

Surely I Can *by Sylvie Gouin*

As a modern day Yogini living in a prosperous land, surely I can take my yoga off the mat by setting standards of morality that move beyond social constructs of normality. Yoga may be a common word today. However, I question whether the meaning, the essence, is really grasped. What is yoga? What is it about? What does it mean to be a modern day yogi? It is an honorable title to give oneself and many use it freely, but it must be understood that the title belongs to those who practice not only on the mat but also on the cushion and, most importantly, off the mat. The question often concerns “how” and “where does one start”. I will attempt to demonstrate that starting with the aspiration of non-harming in thought, word, and action is the foundation of a life filled with the gifts of yoga.

First, let's define yoga: Yoga is a unitive spiritual tradition within the great cultures of Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism native to India.¹ The word *yoga* comes from the Sanskrit language and has many meanings, but the relevant meaning for a hatha yogi is unitive discipline. Please note the use of the word “discipline” and not simply “unity”, as often described.

Yoga as we know it today has demonstrated its ability to support physical health and well-being. It reduces the occurrence of injuries for athletes, brings more comfort for those afflicted with illness, and provides a sense of radiance and energy for those who practise regularly. All of these benefits are worthy of great praise, but what about yoga for happiness? What about yoga for enlightenment? Is it not our birth right to experience undying happiness, conscious awareness, and benevolence as our true nature? We hear of great beings in this state, but we rarely meet them. We read wonderful stories, but we leave it at that — great stories. It often seems that these states, this level of awareness, and experiential existence is illusory, a fantasy that may be pursued but never attained. Therefore, out of a conceptualized methodology based on rational thinking, many give up and leave this fantasy of existence to the dreamer. Hence the question: what if this state is right here, right now, exactly the way things are? What if it is simply clouded by a heavy body filled with undigested food? What if it is simply clouded by a lack of oxygen, a lack of *prana* due to improper breathing and posture? What if it is simply clouded by greed and negative thinking?

¹ http://www.traditionalyogastudies.com/articles_yoga_faq.html

I remember being about 13 years old and reading a book by Louise Hay where she explained that we don't have to believe everything we think. At that time in my life, that idea was a shock. I could not understand what she meant. That statement rocked my world and it is what inspired me to move beyond my current state of awareness and start questioning my existence and its purpose. It was such a simple statement, but one that gives everyone the space to start over and to possibly even let go of some thought patterns that keep us stuck in a mundane existence of feeding the senses.

With a history of 5000 years, yoga has taken many turns. Although yoga is not a religion, the influences that we see today are rooted in Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism. A variety of techniques, Gurus, and teachings of both a dual nature and non-dual nature provide the aspirant with incredible choice. Although choice is well associated with freedom, an important aspect of our life, it can also be a source of confusion. What if I have made the wrong choice? What if the other school really has the secret? These questions often lead us to taking a little from one school and a little from another, leaving behind what we don't like. Discipline is often one of the ingredients we leave behind. Discipline in our culture has a tendency to be associated with rigidity and boring parameters for the guilty.

Having spent three years reading and reflecting on the study guide for the 800-hour course on the History, Literature, and Philosophy of Yoga by Georg Feuerstein, I can attest to one thing that always arises, again and again, whether dual or non-dual in philosophy, whether of Hindu, Jain, or Buddhist nature, and that is the importance of discipline. Discipline is always at the root of the teachings; without it, yoga, true yoga, will continue to elude us. It will continue to be a great story of great people who once lived on our planet. I am not saying that discipline is the sole ingredient or a guaranteed seed to a life of pure happiness, but it is an essential foundation on which to build a solid life of spiritual fulfillment. Excessive discipline can, like anything, be taken to extremes, in which case it may become a form of prison; but equally, lack of discipline can also be taken to extremes and become another form of prison. A disciplined intention must be supported by benevolence and the continuous reminder to not take ourselves too seriously in order to bear fruit. Just as Gautama The Buddha had to find his centre, after years of an intense ascetic lifestyle without reaching enlightenment, he recognized that he had to soften his edge to remain on the path of wisdom. This is what eventually led him to his enlightenment. We must be clear of what our starting point is. For most of us westerners, letting go of discipline is not the balance but integrating discipline is the essence.

The following ancient texts are examples of the importance that has historically been placed on non-harming as a grounding base for spiritual awakening.

1. The Bhagavad-Gita², with its 700 verses, has been called the essence of the Upanishads. It is one of the two most important works, alongside the revealed scriptures of Vedanta — a nondualistic metaphysics — and one of the (darshana) of Hindu philosophy.

It is a dialogue between the incarnate God Krishna and his student Prince Arjuna who is about to embark in battle³. Its importance for the student of yoga is obvious, since it must be regarded as the first full-fledged Yoga scripture.

For Krishna, the yogic work consists essentially in totally re-aligning one's daily life to the ultimate Being.⁴ Everything that is done should be done in the light of the Divine. One's whole life must become a continual Yoga. By seeing in everything the presence of the Divine and by casting off all mundane attachments, yogins purify their life and no longer take flight from it. With their mind immersed in the Supreme, they are active in the world, guided by a pure desire to promote the welfare of all beings.

Let's read this again, and again and again... What does this mean to the modern day yogi? What does this mean to those of us who get trapped in the daily activities of rush hour, deadlines, rude and poor service, products that don't last, and so on. What does this mean to those of us who are still attached to the material world? It means what it means. It means what it means to you today. Sit with it in your heart. Read the above paragraph over and over again. As you read, reflect on the impermanence of your life. Reflect on what will really matter at the time of death and then know that: Surely as a modern day Yogi, I can avoid simple gossip today. Surely I can let my words be a source of inspiration. Surely I can try to discipline my mind towards benevolence and away from everyday socially acceptable harming, if just for today.

2. Patanjali, who composed the *Yoga-Sutra*, the source text of Classical Yoga, places non-harming as the first restraint of the first limb of the 8-limb path of yoga. Please note the importance of Patanjali's words, as he is the father⁵ of Classical Yoga. This is an important accomplishment in the evolution of yoga, because Patanjali's systemization of the path summarizes the preceding developments. Had he adopted a nondualistic (advaita) rather than dualistic (dvaita) metaphysics,

² Teacher Manual, Chapter 5, Page 320

³ The Yoga Tradition, Page 188

⁴ The Yoga Tradition, Page 190

⁵ Teacher Manual, Chapter 9, Page 567.

his philosophical system would undoubtedly have become the dominant approach within Hindu Yoga.

Sutra II –29⁶: Restraint, observance, posture, breath-control, sense withdrawal, concentration, meditative-absorption, and ecstasy are the eight members of yoga. Sutra II-30: Non-harming, truthfulness, non-stealing, chastity, and greed-lessness are the restraints. Sutra II-35: when the yogi is grounded in the virtue of non-harming, all enmity is abandoned in his presence.

In his definition of Sutra II-35, Feuerstein explains that⁷ “non-harming when cultivated to perfection, is an attitude, a state of being, which transmits itself to others to the extent that all feelings of antagonism cease in the presence of the yogin.” When I read this, and in looking at the state of our planet, I feel that if I do nothing else but nurture non-harming within myself, my life will have deep purpose. And so Surely as a modern day yogi, I can cultivate thoughts of care towards myself; surely as a modern day yogi, I can focus my energy on mindful benevolence. Surely as a modern day Yogi I can try!

3. Hemaandra, a Jain scholar and author of the text *Yoga-Shastra*⁸ writes “spiritual practice is worthless if it is not based on the abandonment of all harmful activity” (2.31).

It is important to keep in mind that the level at which Jains value non-harming far exceeds what most of us are ready to commit to. For example, the Dasha-Vaikalika-sutra⁹ writes:

”Sir, the first great vow is abstention from harming living beings. Sir, I will abstain from harming any living beings, be they small or large, mobile or immobile. I myself will not harm any living being. I will not condone the harming of any living being. For as long as I live, I will not cause, instigate or condone harming others through the threefold means of body, speech and mind.” (1.11):

In order to maintain this vow, Jains’ are not only vegans but they are very careful walking on the earth as to not crush small insects or vegetation. If an insect is on their body, they remove it gently and place it somewhere that it will not hinder any other being.

⁶ Feuerstein translation of yoga sutras

⁷ Feuerstein translation of yoga sutras

⁸ Feuerstein Yoga Morality, Page 97

⁹ Feuerstein Yoga Morality, Page 98

As mentioned above, for most of us, this is radical living. The message however remains the same. Surely if a human being has the capacity for such devotion, if another human being feels so connected to a peaceful path as a way of liberation, surely I, as a modern day yogi, can recycle today. Surely I can drive less this week. Surely I can think positively toward the people who annoy me!

4. To summarize my thoughts in relation to this essay and correlate it with Buddhism as a whole, I have chosen the following writing by Atisha (11th century Tibetan Buddhist master) :

The greatest achievement is selflessness.
The greatest worth is self-mastery.
The greatest quality is seeking to serve others.
The greatest precept is continual awareness.
The greatest medicine is the emptiness of everything.
The greatest action is not conforming to the world's ways.
The greatest magic is transmuting the passions.
The greatest generosity is non-attachment.
The greatest goodness is a peaceful mind.
The greatest patience is humility.
The greatest effort is not concerned with results.
The greatest meditation is a mind that lets go.
The greatest wisdom is seeing through appearances.

Although I have only scraped the surface of study when it comes to Buddhism, I feel that the above writing gives a good overview of the teachings. Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana Buddhism — the three major schools — all find their roots in compassion. The noble eightfold path taught by Siddhartha of right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration leave very little space for a harming attitude. In fact, upon reflection, it is clear to see that it is based in non-harming.

Kashmir's Shaivism describes a model of growth this way *icchā-*, *jnāna-*, and *kriyā-shakti*. The first represents being aware and having the desire to change something that is not right; the second represents knowing what the "wisdom" ingredient required to change it is, and the third represents the ability to integrate it to put it into action. Simply put, an alcoholic who realizes and admits his addiction and who has the desire to change equals *iccha shakti*; joining a supportive group for help is equated with Gyaan Shakti and actually implementing the methodology exemplifies *kriya shakti*. I believe that this process is a continuous process for the yogi. When we first come to yoga, it might have been for back pain. We have the desire to reduce the pain; yoga is the wisdom, and we

put it in action by showing up to class once a week. Eventually, the practice begins to sink in and we start to experience deeper dimensions of our existence. More and more, the desire to let go of mundane existence of serving the senses permeates our being; we find the wisdom in yoga and build the stamina to put it in action.

At the core of our being, we all know that non-harming is the essence of happiness. When have we gained happiness from harming another? At the lowest level of evolution, we may feel a moment of joy or satisfaction when harming, but it does not last; we all maintain a sense of happiness when we reflect on a moment of selflessness.

Recently I was at workshop with a teacher who is known as a teacher of teachers, a teacher with 25 years of experience, a teacher recognized throughout Canada and the US. This teacher shared with us that he does not believe in the yamas and the niyamas. He shared with us that he does not believe in the aspiration toward ahimsa, as it is an unattainable state that leads to frustration, guilt, and unnecessary restrictions. He instead urged us to do nothing. I have to say that I find this sad. I find it sad that such a reputable teacher with an obedient audience does not take this opportunity to inspire peaceful living by honouring the scriptures. This idea that a disciplined life is a life of guilt and that living with consciousness is equal to living with continuous guilt must be removed from our culture. We must recognize that, when one is conscious of the interconnectedness of all earthlings, we want to take responsibility for our actions. We aspire for growth and for a supportive environment. It is not a matter of guilt in the sense of aspiring for an unachievable state of perfection but, instead, a willingness to share the planet and to experience inner peace. I ask, “How can one experience inner peace if ahimsa is not cultivated? How can one do nothing in the spiritual context he was suggesting if one does not cultivate inner peace?”

To quote the *Bhagavad Gita*¹⁰, discourse 3 verse 6: *He who, restraining the organs of action, sits thinking of the sense-objects in mind, he of deluded understanding is called a hypocrite.* Verse 7¹¹: *But whosoever, controlling the senses by the mind, O Arjuna, engages himself in Karma Yoga with the organ of action, without attachment, he excels.* Verse 8¹²: *Do thou perform bouden duty, for action is superior to inaction and even the maintenance of the body would not be possible for thee by inaction.*

Simply put: better than inaction and better than action is action without attachment.

¹⁰Bhagavad Gita translated by Swami Sivananda, Page 60

¹¹ Bhagavad Gita translated by Swami Sivananda, Page 61

¹² Bhagavad Gita translated by Swami Sivananda, Page 61

As anyone who has studied the scriptures knows, our action must be supported by right intention and purity. The discourse continues to be explained in verse 21¹³:

Whatsoever a great man does, that the other men also do; whatever he sets up as the standard, that the world follows. Verse 22¹⁴: There is nothing in the three worlds, O arjuna that should not be done by Me, nor is there anything unattained that should be attained; yet I engage Myself in action. Verse 23¹⁵: For should I not ever engage Myself in action, unwearied, men would in every way follow My path, O arjuna.

This explains how we are social animals, influenced by our environment and following strong energies. It is up to us as modern day yogis to build positive energy and to support healthy, positive, conscious communities.

Verse 25¹⁶: *As the ignorant men act from attachment to action, O Arjuna so should the wise act without attachment, wishing the welfare of the world.*

These teachings are as valuable today as they were then. They were not provided for the superhuman. They are guidelines for us. Surely as a modern day yogi, I can aspire to inspire my community through the intention of living ahimsa. Surely as a modern day yogi, I can fill my mind with uplifting readings and teachings. Surely as a modern day yogi, I can breathe and awaken to the fact that I am alive.

Here I share another example of what I consider unnecessary chatter that I have encountered. I have taken workshops with some wonderful Astanga yoga teachers and some equally respectable Iyengar, Kundalini, and Sivananda teachers. What occasionally (not always) happens is that, at some point during the workshop, someone will point the finger at another school as being the school that really has no respect for the essence of yoga. Remarks arise about another school holding postures for such a short time or other schools being so dry and focused on posture perfection that it misses the sweetness, the openness, of the practice. At that point, the energy shifts in the room. The conversation becomes dry and mundane. Although the workshops were posture-based, the focus, in my opinion, did not have to focus on external technique as the core of our practice, thereby forgetting the quality of observation and the attitude underlining the technique. I believe and have experienced the importance and the value of techniques; however, growing attached to them and filling our ego with the idea that they are the best technique by degrading others is simply a distraction that moves us away from yoga.

¹³ Bhagavad Gita translated by Swami Sivananda, Page 68

¹⁴ Bhagavad Gita translated by Swami Sivananda, Page 68

¹⁵ Bhagavad Gita translated by Swami Sivananda, Page 69

¹⁶ Bhagavad Gita translated by Swami Sivananda, Page 69

I find it interesting how easy it is to fall prey to this type of accusatory attitude and most of us are not immune to it, most of us have not yet moved beyond it. Yet it is so clear when one connects with the roots of yoga that even a perfect external posture that is mindless or ego driven will remain that — an ego driven physical performance that impresses the weak and the stiff. Yet, a posture that appears simple from the outside, a posture that is supported with an internal focus that moves beyond the pressures of expectations provides the yogi with deep internal alignment. It is essential that, as Yogis, we nurture the ability to cultivate an attitude of non-harming on our mat and then allow it to transcend beyond the mat. It is essential as Yogis that we cultivate an attitude of non-harming off the mat and that we allow it to transcend to the mat. It is essential as yogis that we unite our life. We must move beyond conceptualizing Spirituality and being in denial of this level, instead nurturing the discipline that is required to experience our Spirituality in all of life. But first there must be an honest observation of where we are at. We are, for the most, beginners, even when we start to tap into deeper dimensions of our existence, because often the life of superficiality that we come from is so dry that even the beginnings of authenticity seem deep. In my opinion, this is o.k.; it is our starting point; we get distracted when we start denying our starting point and try to build our practice from the outside in. Yoga builds from the inside out, and stages of development cannot be skipped. Thinking in the reverse just keeps us stuck in concepts. Let's wake up by observing ourselves, by creating a code of conduct or by reading and reviewing a code of conduct that supports our yogic lifestyle daily. Let's wake up to our true potential as human beings by celebrating our existence through authentic living. Let's wake up and start at the beginning. Let's try to cultivate non-harming.

The three most important hatha yoga texts are: *The Hatha Yoga Pradipika* written by the Sage Swatmarama in the 14th century. This is the classic manual on Hatha Yoga. It consists of 389 stanzas organized in four chapters. It discusses and describes cleansing practises, asana, pranayam, mudra, and the importance of awakening the kundalini energy. The 2nd is the *Gheranda-Samhita* which might have been composed at the end of the 17th century. Here the path of hatha yoga is 7 fold. It includes cleansing techniques, postures, seals, sensory inhibition, breath control, meditation, and ecstasy. The third is the *Shiva Samhita*, considered the most comprehensive treatise of hatha yoga. Scholars believe it was written in the 17th or 18th century. This text has a distinct Buddhist influence and is devoted to expounding Vedantic nondualism. It discusses liberation and describes 84 postures of which 4 are said to be important.

As modern day yogis, whatever style of hatha yoga one is practising it has somehow been influenced by one of these texts, even though they are ancient and filled with practices that we may never pursue, for example¹⁷:

¹⁷ Hatha Yoga Pradipika translated by Vishnu Devanada, Pages 12-13

The practitioner of hatha yoga should live alone in a small matha situated in a place free from rocks, water and fire to the extent of a bows length and a in a fertile country ruled over by a virtuous king where he will not be disturbed. The matha should have a small door and should be without window. It should be level and without any holes. It should be neither too high, too low, nor too long. It should be very clean, being daily smeared over with cow dung and should be free from all insects. Outside it should have a small hall with a raised seat and a well, and the whole should be surrounded by a wall. These are the characteristics of a yoga matha as laid down by the siddhas who have practiced hatha yoga.

They are still a great resource for the modern day yogi. They provide us with a map for the path of hatha yoga. Although I think it fair to say that most of us lack the physical, mental, and spiritual stamina to implement to the full extent the techniques described in these texts, this should not be a reason to give up. Continuing our asana practice will support a healthy, strong, and limber body; eating moderately and choosing clean food that is easily digested will support the physical body and help reduce unnecessary lack of energy that creates distractions. Building a lifestyle that is disciplined and guided by our consciousness and not our senses is a life based on ahimsa and, therefore, yoga. Surely as a modern day yogi, I can try, if just for today.

Here is a plan I have created for myself:

1. Be aware of my thoughts. I listen, meditate, and, with mantra and affirmation, I build a peaceful inner dialogue.
2. Listen to my words. I watch myself when speaking, my tone of voice and my body language. I build relationships that radiate peaceful understandings.
3. Watch my actions. I am aware of what kind of residue I am leaving behind. How do my actions impact the people around me and the people I will never meet? How does my action impact the animal kingdom and if Mother Nature had her eyes on me, what would she say?

Reflecting and living a path that nurtures non-harming requires a bit of attitude. It requires the strength to stand up for what is ethical, even if our social conditioning has not yet caught up to it. It is a fine balance between personal observation, community involvement, and global awareness. It is a continuous return to the beginning and a willingness to truly care.

As Patanjali writes: *Atha-Yoga- anusasanam: Now [commences] the exposition of Yoga*