don't know, ask the horse." This story may be funny, but it can be very instructive when we consider the way we live our lives. To you, that galloping horse may be your drive to get into a good college or to find a perfect girlfriend or boyfriend. To me that galloping horse can be getting all the work done as a teacher, a mother, and a homemaker. That galloping horse pushes us and decides everything for us. And we follow, without having sovereignty over ourselves. In Chinese, the character "busy" is the combination of death and heart. To be busy riding on that galloping horse is to experience the death of our heart.

Once we are aware of that galloping horse, we have to do something to take the control back. Meditation is what I have found to be the most powerful way to stay in touch with myself and not be dragged around by that horse. In Buddhism there are eighty four thousand paths to reach enlightenment and we just have to choose what is the best for us. I do not have the luxury like Wordsworth to wander lonely as a cloud, therefore I choose the most convenient path, combining what I love to do, cooking and eating, and the time that is always available to me, Wednesday long lunch. That hour and a half is the only time I can cook and eat a meal without socializing or parenting.

It is the only time that I can cook and eat with the fullest pleasure. It is a pleasure that comes from mindfulness not ignorance. It is the only time that I can just cook and eat. Staring and biting into that peanut butter sprout sandwich makes me feel connected with the farmer who

grew the wheat, the baker who made the bread, the water and the sunlight that nourished the seeds. Making and eating sandwiches that way is for me a way of turning on that innate antenna and tune in to the songs available in the here and now.

So why eat all alone? It is the simplest way for me to experience rasa, giving the wholesome food I am blessed to enjoy my fullest appreciation, and absorbing fully its nutrition and soul.

So, here is my twist to Wordsworth's poem:

For oft when in my kitchen I chow,
In vacant or in mindful mood,
They flash upon the here and now
Which is the bliss of solitude,
And then my heart with pleasure fills,
And dances with the sprouting dills.

But let me tell you the truth. It is never easy to just cook and eat. When a Japanese legendary tea master was asked the secret of the tea ceremony, he replied: "lighting the fire, boiling the water, whisking the tea." A student immediately responded: "You must be kidding! Everyone can do that." The master said: "If you can truly JUST do that, then I will be your student." It is never easy for us to just sit in the chapel and be in the here and now with an undivided mind. Our body can be still, but our mind can be as wild as a monkey. In fact, the hardest pose in yoga is not the one that twists your body like a pretzel. The hardest pose is called shavasana, which asks you to lie still like a dead body and quiet your mind. Just like the experience of rasa, it's not about what you do, but how you do it. You can make everything you do a meditation, if you can do it with a perfect union of your body and mind. Now I would like to invite you to sit up tall and slowly close your eyes for a three minute sitting meditation. Let your breathing be the bridge between your body and mind. Listen to your breathing and watch your mind. Let the thoughts rise and go. No need to suppress any thoughts, no need to judge any thoughts. Just watch them. The music you are listening to now is performed with a Japanese flute called shakuhachi. Pay attention to the silence in the music. After all, Laozi, a Chinese Daoist philosopher, once said that "Great music has no sound."