

Not Affected by Pleasure

There is a shabad in Siri Guru Granth Sahib written by Guru Teg Bahadur in raag Sorath on ang 633 that might have inspired Yogi Bhajan when he gave us “The Definition of a Yogi” in the 3HO Code of Excellence.

Sorath, Ninth Master:

That man, who in the midst of pain, does not feel pain, who is not affected by pleasure, affection or fear, and who looks alike upon gold and dust; ||1||Pause||
Who is not swayed by either slander or praise, nor affected by greed, attachment or pride; who remains unaffected by joy and sorrow, honour and dishonour; ||1||
Who renounces all hopes and desires and remains desireless in the world; who is not touched by sexual desire or anger - within his heart, God dwells. ||2||
That man, blessed by Guru's Grace, understands this way.
O Nanak, he merges with the Lord of the Universe, like water with water. ||3||11||

This shabad describes a state of being that is victory in the game of life. It is a powerful touchstone of self-reflection. In the following, I try to elaborate on one small aspect of it.

The phrase “does not feel pain” could be understood as if someone would inflict physical pain to the person they would not feel anything. However, this might not be what it means. As we walk on a path of bhakti and sadhana, the sensitivity of our senses increases and our awareness of their influence on us sharpens. The vulnerability of our open hearts becomes more obvious, we desire to be touched by others and the world around us, and we understand that this can also be painful at times. As we then explore deeper our relationship to our senses and their influence on us, we start to understand the meaning of attachment, detachment and non-attachment and the immense power and consequences these phenomena can have on us and our lives.

“Does not feel pain” might instead mean that the person is fully aware of any sensation, but the process of perception, comparison, judgement, labelling and identification is not automatically unfolding, and the usual consequence of desire to get rid of, or change a sensation, including plans of how to avoid it in the future, does not necessarily take place. This would be a state of profound acceptance.

The term “not affected by pleasure” seems more easy to understand. The person is able to feel pleasure, but is not affected by it. Normally, we are very much affected by pleasure in the sense that once we feel it, we immediately build up a desire to keep it or to repeat it in the future. The experience of pleasure becomes part of the experience and understanding of who we believe to be, who want to be, our ego. We establish an energetic link to the memory of the experience, and to the hopes and desires it has induced in us. We become “attached” to the pleasure, it alters the image we have of ourselves and affects our future thinking and behaviour.

At first, this might seem quite normal and not so bad. We all do it all the time, our whole economic system is built on a “greed for pleasure.” To find the motivation to change something about it needs a very conscious experience of frustration; the frustration of a vicious circle of endless unquenchable desire and the exhaustion of striving after satisfaction which seems to stay always more promise than reality. Similar findings can be observed in case of possessions (“gold and dust”) or reputation (“slander or praise,” “honour and dishonour”) which are both part of our ego, too. After some (million?) rounds in this wheel, we might become interested in alternatives: “Who renounces all hopes and

desires and remains desireless in the world... within his heart, God dwells.“

In the wake of such a frustration, the monumental question arises of *how* to “renounce all hopes and desires and remain desireless in the world“ (a state that is often referred to in the scriptures as “dead while alive,” “jivat mare”), of *how* to be “not touched by sexual desire or anger”, and *how* to “remain unaffected by joy and sorrow, honour and dishonour.“

I believe that the answer lies in the repeated keen observation of the above described process of habitual attachment to pleasure and avoidance or non-acceptance of pain (or any other sensation) together with a continuously reaffirmed motivation to get out of the vicious wheel of karma. For this, we need to look closer into the subtleties of our inner behaviours towards ourselves. Once we become more honest with our many little everyday seekings and avoidances, we might discover that we habitually manipulate most of our sensations in order to make them fit into known patterns and facets of ourselves, so we keep feeling safe and comfortable in our ego. The target sensations we usually try to produce are varied and not only “pleasurable” in the common sense. Some people have the (subconscious) habit to make themselves feel angry, depressed, miserable or as a victim etc.

We use all available means to manipulate our experience of the moment: food (and drugs), shopping, (social) media, communication, entertainment, music, sports, yoga (!), sex, fantasy, daydream (e.g. while meditating)... even the seemingly most innocent thought might be motivated to change what we feel right now: We search inside for something to look forward to, re-evaluate a past situation, or simply wait for something to end (e.g. while meditating) just to escape anything that is right now, may it be excruciating physical pain or emotional grief, the boredom of emptiness, or any other still nameless state that might otherwise develop into something surprisingly different and healing. If we feel sad, for example, it might be a valuable experiment to try and just feel whatever we feel, without trying to change it, neither dismiss nor indulge, not move even a single degree of quality or intensity of what we feel, just be attentive like in meditation.

The state described in Guru's shabad seems to be one of unconditional acceptance of what we feel, which is a state of deepest relaxation and highest awareness at the same time. It is the acceptance of what is and might come every moment, the “Hukam,” the Divine Will. Normally, we can only relax once we have created the perfect environment, where there is nothing disturbing that we cannot accept. This shabad suggests that there is a state of being of maximum continuous relaxation in our true essence rather than in the ever-moving works of our ego-minds.

In my experience, firm resolutions that might border on declarations of war to our habits have little success but often result in setbacks. The ego knows how to take revenge. A continuously refined self-observation and honesty about our motivations to change something, together with cultivating forgiveness and compassion towards ourselves seems more promising. These abilities can be developed in daily sadhana and meditation. So we come to “understand this way” and become accepting, flexible and fluid to merge “like water with Water” in the union of the yogi.

Pardon my errors and short-comings of understanding
Waheguru ji ka Khalsa Waheguru ji ki Fateh
SS Sat Siri Singh Khalsa

