

# Preya and Shreya

Which choice will you make?



## A Framework for Conscious Choice

Ever since Adam and Eve chose to taste the forbidden fruit, the concept of choice has been seen as posing significant life consequences and being central to what makes us human, writes Peggy Hailstone.

Although we live in an era that holds reason superior to superstition, custom, tradition and the like; when it comes to choosing what is beneficial – rather than what instantly gratifies – many of us struggle. Evidence of this struggle can be seen in almost every human vice or social issue: drug addiction, smoking, gambling, obesity, crime, violence, environmental problems.

What is also evident is our lust for immediate gratification. “Buy now, pay later,” urges the latest shouty television advertisement. “No interest, no repayments until 2012,” proclaims the latest furniture catalogue. “Lose 10 kilograms in 10 days,” promises the latest fad diet.

Many spiritual and new age seekers argue that the problem with choice is that our choosing takes place in a world resplendent with opposing forces: good/evil, love/hate, joy/sorrow. This dualistic philosophy is one that is central to the *Katha Upanishad*, one of the most widely published Upanishads expressing mystic truths. “Every moment, whether you see it or not, you have a choice of two alternatives in what you say, do, or think,” writes Eknath Easwaran in *Dialogue with Death*, a highly respected translation of the *Katha*. In Sanskrit, these two alternatives are known as preya and shreya.

### Preya and shreya

Preya, Easwaran tells us, is that which is pleasant. Shreya, in contrast, is that which is beneficial. “Preya is that which pleases us, that which tickles the ego. Shreya, on the other hand, has no reference to pleasing or displeasing. It simply means what benefits us – that which improves our health or contributes to our peace of mind.”

The trouble, Easwaran suggests, is that preya – that Adonis-like benefactor

While shreya may know what’s best for you, she would never force her views. Rather, she will hover just near the boundary, never crossing it without invitation, yet fully present at a moment’s notice when called upon. Shreya holds your hand when you’re down and out, and promises you’ll find another side to yourself if you delve deep enough. Preya is the comrade-in-arms that seizes your hand and frantically drags you across the freeway

## The mind can be either liberating or binding.

of immediate pleasure – is a slick salesman, appealing directly to our senses or ego. You deserve it, preya asserts. You’ve earned this wage rise/reprieve/rest, he wheedles. You worked really hard today. There’s no need to exercise/train/study tonight, he cajoles. How about another ice cream/beer/slice of pizza?

In this framework, preya is the showman. Shreya, in contrast, is a somewhat drab behind the scenes type. She’s someone you forget moments after introduction. And while preya is the seducer and wannabe tyrant, shreya is the good, old fashioned, not quite of this world, wise old soul.

at peak hour because there’s something shiny, alluring, digestible, or offering distraction on the other side.

The important distinction between preya and shreya is that one offers immediate but temporary satisfaction; the other requires effort but the satisfaction is long term.

### Choice and consumerism

If choice is difficult due to the dichotomy of alternatives, it lays a further burden upon us in current times through consumerism. Did you say you wanted a latte? Was that regular/medium/large, skinny/fat/soy, decaf/chai or caramel flavoured, with sugar or sweetener, have here or take away?

Even a commodity as common as milk has become complicated with choices such as low fat, high fat, high calcium, high protein, skinny, skim, heart active, shape, farmers best, UHT milk, soy milk, rice milk, oat milk, or Anlene (just to name a few). Bread also becomes

consumer is rendered helpless and dissatisfied as a result. This proliferation of choice in goods and services – and the problems it creates – is the thesis of Barry Schwartz's best selling book, *The Paradox of Choice*. The paradox, Schwartz asserts, is that more is not necessarily better.

## Through the practice of yoga, via the increased sense of self it develops, our initial choice leads to greater rationality and greater consciousness in choice.

bewildering when you are faced with choosing from 27 pre-packaged loaves or 16 baked on the premises varieties, as is the case at my local supermarket.

Three decades ago, two types of milk existed: full cream in a recyclable glass bottle, or full cream in a two gallon bucket straight from the family cow. Bread was also simple. It came in loaves, delivered by a baker (yes, they bought it to you). The choice was square loaf or round loaf. All of it white. None of it sliced. And not a wholegrain, multigrain, cape seed, or linseed loaf in sight.

In countries like Australia, we pride ourselves on the availability of choice. We promulgate it as akin to freedom. Educational choice means we can have the career of our choosing, religious choice means we can worship the god of our preference, and moral choice means we can choose the type of person we want to be. But are we happier, more fulfilled, better citizens as a result of this smorgasbord of choice?

The problem with all pervading choice is that it pervades everything. From the carton of milk, to the loaf of bread, we are compelled to make decisions. From the kids' school, to the type of health insurance, we must make a determination. From the maker's mark on our watch, to the height of our Italian designed shoes, ours is a lifetime steeped in choice.

### The paradox of choice

Choice has become promiscuous, argues American psychologist and self-help author, Martin Seligman, and the

Schwartz's argument is that the 'culture of abundance' robs us of satisfaction. It does this by creating stress and anxiety: I think I want the brown one; no the black; okay the brown. What's that you say? I can have it in firm, soft, super soft or fluffy, with zippers or buttons.

There's also stress and anxiety once you've made your choice. Is this couch/job/partner the right one? What if I've chosen poorly? What if I've made the wrong choice?!

The proliferation of choice inherent in small purchases also applies to big picture life stuff. Which career will you choose, we ask 17 year old kids. Which university will it be, we demand of them at 18. Will you take honours or postgraduate studies with that, we query, often before university 101 has had a chance to consciously impact their critical and conceptual abilities.

Australian universities have come to the choice party with a slab of options: students can now mix and match degrees across faculties and across disciplines, something unheard of 15 years ago. Yet, according to a recent *Sydney Morning Herald* article, nearly 20% of Australian students don't last a full year. One of the major problems, reports higher education writer Heather Gilmore (December 2009), is unhappiness with the subjects they've chosen. Perhaps choice isn't quite as emancipating as we initially thought?

According to Schwartz, a further consequence of all this choice is increased busyness. Somewhere, sometime, we must

find the time to research, analyse, resolve and rationalise our choices. The result is that by the time we've gone to 12 different furniture shops to find that comfortable as heaven, cherry red leather couch, the \$150 saved by shopping around has been spent twice over on petrol, time, research, and analysis. This paradox – of more choice leading ultimately to less benefit – could indeed be our old friend preya in Western dress.

"Come with me, you can have it all", this modern Westernised preya promises. Enticed as we are by the truly fabulous range of cheery, cherry red couches, we don't notice Ms Shreya hovering quietly in the background. Nor do we hear her whispered warning, "Yes, you can have it all, but where on earth are you going to put it?"

### Choice and yoga

When we choose to follow the path of yoga, there are also many choices to be made. Am I in it for the physical/social/spiritual? Will it be a hobby/exercise regime/form of spiritual devotion?

In the Bhagavad Gita, Sri Krishna says to Arjuna:

*"Yoga is not for him who eats too much or eats too less and it is not for him, O Arjuna, who sleeps too much or keeps awake too much. A man of modest habits in eating and enjoyment, who is controlled in his actions, having proper amount of sleep and wakefulness, comes to achieve yoga which destroys all his sorrows."*

By choosing yoga, we inadvertently commit to [choose] certain principles and practices. In the beginning, these choices may not be highly conscious, but through the practice of yoga, via the increased sense of self it develops, our initial choice leads to greater rationality and greater consciousness in choice.

### Choice and the senses

So why do so many of us struggle to make healthy and beneficial choices? Why is it, when class time comes around, the perennial internal argument about attendance ensues? Why is it that at the end of a long hard day, the short term thrill of beer and pizza regularly wins out over the best laid healthy intentions?

It's a question asked by Nanchiketa, the main character in the *Katha Upanishad*. "There has to be more

to the story,” he says. “Even when we understand these choices, we often choose a direction that takes us somewhere we don’t really want to go.”

Yama, the God of Death, answers Nanchiketa:

*“Your body is the chariot, drawn by five powerful horses: the senses. These horses travel not so much through space as time. They gallop, let us say, from birth towards death, pursuing the objects of their desire. The discriminating intellect – judgement – is the driver, whose job it is to see clearly and not drive you over a cliff. His reins are the mind, your emotions and desires. And you Nanchiketa, are the rider – the Self”.*

When we choose from a point of oneness, when our true Self is in the charioteer’s seat, the intellect plays a major role. “The job of the intellect is to see clearly, and the job of the mind is to act as reins,” Easwaran writes. “But when the senses are uncontrolled, they immediately take to the road they like best: personal satisfactions, mostly pleasures”. In this scenario, our horses make decisions rather than us.

As the *Katha* allegory conveys, the trick is to train your horses. With trained horses (senses), we maintain the capacity to choose consciously no matter where or how we travel.

In a myriad of ways, the practice of yoga offers us a means of educating our horses. Through asana (postures), we train the physical body to bend and flex like a reed. This subtleness of body allows us to adapt to, and flow with, the many and sudden changes and challenges that get blown our way. Through pranayama (breath control), we train the breath, re-oxygenating our body, increasing our supply of life force, and strengthening the link between body and mind. This allows us more energy to face life’s challenges, and builds a stronger, more holistic sense of self when we are called upon to act and react to everyday situations. Through dhyana (meditation), we train the mind to concentrate, contemplate, and observe without attachment. This ‘onepointedness’ enables us to consciously choose our life direction, rather than be driven all over the place by our own and others’ whims and desires.

Unfortunately, many of us confuse our Self with our chariot. According to my Linked-In profile, I am university educated, married, and self-employed. “Nonsense,” Yama would say. “You are not your chariot”. Your chariot is scholarly, partnered, and works for itself. Next time you are in a hurry, think about this: are you in a hurry, or is it simply your horses? Ask yourself, who really is holding the reins?

### **Choice and the mind**

The understanding that the mind can be either liberating or binding is an ancient one, present in many yogic texts. It’s also the view of Swami Shantananda of the Australian College of Classical Yoga in Melbourne: “The choices you make with your mind are the real decider of how you experience life,” she says. “And how we use the mind is deeply significant in its effect on our living.”

Mataji – as she is affectionately known – uses the example of feeling let down. “If I am feeling disappointed, I can look to see how my mind is positioning itself. If I am feeling proud

and inflated, I can look to see how my mind borrows approval from things people say to me. Equally, if we choose to take the outcome personally instead of simply dealing with the situation, the mind reinforces its perception by blaming the other person.”

Mataji says meditation is essential to settle the reactive mind. “In stillness there is neither good nor bad, Self nor other, only oneness. From that state, the mind learns to respond calmly instead of reacting like a ping pong ball to everything that touches it.”

Similarly, the *Katha Upanishad* upholds meditation as a liberating force:

*“The brave one who, by continuous practice of meditation on the self, identifies and understands the Self...he immediately leaves behind himself all sorts of happiness as well as sorrows. He remains unaffected by either of these.”*

Like a charioteer in charge of his horses and consciously using the reins, the vehicle bearing such a well trained mind knows exactly where it’s going and the route it’s taking.

### Choice choices

For most of us the key question is: How do I choose? How do I favour the reticent shreya over and above her seemingly more congenial cousin, preya? How do I choose the road that will lead me toward health, security, and peace of mind?

It’s a question also asked by Nanchiketa. “Now tell me how to choose. How do I take the road that leads to wisdom?” he asks.

The intellectual amongst us will expect a highly complex answer; one replete with schematic drawings and a whiz bang, power point presentation. Those of us driven by our senses have probably already tuned out; such was the lack of instant gratification and the fear that conscious choosing is likely to require a huge investment of energy or time.

Yama, the God of Death replies to Nanchiketa. “Very simple,” he says. “Just don’t take the other road.”

### References

Schwartz Barry. *The Paradox of Choice, Why more is less*. HarperCollins, New York, 2005.

Gilmore, Heather. Nearly 20% of university students don't last full year, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Higher Education supplement, 6 December, 2008.

*The Bhagavad Gita*, The Philosophy of Life [www.aryabhattacharya.com/geeta/index.htm](http://www.aryabhattacharya.com/geeta/index.htm), (Chapter 6, Self Discipline: Meditation Yōga), accessed 15 January, 2010.

Easwaran Eknath. *Dialogue With Death*. Jaico Publishing House, Mumbai, 2007.

*Katha Upanishad* Translation [www.vedarahasya.net/katha-2.htm](http://www.vedarahasya.net/katha-2.htm), accessed 17 December, 2010 (author unidentified).

Peggy Hailstone is a Melbourne freelance writer and a (currently non-practising) yoga teacher. She can be contacted at: [phailstone@researcheditwrite.com.au](mailto:phailstone@researcheditwrite.com.au)