

A SHORT MEDITATION ON *SATYA*, *AHIMSA*, *SVADHYAYA*

Patanjali's *yamas* and *niyamas* are very frequently interpreted as moral imperatives of a similar character to the 'Ten Commandments'. This is not surprising: there is indeed a resemblance. (*Yoga Sutra* 2.30 – 2.45)

However, there is a far more fruitful way of understanding the *yamas* and *niyamas* and I'd like to illustrate it here with reference to the *yamas satya* and *ahimsa* and the *niyama svadhyaya*, and particularly to suggest how these three can work harmoniously together.

Patanjali's recommendation of *satya*, literally 'truthfulness', is usually construed as being an exhortation to tell the truth to others. *Ahimsa*, literally 'non-harming', is similarly thought to be other-directed: one should do no harm to others, perhaps 'turning the other cheek' or becoming a vegetarian. *Svadhyaya*, literally 'own-study', is also often considered by commentators to be outwardly focussed: one should read and/or recite the scriptures diligently.

No doubt it can be argued cogently that there is some practical value to the yogi, not to mention to society at large, in such other-directed, outwardly focussed applications of *yama/niyama*. But when seen as **self-directed**, or **inwardly focussed**, (i.e. as particulars of *pratyahara*), *yama/niyama* reveal themselves as immensely powerful pointers to our intrinsic wholeness.

Satya, when self-directed, is nothing less than a ruthless honesty about ourselves. And it is ruthless, not in any aggressive sense, but because there can be no partial *satya*. This in turn means that when we look inwards truthfully, we are radically open to finding whatever is there in our inner universe, whatever character it might have. So, the practice of *satya* cannot be one of denial or repression or moral self-condemnation, or moral self-congratulation. Rather, in its necessary completeness, it must be a simple, **innocent**, clear-sighted finding out of what our inner universe is like. What is required for this discipline is a willingness to encounter what actually *is*.

Inwardly focussed *svadhyaya* is best seen as 'self-study' rather than 'own study'. (*Sva* commonly means 'own' but also has the sense of 'one's self, the Ego, the human soul' (Cologne Digital Sanskrit Lexicon). What is being studied in this inwardly focussed *svadhyaya* are human life and human consciousness themselves, as we are most closely acquainted with them. This self-study seems eminently practical, indeed necessary, if we are to confirm or dis-confirm the alluring rumour that some beatitude lurks within us and if, like Patanjali, we have considerable trust in direct experience.

Svadhyaya, looked at like this, is impossible without a commitment to *satya*. If we study ourselves without abandoning the very human tendency to find what we want to find rather than what actually is, we are hardly studying at all. Rather we are indulging in wish fulfilment fantasy.

Of course, what we actually find may be rather shocking. Human beings are beautiful, clever, inventive, loving, and creative creatures. They are also torturing, hateful, murderous, manipulative, cruel and mendacious. And if you look coolly at yourself you will find *all* of these potentialities within you, the angelic *and* the demonic. *And simply because you are human*.

An almost universal reaction to encountering one's demonic possibilities is a kind of remorse of conscience and a consequent desire to conform to some positive ideal. It's not an exaggeration to say that very many religious practices originate from and are motivated by that desire. Yoga itself is often construed as just such a project of making oneself conform to some ideal of goodness or

saintliness and the resemblance of the *yamas/niyamas* to religious ethical injunctions compounds that construal.

However, to stop at that point is premature. *Satya* insists that we press further with our looking. The impulse to self-condemnation and the resultant programmes of 'self-improvement' or 'self-perfection' also demand to be examined.

What do we find when we look clearly at these phenomena? Many things jump out, but here I want to concentrate on one particular. What jumps out is that our impulses to self-condemnation and self-improvement are contingent upon our biography and consequently suffused with the cultural ideals, prohibitions and conceptual structures in which one has been immersed and which were actively impressed upon one at a formative age. In Patanjali's terms, they have the character of *chitta vritti*, or more or less fixed, repetitive patterns of thought and feeling acquired in the past (*Yoga Sutra* 1.1 – 1.4).

There are many ramifications of this discovery. The most important is that any attempt to attribute metaphysical significance or absolute status to one's ethical promptings is highly suspicious. This is for many people quite frightening since it removes the basis for being unequivocally compelled by such promptings and seems to invite a ruderless state.

If a consciousness intent upon *satya* comes to this point, it is faced with a profound dilemma. On the one hand, we do not wish to succumb to our evil potentialities. On the other hand, that very wish reveals itself as guaranteed by nothing more than some second-hand, culturally determined narratives.

What almost always happens at this point is that the grip of 'conscience' prevails. This goes for so-called spiritual cultures as well as individuals. By and large spiritual cultures fudge the issue of the relative nature of their injunctions and remain haunted by dreams of perfection as measured against some ultimately arbitrary standard. The result is that practitioners who fall for this fudge, whether through their own baulking at the dilemma, or through the promptings of their teachers, become future-oriented in their practice. Consciousness is subtly (or not so subtly) dominated by a goal rather than what is actually unfolding immediately, in the moment. This type of practitioner's self-understanding is that of a being on a 'path' or attempting a difficult assault on a metaphorical mountain peak. The mode of practice then becomes one of 'doing', manipulating, cultivating. The practitioner's psyche remains structured by the very structure it would seek to be free of, *and because of that very seeking*. (I call this syndrome 'asceticism'.)

Under these conditions, *satya* is impossible since it is concerned with what is and not with some ideal we would like to realise one day. The future-directedness of asceticism directly subverts the project of *satya* even though it is *satya* which intensifies the invitation to asceticism.

At its worst, asceticism not only subverts *satya* and *svadhyaya* in the way just outlined, but actually becomes morbid. The shock of seeing ourselves warts and all easily leads to self-punishment, guilt, depression and feelings of worthlessness. It can even lead as far as self-mutilation, self-inflicted physical torment, unhealthy self-abnegation before someone imagined to be super-naturally powerful, extreme regulation of the natural appetites, the more painful the better, and a whole host of other pathologies. The apogee of this trajectory is hatred of life-itself and the condemnation of life that is a prominent feature of many religious discourses is its fruit.

Fortunately, one doesn't have to get stuck in this blind alley and to help us avoid it Patanjali dangles

the notion of *ahimsa* before us.

Ahimsa literally means 'non-harming'. In this context, it is a practice of non-aggression *towards ourselves*. The temptations to engage in asceticism because our conditioning is making us feel bad about our potentialities is immediately undercut by a resolve to be gentle and *forgiving* with ourselves and the immediacy of *satya* can then remain undisturbed by future-oriented, goal directed, guilt-fuelled attitudes. Then, what is, whatever is, can emerge in its nakedness into the field of consciousness.

What's the point of this though? Because it is in this *isness* that the not-so-secret blessings of Yoga are only apparently hidden.