

Practising Yoga, Part 2 - Off The Mat

In the first part of this article on yoga practice, we reminded ourselves of the goal of yoga - freedom, independence. The Sanskrit word is *kaivalyam* and Patanjali is not specific, but it certainly includes freedom from our fears, from reacting instead of acting consciously, from bondage to old habits, from dependence on others for our well-being. Yoga helps us to be healthy in body and clear in mind so that we can make the right choices and live our life fully. There is a wonderful concept in yoga called *dharma*. It means doing what we are meant to, fulfilling our potential - so that we contribute as best as we can to the world. It is so much more than how westerners usually think of 'doing our duty', because it stems from us - how we are, our character, our talents, our potential. Furthermore, it has the sense of 'supporting others whilst supporting ourselves', so that there is a complete absence of the heavy sense of self-denial that is so often part of the western concept of 'duty'.

We saw how the idea of practice is fundamental to yoga - indeed it is the very first thing that Patanjali says is necessary for achieving the state of yoga, *cittavrtti nirodha*, when the mind's activities are calm, under our control and directed. This is because we are all creatures of patterns, of habits, and for change to occur we need to set up new patterns and habits which can eventually become stronger than the old. These are patterns in our body, breathing, mind and attitudes. We saw how he describes practice, not in terms of what we should do, but only in terms of the qualities that we should bring to what we do. Our attitudes, our personality, our qualities - all these make up the most important part of ourselves when it comes to yoga, for two reasons: they lie beneath everything that we feel and think and do...and we can change them. When the different aspects of being human are discussed in the Taittiriya Upanisad, they are classified as *annamaya*, the body, *pranamaya*, the breath and energy and life-force, *manomaya*, the mind, *vijnanamaya*, the personality, and *anandamaya*, the realm of feelings. Of these, it is in the *vijnanamaya* that we find yoga.

We tend to think of yoga practice in terms of *asana*, *pranayama*, and perhaps meditation - the things we do on our mat - but in terms of the goals of yoga, how we live the rest of our life is just as important, if not more so. When Patanjali sets out the

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eight components of yoga, which will help us to gain the clarity needed for our goal, many more sutras are given to the *yama* and *niyama* than to *asana* and *pranayama*. They are the necessary foundations of right behaviour, without which even the most accomplished *asana* will be useless. There are five of each, and all the commentators say that the order in which they are given is very significant.

The first *yama* is *ahimsa*, non-violence, and it is the very base of all the others. The second is *satya*, truthfulness in communication (providing that it does not harm. If it will harm someone, then it should be communicated differently or even, perhaps, not at all). *Asteya* is not stealing, and as well as property, it refers to all ways of taking what belongs rightly to another - accepting praise for something that someone else had a lot to do with, for example. *Brahmacarya* literally means ‘going towards the Divine/the Absolute’, and Frans Moors gives the following synonyms: “moderation in all things, control of one’s impulses, discipline conducive to spiritual development, moderation to serve the pursuit of the higher goal, self-restraint for the benefit of spiritual evolution.”¹ Always it should be consistent with *ahimsa*, *satya* and *asteya*. *Aparigraha* is the fifth *yama*, not having a grasping attitude towards things, material or immaterial. For instance, sometimes we can have a grasping attitude towards knowledge - wanting it at all costs, and then being unwilling to share it.

One way in which many people who come to yoga classes are violent is in their attitude to themselves. Yet we live with ourselves every moment of every day of our life, so that our relationship with ourself is the most important that we have with anyone. If we are hypercritical, judgmental, harsh and unforgiving towards ourself, those will be the uppermost qualities in our life. If we can begin to practice kindness and tolerance and forgiveness to ourself, then we shall bring those qualities into our life at a very deep, personal and intimate level. Perhaps this is why Patanjali says that “animosity disappears in the presence of someone who has perfectly established non-violence within”.²

He gives the results of the other *yama* as well: when we are established in truth, then “there is absolute harmony between the action and its result”³. When honesty

¹ Liberating Isolation, the Yogasutra of Patanjali, trans. Frans Moors, 2.38

² ibid 2.35

³ ibid, 2.36

pervades all our attitudes, thoughts and actions, we are offered many treasures. When we are moderate and self-disciplined, remembering our higher purpose, then we achieve great internal strength. Being able to give up possessiveness brings a spaciousness and clarity to our life, so that we have time and space to think deeply and gain a complete understanding of ourself.

Whereas the *yama* are often seen as being more about our behaviour and attitudes towards others (although, as we have seen, they definitely include our attitudes to ourselves as well), the *niyama* are more personal. They are *sauca*, *samtosa*, *tapah svadhyaya* and *isvarapranidhana*. *Sauca* is cleanliness, purity - of the body and the mind - and from this comes a better understanding of what is superficial and what is profound, both in ourselves and in others. *Samtosa* is a fascinating quality, not easily accepted by our society, which often confuses it with smugness, an attitude of “I am alright and don’t need to change”. But it is not this at all: it means contentment, a deep acceptance of whatever is the current situation. This is something that we tend not to do and not to value - we think we should be continually progressing in various ways and that this must involve a restless yearning for something different from what we have. But accepting the current situation as being right for this moment (even if we don’t understand it yet) is such a relief! Patanjali tells us that it brings intense happiness (2.42). It doesn’t mean that we don’t expect things to change - he says elsewhere that there is always change in this world - but this also is something that we can accept and be content about.

Tapah is a discipline of body, mind and senses, so that impurities are reduced - and this is the key to knowing whether something is *tapah* in Patanjali’s sense, rather than, for instance, simple physical exercise or even austerity, which can actually harm people. Through this, he says, mastery over the body and senses is obtained. We are told by our teachers that it includes right diet and lifestyle, and getting enough sleep. *Svadhyaya* was traditionally study of the sacred teachings through chanting them and listening to the teacher. It is a very personal type of study or enquiry, one that brings us to a better knowledge and understanding of ourself. And what a prize can result from it: perfect union with our own bringer of light or spiritual path. *Isvara pranidhana* - devotion to the Highest Principle - interestingly is what Patanjali says will lead to the accomplishment of *samadhi*, deepest meditation, complete

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absorption. These last three *niyama* were first mentioned at the very beginning of the second chapter, which is called *Sadhana Pada*, “the chapter about the path”⁴, as the components of the Yoga of Action, *kriya yoga*. As such, they were advocated as the first step on the yoga path.

What we have looked at here are only the first steps, but they are also the necessary foundations if we wish to go further on this beautiful exciting lifetime path of yoga.

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⁴ *ibid*, Frans Moors, p73