



Prajna Paradha: Transgression Against Wisdom

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One of the most important questions in regard to our desire for health and healing is this—why is it so hard to do the right thing? Many of us struggle with this. On the one hand, we desire to be healthy, strong and fit — and on the other hand, we desire to sit on the couch, watch movies and eat ice cream.

It is challenging enough to wonder why we do not do the right thing on a global perspective, but perhaps we need to examine this on a personal level.

Just last night I talked with a friend and sometime-client who has been having heart palpitations. Because she is otherwise a healthy, active and happy woman, they are incredibly distressing and unnerving. A few nights ago they got so bad that she called paramedics to her house at one in the morning when she awoke with her heart racing. They connected her to a heart rate monitor for 24 hours to make sure there was nothing seriously wrong with her heart. Fortunately, there was not. When we spoke later, I asked her some general questions and made some suggestions about what might help bring her heart into synchronization with her body.

In addition, I asked her if she was still drinking coffee. She said she had minimized coffee to just one cup in the morning. Then she gave me several reasons

why she needed that coffee—to get going, to get to work on time, to wake up. Now, I love this friend and of course want her to be healthy. But I am also resolutely, and by necessity, non-attached to my clients', friends' and family's choices and decisions with regards to health (and pretty much everything else). This woman knew that coffee was bad for her, knew that coffee revs up the adrenaline in her body — ultimately depleting the adrenals — and puts the body in a constant low-level form of fight or flight. Her heart was reacting to some stimulus in her body and she was trying to discover what that was — but she was still unwilling to give up the single biggest stimulant she was consuming. Why is that?

I asked this question of another friend and he said that he likes to be “bad.” He likes to color outside the lines, take risks and not always be the boring, do-everything-right man. It makes him feel excited to take those risks.

Again and again I come across this tendency, what is called in Sanskrit *Prajna Paradha* and translates literally as “a transgression against wisdom.”

We know eating sugar is bad for us — that it feeds cancers, creates fat and diabetes and is more addictive than heroin. Nevertheless, we eat more sugar every year, averaging 180 pounds of sugar per person



in the US. (No, that is not a typo.) Smoking, excessive drinking, caffeine, speeding and inactivity are among a list of things we know are wrong for us. Yet, we often ignore this — much to our own detriment. Once we are diagnosed with a “dis-ease” we say, “*Now I will stop*” this or that. Although sometimes, even that will not stop us. Why is that?

Prajna Paradha tells us why — It is a “violation of good sense, or perversity of mind, which arises from attempts to rearrange the world to suit oneself while ignoring the inherent rhythm of the universe...Most causes of disease are individual and preventable, but most of us fail to prevent the disease by acting

and then started attacking itself (shingles). It is not too late for him to turn things around, but a much bigger intervention is required now than if he took care of himself from a young age.

Here are a few reasons my advanced students gave for not “doing the right thing”:

I would say poor planning and time management. For me I know I need to work out to feel better and also eat healthier. But with a toddler it feels overwhelming just to shower, much less feed myself or work out. Planning ahead and managing time better can help. (B. Orchard)

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contrary to what we know is in our own self-interest mainly due to a weakness of the mental will.”¹

I believe one of the reasons why we ignore what we know to be in our best interest is that we think we can overcome anything. We think we are invincible and that nothing bad will happen to us. We are also highly resilient and our bodies can take a lot of abuse before showing its displeasure.

For instance, I have a friend in his early 70s. In the past ten years, he has had one ailment after the other — open heart surgery, debilitating shingles, depression. When I talked to him he said, “I don’t understand it really. I was so healthy all my life and then, boom!”

Well the truth is, he was not so healthy his whole life. He has had a three-a-day martini habit for decades. He rarely exercises, aside from walking frequently. He eats well, but not with any particular reason beyond his taste buds. His body was able to live and function for his whole life without any problems that he could notice. But the fact is, his body had been struggling for years. At last it gave up and exploded (his heart)

I’m realizing how stubborn I can be. (E. Guerriera)

I think it’s about not being able to resist pleasure. Foods that are bad for you but taste so good. Skipping exercise because the rest on the couch feels great. Getting sucked into social media instead of sitting down to meditate for those 20 minutes—the pleasure pulls us! There is greater long-term pleasure and benefit to choosing the healthy options, but in the immediate moment, it isn’t always a strong enough pull. (S. Walker)

I believe humans are not so good with “transitions.” Sitting on the couch—great. Going out to take a walk is also great. But moving from the couch and deciding to go out for a walk— not so great. We negotiate, we procrastinate and we find good reasons to change our mind. Often it is only a matter of taking the first steps. (L. Sykes)

I think another reason many people make choices against their best interest is that they fear boredom. If you work in a job that does not make you happy, it is hard to wake up and get there every day. After a



day working on someone else's projects, you feel the need to have some personal enjoyment, cut loose and maybe, as my friend said, "be bad." There is also the perspective that these bad choices are "treats" or rewards for doing something. So after you have worked out and eaten well all week, your reward is a big piece of chocolate cake after pizza and four beers.

One of the other reasons is perhaps darker—an overwhelming nihilism. After all, we are all going to die, no matter how healthy we are now or how much kale we eat or how much sugar we avoid. I have had the experience myself of spending all my time and energy trying to "do the right thing." Always eating organic food, no sugar, no alcohol. On and on. During ski season I started hanging out with a younger, partying crowd, and I watched myself being almost a parody. I was like a character from *Portlandia*, wanting to know if my organic chicken had led a happy life. There is nothing wrong with vigilance and self control, but I was literally stopping myself from the full enjoyment of life by my restrictions. When I looked at my motivations more deeply, I saw that they were anchored in fear. A fear of getting sick. A fear of dying.

I have had many beloved people in my life die far too young — sometimes from diseases that I now know had some preventable component to them. That is the impetus that has propelled me to seek the healthy road that I have been on for so long. Understanding that there is no elixir anywhere that will prevent your death can also free you to enjoy your choices more and to make them with a less strict and self-sacrificing drive.

The beauty of tantra yoga is that it allows everything on the path to understanding and finding your true inner self, your inner divinity and life's purpose. Nothing is forbidden. This is why tantra is sometimes equated with sex, because many yogic disciplines (and many religions) require a denial of the sexual impulse in order to reach the heights of nirvana. In tantra, sexual energy is rightly understood to be the life force energy and as such is celebrated and used to allow us to reach beyond sex to find higher sources of


satisfaction, joy and ecstasy. Nothing is denied on the path to spiritual enlightenment in tantra, whether other substances, alcohol, drugs, fast driving—you see where I am going with this. It is important to say that the spiritual path is not one of drugged-out-sexed-out excess. Not at all. The purpose of this freedom is to show you a window into what is possible. Once you see that possibility, you are then emboldened to increase your own innate powers of arriving there yourself. That is what all these beautiful, scientific and powerful practices are showing you—the path to peace.

Where we get derailed is when we lose our internal will, our own *iccha shakti*, as it is called in Sanskrit. It is easier to get drunk every night than to meditate. The important thing to learn is that every night the drunk is what Martin Prechtel calls "lost in the water." Perhaps you once had a glimpse of divinity, but now, you are simply drowning. Or perhaps the sadness and grief in your life seems too big. So drinking is the way to mask and hide from it.

What is important is that we increase our own inner strength — not only to be able to see what the right choice is in any given situation, but also, to be able to make that right choice. That is the height of discernment in yoga—to have the clarity to see the right path before you and to have the strength of will to take it. The goal is to have balance. So maybe you have that glass or two of wine, but you do not drink the whole bottle. However, if you do drink the whole bottle, the next morning on your yoga mat you deeply ask yourself, why? Further ask yourself, from what am I hiding?

One of the other and perhaps even more powerful translations of Prajna Paradha comes from the description of how Ayurveda views the creation of the universe. At first, there was only pure potential. Then, there was a piece of awareness that separated from that oneness, saw itself and became aware of itself. The huge pool of awareness is love, and one of the first transgressions against the self is to fail to understand that we are all from love, all made of love and



that loving the self is the path back to wholeness. This is what it means, this “transgression against wisdom.” The wisdom is—We Are Love. It is a lack of self-love that drives us into nihilistic behaviors, including addictions and bad choices. If we look more clearly at this interpretation, we can see that loving the self gives us the will to make the right choices that then allow us to be healthier, more balanced and joyful. In fact, knowing that we are love is one of the most healing tools you can access. 



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References

1. Svoboda, R. & Lade, A. (1996) *Tao and dharma*. Twin Lakes, WI: Lotus Press.