



March 2011 Contemplation Theme

Ahimsa: Non-Harming

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You are the light of consciousness, manifested in a unique and individualized form. That light shines through your eyes, fills your heart and sparks your greatest ideas. The light of your own being arises from its source, spills into your life and fills your relationships with light and love and joy.

This happens consistently and reliably only when you have cleared the pathway – the pathway for the light of consciousness is your mind. This means you must do some yogic work on your mind, not just yoga for your body and breath. I would like to make two related points here: 1) working on your body is not enough; 2) when you work on your body, more begins to open up.

Working on Your Body Is Not Enough

Perhaps you expect your yoga practice to perfect your body. If so, is this a reasonable prediction of your future? I know many yogis who have been practicing for decades. This means they are now decades older than when they began. While their aging process is profoundly different than any non-yogi, none of them expect their body to return to the condition it was in when they were 15 or 25 years old (assuming it was perfect back then).

Still, if your goal is to perfect your body, does that mean you will shine with the light of consciousness when your body is perfect? If so, the fashion models, TV & movie stars, professional athletes and singer-dancers would be enlightened. This is clearly not the case!

Thus working on your body is not enough. You must begin aligning your life with the principles of light by following yoga's precepts for living, so your own inner radiance can shine through your life. Yoga's precepts for living are titled the yamas and niyamas. There are five of each, which we'll explore in next few months.

The first and most important precept is *ahimsa* – non-violence. We recently watched Egypt undergo a nearly bloodless revolution because the principle of non-violence has become so well established, even in national and international relations. The American Revolution wasn't bloodless, neither was America's Civil War, and the Libyans are undergoing similar difficulties.

Yet only 53 years ago, under a yogi's guidance, India led the way into the new model for international relations by winning independence from Great Britain through a (nearly) bloodless revolution. Twenty years later, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., followed Gandhi's lead to create a civil rights movement that turned America's political and social structure upside down – or perhaps I should call it "right side up." It's easy to see how powerful ahimsa can be!

More Begins To Open Up

Whether you realize it or not, the practice of ahimsa has already begun to sneak up on you. When you do your yoga poses and breathing, especially when you are doing Svaroopa® yoga's core opening practices, it isn't merely your body that begins to change. Life begins to change.

One of the reasons that people are interested in doing yoga is because they have heard that it calms their mind while it makes them happier and more peaceful. This is true, but it is only part of the story. It also makes you less violent. When your spine is open, you can face an opponent (or a family member), and the encounter goes differently because you're not inclined to lash out at them or to try to get back at them.

Another way that ahimsa sneaks up on yogis is vegetarianism. Many yogis find themselves gravitating to a healthier diet, even a meat-free diet, without realizing that it comes from yoga. One of the primary practices of ahimsa is to stop eating foods where the animal had to give up its life in order for you to eat. A yogi traditionally does eat dairy products, because you don't have to kill the cow to get the milk.

Ahimsa is the most challenging when you apply it in your relationships. Ahimsa means: Do no harm. It's a simple principle, and you might even think that you're doing pretty well with it already, at least until you look more closely.

How Am I Doing?

Patanjali gives a yardstick by which you measure your progress in the practice of ahimsa:

Ahimsaa-pratishthaayaam tat-samnidhau vaira-tyaagah. Patanjali Yoga Sutras 2.35

All others will cease to feel hostility in the presence of one who is firmly established in ahimsa.

This means that you can walk into a room where your teenager is arguing with someone and they both calm down in a way that surprises even them. You can join in a family gathering and, because you are there, no one argues with anyone else. They all enjoy one another in great peace and joy.

Of course, it also means that you don't feel any hostility toward anyone – not only do you refrain from hitting them, refrain from shouting at them and refrain from making snide or sarcastic remarks, you also don't think harmful thoughts about them. Your yogic mind just cannot go there because you don't have any violence or pain-causing thoughts to share, because you don't have any injurious thoughts or impulses left in you. It may take some work to get to this point, but it is a point worth getting to.

One way you can see how you are doing with ahimsa is to watch your driving habits. You may be sweet and charming to everyone in person, but how are you when you get behind the wheel? Or consider how you act when you are on the phone with a customer service representative who speaks English with an accent.

What Do I Do?

You must recognize your own violent impulses in order to do something with them. Once you recognize that you are in a knee-jerk reaction, you can do something about it. You cannot do anything if you don't recognize what is happening inside. If you realize it three hours later, you cannot do anything about it. If you believe you're not a violent person, go back and use Patanjali's measuring stick, so you're motivated to begin at the beginning – recognize when a violent impulse arises.

What do you do when you feel the cutting remark rising up inside? Don't say it, this yama tells us; don't act on it at all. Breathe. Wait it out. It will dissolve and completely disappear. It cannot continue to survive as a thought or impulse when you deprive it of the ability to motivate your actions. The thought just dies and it doesn't come back. Try it – you'll be surprised!

This is not suppression, denial or avoidance. You've already tried these strategies and know that they don't work. Now you're taking the intelligent path: simply don't hurt others. You're only tempted to hurt them because you're not getting your own way. But don't take it out on them. Even if they could improve the situation, hurting them is not the most effective way to make progress. Thus intelligence demands that you don't act on your harm-causing impulses, even though they will continue to arise inside for some time. It takes time to eradicate your own violent tendencies.

You have violent impulses because you are a human being. It is a human characteristic – everyone feels this way sometimes, until they've used yoga to become free. You will feel like hurting someone but, since you're a yogi, you are simply not going to do it. What do you do instead? Simply feel it. Feel the violent impulse. Don't deny that you feel like killing that person, but don't kill them. The yogic key is this – you must be aware that you feel like killing them. Let the feeling arise; don't even put words to it. Just feel it, and while you are feeling it, don't act on it.

If you let it arise, and you don't lie to yourself about the feeling, it will only last a short time. It might last 45 seconds, or it might last 3 minutes – but it won't last long. If it lasts longer, you weren't actually allowing yourself to feel it; you were trying to justify it, or trying to figure out what to do about it. Just feel it. It dissolves, like fog in sunlight.

That is exactly what it is — brain-fog. It is the clouds of confusion, the mists of delusion, the fog of dependency mucking up your innards. When you go outside and stand in the fog, which I love to do especially at sunrise, the sun comes up and shines through the fog. Slowly the fog dissipates. It melts away.

You must do the same thing with your brain-fog. Stand in the fog, being aware of the fog. Your awareness is the sunlight — it is the light of consciousness, and it dissolves the fog. It dissolves your anger and fear; it dissolves your desire, need and greed; it dissolves your regret and worry; it dissolves your blame and guilt. It dissolves all the reasons you want to hurt someone or something.

What About Me?

Some yogis emphasize that you must not do harmful things to yourself when you are practicing ahimsa, but this is not the focus of the practice according to the ancient sages. While your violent impulses are instinctual, knee-jerk reflexes, and you do need to outgrow them – you're actually inclined to hurt others much more often than you are inclined to hurt yourself. When you refrain from hurting others, you'll naturally stop hurting yourself.

Even though the practice of ahimsa is about how a yogi deals with the world, you can see how ahimsa works in Svaroopa® yoga poses. You carefully prop and align your body, to go to the fullest angle that is safe. When you are positioned and supported, you wait for 30-60 seconds, and your body naturally begins to open up. It doesn't work if you are out of alignment or if you are pushing yourself. The principle of ahimsa is already built into your poses and your Ujjayi Pranayama. It's nothing you have to add to your practice. You need to add it to your life. Do more yoga.

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